

>> Male speaker: ...rolling. Stand by. Start to pan. Okay, again.

>> Female speaker: You want it a lot faster?

>> Male speaker: About the same. Tracy [phonetic], tilt it up just a little bit. There you go. Okay, start to pan. All right, go in to the top of one of the columns with the names on it. We'll do a tilt down. Okay. Make it move. Okay, go for that center section. Is that level?

> Female speaker: Not really. [indistinct] yeah. That's level.

>> Male speaker: Okay. Okay, make your move. One more time. Okay, make your move again, Tracy. Okay, come out and give me, give me as much or all of it as you can. There you go.

>> Starkman: The one from California was an only child too.

>> Interviewer: Yeah.

>> Starkman: And we have another Leah. We're all named --

>> Interviewer: Okay, we're standing by, so it'll be just a couple of seconds now. And when I start to ask you questions, you'll know that's the beginning.

>> Starkman: Okay.

>> Interviewer: Please tell us your name --

>> Starkman: Well, my name is Leah Starkman.

>> Interviewer: -- and where and when you were born.

>> Starkman: I'm born in Charleroi, Belgium, July 31, 1929.

>> Interviewer: Can you tell us something about your life as a young child in Belgium?

>> Starkman: Well, my parents were just average people. My father was a shoemaker. My mother was a housewife, part-time dressmaker, seamstress, whatever you -- and we had a normal life. My father was very active in the Jewish community, so I was always behind him and going with him every place. I was an amateur actor at the age of 5, with my father guiding me. He was a singer, and I enjoyed doing things with him. I went to school till third grade, till the war started.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember any anti-Semitism in Belgium as you were growing up?

>> Starkman: Not really. Not before the war, or maybe if there was, we didn't get in contact with it, nothing at all. We had Gentile friend who lived around us. There were only maybe two or three Jewish family on that street, and that's it. You know, it was like townhouse, they would call here, you know. It's not little single home. And my father had his business right at the beginning of the street there by the main street. And no, I didn't -- not that I remember. I didn't see nothing that affected me, really.

>> Interviewer: Were your parents born in Belgium?

>> Starkman: No, my parents are born in Poland. My mother is from -- I don't know if she was born in Czestochowa, but I think it's outside of Czestochowa, and my father is, too, from outside of Czestochowa. I remember Ziebice.

>> Interviewer: Did you ever have an opportunity to go to Poland?

>> Starkman: Yes, in 1938, I went to Poland, and I only saw one set of grandparents, from my mother's side, and her sisters. She had four sister there. I had four cousins. And from my father's side, there was -- he had one sister -- two sister, one who had one child. That was one cousin who was alive, and the one -- the older sister who had six or seven children, there was only one who was alive, who survived.

>> Interviewer: Leah, can you tell us how life began to change for your family?

>> Starkman: In 1940, when the German entered into Belgium and we heard about it. I live in the southern of Belgium, so a few neighbors got together, bought a truck, an older truck, and we all evacuated in that truck. The truck was packed, and there were like two or three people of the group who knew how to drive the truck, so they drove. We were about seven or eight children, between all the neighbor and their family. And we evacuated into France. When we passed the border, the truck broke down, so we couldn't find nobody to repair it, so we went on and stayed on a farm, everybody. From there, we all split up, and each one went their way. Some went back into Belgium, and some of us kept going. My parents and myself were the one who kept going and went into -- deep into France, more to the southern part in the Ardeche somewhere in the mountain, and we stayed there till my parents were arrested. My father was a shoemaker, so with a bicycle and a basket in front of him, went around to the farm and collected shoes to repair them.

My mother was a dressmaker so knew how to sew. She went all around and offered her trade, you know, to be able -- if they needed people to sew, and one farmer told another, so we did fairly well. I mean, we survived, and we had food because they didn't pay us with money. They paid us with food. Then she worked for a special family. He was the Baron de la Roque [phonetic] in the Ardeche there. That was the summer home, so he was there -- I think they had nine or ten children, and she made all the clothes for these children. And if a daughter got married, she made the trousseau, you know, the linen, the embroidery. I was doing a lot of the embroidery. My mother had taught me, just to keep me around her, so she taught me how to sew by hand.

In March, 1942, or maybe a little bit before -- I don't remember the date. Maybe it was February or the end of February. I know

before my father had to go for hard labor, and he left for the week, came back on the weekend. Around February, a truck came up to the door. I was not at home then, and the girls told me there is a truck with a -- I don't remember how they used to call them. It is the French who work with Nazis, you know, with the German -- are there, and they're picking up your parents. And so they hold me back. They didn't let me go home, some of the adult who knew that the truck was there. But my father was a comedian and actor, played passed out. I mean, he acted up that he passed out and he couldn't get up. He didn't -- like he was unconscious. So they left him there, and they said to my mother, "we'll come back."

After the truck went away -- it was really up a hill in the mountain. After the truck went away, the adult kept me. It was like a restaurant, like a hostel place, you know. They rented a room upstairs and food. And then after this, when someone came and told them the truck had left the little town, I went back home, and I walked in, and my father was laughing, so I knew he was all right. He says, "I got them. They didn't take me. But they're gonna come back." So my father says, "Let's go somewhere else." Some of the farmer would have taken us in and hid us, but my mother had in her mind, and I'll never forget, "I want to go to Poland. I'll be with my parents." My father couldn't fight her. I still remember what happened, I mean, the arguments and everything. She just wanted to go with her parents and her sisters. "we'll be all together," never thinking that some atrocity like this would happen. She just thought she might be, like, in a ghetto all together, and we'll survive all together. My father had a fear because he had a brother that had come from Germany in 1935 or '36 -- I don't remember -- who told him what went on in Germany, so he had that fear that's it's gonna happen there, too, and he wanted to go into hiding. She didn't want to, so decided we all stick together. Well, in March 1942 -- I don't remember the date exactly -- a truck came. There was other Jewish people in the truck that they must have picked up all

along. And we were told, "Pack the strict necessary, and go in that truck." We all went together. When we went in the -- how you call this -- like Columbia is for -- like the Statehouse --

>> Interviewer: The capital?

>> Starkman: The capital of the Ardeche -- I think it was Privas. Yeah, I think it was Privas. We were all Jews. We're, I mean, gathered there in a big yard. I didn't realize there were so many Jews in that small, little department of France, you know, or maybe they came from another department. All of a sudden, on the loudspeaker, they called my mother and me, but not my father. So my mother went to the office, and I stayed with my daddy. The Baron de la Roque, his wife, wanted to take my mother out and me to keep because she needed my mother for, you know, helping her with the repair and all the clothes. My mother still said, "No, I'm going to Poland. I want to be with my parents." I don't know if she would have survived, but, okay, you know, even if she would have stayed because we found out something after the war. Then -- the Baron de la Roque was working with the Nazi, all right. So we found this out after the war. And after this, we were all taken by trucks -- I think it was trucks -- and we were taken to Venissieux. It's by Lyon in France there. We were in a camp. It looked like it was camp with Indochina people, like the Vietnamese, you know. I don't know because France, that you used to be hard labor, you went to Indochina for -- instead, you know. Instead of life, they send you over there for life. And that's all what I saw, Oriental people around there, but not too many. And they put us in barracks, and a little mattress on the floor made out of straw or things, whatever they had. And we all laid there on the floor.

Meanwhile, while my father was working, my mother didn't get -- wasn't well then. She had already had one gallbladder attack after another, and she was depressed and everything. So then there in the camp, she realize a little bit that maybe she did a

mistake. After this, my father walks in the yard and finds a man that used to be my -- starts talking with other Jewish people that used to be a neighbor of my uncle, his brother, his older brother. And he says, "where is my brother?" My father was, you know, wondering, Is my brother here? He says, "No, your brother, they didn't take." In the beginning, when they start taking them in the other half of France -- you see, the first part of France was under Vichy government, so the German didn't come down that fast, you know, when they came down to us, when they took over all France, you know. So that's when they came down and took over the whole point and starting picking up the Jews from the southern part below Vichy. So he says, "No, in the beginning, they don't take women who are pregnant." My aunt was pregnant with her first child. But aunt and my uncle went into hiding, so they were lucky they weren't taken. He says, "That's what happened. They didn't take them." After this, we stayed a while there, and all of a sudden, the underground or the Red Cross was involved. I really don't know, but they were addressed as the Red Cross. You had to go to the infirmary, and it was going around, who wants to leave their child behind? You have to come and sign papers. My mother still didn't want me to go. My father fought her. He took me away from her, and I still remember the picture.

>> Interviewer: It's okay. Just take a moment, and then you'll talk.

>> Starkman: My mother screaming, "Don't take my child away!" My father took me, and he went and signed the paper. So that night, all the children had to be brought with the paperwork signed -- had to be brought to the dining room. It was a big hall with table and bench. The older girl or the older children had to take care of the smaller one, two years old, one year old, babies. I had a child who was about two-and-a-half years old. That was my responsibility. All of a sudden, we see the big buses going and taking our parents away, and I kept watching to see our parents going, but I didn't see mine. There was one

mother who saw that little boy that I held in my arm and broke the glass on the truck, put her arm out, and the blood -- and that little boy screaming, "Mama!" But the truck went on -- the bus went on. It was a bus.

Then they came with a truck in the middle of the night and took us out, rushed us out. We were supposed to be rushed out. We got rushed out, and they put us in a place in the evening. It must have been -- because it looked like Boy Scout sign, you know, like -- it must have been a center for youth or Boy Scout or Girl Scout. I don't know, and it had a beautiful yard. All the children were allowed to play outside. Before we leave, we start forgetting about what happened. Everybody played. But each older child had the responsibility of the littler one. At night when we all had to take the children, the smaller one, the older one washing the children, washed them, getting them ready for bed. There were voluntary workers feeding us, but they didn't have enough to help us with the little kids, so the older took care of the littler one, and then whenever there no older children, the adult took care. They had a nurse there. They had -- oh, they had a doctor. There was a man there; I don't know. And the little boy starts screaming and crying, didn't want to go to sleep without his mommy and things like this. I went hysterical, and they took me to the infirmary. I just lost control of myself, and they give me a shot.

And after this, I didn't know what happened. I don't know how long I was -- during the time I was asleep, something must have happened, and I was put in a room upstairs by myself on the floor. When I woke up, I don't know how I long I was sleeping there. I mean, I woke up one time, and I found myself all alone. I looked out the window. I didn't see nothing. The room was completely empty. And I tried to walk down the steps to see -- to find my way out of there. And then I saw a woman coming to the steps, and they say, "Are you one of the children?" I said, "No." You know, I didn't know who she was. I was scared. But then I was gonna go back up, and I waited, standing there by the

steps, and that woman knocks on the door and says, "Do you still have some of these children? I'll take a few to hide them." They says, "No, we don't have them." After that woman left, I went out the door and knock on the door. I says, "I just heard you saying to that woman -- what happened to the other children? what's gonna happen with me? I'm here all alone." She said -- well, she got scared, I guess. She says, "You go back from where you come. Go back up there." It was, you know, scary. I went back up there and stayed there. In the late afternoon, there was a young woman who came with a bunch of -- I didn't eat, I don't remember how long -- a bunch grape in the bag. They used to give this, like in Europe, when someone was sick, that's what you brought them, you know. She says, "Look, I'm pretending I come and visit someone sick, and he eat the grape. I know you didn't eat, and let's go." I says, "Where are my suitcase?" She says, "It's gone." well, I cried, not that much for the clothes, but I had a suit of my mother and a pair of shoes of hers she had put in that suitcase and told me there was money hidden in the shoulder pad, in emergency, to use it. To me, that suit meant more than anything else. I felt like that could save -- help me eventually.

well, she took me and put me in the car -- no, we went and stopped at a sidewalk café, and another -- I guess from the underground -- were there and watching all around them, and I had only the clothes I had on me. And they took me, and they put me in the convent, and they asked me what I could do because I was 12. You know, I could help in the kitchen. I says, "I'll do anything." I said, "All right." And I was helping in the kitchen, peeling the vegetable and everything, and then I went in the sewing room. Then all of a sudden, I started having like -- I felt like I was choking. I guess I couldn't talk. I just -- you know, I get -- I don't know. I was in a state of shock, and I felt like I always had a lump in my throat. I couldn't eat. I just didn't want to talk. I guess I was going through depression. And they took me -- so another person came and

picked me up, and they put me in a hospital. I had a private room. And that's when I got my name, another name. They changed my name to Léonie Wagner [phonetic], and that's the name that stayed with me till after the war. I stayed there. They ran some tests. They didn't find nothing wrong. They took me out, and then they took me to a Presbyterian minister. They were lovely people. They took care of me.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember the name of the minister?

>> Starkman: Not really, no, no. I do not. I tried to think about it, and I just cannot remember their name. And he was very nice. She was lovely, too, but she expected a baby, and she was disappointed. I was very short and skinny. I looked so pathetic. I mean, for my age, I didn't look my age. I was 12; I looked nine or eight. And she wanted an older child to be able to help her and take care of her two other children. Well, she was pregnant, so I was not convenient to her. Well, my asthma got worse, I guess, because I was scared, Here I go again. They took me out of my room, and they got another Jewish girl who was older, 16, 17. Oh, it was great; now I have a pal, you know. I won't be -- we both have the same problem. But the minister's wife was much happier with that older child to show the people -- you know, not to make it obvious, I guess, because I could hear her talking with her husband that it should look more like it's a maid she hired than hiding a child, and in the same time, it was a Jewish child. So they gave her my room, and they put me in the maid's room in the attic.

well, the asthma got worse when I was up there, so they decided, I don't know, they're gonna take me to a preventorium. It's a place where children from the city who have problem with bronchitis or asthma, and they put them there to recover or to be treated. And I stayed there many months. I know I passed the winter because I remember we went sledding in the snow, all the children, together. Nobody knew. Maybe the *monitrice*, you know, the -- I don't know how you call it. We call it *monitrice* over

there, the counselors, yeah. The counselor knew that I was Jewish. I really don't know. All right, everything was pretty good for quite a few months, but after this, they had to hide me in there till they could find somewhere. There was a rumor that they were picking up all of the children from homes and things like this that, you know, like, centers, camps, you know, like -- there, they call them *colonie*, you know, children *colonie* that parents used to send to change the, you know -- they used it for fresh air, they said, like not to be in the city. So they started picking up all the Jewish children, so there was a rumor going around that they have to get rid of me too. You know, they cannot keep me. It would endanger all the other children. I don't know if they got rid of the other Jewish children, but, okay, I know I had to go. So the minister came and talked to me and said good-bye, and I remember he gave me a present, but I don't even remember what it is; a little token of something.

Oh, yeah, there was another thing happened while I was in the home. I want to go back to this. When I arrived there, the doctor there, his wife wanted to adopt a child, and I was under the impression he was Jewish, too, but he was an assimilated Jew who didn't, you know reach -- for many, many years back, you know. Through marriage, maybe his parents or grandparents, but his background, there was some Jewish in him. So he took me home, and I had dinner there, and they had a little boy. Took me for a ride in the mountains, and he asked me, "we'd like to adopt you." And I start -- I went hysterical. I said, "My parents are coming back. You cannot adopt me." And I cried. So they decided that I'm not the one who they could adopt because I was fighting him, so it was no good. So they put me -- they took me back to the home, and that's when I stay.

So at the end there, when it was time for me to get out, someone came and picked me up and took me to the farmer, and supposedly, she introduced herself as a member of the Red Cross. This, I remember that. That's I don't know what happened between -- if it's all member of the Red Cross, but I guess that's the way

they passed, but I'm sure it was the underground. And I was there at the farm. And from the beginning, they were receiving a check to take care of me, you know, and things, but eventually, when it got worse, I guess, they didn't get nothing. So then it was a little harder. They made me do more labor, the wife there. But it wasn't that bad. They all worked hard, so -- but in those day, I resented it. You know, I was child, and I resented it. I had to get up early in the morning, snow or heat or anything, and wash the potatoes or -- we call it *topinambour* -- I don't remember -- I don't even know what it is here -- to feed the pigs. That was my job, and I used to love it because the little baby pigs, that was my pets, you know. I felt like, Oh, God, I have a pet. Then after this, at night, maybe I had to milk the cow, and I knew how to do that too. And during the day, in the afternoon, I used to take the sheeps to pasture. And really, I didn't suffer from hunger. They really did not mistreat me. I had to work hard though. It comes on Sunday. I had no contact too much with the other children except on Sunday, going to church. I had to go to church every Sunday morning. They make sure I had something decent to go with. From their clothes, they made them smaller and put them on me. I mean, I looked decent. I didn't look less than the other children, the other farmers' children. And after church, I was allowed to go with one girl. It was a neighbor farmer. I had to walk a little bit. And we could stay together and talk, and we were the same age. And then I come home, and Sunday I didn't have to do much, just maybe helped in the kitchen, you know, taking off the table, like; little chores here and there.

The farmer had given me a room with a back door that in case someone would come in through the front door, if I heard any noise there in the front door, I could run in the woods. They lived on the base of the wood -- the mountain -- a hill, a big hill. They had showed me where I should go. I had one little suitcase that was always packed, and I lived out of a suitcase. There was nothing else; couldn't show that there was somebody

here. There was like a back room where they used to take care of the honey. They had bee hives, and they used to, like, cultivate the honey, you know, taking care of it. And there was all kind these machine there; make it look like it was just a spare room. And they had, like, a trap under the bed, and that's where I had to run if anything -- they told me to shove my clothes, my big suitcase, under there, grab the little one, and go. That was they had told me. Well, in between, the minister had found my suitcase. I don't know how. My name was inside, outside, everything. I mean, it was all over, so they found it, and I found the suit of my mother. So that suitcase followed me everyplace, you know. I wind up over there, and I stayed there till the liberation. But in between, they couldn't understand why I had an adult suit and a pair of adult shoes with spike heel in my suitcase. They said, "we could make something for you with this," and I started crying. I didn't want them to touch this. I was hoping that my parents come back and I could give them something to get started. I thought it was a fortune in there. It was almost nothing. But in my mind, you know, I thought it was this. Then I told them. I says -- they took out the money. They made something for them self. It was cut out with the breast, you know. It was not a suit. They make something from them self, but from their clothes, they made for me. You know, everybody -- it was not -- I mean, they couldn't afford much clothes, neither, so they made something for them self. The shoes, they couldn't wear, but they didn't want it in my room in case -- wondering, you know, why a pair of adult clothes should be there. They took the money out and kept it, okay. Well, I said, "That's it. It's gone," but I never fought them because I felt, well, maybe they want to get paid for what they're doing.

When the liberation came and I was allowed to go in the city -- it's a little town, but to them it was the city -- and see all the American soldiers coming. I was allowed to go with that girl, not by myself, I guess, for security. They want to make

sure. It was great. It was wonderful, but I still didn't know if I was gonna see my parents, you know. I didn't know. I didn't know what was going on really. And the American soldiers were throwing the chocolate and the chewing gum because really, the sweetness, we didn't get during the war. You know, it's all with ration, you know, the stamps and tickets they had to buy food. It was great, all the kids getting all excited, picking up all these goodies that the American threw down from their tank and everything. Then in the evening, we came home, and there was a dance, people dancing and singing in the street. But during that time that I was there, there was an escape from -- a prisoner of war they hid, too, not only me. For the last -- for the first two year -- I was about there two and a half year, maybe less. It was fine. I didn't have to run in the woods and hide. The last six months was terrible. Every time -- some people must have known they were hiding the prisoner of war, but they didn't know they were hiding a Jewish child. They came to him and says, "Go, hide. They're in town." So right away, he went in the woods, and I went with -- for a couple of times with him. We had a little suitcase. He was doing the same thing. He had his little suitcase packed. And we went in the wood.

>> Interviewer: This prisoner of war was living with the farmer.

>> Starkman: with the farmer and worked with him as a laborer, you know.

>> Interviewer: I see.

>> Starkman: Okay. At the end, it got too bad. He went and worked with the underground. And then it happened one time I had to go by myself in the wood, and I was petrified. With that suitcase sitting there by a place -- it was all bushes there. And they told me to sit there, and I will hear some kind of a whistle when the son -- when it's safe, you know, the son will come and get me. They knew that the prisoner of war was not gonna come back, that he was gonna go with the underground, and that's where he had gone. And I start crying when he left me

there. I didn't know till I hit that spot where I was supposed to stay. And he says, "Don't worry. I have to go. They'll come and get you." Well, they did come and get me, and I -- that's the only time I had to go in the woods by myself and hide really.

All right, well, after the liberation, the farmer talked to me. They left me alone for a while, but I was depressed. I wanted to find my parents. I wanted to know if they were alive. I says, "What do I do now?" I remember all of a sudden that that man in Venissieux in the camp when my father found him, told him my uncle went into hiding -- wasn't taken. So I says, "well, let me write to the mayor of the town." And I remember the town, but I couldn't remember no other address, so I wrote the town and the department, you know. It was [indistinct] de Loire. I don't remember that small town. I wrote to the mayor, and I was waiting to get news, okay? The mayor received my letter, and on his own bicycle -- he knew where my uncle lived in another town. It's [indistinct]. It was in Riorges. And he took the letter and gave it to my uncle. So my uncle, by that time, knew already I was alive. He wrote me a letter, a few words. He didn't know to read too much French. His wife could. And just a few words saying, "we'll see you soon. we're working at it. Take care of yourself. we love you." Something like this is French. Okay, through the Red Cross, a telegram came that the farmers had to take me to a certain place in Gap -- it was like another bigger city -- and drop me off at this place of the Salvation Army. It was like -- salvation, it was a small place, you know, that during the war, people stayed there maybe. That woman was there with the little boy. Before I left, they hugged me, they said good-bye, the farmers, and handed me the money. They even made a pouch and hanged it on my chest. They says, "If you need it, at least you have something." They gave me back everything.

well, when I wind up in the Salvation Army, I don't know what's happened. Nobody came and picked me up. Some misunderstanding, maybe, or what. I stayed there a few days. I was under the

impression that woman was Jewish, too, in hiding, and finally wind up there with that little boy. And she spoke another language, but I don't remember what it was, with that little boy. And I stayed there, and all of sudden, she says, "You know, I cannot afford to support you." But I didn't want to touch that money. So I says, "Well, I have a few franc." I says, "I'll give it to you." That I had in my pocket, and I gave it to her and said, "That's all what I have." I still had wanted that money for my parents. I thought I could help them to get a start. She put me on a train. She paid for the ticket. I guess I didn't give her much. I didn't have much. And sent me to a woman who had another Jewish child, an older person, beautiful woman. When I was over there, I stayed with her awhile. She wanted to adopt that child. That child was given to her by the parents. It was a little girl, blond, beautiful child. That's why I thought -- I had the picture. I was looking for her picture, and she was with that woman. I thought if I could find it -- I'm still gonna look maybe and see. And she kept me for a while. It was so nice to be there, and she gave me beautiful little blouses she made from her own blouses and went out and even bought little socks for me and took care of me as much as she took care of that little girl. And she told me, "I'm taking care of you," and I still remember, "You have to promise me, don't tell nobody I have a Jewish child here." And I promised her, and I kept my promise. I never told nobody there was a Jewish child. She says, "I'll give it only to the parents. I will never give her to nobody else." So I don't know what happened to that child.

When I was there -- I must have caught this at the Salvation Army -- I wind up being full with lice, body, hair, everything. I woke up one morning. I couldn't sleep the whole night. I didn't know what was happening to me. I woke her up. I was embarrassed. It was degrading, really, to me, you know. I remember my mother being so spotless and meticulous with me, being an only child. I went to her and told her, and she says, "Oh, my God." She was so afraid that the other little girl was

going to catch it. She says, "I cannot keep you." She disinfected the bed and stripped it. Disinfected -- fumigated the whole room. I had to pack my suitcase. She put me on the train. She gave me an address. She thought it was the Jewish community center. She says, "Go find this, and they could get you to a Jewish community center."

By the time I hit Grenoble -- that was in Grenoble, she wanted -- it was a bigger city. It was a much larger city. I got the address. Nobody knows of this place. So I'm walking in the street, not knowing where I'm going. I left my suitcase on the train where you could store your luggage. I know I couldn't carry it with me. I walked in the street, and I cried there over a bridge, and I kept looking down and thinking, what do I do now? You know, scared, petrified. I was scared. At that time I was 14, I guess. I was close to 15. My birthday's in July. And there was a young couple there, holding hands, hugging and kissing, and they start talking Hebrew. I says, "Oh, God." I went and approached them. I said, "Are you Jewish?" They looked at me. They were afraid to admit it. Even after the liberation, people were afraid to admit that they were Jews. And they looked at me and stared at me, and then the young man asked -- he was over 20; I mean, they were not teenagers -- what I was doing, and I explained a little bit of my situation, what happened. He said, "Okay, I'm taking you home."

They lived so poorly, you know. whatever they could survive after the war, everybody tried their best. And that poor mother must have arthritis, and I remember her hand like this, and she made matzo ball to eat. It was not made with matzo. It was made with breadcrumbs. I don't know what she made, but it looked like matzo ball. I says, "What's this?" She says, "Well, I'm making matzo ball." But I said, "But that's not matzo." It must have been dry bread that she had grated. Couldn't even grate it. She asked me to help her to grate it. And her husband helped her. And I told them I was filled with lice. I admitted it because I didn't want to infect -- and he says, "Don't worry. We saw worse

than that. You'll sleep on the floor." They put blankets, a few blankets on the floor. He says, "And tomorrow, I'll have it fumigated." And he kept me there. They didn't put me out. I slept there even more than one day. He wanted his girlfriend to take me, but she wouldn't. She was afraid because of the -- I was infested. Then the next day, he took me to the Jewish community -- I mean, there was like a Jewish community center that they had rebuilt for all the people who were safe, survivors, you know, and things, went into hiding, all the hidden people, adults, children. And I asked him, "I want to take a bath." I thought that if I take a bath, everything's gonna disappear, but they did -- they sent me to a hospital. I was so embarrassed. They put me in the nude, sprayed me all over, then put me in a room. And something came from the room. I don't know. They took my clothes and fumigated them, too, and then after this, it's fine. Then that girl wanted me in her house, so they kept me for a while till they could find my uncle again, to get back in contact, to see how they're gonna do this.

I had to take -- from there, from Grenoble, I had to take a train to go to Roanne again. That's where the train station was. So my uncle sent a telegram, "I'll be waiting for you on this and this day at this and this time." They put me on the train, and where we exchange, they announced that the next train is delayed. And I didn't know where to turn. My uncle had no telephone. I just knew the street -- but at that time, I knew already the town. I didn't know the street. You sent a telegram -- in France, in the small town, you just give the name, and that's it, and the town, and no street, nothing, so I really didn't have a full address of my uncle. The man -- I cried, and I didn't have no change. At that time, I would have taken the money, but it was all paper money. So the man saw me crying and he said, "Do you want a cup of coffee?" Well, I was scared. It was like an older man. I was a little scared. He went and got myself a cup of cocoa, and he gave it to me, and I says, Boy, I don't know that man. It scared me, you know. Then he says, "What

happened with you? Why are you by yourself in a train station? You're too young." Because I looked like I was eight, not -- you know, I was so short and skinny. And he gave me money to call my uncle. I explained him what happened, tell him the train is delayed. Well, my uncle had no phone. You called the post office, and they give him the message. You see, they go and get him. They hold the line and give him the message, and then he came. He says, "Okay, I'll wait for you." See, it was like a little town built around the post office and city hall and everything, but city hall was further away. "And I'll wait for you." So okay, that man didn't leave me alone till I went on that train, that older person. I thanked him and went on.

I arrive in Roanne at the train station. My uncle didn't recognize me, and I didn't recognize him, and we didn't get together. He went home without me, and I stay at the train station. I felt like the whole world had fallen apart. I fell -- I stood with my suitcase there, I fell asleep, and as I fell asleep, I fell asleep on a man, my head. It was a younger man, closer to my age, I think; maybe 19, 18, you know. We start flirting, and then he says, "Let's go have some coffee." We went and had coffee. And then I started stressing. I said, "My uncle was supposed to pick me up." So we went -- he took me -- I guess he felt so sorry for me. He took me to the -- for the train station, the chief there, I don't know, somebody there. Explained the condition. He said, "Look, you stay here, and tomorrow morning, we'll see what we can do." Well, they couldn't do nothing. Hoping that my uncle might come back early in the morning. He never came back. He thought I'd missed -- you know, I didn't make it. I remember it was pouring rain. I says, "Well," I says, "can I leave my little suitcase here?" And they kept it. They gave me a ticket for it, and I walk, hoping I would be as lucky there that I was in Grenoble, finding people maybe talk Jewish or what. Well, it rained so hard, you didn't see too many people there. So I asked people, "where is city hall?" I mean, just the name, and, you know, it should be

registered because everybody in Belgium has to walk around with identification card. You cannot walk around with just like this, you know? Everybody there.

So I went there. It was a bunch of young people there at the office, and I was soaking with my hair hanging, everything. I mean, I looked like a mess. They start laughing. They thought I looked funny. Well, I guess I did. And I asked for that person. I says, "well, my uncle lives here," I says, "because I received a telegram." He says, "well, we don't have nobody by that name," but they didn't even bother to go looking in the books, you know. So one guy, yes, did pretend he was looking, and then he says, "No, we don't have nobody that." I don't know if realized I was Jewish or what. I have no idea. And I just told him I missed my uncle at the train station, and that's it. After this, I walked, and I went to the post office. I says, "Look, you delivered some telegram to my uncle this-and-this date, and I received some back." I says, "I don't have his full address. I just know it's in Riorges, but I don't know where it is, and I missed my uncle on the train station." He didn't come -- I thought he didn't come and get me, okay. That's the point. I didn't realize he didn't recognize me. And she really was pretty sarcastic, and it was a man behind me. He says, "Don't you see that child is suffering enough? Can't you do something for her?" Finally, you know -- no, the first time, I went out of the line. She says, "Get out of the line." She says, "I'm busy. Don't you see all these people behind you?" But I went back in line. I was determined that somebody was gonna have to give me an answer. I didn't know where to turn at that point, and that's when that man said, "Don't you see that child is suffering enough?" He must have realized what's going on or what. And she went and looked through where the telegram was delivered from this person. They must have this on file. And they took me to my uncle. The man walked me halfway there. He said, "Okay, that's that all the way down there."

And they lived in a place there, and he went back to his sewing. He was a custom tailor. And when I walked in, he was fitting a man there, and he looked at me and turned white like a ghost. And he says, "I didn't see you," and I passed out. I just was in a state of shock. When I came back to myself, my aunt was smacking my face, and then I saw my little cousin. She couldn't even talk -- she was almost three years old -- I guess for being in hiding too. They had given away that child. She couldn't talk, and I just went and -- they started hugging me and kissing me, and that little girl wanted to hug me, and I didn't want to hug her. I was afraid she was gonna catch my lice. I stayed away from her, and I took my uncle's big shear, I remember, and I cut off all my hair. They couldn't stop me. They were afraid because I went, like, crazy. But I didn't have no more lice. It was just, you know, in my mind. I felt better after I cut my hair. I guess all my frustration, everything, went out the window. Crying and crying, they couldn't stop me. They had a customer there. He went out. He says, "I'll be back tomorrow, and then we're all sitting there, carrying on." Then my uncle explained to me that he didn't see me. So I guess he didn't recognize me. And the next day, my aunt took me to the doctor to see if I was well, if everything was all right with me because I went through more at the time at I was liberated than I -- you know, during that space, little time I had there to find my uncle, being lost and shipped from one place to another, I was like -- the only they had to give me was like something to calm me down because my nerves were shot. You know, I was always shaking, and I had like a nervous tick, you know, always trying to clear my throat. I always had that lump in my throat.

But after I was there and lived a mostly relaxed life and met other Jewish young children, I felt better, but I had to legalize my paper because I was still under my false name. So what I did, I wrote to the city hall of Charleroi and explained, you know. They knew all about that. I mean, I was not the only child who was with a false name. They sent me my birth

certificate. I wrote a letter to Gilly to have residence certificate from where I was living before the war. I needed that, too, to get my card, you know. If not, I couldn't walk around. And so Charleroi and Gilly knew I was alive. They all knew, the neighbors, because the police -- it's not a big town. They went around and said, "The shoemaker's Leah, Leah" -- I had a nickname, Leah Banana. "Leah Banana is alive." They didn't know nothing about my father. There was a Jewish family who lived down the street from me, and when he found out I was alive -- my father had a sister survived the war too -- he went to my aunt and told, "Your brother is alive in France, the older one, and the daughter of Zelick is alive too. Leah is alive too." And so it took time for me to have all my paper legalized and I was able to have my card to be able to get food and things like that. At that point, I gave my aunt and uncle the money, and I told them to do whatever they need for me. My shoes were worn out. They went out and bought on the black market a pair of shoes for me. My aunt bought me -- didn't take -- just the money for the shoes because that was expensive, and they didn't have much neither because -- and my uncle was a tailor, so he make me clothes from pieces of material my aunt bought and things like this for me to look decent. And my aunt took me to the beauty parlor to have my hair shaped because I really messed it up.

>> Interviewer: Leah, how did you find your father?

>> Starkman: I'm coming to it now. So my hometown knew I was alive. The Jewish community of Roanne came to my uncle and said, "What are you gonna do with that child? She missed too much schooling. You have to teach her something. She has to learn something. You cannot leave her like this." He says, "If you sign paper, we'll take her, we'll train her, and we'll send her to a kibbutz in Israel." My uncle says, "I cannot do this. If my brother ever survived and he found out I gave away his child, he'll never forgive me." So my uncle didn't sign the paper. So we were there, so that was -- you know, I arrived there, and I must have stayed seven, eight months, not a whole year with my

uncle, and I remember it was around this time because we were cleaning the house for Passover, the house, the little place there, with my aunt. And a telegram arrived. "Daddy's alive. See you soon." When that telegram arrive, and it arrive from Charleroi, at that time, we knew my aunt was alive because she -- you know, city hall gave her the address, and she wrote to her brother, to my uncle. When I got the telegram, my uncle grabbed the telegram. I grabbed the telegram, and we ripped it in two. We were so nervous. That telegram came from the mayor. He came in on a bicycle again.

My father arrived in Charleroi much later than all the other Jews came back because while he was in camp, he found a niece who was laying with typhoid fever. That's my cousin who lives in California now. So he says, "I don't know if my" -- he knew my mother was not alive anymore, and he says, "well, if my child is not alive, at least I'll have my daughter's child." She's five years older than me. Her name is Leah, too, okay. So he waited till she got well, and then he came to Belgium, and it was quite a while after the other one, and every day I used to go to the Jewish community and see if my father's name -- they used to have, like, on the wall, the name of people who came out of the camp. I never saw my father's name. And my uncle says, "well, I guess he didn't make it." The Jewish community came again. Finally, my uncle signed the paper for me to go in a kibbutz, and that's when the telegram came, okay. So it wasn't meant to be. Through the Red Cross, I make sure that, you know, that first came telegram came.

When my father arrive to Belgium, when he went off the train, there was always in every train station, there was a station from the Red Cross for all these refugee and everybody coming back and the prisoners. My father came back more with the prisoners of war, not the Jewish people, and he came with Lulla [phonetic], with Leah. I mean, we called her Lulla not to get confused. Came out the train station, and he went and asked, "Is there any Jews still alive?" He says, "Yeah, there is quite a

few," and he asked where my father lived before the war, and he told him. And he said, "Do you know a Monsieur Fayee [phonetic]?" Monsieur Fayee was a principal of a school. Not the school where I was; another school. He was one of our neighbor. And every couple of days, he stopped with my father and talked to him, politic, all kinds of things. That was their gabbing there together. So my father said, "God, that's a friend of mine." He says, "Okay, I'm gonna call him and tell him you're here and you're alive. He'll come and get you." They call him, and Monsieur Fayee, the Jewish family who lives down the street, was his next-door neighbor. He knocked on the wall and screamed and went outside and screamed, "The shoemaker is alive," and everybody was outside. That Jewish family went out that was Monsieur Korenblit, Max Korenblit, my girlfriend comes every second year and visit me's daughter. Came to the train station, and my father was there, and he said -- oh, you know, they're hugging and crying and everything. And he says, "My God, Zelik [phonetic], how come you found Leah already?" And that's the way my father found out I was alive. He said, "That's not my Leah." He said, "That's my sister's Leah." Because he heard him calling Leah. He said, "My Leah is alive?" He says, "Yeah, she's at your brother's in France." And my father broke down and said, "My brother is alive?" And he says, "And your sister too." So the only two sister he's lost, the two, were in Poland with their children except one of the sister, the two children are here, one of each. That's when he sent that first telegram, but it was the wrong address. My uncle didn't live there no more. So the mayor came, and that's when we got that first telegram.

well, a couple of days -- meanwhile, I had already got in touch with the Red Cross. How do I go home? You know, the Red Cross used to take care of all this because I was still a minor. And I wanted to go back home. And my uncle wanted to see his brother and his sister. So the Red Cross sent me a ticket. Meanwhile, the second telegram comes. Monsieur Max took my father to his sister, and they arrived there, you know. They still live in the

same, old house they used to live before the war. They took it. You know, there was a law, if the house from these people who went to -- during concentration camp, their quarters, their business had to be returned to them. So my uncle got back his place. And they -- my aunt was happy. She got another sister's child there. And then I heard Leah is alive and Max too. He says, "Yeah." He says, "I sent already a telegram." He says, "Where?" He said, "No, they don't live there." So my uncle right away took the trolley, went to send another telegram to the real address, so the second telegram came to -- we got two telegram. During the time, between all that, the ticket came from the Red Cross, and I was able to travel legally because, you know, I had no passport, nothing. I mean, I was still a minor. My uncle went and smuggled into Belgium to be able to see his brother, and I'm sure that cost him quite a penny, but he wanted to see him. Well, in Paris, we were split, okay, because I went legally and he went illegally. So through Paris, he knew some people there. He found them, and they took care of him to go through. I go on the trolley.

I still remember where my uncle lived, everything, so I went there. My father goes out of the place. He looked all swollen. He didn't even look skinny like, you know, you heard people saying the people coming out from concen -- he was swollen. No hair, you know, just started to grow, and he looked so pathetic, so worn out, so old to me. I thought it was another customer of my uncle, you know. I didn't realize it was my father. I walked in the house, and my aunt was screaming. She thought it was a customer downstairs. She said, "who is it?" I say, "It's Leah." She says, "What kind of Leah?" You know, she thought it was the other Leah. She said, "*Tante*." We called her *Tante*. Said, "It's Leah." She ran down the steps, and she knew right away who I was. Started crying, says, "Your father just walked out," and I ran out, and I realized it was him. And I ran after him. I says, "Papa." That's "daddy" in French. And we were crying there, standing in the street and crying. My uncle is looking at us.

He's just -- first word I asked, "Where is my mother?" He says, "We'll talk about it." He never wanted to talk about her. Then we came back in the house. They never went -- my uncle went by himself, and he walked back with me, and he told me that my cousin was alive. And I knew -- I remember her from going to Poland. And then we found out that the other niece is alive, too, from the older sister, one of them. But she lived in France. And then after this, my father just helped my uncle being a shoemaker. Tried to make ends meet. The ORT trained me for typing and shorthand, but I never used it, and clothing came to the Jewish community center, and we were allowed to go and pick out what we could. Each child was allowed to pick up one or two outfit; I don't remember. I had no winter coat, so from an American blanket, bought on the black market, we dyed it in brown, and we had a coat made for me. And because winter was approaching and Belgium, the winters are pretty rough, and we stayed with my aunt for a while.

Everything run smooth, but it was rough. Everything was crowded. We were all together. And it didn't work out. I had a rough time with my uncle there. Couldn't stay there. My father stayed there. And he wanted me to -- I was so innocent. He wanted me to go pick up some American soldiers. He told me he doesn't feed me for nothing. He wanted to do black market with them, I guess.

01:02:49