EI-080
LILLIAN SCHWARCZ KAPLAN
BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 7, 1928
INTERVIEW DATE: 8/28/1991
RUNNING TIME: 57:57
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: BRIAN FEENEY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1993
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 7/1993

CZECHOSLOVAKIA VIA SWEDEN, 1952
AGE 23

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, August 28th, 1991. We're here at Ellis Island with Lilly Kaplan, who was born in what was then Czechoslovakia and through a series of events ended up in Sweden, and left from Sweden and came to the United States in 1952. Good morning. Mrs. Kaplan, can you please give me your full name, and include your maiden name in that.

KAPLAN: Lilly Kaplan. My maiden name was Schwarcz, with a C-Z.

SIGRIST: Okay. And when were you born?

KAPLAN: November 7, 1928.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

KAPLAN: In Uzhorod. Czechoslovakia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

KAPLAN: U-Z-H-O-R-O-D. And the Z has a little something above it.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you tell me a little bit about this town, what was it like?

KAPLAN: Actually it was a city with a large Jewish population and lots of schools. There were gymnasiums and high schools and, of course, since then it has had not only universities but even a medical school. It was a beautiful city, and all the children from the surrounding communities used to come in on the railroad station every morning to attend the secondary schools. And there were people who were wealthy, middle class and poor. My family, we had a bakery, a wholesale bakery, and there were five children in the family. Three boys, two girls. I was the oldest. And my parents definitely wanted to send me to schools and have as much education as I could possibly get. Had it not been for the bad times and for Germany occupying the city, I would have most probably continued as far as I could go, but this all interrupted my education.

SIGRIST: Talk about the bakery business. How did your father

get involved in the bakery business?

KAPLAN: Well, actually what happened is what my grandmother built a bakery even before my mother was married. My mother was, had a store, and she was in business, and I guess those years knowing that she owned a bakery, which she was subletting, (she laughs) they were sort of, you know, introducing my mother to somebody who was in the field. So my father, who lived in another city, was introduced to my mother, and they were married in January 1928 and my father started to operate the bakery. And it was quite a busy bakery, as a matter of fact. When times were getting very bad during the Hungarian occupation, more towards the early '40s, 1940's, all the Jewish bakeries were denied licenses and when they weren't denied the license, then they were denied the allocation of flour. So without flour we really couldn't exist. But my father was in the service and my mother, who was a tremendous businesswoman, she went over to the village, villages, and she suggested to the then, whatever mayor or whoever was in charge, that instead of the peasants having to come home after a day's work baking their bread that if he allocated the flour to our bakery, we would bake it and deliver it ready made. And so they accepted her idea, and so that the bakery was in operation until 1944.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk very specifically about your

parents. What was your father's name?

KAPLAN: My father's name was Geza, G-E-Z-A. My mother's name was Rezsi, R-E-Z-S-I.

SIGRIST: Were they both from this town?

KAPLAN: No. My mother was and my father was from a different, small town. He also had two brothers who subsequently moved to this city so that the family was all living in Uzhorod after that.

SIGRIST: As a child, how do you remember your father? What did he look like?

KAPLAN: Well, my father, I was very, very close to him. And maybe because I was the oldest. He loved children. (she is moved) I get emotional. And I lost him at age seventy (?) of lung cancer in the United States. My daughters were very close to him. He wasn't there when my mother and all the children were taken to the concentration camp. Subsequently, he came back to Uzhorod after the war thinking that he's going to find his family, and then he found out that I was in Sweden and that it didn't look like anyone else was coming back. And he started to operate the bakery after the war, but when he saw that the Russians were coming in to take over he decided that he'd better

escape before they close the borders or else he'll never get out. And he escaped, and he lived in Germany in a displaced person's camp for three years until I was able to arrange for him to join me in Sweden, where I landed after the war. He told me this story, but I was back in Uzhorod in 1986. And I met an old lady, I went to my house, and she didn't know who I was, and she was telling me this story how Mr. Schwarcz came back after the war, how he operated the bakery, but that he then left and he was going to try to get to the United States, upon which I told her who I was, and she broke down in tears, you know, it was kind of emotional.

SIGRIST: Sure. Talk a little bit about your mother. What was her temperament like?

KAPLAN: My mother was very, very smart. She was a tremendous businesswoman. I was not as close to her as I was to my father. She was much more critical. Maybe she accepted a lot more from me. I was only, you know, fifteen years old. But being that my father was in the service and she had to take over the bakery and running the whole business, naturally she didn't have as much time to devote to her children. We always did have household help, you know, for the hard work. But nevertheless she was so preoccupied with more important things. But I admired her for what she was doing, and she had a great deal on

the ball.

SIGRIST: Sure. Talk about the house that you lived in.

KAPLAN: We lived in our own house, and adjoining to our house, which was right near the bakery, and adjoining to our house lived my uncle, my aunt, and they had three daughters.

SIGRIST: Was this on your mother's side?

KAPLAN: On my mother's side, and he had a grocery store. Nobody came back from that family. We were very comfortable. I mean . . .

SIGRIST: Talk about the house. Describe it for me.

KAPLAN: The house, the house wasn't enormous. You know, a huge kitchen and a big living room and actually two big bedrooms where we all had to, you know, share. But it was built by my father, and for the circumstances it was very comfortable. There was no, you know, central heating or hot water. I mean, all this, very few people in my home town those years had it.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity in the house?

KAPLAN: Yes. We had electricity, definitely, sure.

SIGRIST: I see.

KAPLAN: And some people already had cars. I mean, you know, it was starting to, things started to get better, but we didn't (she laughs) we didn't know any better. We thought it was very good. And my childhood, basically up to the point that the problem started, was a very happy one.

SIGRIST: That was going to be my next question. Kind of tell me what it was like to grow up in this kind of environment.

KAPLAN: All the children were very happy, because we had the basics. We had good food and we had loving parents, and we certainly had a lot of friends. Except that as the Hungarians came in and occupied our city on November 10, 1938, and the reason I remember the date so vividly is because my mother was giving birth in the house to the youngest child. And my father had to get the midwife, and there was shooting all over town while he went to get her. So this is why I don't think I can ever forget the date. And it was happy until the point that my father was away a lot in the service. My mother and the business, and of course anti-Semitism grew by the days, and it was frightening because in a police state which, of course, very few people would understand here. Here if you see a policeman you feel you have a friend, you can ask him a question. Over there if you saw a policeman you were scared that he is going to your house. So you had all these different misgivings and fears

and all the unknown that you didn't know what's going to happen because we heard rumors that things were happening in Poland and things were happening in Slovakia, we didn't want to believe it. We couldn't conceive that anything like this would ever happen to us.

SIGRIST: And you said this town had a very large Jewish population.

KAPLAN: A very large Jewish population. I think the city now has maybe a population of 200,000 at this point. I don't remember exactly what the population was then, but the area of the city was very large, because over there it's not as dense. I live in a city of eighty-five thousand in New Rochelle, but I think my city was much bigger in the territory because they don't have as many apartment buildings. You know, people all have individual houses no matter how modest.

SIGRIST: Talk about going to school in this city. You said that, obviously there were a lot of schools in this city.

KAPLAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Talk about your own education and your parents' education.

KAPLAN: Well, I was going to, the first four years into a

private elementary school which was religion-oriented. You know, it was a Jewish private, like a parochial school. And then, when I finished my fourth grade, the rumors were that the Russians are coming in, which was in 1938. And so I very quickly registered in a Russian preparatory school for the fifth year. Of course, they didn't come in, and the Hungarians came in. So then I entered Hungarian, which was called, over there, high school. I would consider it over here junior high school. Our system works differently. We went to school six days a week. We didn't have long summer vacations. We didn't have long Christmas or Easter vacations. Only two days each time, so that I would judge, you know, what they called high school, which I graduated in 1943.

SIGRIST: You mentioned Christmas and Easter vacations. Was this not a Jewish school as such?

KAPLAN: This was already a Hungarian public school. High school, I went to a Hungarian public school. But our school system was not separated from religion. Each religion did have religious instruction separately.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your family's religious life, in general? Were you religious people?

KAPLAN: We were, of course, we are Jewish and we were, I would

consider, compared to people here, that it was, that we were religious. But yet we were kind of modern. I mean, my father went to synagogue, and he didn't smoke on the Sabbath, and we kept a kosher household. But it wasn't ultra-orthodox.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue in your neighborhood?

KAPLAN: Yes. There was a synagogue in my neighborhood. The only time my mother attended synagogue was the high holy days, but my father did go Friday night and Saturday morning.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk about, just sort of give us a cursory view of the war coming and what it was like to live in the town as this was happening.

KAPLAN: Well, as this was happening, my mother suggested to me that maybe I ought to hide. And there were some Christian families that we were close with, and they wanted to hide me and dye my hair and put a cross on my neck, but I refused. I refused because my father was in the service and I couldn't see myself letting my mother go with the four kids. So as a result we were taking into the ghetto. As I said, my father was not there. While we were in the ghetto, my father came and they allowed him to visit. But because he sneaked in some cookies and salami, he was really beaten up by the Hungarian, you know, police, gendarmes, as they called them.

SIGRIST: When you say the ghetto, had they rounded up the Jews and put them in one part of the town?

KAPLAN: Yes. There were two places in my home town. One was a huge brick factory and the other one was a huge lumber yard. And where normally they would store lumber in this huge area, they have put down, I guess, some hay and so they just gathered up the Jews and divided them based on where they lived into these two different ghettos, which were then surrounded by guards. And they, we were only able to take whatever we could carry with us, and we had to leave the house and all the possessions, and we were in the ghetto. I don't remember exactly how much, I would judge maybe five to six weeks.

SIGRIST: When you were escorted to the ghetto, was this done in a non-violent way?

KAPLAN: Well, it was non-violent because we didn't have anything to be violent with, so we just did what they told us.

SIGRIST: But very threatening.

KAPLAN: And so we went in, like, herds, we were taken. And during this period, as I said, my father visited and then we, then he left. And then they put us, of course, into the cattle cars, and the rest is history. I came to Auschwitz. I was

separated from them at the railroad station.

SIGRIST: You left with your mother and brothers and sister. How old are you at this time?

KAPLAN: Fifteen.

SIGRIST: Fifteen.

KAPLAN: And I never saw them since. (she pauses) I was in Auschwitz about, I don't recall exactly, maybe around six weeks because I was one of those that they were going to send to Germany for labor. We always saw that the children and the mothers were somewhere in a different camp. Naturally the other inmates, mostly Polish Jewish girls who have been there for years, and they were kind of harsh because of the time they spent there, they used to point at the big flames and saying, "That's where they are." (Interviewer's note: she is moved emotionally)

SIGRIST: I see. I see.

KAPLAN: So we had to accept the fact that that's what happened.

SIGRIST: I know this is difficult. Let me ask this question. When you were there for six weeks, what got you through? What

did you cling to?

KAPLAN: Somehow or another, when you are with a large group of people, you know, it's like you roll with the punches, and also you become sort of concerned, all of a sudden, with yourself. We were counted every morning, and we had double, I don't know what you call it, decks where we slept like sardines. We had to sleep on the side, and everybody had to turn at the same time because there was very little space. And we knew that we are in this particular block because we were going to go on. I became friendly with two other women. Actually, they were older than I, maybe four years older. One of them was a house servant in one of my neighbor's houses and one was a neighbor's daughter. And they took a little bit of charge of me because I was the youngest, and we were kind of concerned when they were selecting us to go to Germany that we should stick together. We were afraid to stand together, because then they would know we are friends and they would separate us. So we tried to be in different spots in the hope that they will pick them, too. And so they picked them too, and then we were all transported to a place called Gelsen Kirchen in Germany.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

KAPLAN: I assume it would be G-E-L-S-E-N. Kirchen, K-I-R-C-H-

E-N. And they didn't have any facilities for us other than tents, huge tents with double layers, again, for us to sleep in. And there were two thousand of us.

SIGRIST: And these are all young women?

KAPLAN: These were all young women, and two thousand of us were sent there. We couldn't figure out what we were going to do there because there was a lot of bombing going on which, of course, when we got there we didn't know yet. But they were going to use us to unload brick from the ships and we would make a human chain and pass the brick one to the other all day long until the tips of our fingers were bleeding. So we were there, the first night was the biggest surprise of my life because up to this point we were not exposed to the war. And the first night we went to sleep, (she uses a tissue) the air raids went off, and there was bombing all over, and we were so scared that we jumped off the higher, you know, decks, and we were all ripped apart because it was dark, and we ran to the two openings of the tent trying to see if we can escape, but it made no sense to go any place, there was no place to go. They were bombing us practically daily, so the fright of the war was even worse than being, you know, in prison.

SIGRIST: And, as you say, this is really the first time that

you've been subjected to actual bombing.

KAPLAN: Exactly.

SIGRIST: In your city it hadn't happened.

KAPLAN: No. And it didn't happen in Auschwitz. Now, we were there a couple of months, if I recall, maybe two months, when some German dignitaries came. They lined up all two thousand, and they again picked out five hundred. My friends and I did the same thing. We spread out in the hope that they would pick us out. Of course, in Auschwitz we had to stand in the nude because if they saw a pimple or any marks on you or you were too heavy or too skinny you were picked, you know, you weren't sent. But over here already they didn't go to this extreme. And fortunately they picked five hundred, and all three of us were together. And these people were actually officers of Kruppp, the big ammunition factory owners in Germany. And they took us to Essen, E-S-S-E-N, a large industrial city where I remember a street, Humboldt Strasse, and there were barracks, for the first time, with just a couple of girls in each room, and regular beds, and it really looked like this was going to be terrific. And they had not bunkers, but almost like they call them splittegrabben, where you just went down a few steps on the ground, and they would have air vents in order to escape, you

know, fragments of any bombings. But, of course, if a bomb came close to this area, then that's it. So things looked much better, except what we didn't know that Essen was maybe the second city that was really bombed after Berlin very heavily, and all the barracks burned down. And there were some Russian prisoners adjoining our camp, and one of the bombs fell on their bunker and killed them all, and we were running to see if we could salvage some of the clothes or whatever we could. And from this point on we had to be, we were in a cellar where they arranged for these double-deck places to sleep on. And a big problem was that this was all concrete and from condensation all night the water was dripping on the blankets. So in the morning in the winter, you had to go out to be counted at five o'clock, you would take the wet blanket, and that was actually your coat, the blanket you slept with. We used to wrap it around our head, down, and then take a belt and tie it around the neck, like a cape. And it used to be damp because of the condensation. And the Germans tried to put the barracks back, and each time they went two-thirds they were finished there was new air raids and it was down to the ground again. So that's where . . .

SIGRIST: And all this time you're still being used in the munitions factory.

KAPLAN: I worked, there were several factories. I worked at

the Weilswork where there were, a huge ammunition factory where they were, you know, I don't know how you call it in English but, you know, they would take the steel and put it in the ovens to harden them. You know how they have to harden the steel. And I was working these ovens, you know. You had to adjust the temperature, how much gas, how much air, and it had to be a certain given temperature, and then the steel would be lowered by the cranes and put into these ovens. As a matter of fact, a strange incident happened to me. I know a girl for the past three years who's a member of my club, and I knew that she was a Holocaust survivor. I never discussed anything with her, until one day I saw her picture in the local newspaper, and when I read her story I had goosebumps because when I called her up and I said, "I see you were in Essen during the war and that you worked in Weilswork in Krupp." I said, "What did you do there?" "Oh," she says, "I was on the crane lowering the steel into the ovens." I said, "Really." I said, "I was the girl at the ovens accepting the steel." And we have known each other for years and we never knew that we worked at the same, you know, station.

SIGRIST: Amazing. What was the name of the factory?

KAPLAN: Weilswork. Work is like factory, I think, in German. So we worked one week, I think, nights, and one week days, twelve hour shifts. And the biggest problem was the winter.

Because after they bombed all the streetcars, they used to take us on the streetcars, and there was snow on the ground. We had to walk from Humboldt Strasse to the factory, which was a very long walk. We had wooden soles on our shoes, and as you walk in snow a ball forms underneath your sole, so you couldn't walk. You were falling backwards to the point where the S.S. had to use their bayonets to chop the snow several times off the shoes or else we couldn't even get to the factory. And so that was one, you know, bad situation, and the other one, of course, was, especially when you worked nights, and the air raids came. The Germans wouldn't let us into the bunker. So he, all the planes are bombing and all the lights are flickering and all the turmoil. And here we are clutched together not going what's going to happen. As a matter of fact, once they let us into the recreational area where they usually had their coffee, and we were huddling in one corner of that room. And all of a sudden in another corner a big radiator came down from the air raid, and had we been in that corner we would have all gotten killed.

SIGRIST: Were you expected to continue working during the air raids?

KAPLAN: No. Nobody could work because all lights went off. And nobody worked, but there was a very big bunker. I mean, at one point they let us in a couple of times, you know, depending

on who was in charge. And let me tell you it's a lot of, lot of steps. It was all the way underground, and once you were in there you were safe. But they didn't always want to let us in there. So that was a very bad emotional thing because you never knew, and many times we would come out of the factory and find shot-down planes in the area, you know. And when I got to Essen there were many, many beautiful homes around, and when I left Essen I don't' think there was one building that wasn't hit. So it was a terrifying experience just to be part of the war.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Essen?

KAPLAN: Well, let's see now. I don't know. If I was six weeks in Auschwitz, two months, that's three months. Maybe a month in Bergen-Belzen, that's four months. Maybe around eight months, seven, eight months.

SIGRIST: It's almost a year. Is that where you were . . .

KAPLAN: I was a total one year in the concentration camp because when the Germans, when the English started to get closer to Essen, then they packed us up and they took us to Bergen-Belzen, where I was liberated April 15, 1945.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about that. What did it feel like?

KAPLAN: Well, when they decided to take us out of Essen so we couldn't be liberated, there were six girls that escaped. And, of course, they were searching for them high and low, and four of those girls are from my home town, and two of them I'm in touch with. And, of course, they were telling me what happened to them. I mean, they went to the cemetery, they were hiding out. That's a very long story. Maybe I'll suggest that you get in touch with her, because that's really an unbelievable story, what happened to these girls who escaped. But they took us, and unfortunately all the railroad tracks were bombed. So what maybe what would have taken a few hours, I should look it up on the map, from Essen to Bergen-Belzen took a week, because we were going back and forth trying to get connections to get there. Now, in the process I recall that we passed by a concentration camp when I recognized one of them men who was working in the bakery and he was like a skeleton, and he recognized me. And that kind of was a very sad experience. But we got to Bergen-Belzen and in Bergen-Belzen they put us into one huge room, hundreds of us.

SIGRIST: And, again, all young women?

KAPLAN: Well, everyone wasn't the same age, you know. If somebody was twenty, or even twenty-five, and didn't have little children, they could have been with us. So not everyone was my

age. There was a variation, let's see, if I was sixteen at that point, then you could have also had some that were thirty. We were there for a whole month, and there were guards standing all around, and they were giving us very inferior soup because really they didn't have that much to eat themselves and some bread and the terrible thing there was that the diarrhea. You know, all these thousands of people that had no chance, I don't even remember if there were any latrines. They just walked out of the room and they were sitting down and doing their thing wherever it was comfortable, so as a result there must have been typhus was going rampant. And there were friends that I spoke to one minute and the next minute they were dead. So they were dying like flies. We had to take them by the hands and drag them out to this big mound of all the dead bodies in Bergen-Belzen. And I hate to say this, and I don't know if it would be of any interest to anyone, but we spent our days exchanging recipes because when we spoke about food it sort of made us feel better, and the other occupation was picking lice out of our clothes. All day long spreading the seams of our clothes and trying to, and then of course they were back the next hour. And so this is how we spent the whole month that we couldn't work, there was nothing there. It was chaos. And April 15th we noticed that there are no guards. We couldn't believe that anything good is happening. And the next thing we knew we saw

tanks and English, you know, military coming by and they were going through the camp, and I think that my lucky break was that I was with two girls whose father was in United States, and these girls spoke English. I didn't. And they went over to one of these military men and said, "Look, we are still alive, we still feel good. Please get us out of here." Because we were afraid that any day we'll go because the people raided the kitchens and they stole all the canned stuff, whatever we found, and all the potatoes and they were sitting baking potatoes, and we would bake it like for two minutes and eat it raw, and we would eat all that canned stuff, so it was getting worse and worse with the diarrhea. And so this, they took us, and they put us into, well, before we went into the hospital, they deloused us, you know, and cleaned us up, and they put us into these makeshift hospitals that they set up, and that's what happened.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: What did you do after the liberation, after you were released from this makeshift hospital?

KAPLAN: Well, it wasn't that simple because I started to run a temperature, and they didn't know what was wrong with me. In

the meantime, more of my friends died there. And after they sent me for x-rays, they discovered that I had a spot on my lung. So now I stayed there for a while, and those two other girls that I was telling you about, they decided that they want to go back to my home town. And I said, "I'm not going back." Number one, they threw me out of there. Number two, if I'm sick, I'm afraid to go back because I don't know if I'll be able to get the care I need.

SIGRIST: Is it that they wanted to accompany you back to your home town?

KAPLAN: The people just picked up and left, and at that point I heard that Sweden wants to take some of the people. And regardless whether they, as a matter of fact, they had to be sick, I think, for the most part. Because, you know, I hate to say this, United States only wanted you if you were well, and if you have private people guaranteeing for the fact that you won't be a burden to the government, but Sweden didn't care. And so I volunteered, or I suggested, or I wanted to go to Sweden. I remembered from my history class, you know, that they were nice people, there was no war, and I figured it'll give me a chance to see what another place looks like.

SIGRIST: And at this point you're convinced that you have no

family left. You didn't know that your father was . . .

KAPLAN: I didn't know that my father was alive. So I volunteered to go, and we were taken to Lübeck, where we were de-loused again. And then on a ship I remember, and we came to Malmö which is a city in Sweden on the southern border. And we were put into a huge school that they converted into a quarantine, and for six weeks they wouldn't let you out because they had to double-check to see whether anything was wrong with you.

SIGRIST: How many people in this group?

KAPLAN: Oh . . .

SIGRIST: Hundreds?

KAPLAN: Hundreds. Not only that, but I met two girls that I'm still friendly with who live on Long Island. And I was in fairly good health in spite of my T.B. But there were so many young girls that were so sick they couldn't even eat when they could. So I used to, these girls and I used to collect all the sandwiches from them. We said, "Don't give it back. Just take it." So we would be sitting up all night eating, and I gained thirteen pounds in one week.

SIGRIST: Oh, dear. (he laughs)

KAPLAN: So anyway, we stayed there for six weeks, at which point they sent us to Karlstad, which is a city in the northern border where they also made a hospital out of a school strictly for T.B. And I was there. There was a very prominent doctor who had a sanitarium, and he came to oversee the treatment of these people. And while I was there one day he felt that I should start getting treatments. The treatment at that time, since I didn't have the medication, it was called pneumothorax. And what it really meant that they put a large needle in your rib cage and they pumped in air to collapse the lung to give it a chance to rest, which meant you only were using the good lung to give this one a chance to get better. And while I was on the stretcher waiting for my turn to go in for this first treatment, which I understood wasn't very pleasant, I received a phone call from a cousin of my mother's who was in Sweden. And I had a feeling that she maybe wants to tell me something about my father. At that point I was maybe childish, but I said, "I don't want my father to know that I'm alive, because I'm going to die anyway." Because I was brought up with the idea, in my childhood, that if anyone had T.B. they were dying. I remember that if I knew someone had T.B. I wouldn't even walk on that side of the street. But anyway, everybody was, you know, urging me to pick up the phone. And when I picked up the phone, this

cousin said to me that her sister, who was not in the concentration camp because she married a Christian man long before the war, went to my home town to look for her family and met my father there. And that she, you know, and that my father is alive and he is back in my home town. And subsequently when he found out that I'm alive and I'm in Sweden, because I guess she must have sent word to him, he then escaped and came to Germany to a displaced persons camp. Now . . .

SIGRIST: How did you feel? How did you feel when you heard that news? I mean, you said you didn't . . .

KAPLAN: I cried.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Because you must have felt very much alone up to that point.

KAPLAN: Sure, sure. Anyway, so what happened was this very prominent doctor who was conducting the treatment of these, he went back to his sanitarium. And when I started to get the treatment, I felt that maybe staying where I was, and they were practicing on me, and I didn't know the other doctors, and I became a little bit concerned, because he really took all the sick people with him to that sanitarium. I wrote to him a letter that I really would like to come to his sanitarium, that I did start treatment, and sure enough he wrote back to me and

he arranged for me to go. So I stayed in his sanitarium, which was a beautiful sanitarium with all the Swedish people, and I was getting the best treatment that anyone else could get. And I must have stayed there maybe about six months, at which point I was ready to go to a convalescent home. And I came back to a place called Vickingshill, which is outside of Stockholm. And, of course, again I was with a lot of other people and a lot of other friends. And I stayed there not very long because at that point they offered us, since I was young, to go to a boarding school. And I jumped to the occasion, and I was sent to the school in Darlana, which is a northern part of Sweden. It was called By'Kyrby, and it was a boarding school that was absolutely fabulous. We had all the subjects, including Hebrew and English.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the school?

KAPLAN: By'Kyrby. B-Y, apostrophe, and then K-Y-R-B-Y. And so it was all Holocaust survivors, mostly girls, very few, you know, young men, and so we had classes every day. Almost all the subjects, plus languages and then we had a lot of extra-curricular activities: classical music, all kinds of dances and games, and it was a very, very nice place to be. I must have been there maybe two years.

SIGRIST: Did you learn Swedish?

KAPLAN: Very fast. I mean, I was fluent. And just before I was ready to be discharged, because they were going to dissolve this, a lot of the girls at that point went illegally to Israel and I felt that I have to really start thinking what I'm going to do. So I very quickly, they offered me some courses in bookkeeping, and I took them. And in the meantime my father came, in 1948. So I haven't seen him from '44 to '48, and I arranged for him to come to Sweden, and he was able to get a position in a bakery and so he was settling in and at least I was able to, you know, see him from time to time.

SIGRIST: That must have been very emotional seeing him for the first time.

KAPLAN: Absolutely. It was really something. And then I left the school and I worked in a very large company called Asea, A-S-E-A. I would say it was the equivalent to General Electric. And I worked in Westerose, which was the main factories. They also had offices in Stockholm. And I did bookkeeping, but before I started to work I jumped a little bit too fast, I think, from the school. I was sent to Westerose to another sanitarium first, and I stayed there a few months, and then I went to work. And I worked in Asea in Westerose. And my

father, in the meantime, remarried and he lived in Stockholm. At that point I asked to be transferred to their office in Stockholm, and then I took a course in shorthand, in Swedish shorthand, and so I was working in their offices in Stockholm until January 1952. No, actually I left Sweden late December, '51.

SIGRIST: Why did you want to come to America?

KAPLAN: There were several reasons. I loved Sweden, and it's the greatest country, and I still have friends living there. One reason really was that I felt that the Jews were very spread apart. That I had a choice either completely to assimilate and forget my roots or, you know, I had to either go to Israel or the United States. And the reason I didn't go to Israel is because I felt that my health was not perfect, that Israel didn't need people to take care of. Israel needs people who can take care of it. And so I felt since I had family in the United States, I had my mother's brother and all the cousins. I had my grandmother's sister. They were, the grandmother's sister was still alive when I got here. My mother's brother unfortunately died before I got here. It took me seven years to get in here because, you know, I couldn't come until I was well enough to come. And that's why I chose United States.

SIGRIST: I see. So you left from Stockholm?

KAPLAN: I left from Stockholm. I went to Göteborg, where I came on the Gripsholm, on the ship. And I think I maybe mentioned this in my report that unfortunately on New Year's Day I had an attack of an appendectomy and I had surgery on the ship. So when the time came to come in to United States, not only the fact that I had surgery on the ship but they also discovered that I had T.B., and so they wouldn't let me in until I wrote to my father and they sent all the records.

SIGRIST: Talk about being sick on the ship. Talk about having appendicitis on the ship. What was that like?

KAPLAN: Well, what happened was it was New Year's Eve on the ship, and I really brought a beautiful dress and it was a great party and I was dancing and having a great time on the ship. And I went back to my cabin and I wound up with terrible, terrible stomach pains. And I guess when they took the blood test they realized what was wrong. I was a little bit frightened about the surgery, but then I also felt that, gee, I don't care now what happens. I'm coming to a total strange country. I really don't know what's awaiting for me, and I understood that medical bills are very high in United States, that I'd better have it done on the Swedish territory because it

wouldn't cost me anything, and I had no money. And the fortunate part was that there was a passenger who was a doctor who was emigrating to the United States, and he assisted the ship's doctor, who maybe never did surgery in his life. And so between the two of them they managed to do it, and so that's what happened.

SIGRIST: I see. So talk about ending up at Ellis Island.

KAPLAN: So, to my greatest shock, when I came off the ship, I wound up in Ellis Island. When you're young, you know, and you're alone and you have a lot of unknown things awaiting you, you really don't fall apart so fast. But it was a scary experience, and the scary experience was that when I looked out I saw the same guard stands with the guards surrounding Ellis Island as I remembered in Bergen-Belzen. So, you know, it brought back terrible memories, and I really didn't know what the outcome of my stay will be. And it was a lot of people, you know. And the food wasn't bad because they told me that you had a kosher kitchen here, so I asked to go there, and the food was palatable. It didn't matter.

SIGRIST: Where did they feed you? What did that look like?

KAPLAN: They had long tables in there, and I didn't think, I didn't make a very big issue of that. I know that the room I

slept in had an awful lot of people in it. And I had visitors.

SIGRIST: What kinds of people were here with you?

KAPLAN: All kinds, from all over. All kinds. And I had friends that I called. I could use the phone. And I had visitors, and they would bring me, you know, like a little fruit, or this or that. And I tell you something, my concern just was I want to get out of here. And I remember once they took me to Staten Island from here to a Navy hospital where they pumped my stomach. They took one of these rubber tubes that they put down all the way into my stomach to get the juices, I guess, which then they injected into a rabbit or something, like a rabbit, I don't know how, to test to see whether there was any kind of bacteria, you know. And so I had all these tests, and then the x-rays arrived and they let me go.

SIGRIST: How long were you at Staten Island?

KAPLAN: Oh, that was just for the day.

SIGRIST: Oh, and they brought you back.

KAPLAN: A guard. I mean, I was guarded. A guard took me, and a guard stayed, and a guard brought me back.

SIGRIST: At Ellis Island, were you basically bedridden?

KAPLAN: No.

SIGRIST: Or you were up and around, you were fine?

KAPLAN: No. As a matter of fact, let me, you know, tell you about this. I was hardly ever bedridden. I mean, I wouldn't, you wouldn't be able to tell that I wasn't well. I was hardly ever bedridden, except when I started the treatment I had to take it a little bit easy. But I went to school, right, and then I was working. And during all this time I was getting treatments.

SIGRIST: So you were always functioning?

KAPLAN: Oh, sure. The treatments were starting, like, weekly, and then bi-weekly, and then every three weeks, and then every four weeks. So as I was working for Asea in Stockholm, I knew that once a month I had an appointment with the doctor to go to get the treatment.

SIGRIST: When you were at Ellis Island did you stay in the main building, or were you in one of the hospital buildings?

KAPLAN: The main building.

SIGRIST: So what did you do all day?

KAPLAN: I guess talking, reading and mingling with people.

There wasn't that much you can do. I don't remember going out.

SIGRIST: Did they have any movies or anything like that for you?

KAPLAN: I don't remember anything like that. I really don't recall anything like that.

SIGRIST: Where did you spend the day, the day part?

KAPLAN: In the large, in this large area. They must have had tables, you know, and you were listening to stories. Everybody had a story, and everybody became, obviously I didn't make permanent contacts with anyone because I have no contact with anyone that I might have met here or seen here. The guards were nice, the people that were, you know, talking to us, or questioning us in Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: So the x-rays arrived, your father sent them.

KAPLAN: The x-rays arrived. They reviewed them. And then they told me that I could go, and I was picked up.

SIGRIST: Who picked you up?

KAPLAN: Well, my step-mother, whom my father married, this lady had a brother here who were closer to my age. I really didn't feel, my mother's family lived in Youngstown, Ohio and my

grandmother's sister was old, she lived in Brooklyn. And so I really chose to stay with them until I, you know, see what I want to do. And so my stepmother's brother, who is my closest friend, he and his wife, even today. We took all our vacations together. He came and he picked me up. At that time he lived in the Bronx on Intervale Avenue on a five, a fifth floor walk up.

SIGRIST: On what Avenue?

KAPLAN: Intervale Avenue.

SIGRIST: Oh, Intervale.

KAPLAN: A fifth floor walk up, and they only came here a few years before, you know, they were just starting out. He barely spoke English. And I stayed with them, and then I decided to visit with my family, so I, first went to Pittsburgh, and I had cousins there, and then my cousin who worked in Kent, Ohio, came in and picked me up, and I was visited with her. And then I went to Youngstown, Ohio, and visited with the family.

SIGRIST: You speak no English, right?

KAPLAN: I spoke English.

SIGRIST: You did speak. When did you learn English?

KAPLAN: Oh, sure. In this boarding school, for two years I took English.

SIGRIST: Oh, oh.

KAPLAN: Not only did I speak it, but I really learned it as it is learned in England, you know, like cinema instead of the movies and things like that. And I wrote, you know, and I spelled right. I mean, I really learned it in school, so I had no trouble with the language. As a matter of fact, my cousins didn't get my notice in Youngstown that I'm coming. And when I arrived at the train station, no one was waiting for me. So I took my luggage and I put it into the locker and I started to walk to find the street, and I did get there. And I left a note that I'm here, no one was home, that I'm going back to the station. And they were hysterical, because they figured the greenhorn is going to get lost. So as I was going back towards the station, I see a girl running out of the railroad station and by chance I said to myself, "I'll call her name," and I called Sylvia and she turns around, and I went to her, and it was my cousin, and she says, 'My God, where were you? We were so nervous? Where is your luggage?'" I said, "It's in the locker." "How did you know where to put it?" I says, "Wait a second. I didn't come from the jungle. I came from Sweden." I said, "In Sweden is, you know, very progressive." And so they

were sort of relieved, because they didn't know that I would know what to do, you know, with the luggage, and I wasn't going to carry the luggage, I was going to leave it and just walk. But anyway, I visited the family, and they did invite me if I wanted to stay with them, but I said no. And I came back to the Bronx and at that point one of the girls that I met in Karlstad, in that first hospital, heard that I am here, and she called me up and she said, "Lilly, we just bought a house in the Bronx, and until you get settled we would like you to live with us." So I moved in with them.

SIGRIST: You did a lot of travelling in your first . . .

KAPLAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you feel out of place in America when you first got here?

KAPLAN: No. I liked a lot of things, and I didn't like a lot of things, but I said to myself, "You have to wait until you make the adjustment. You can't, everything cannot be perfect." I was very turned off and I came to the Bronx and I saw clotheslines hanging and cats running around garbage cans, because you don't see that in Sweden, you know. And I didn't come from my home town where maybe I would have seen it. So that the adjustment, you know, coming from a progressive country

as Sweden that's so clean and neat and everybody does the right thing, and then come to the Bronx, it was an adjustment. But I didn't, you know, jump to conclusions. I said I wanted to be here, you know, and things are going to be all right.

SIGRIST: Oh, and you had been through so much anyway that adjusting to America was probably nothing.

KAPLAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit in our last few minutes about your father and his coming to America.

KAPLAN: Well, yeah. My father and his wife followed me. They came in May of that same year.

SIGRIST: And did he speak any English?

KAPLAN: No, and neither did his wife.

SIGRIST: Was he coming with the intention of coming to stay with you?

KAPLAN: Not with me because I, you know, I wasn't married yet, and I was just living with my friends. But what I did was I rented a little apartment behind the butcher shop. The butcher was my friend, and there was this little apartment behind the butcher shop in Brooklyn. And so I rented that for them until,

you know, see what they want to do. And the two of them came in May. But my father had a trade and being a baker was no problem. He worked for Ebbinger's in Brooklyn for the first moment on, became a union member, and that was absolutely no problem with earning a living. She was a seamstress, and even though she never really learned how to speak English, because she was a true Hungarian, and Hungarians have more difficulty learning a new language. But she had a job, you know, because you know what you know. You know how to sew, and that is it. And subsequently they moved to a much nicer apartment, and subsequently after that they bought a two-family house.

SIGRIST: Did they learn English?

KAPLAN: My father learned English, and he drove a car, and he loved it.

SIGRIST: He liked America?

KAPLAN: Oh, sure. Absolutely. And, of course, I met my husband in June of that year and I was married in September.

SIGRIST: June of '52.

KAPLAN: '52. So I really, in January, met him in June, I was married in September.

SIGRIST: Things happen to you very quickly. (he laughs)

KAPLAN: Exactly. And so my father and my stepmother, of course, were at my wedding, and they were very pleased. And the following year in August I gave birth to Ruth. And then my second daughter was born nineteen months after that, Harriet. So my father had a tremendous amount of pleasure from these girls. He just absolutely adored them. And so he never spoke about his children, you know. We never really, I wish sometimes I would have asked him certain things. But you put it off, you put it off, and somehow or another, I guess if you don't want to cry, you don't want to talk about it.

SIGRIST: Sure. He may not have been willing to talk about it. Did he ever want to go back, or did he go back to visit Europe for any reason?

KAPLAN: Oh, he went to Israel.

SIGRIST: To Israel. Did he have relatives there, or?

KAPLAN: No. He went to Israel, and I have gone to Israel fourteen times, and I'm going again in October. We know a lot of people. And, of course, I know a lot of the girls that I was with in this boarding school. I chose to come here, they chose to come there. And I also know a lot of, I have friends who I

grew up with in my home town. You know, they're not connected to Sweden. So when I go there, you know, I enjoy myself because first of all I feel it's beautiful weather, it's a Jewish state that needs the support. And I also have a lot of friends, and I also have an opportunity to meet people from all over the world. So I really, I have run into people that I was in Sweden with that I haven't seen in forty years. So I love to go there. So he has been once to, to Israel, yes.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you, actually, sort of our final question, when you went back to what had originally been Czechoslovakia, as you were saying, how did you feel? What did it feel like to go back to the town that you were born in?

KAPLAN: You mean 1986?

SIGRIST: Whenever it was that you went, you mentioned before. Because, actually, you had a lot of bad memories of that town, too.

KAPLAN: Are you kidding? (she laughs) You really asked the right question, I must tell you, because in 1986 my friends, my stepmother's brother and his wife, the four of us went to Budapest with the idea, I was getting a Russian visa that I would go to visit my hometown. As I was getting closer, I didn't want to go but my husband insisted. He says, "I want to

see your roots, I want to know where you came from." So the two of us got to the railroad station and got on this Russian express, which gave me the chills. And the trip was terrible and I wanted to get off, but he just insisted." They were searching the cabin and they were looking for gold and they were looking for rubles. And I started to get very nervous because I would have these nightmares that I went back to my hometown and the Russians don't want to let me out. So here I find myself on the Russian express going just back. But I was already, it started out, my husband wanted it, and we were going. And we got there and the whole experience was so bad that I came home and I wound up with a nervous breakdown. So for six months I had to be under a doctor's care.

SIGRIST: So it had just been so traumatic just to go back to that town?

KAPLAN: Oh, it was terrible, it was terrible. First of all, I was scared of the KGB that were following us. You see, this was before this situation happened, you know, with Glastnost and openness. The girl who was the guide said to me that the manager wants to speak to me to see how I like the hotel, but when she took me up into the room there were a lot of people. And she tipped me off. She said to me, "This is Mr. So-and-so, this is the manager, I don't know this gentleman." So I like,

one says, be careful what you're saying. And then it turned out that there was a newspaper reporter. And then I found out there was a whole big article the next day. But my husband, who is American and very naive, I kept on kicking him under the table because at one point he was telling them that he was a retired, you know, my husband is a retired sergeant of the New York City Police force. Fortunately the guide didn't translate that part because I gave him such a kick under the table, or he would complain about his breakfast because he is American, he doesn't know that you have to be afraid. So I was so nervous about what he was saying, and he was criticizing things there, and I was nervous being back there. And then I went to my house, and I went to my friend's house. And, you know, knowing that nobody came back and nobody's around, I went to my school. I took lots of pictures. I almost feel that maybe I ought to go back just to overcome the memory of how bad I felt when I was there. And I made contact with some people through friends in Budapest, so I had a nice guide. He was a young doctor and his wife, who really drove us around. But things were very strict when I was there, and I know I was followed, and I really couldn't do what I wanted. So I don't know. I have some friends that are going back this year, and I don't think I can go back, but my girls said that maybe one day they would like to go back. And if they still feel that way, maybe in a year or two I'll be ready, and

maybe I'll feel different.

SIGRIST: Sure, once some time has passed.

KAPLAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So you're glad you came to America.

KAPLAN: Oh, absolutely. No question there. I never dreamt, if you would have told me in 1944 when I was in the middle of all this that one day I'm going to be living six months in New Rochelle in a beautiful home, and six months in Florida, and have two wonderful children. I mean, Ruth is a physician and a bright young woman, and the other one same, very nice and very devoted. I would have never believed it. And you know I worked for a lot of years. I was selling residential real estate and it was hectic raising the children and going to business, but it was also exciting. So I certainly have no complaints about anything, you know, as far as the United States is concerned.

SIGRIST: Well, I want to thank you, Mrs. Kaplan, for coming out here. I know we've been on the phone playing phone tag for some time, and it's been a real pleasure listening to your story. I just want to thank you for participating here in the Oral History Project.

KAPLAN: Thank you for inviting me, and if it's going to do any

good at all then I'm glad that I did.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.