



SAMS Roots Interview Transcript

Kitty Hart-Moxon interviewed by Caroline Pearce, transcribed by Caroline Pearce

23rd July 2015 at Kitty's home in Harpenden

Recording length: 1hr 9m 52s

CP: The first thing I want to ask you about is SAMS: how you came to be a member of SAMS and why you picked St Albans [Masorti Shul](#) as your shul.

KHM: I actually lived in Birmingham from the end of the war when I came over until 2006. In 2005 my husband passed away and my son Peter, daughter-in-law and all their sons live in Harpenden and I decided I've got to move because I was obviously becoming isolated. Most of my husband's friends had passed away – he was older than me – and the same with many of my friends, and I thought the most sensible thing would be to move down to be near the family.

CP: Were they already members of SAMS?

KHM: The parents of Moira, my daughter-in-law, were founder members of SAMS and of course Moira is very much involved with SAMS, being now Co-Chair, and always has been very much involved, and I became a member of SAMS. I was a member of the Liberal synagogue in Birmingham and the nearest to that around here was SAMS so that's why I joined.

CP: [SAMS] is a little different from Liberal in terms of the service...

KHM: Very different from Liberal and far more religious than I'm accustomed to because I wasn't brought up in a religious environment than the Liberal.

CP: In terms of the community itself have you found that people are friendly?

KHM: I think the community is lovely, and [its members] are all very friendly but they are all pretty much younger than I am. It's a fairly young community. Also they're in St Albans and I'm in Harpenden and I've been so busy chasing around the country during the whole of the time I've been here and I've really had very little opportunity to do a lot of socialising or mixing with the community. I have been but probably nowhere near enough.

CP: Yes, there are the services and that side of it, then there's the social side. People join for different reasons, don't they?

KHM: Yes that's right. It's been difficult for me to get there from Harpenden, it's not on my doorstep so that's probably been one of the difficulties, and the time.

CP: You said you've been chasing around the country – I understand that's with your work educating people about the Holocaust. Do you go mainly to schools?

KHM: I am a Trustee of the Holocaust Educational Trust and we've got various projects that we're engaged in. We've got something called the Outreach Project and that [involves] going into schools, speaking in schools all round the country and of course I do things for them and independently people come to me [to ask me to speak], not only schools but colleges, universities, doing all manner of projects, not just speaking but other things, trips to Poland for instance with different groups. I've been back to the [Auschwitz] camp practically every single year since 1978, sometimes twice a year. I've also been speaking abroad, in Germany in different schools and different former concentration camps which are now education centres. I've lectured all over America so it's just been so busy.

Here [in the UK] I've been – well you name it! – I've been from Aberdeen down to Exeter. I've just about covered the country. And of course the other big project we do at the Holocaust Educational Trust is the Lessons From Auschwitz project. That means that we take two students from every single secondary school in the country to Auschwitz for the day and we have done last year I think eighteen trips – eighteen plane loads, that is, and we don't only take the two students from each school, but we also take some of the teachers and we take other people [such as] VIPS. We always make space for [such] people, members of Parliament, all kinds of people. We have taken footballers, headteachers, all manner of people have come and of course I have been on many of the trips. I don't do them now because [one is] up for twenty-four hours and I just can't do it any more.

But what we do is before we send them to Poland, we have seminars in all different parts of the country, so if we're doing the Midlands, we'd have a seminar in Birmingham, probably at the university or in one of the hotels, and I usually do the Auschwitz introduction seminar. Then when the kids come back, they return and have another seminar, like a follow-up. [Additionally] they do all kinds of projects in schools participating in many of the activities. The third thing is that I have been speaking at the Holocaust centres, Beth Shalom, for instance – I've done a lot of work with Stephen Smith, one of the centre's founders, going around schools. In fact I'm going there on 9th August. [Tickets were available] on the web, and they've sold out, so it's quite busy. And in between I've had to do some housekeeping and I [can get] pretty tired so I haven't really had much opportunity to mix at SAMS.

CP: So educating people in this way has been your career...

KHM: I've had other careers, so I've had to do it alongside my other careers. I was at one time I was working nearly full-time [for] the NHS and then my husband, who was a consultant radiologist, set up a private practice and I did his x-raying and ran his practice. We had seventeen consultants of all different specialties in the building and I was running the building. So in between I was doing the Holocaust work. I've written two books and done numerous programmes and it all takes time. I've been at it for sixty-five years.

CP: Can we talk about your tattoo?

KHM: Yes, we can talk about my tattoo. How did I get my tattoo in the first place? I was brought into Auschwitz on the 22nd of April 1943 and the very first thing that happens to you [is that] you're initiated into the camp and part of this processing – we call it processing – is your camp number is tattooed on your left forearm. It was on the left arm when I arrived [although] they have tattooed people in different places, but my tattoo was on my left forearm. I came in [to Auschwitz] with my mother. She was tattooed first 39933 and I was 39934. You will notice that there's a small triangle under one of the 9s and that meant...that was your Jewish mark.

CP: It wasn't just the Jewish prisoners that they tattooed, they tattooed everybody?

KHM: All prisoners that they admitted into the camp were tattooed. There were one or two occasions when they were not tattooed but those were prisoners who were supposedly in transit, in other words, they brought them in and shipped them [straight] out again and some of these people were not tattooed. But anyone admitted otherwise had a tattoo on their left forearm.

CP: What was the purpose of the tattooed number? Did they keep records of numbers, names etc?

KHM: Oh yes. I came from prison so my prison record came with me into Auschwitz because I was to be handed over to the camp Gestapo for further interrogation. As it happened, we were not called. No one survived interrogation at the Gestapo headquarters so it was hanging over us the whole of the time.

CP: What were you in prison for? Was it do with your [identification] papers?

KHM: Yes it was. We had papers that didn't belong to us, non-Jewish documents and we were betrayed and part of the sentence – I was actually sentenced to death by execution by firing squad – but because they never found out where these documents came from, they commuted our sentence to life imprisonment in Auschwitz [and] for further interrogation so that the Gestapo could get to the bottom of where these documents came from. But they never did. I think they thought we were no longer alive in the ensuing chaos.

CP: Going back to the tattoo, do you remember when you actually had it done? You were sixteen, right?

KHM: Yes I remember when it was done because it was like punching with a pen...it was like a pen, almost like a biro punching into your skin, it penetrated your skin. And in fact when it was done I wiped it and thought it was ok, it was only a pen – I didn't realise it was a tattoo. I think in those days I didn't really know tattoos existed to be honest. I had no idea. But of course you soon realised that it was a tattoo, and we all got infected – it was horrible – and you couldn't erase it and it was a permanent mark, and of course [the prison guards] knew who you were and where you were. They could just call this number and you had to appear.

CP: Is it correct to say that they did roll call in the mornings?

KHM: Yes and some people were called out at roll call. My number was called at one of the roll calls when I was transferred from one camp near the gas chambers. My number was called out during roll call when I was transferred back to the main camp. So [the number] had a purpose.

CP: When you were called out did you know what was going to happen to you, why you were being called out?

KHM: No, I didn't know at that time. I had no idea. I mean it was a good move, with hindsight, but no I didn't. I wasn't aware at the time.

CP: Can you show me where on your arm [the tattoo was]?

KHM: It took up most of my forearm, going from here to there [indicates about a two inch space] but [the removed tattoo has] shrunk actually because it's been in this formaldehyde for so long. The scar goes all the way from here to here [indicates about 4-5 inches] and I've lost quite lot of muscle as well because it was quite deep and it had to be cut out. When the surgeon did it he realised that

[would happen] and told me I'd lose quite a bit of muscle but I said it doesn't really matter. If you go in centimetres, [the scar is] about twelve or so. It varied between people.

CP: And [the tissue that is preserved in formaldehyde] looks about four centimetres now.

KHM: My mother's seemed to be even bigger than mine. It just depend[ed] on who tattooed you.

CP: So they weren't all the same?

KHM: No, not really. It was the prisoners sitting there punching the girls.

CP: There were [prisoners] given the job of doing it?

KHM: It was a very good job actually, sitting there punching numbers. You were working under cover, sitting down, so it wasn't a bad job to do. And I suppose they learnt to do it neatly as they went along.

CP: Later on, after the war, you decided to have it removed.

KHM: Well I was picking at it after the war and I realised my number was so visible. Every time I wore short sleeves it is going to be visible. And as it turned out it gave me huge problems when I came to Birmingham.

CP: What kind of problems?

KHM: My first problems were when I started what I didn't want to do: nursing. I was forced to do nursing which I didn't want to do. And of course all the nurse's uniforms had short sleeves so I stood out, as you can imagine, and [the tattoo] was visible from across the room.

CP: Did people know what it was?

KHM: People had no idea what it was and people would whisper behind my back and of course I knew people would be whispering behind my back, and I got used to that. And I tried to explain but as you know people didn't really want to hear what I had to say – that I learnt pretty soon. But what really crunched it I think is that in the early 1950s I was working in the children's hospital. I was already qualified and was in charge of a department by that time and I found people who should have known by then were totally, totally ignorant, and especially the medical staff. And one day – it happened on many occasions, people would ask me all kinds of silly questions – and one day one of the doctors said to me 'Tell me, couldn't you remember your boyfriend's telephone number, so you had to put it on your arm?' It was a serious question! And people would ask me [if it was] maybe [my] laundry mark because uniforms went to the laundry. And one day I just got fed up actually and I knew a plastic surgeon, and one day I just said to him 'Look – take it out because I've just had it up to here with people asking silly questions and whispering behind my back and as soon as I want to tell them anything they don't want to hear!'

CP: Why do you think they didn't want to hear?

KHM: I'll put it this way. Auschwitz was behind the Iron Curtain. It wasn't possible for people to travel there or [from there to] here. They knew nothing about Auschwitz. Most of the killing centres were behind the Iron Curtain. People knew about Belsen, and they saw [in the media] a lot of bodies lying there, but people didn't want to know about that. People didn't understand what a place like Auschwitz meant. And you can't blame them because it was behind the Iron Curtain. It wasn't really until I did a film in 1978 – when [Poland] was still under Communism when I went to do the main film, which was one of the first...I was one of the first survivors to go back to do a [television]

programme. In fact nobody's done it since. [None of the other survivors] have done a proper programme on Auschwitz.

CP: This was 1978? That's quite a long time [after leaving Auschwitz].

KHM: Yes it's a long time. In the meantime [before making the film] I have published a book, I am Alive, and did quite a lot of writing and started going into schools as well. But then I had the opportunity to do this film. Yorkshire Television wanted to do a programme and went all around the world and came to me. And I said 'yes I want to do a programme, but I'm not going to sit in a studio and talk about Auschwitz because that's not possible. If anybody's to understand anything, you've got to be on location. Of course first they said 'no, we don't want you to do that' but I said 'that's the only way I'll do it'. And they said 'ok'. And that was my first visit, in 1978. And the film actually was a kind of a catalyst. By the time it went around the world people suddenly sat up and said 'what's this place?' When I [first] went to Auschwitz there wasn't a soul there. One or two visitors, people from the Eastern bloc, some Russian soldiers were there because it was behind the Iron Curtain, but that's all. [Apart from them] the place was completely deserted.

CP: It wasn't the [educational] centre it is now?

KHM: No, there was nothing. In fact I went into some of the huts that hadn't been looked at and there was everything just swept into one corner, all the debris and everything.

I found all kinds of stuff there, lists of prisoners, all kinds of things. So nothing had been done. I have found some of the pits at the back of the gas chambers where I found ash and remains of bodies that hadn't actually been touched [since the liberation]. Now everything's been grassed over and you can't actually see anything any more [on the surface]. They've put inscriptions there, it's [become] a cemetery. They don't want people to come and dig there but when I went it was like a free-for-all. I got in everywhere and did everything. Yes, the museum was there because I had contact with the museum from about 1948 or 49.

CP: That wasn't long after the war ended...

KHM: That's right, we actually brought an exhibition...[Poland] was still under Communism and we brought an exhibition over [to the UK] from Auschwitz, and I went round [the country] with it, it was a travelling exhibition. But, put it that way, the education committees didn't want to hear [about what happened at Auschwitz], they wouldn't give us a venue to show [the exhibition]. The only place we could show it was in the crypt of churches. There was a church [named] St George's [of] The East, and there was a bishop there – I can't remember his name now – he was the first one who decided to have the exhibition, and we had it there. So it was a very difficult time. And [interest in the Holocaust] followed my film. That was the beginning of Holocaust education. Real Holocaust education didn't start until the Holocaust Educational Trust was formed in 1988 or 86 and I became a Trustee that we got the Government to put in the National Curriculum and that actually began to have an impact on Holocaust education, in a small way. It took years before it came what it is today.

CP: Have you met many other survivors since then?

KHM: People wanted to talk but they were silenced. That was the problem. So [survivors] gave up. I don't think people...it isn't true that people didn't want to come forward and speak – they weren't welcome. So you can't blame people.] I was angry. It was anger that made me want to [talk about it] because when I came over [to England], on almost the first journey I made from the docks to Birmingham, I was told by my uncle 'remember, I don't want you to speak about anything that happened to you, I don't want to know. And I don't want my girls upset'. And that kind of set the

scene for what happened, and I was angry and decided whatever I'm going to do in my life, some part of my time has to be devoted to speak[ing] out. And that's what I tried to do.

CP: Even within your own family [there was denial]. That must have been horrible for you to feel that you couldn't even talk about it...

KHM: Yes, I wasn't allowed to say even a word, you see. And it happened wherever I went...I'd say it took about fifteen years before someone asked me the first question.

CP: Do you remember what people asked you at that point?

KHM: I was working in one of the hospitals and we had a receptionist who was American – she was only here for a very short time – and she was the first one to say to me 'tell me' and I said 'it's a bit difficult because it's a bit complicated' and she said 'well sit down and write'. And she was the first one who actually encouraged me to... and I said 'are you sure anybody will actually be interested?' and she said 'yes, you've got to do it'. So with a bit of encouragement I actually started.

CP: It seems incredible to us now [that people didn't want to know] I suppose there must have been a lot of fear around it so that's why people didn't want you to tell [your story]...

KHM: It was the Jewish community who have had a lot of fear. The Jewish community was the worst of not wanting to hear.

CP: Why do you think that was?

KHM: I don't know. It was a kind of protecting the Jewish community...I really don't know. It needs a psychologist to work that one out.

CP: As a child in the 1960s I went to a Jewish primary school and it was very much hushed up. We didn't know what happened. We only knew that 6 million Jews [were killed].

KHM: The Jewish community was very much to blame [for keeping quiet about what happened].

CP: In fact the people who started the [National Holocaust Centre & Museum] in Nottingham aren't Jewish...

KHM: No, absolutely not. But I will tell you, you're talking about the Jewish community, I'm a member of AJR, the Association of Jewish Refugees. Most of the people, the members, are former Kindertransport people. So one day I was asked would I give a presentation at an AJR meeting, which I did. And I got to...I was talking about the ghettos, I wasn't actually talking about the camps, when people got up and said 'we don't want to hear any more'. I'm talking about while I was living here [in Harpenden], within the last five years. That's what happened. I had to stop it. I walked out actually. I felt totally, totally offended. The Kindertransport people! Now they're coming forward and talking. Of course they have stories to tell, we're not disputing that, but to shut me up like this, it never ever happened to me anywhere else, and to happen in the Jewish community...I was absolutely appalled.

CP: Do you suppose, could it be because...

KHM: They tried to shut it out.

CP: Because it was their parents who were left behind...

KHM: Yes, fine, I understand that. But when you've lost a lot of people you want to know what happened to them, you don't want to blank it out. I think you need to know.

CP: There is no excuse for them to treat you that way...

KHM: I think that if you don't like a lecture, walk out. But don't ask the lecturer to stop. It's never ever happened to me, in fact I've never had anyone walk out. So I was absolutely appalled, and I tell you I haven't been to an AJR meeting ever since because I didn't like the attitude.

CP: Going back to your tattoo...[did] your mother [have] hers removed?

KHM: My mother never had hers removed. And of course she found it quite difficult to live with but of course she mixed in normal circles, she didn't work in any particular place and when she went on holiday she'd cover it up. And I thought I can't go on covering up and putting plasters on my arm and being careful of what I'm going to wear because my number is visible. It just became a burden. I didn't really want it removed, it's other people [who] caused me to have it removed. I have got it in a specimen, so that's probably a better thing to do. And when my mother died I asked the coroner if he would cut it out. And he did, and he arranged for the two numbers – mine was all kind of screwed up and shrunk in a bottle – and they put [them] together in a specimen but it does need redoing because it's been there for a long time, since my mother died in 1974 so it's been there since then.

CP: She was comfortable with just keeping it covered, she didn't want it cut out?

KHM: No, she didn't want it cut out. I really don't know why. But I thought it was important to preserve these two numbers [then] when I'm gone, at least it's there.

CP: It's a very striking symbol...

KHM: That's right, it's not a photograph, it's the actual piece[s] of skin.

CP: How do you feel when you look at it now?

KHM: I don't feel anything looking at it, no. I'm accustomed to looking at it. I show it in my presentations so no, I'm not worried about it.

CP: Before you had it removed it, you weren't embarrassed about letting people see it...

KHM: No, it's the attitude of people, the reaction that I had when they saw it and the whispering behind my back and not actually me ...if people had come to me and said 'what is it?' I would have been only too pleased to tell them but no, people didn't do that you see.

CP: Do you think that is part of the reason that you wanted to keep it, you wanted it on show, because you actually wanted to tell people, you wanted people to ask you...

KHM: Yes absolutely, I'd have preferred to have kept it.

CP: You would have told them your story...

KHM: I wasn't very happy at having it removed.

CP: After you had it removed you had a big scar on your arm...

KHM: Yes, just a scar. It's not terribly visible, not now. It was...my skin's so bad now, it's got all these age spots, but before that it was much more visible and it went wider...and in fact the surgeon said [he] needed to do a plastics job on it, but I said no, it's absolutely fine because part of it is not visible and part is visible, and a scar sometime goes keloidal – a keloid scar swells and that's how it was. It

took a long time for it to be flat like [this]. But the scar always remains. I've got a few scars like this, all over my body, that remained.

CP: You mean from injuries?

KHM: Well I've got a scar just here where my flesh just opened when I was hit with a whip and the whip had a metal piece at the end – well it had many metal pieces - but a piece hit me here and opened the flesh here, so I've got a scar here. One hit me behind the knees, so I've got a few scars like that. I've got a scar like that here where it opened up.

CP: And you were whipped because...

KHM: I had twenty-five strokes, a punishment once so that was part of it.

CP: Was there a reason?

KHM: Oh yes there was a definite reason. I got out of my hut one night, which was forbidden, because I saw a pile of wood, planks stacked somewhere and we were going to make a fire because inside one of these wooden sheds there was like a heating channel and at one end you could heat it so when you heated this the heating channel became warm and also you could cook something inside. You could put little pots in there and try and heat water, or cook some soup you see. And what happened is that I saw this pile of wood – because we'd had nothing to make a fire with - and there was this pile of wood and I got out and got some planks in, and the searchlight picked me out. There was a searchlight going – if you know the main gate, in Birkenau, there's a searchlight on the top and that was going all night. And it picked me out and an SS woman who was on duty there gave chase and she chased me. But I got into the hut, and I got among the people – there were a thousand women in there...in my hut. And she came in[to the hut] and she said 'who's that person that was outside? If that person doesn't own up the whole block's going to be punished'. So of course I did come forward and she took my number and I didn't hear any more. And then one day my number was called and I was [identified]...that's the purpose of your tattoo. And I had to come forward and sentenced to twenty-five strokes in the penal colony. So that's [why I had] my twenty-five strokes.

CP: I am just trying to imagine what that's like.

KHM: I don't know if you've seen the whips in the museum...there are whips [with] leather straps, [approximately] twenty straps, and at the end of some of the straps were little metal pieces so when you were whipped with this if you got one stroke you already had about twenty [lashes] because of all the different prongs, or bits of leather, and there were metal bits of metal.

CP: When you were in the camp, what was your job?

KHM: I couldn't begin to tell you I'm afraid because I had so many different jobs. Probably about twenty different jobs. At one time I worked in the latrines which was probably the best place to work because it was under cover and [one] had quick access to the lavatories. At one time I worked at the [leichenkommando](#), that's the corpse detail, where we were just collecting corpses, we had to pick up corpses. It was quite hard work. We had to drag them, and load them onto carts or lorries sometimes. Then I also worked outside digging trenches, digging potatoes, worked on the railway – you know the railway that comes into the camp? – I worked on that carrying cement bags, very very heavy stuff to carry. Eventually I managed to work in the hospital, or the infirmary. And then the infirmary was emptied because they killed everybody off. And then I was taken to work in the [Kanada](#) Commando, where I worked for eight months. And that practically saved my life.

CP: How?

KHM: Because we found food there, and we found clothes there and we had access to water. So we had the essentials to life which were not available in the main camp...there's very little you need to live but practically the things that you need to survive in the main camps were not available – food, water, sleep, access to the toilets – those kind of things were not available [in the main camp] whereas I was in the Kanada [where those things] were available, so that's what saved me because I was pretty well on the verge of not surviving any longer.

My mother was very fortunate. When we were tattooed...when she was tattooed, the person that tattooed her was surprised that she was allowed into the camp but as I've always tried to explain my arrival was different to the transports of the Jews from all over Europe because I came from prison, and it was a [prison] sentence, the same as my mother, so we didn't go through a process of selection, my mother came straight into the camp. And when she was being tattooed, the girl who tattooed her was surprised to see her because [my mother] was in her early fifties.

CP: So if she had come into the camp another way...

KHM: She would have been killed on arrival, she would have been gassed on arrival. So [not being killed given her age] was unusual. So the girl who tattooed her came from somewhere not far from my town, not very far from Bielsko. So she said 'look, if you're still alive in three weeks' – there was a six week quarantine, sort of initiation into the camp – she said 'if you survive three weeks of [the] six weeks, until the end of quarantine, I'll come and see if I can find somewhere you can work indoors, or under cover'. And she got a placement for her in the infirmary and my mother worked there for the whole of the time, and she was protected by some of the prisoner doctors, German prisoner doctor, a woman called Ellie Reiner, and she was a prisoner doctor and she really protected my mother. My mother worked there all the time, she was under cover which meant that she didn't have to stand for roll call for three hours, sometimes twice a day, or work outside. So it was a big big advantage and that's the reason she survived there.

CP: Was the German doctor Jewish?

KHM: Not Jewish. A Germany prisoner doctor, we had prisoner doctors of all nationalities, and she was German.

CP: Why do you think she helped your mother?

KHM: I don't know. She realised [my mother] was older, and she was lucky to have got into the camp [rather than being gassed immediately] and she protected her pretty well. And of course she was on the staff so that was a help.

CP: The prisoner doctor was in a good position to help.

KHM: Yes.

CP: If your mother had come into the camp the [usual] way, she would have been sent to the gas chamber because she would have been considered too old to work in her early fifties...

KHM: Selections were carried [out to send people] to the gas chambers as they arrived. There was a segregation: men, women, women with children on one side, all the people [were divided by] total segregation. As far as the women's camp [was concerned] pretty well only teenage girls were

allowed in because they didn't want women of child-bearing age because they didn't know if they were pregnant. So very often they didn't have women, certainly not women with children...they didn't part them either, because they didn't want a lot of panic so they allowed women and [their] children to die together. They didn't actually tear the women away [to get] them into the camps, so obviously women with children were killed almost immediately. So mostly where Jewish transports were concerned we were mostly teenage girls. For men, it was a different situation. First of all they weren't pregnant so [that problem] didn't arise. Also they needed some of these men who had certain skills. And they wouldn't have been teenage boys, so they had doctors, dentists, they had tailors, carpenters...all people they needed. Builders, bricklayers, all these people they needed. So [the camp officers] would very often call out 'are there any doctors? Are there any...' that kind of thing. So there were older men – not old men – men in their twenties and thirties, but that didn't arise with the women.

Consequently women who were in the women's camp, Jewish women, were mostly teenage girls. They had no skills, they were of no particular value. I mean there were older women, Polish women, German prisoners – we had a lot of German prisoners – [political prisoners], criminals, all these different categories. There were a lot of criminal prisoners, and a lot of German political prisoners, a lot of Poles of all ages, perhaps [serving] sentences. But when it came to the Jewish prisoners, they were mostly young girls, of no use at all in other words.

CP: Were you mixed up with other girls? Were the Jews segregated?

KHM: Yes, we were mixed up. [Although] in a way they were [segregated]. In a way we had the Jewish block which was always worse and more overcrowded than the Polish blocks and certainly the German blocks...[they had] better facilities. There was a very big distinction between [them] and you were segregated in such a way that it was very apparent. All prisoners were categorised and they had their numbers written on whatever they were wearing – apart from their tattoos – and they had triangles of different colours. They represented...the black triangle represented the criminal category, for instance, the purple were the homosexuals, or the Jehovah's Witnesses, there were all different colours. Red sometimes were the Poles, yellow were the Jews...so immediately they could tell who is who. Quite apart from that, the Jewish prisoners had huge red crosses on their backs painted on, huge – from top to bottom and across – so from the distance all the [other] prisoners could recognise the Jewish prisoners. So it wasn't just the tattoo that was no so visible [from a distance]. You were visible having a huge red cross on your back.

CP: So there was a distinction...

KHM: Yes, there was a distinction, and a prisoner hierarchy, prisoners who had good jobs, who had better jobs, [Kapos](#) - people in charge of places - some people had jobs in offices, for instances, or the girls who were tattooing. So there were better jobs in kitchens and things. But by the time I arrived in 1943 all these good jobs were gone you could say. So the majority of prisoners were doing manual work.

CP: How long did you work in the Kanada?

KHM: I was in the Kanada for eight months, from April 1944 until I was evacuated - well I was transferred back to the main camp at the end of October 1944, evacuated on 11th November, so I was [in the Kanada] for that stretch. I was there during the destruction of the Hungarian Jews. The whole of the time. And Theresienstadt, the gypsy camp, and inmates from other camps [such as] Majdanek which was a big concentration camp - all these people were brought in while I was there. I witnessed all the main [human] destruction of 1944, that's when I worked near the gas chambers.

CP: So you would see people going in?

KHM: Yes I saw people going in and never coming out. Ash came out one end [of the gas chamber] and smoke came out the other. When we went to be taken in that Kanada, one of the SS who was there in charge of the gas chambers made a very short speech. And he said 'you're here, but remember, you will never be transferred out'. We were isolated there. 'The reason being that you see too much and we can't have you as witnesses. So the only way out is through the chimney'. That was a very favourite expression, 'out through the chimney'. In other words, you'd never be transferred or released.

CP: That wasn't always the case...

KHM: A lot of people went through the chimney out of the people that I worked with. Even people in the Kanada, they also, many of them died.

CP: What was the function of the Kanada?

KHM: The function of the Kanada was sorting out the belongings of 2 or 3 million people that were brought in with all their best belongings - because what would you do [if you had to leave your home], you'd take all your possessions, all your precious possessions, because you didn't know where you were going. You'd certainly take all your jewellery, your valuables, your money, and believe me, you've never seen such wealth in all your life that you've seen there. Jewellery... we used to sort stuff out. I was actually sorting men's jackets for eight months on the night shift. We had a day shift and a night shift and I was on night shift. I was taken to the shed - you didn't have the freedom to run around that place - and you were taken to work and there were big tables, trestles, and I had to find men's jackets, which wasn't always easy among the big piles of rubble, huge huge piles of everything, you had to empty the suitcases...you had to lay down the jackets and you had to open all the seams because all the valuables were found in the seams and pockets and of course wherever these jackets were going they didn't want people to find all the valuables, did they? So once this was done you had to fold the jackets, and you had to do a certain quota and that was then taken to the sauna to be disinfected, then it was shipped - loaded onto lorries - shipped and distributed to the German population. Most of the clothes were for distribution in Germany, and that all had to be sorted and disinfected and that was what we were doing there.

The men - there was a male Kanada and a female Kanada - the men would be working on the ramp where people would arrive and they would bring the luggage to us. It was just heaped up, bigger and bigger heaps - one heap was [something] like three stories high! And when they opened all the suitcases everything was all jumbled up, clothes, shoes, toys, children's little [clothes], everything. And then that had to be sorted, and the men would bring it and the women would do the sorting.

CP: Once that was shipped back to Germany, what was done with the other things?

KHM: The jewellery - we heard what was done with the jewellery. We used to carry the jewellery in blankets at the end of the shift and that was taken to the SS barrack. There was a certain place where it was just taken and handed over. As you know, some of it we buried. But what we couldn't do - what no one could do - was hold one item of any value because there were constant inspections and if you were found with one item, you were killed. So it wasn't worth it - nobody ever kept anything. We did use paper money as toilet paper because we didn't have any.

CP: What about the food [that you found]?

KHM: We used to find food that was rotting away there – there was no food in the main camp – their food was rotting away but of course we were not allowed to touch it, but we did. Food was available because we found it within people's luggage.

CP: So you could eat it...

KHM: We were not allowed to, but we did.

CP: That must have been a risk...

KHM: It was a huge risk, absolutely huge risk. Everything was a risk. I had about four occasions when I went back to the main camp with clothes. I went back to the camp on about five different occasions with handcarts, accompanied by an SS woman, three or four of us with this handcart taking clothes and I used to put on layers and layers of clothes so I could leave [them] behind in the camp and sometimes I would smuggle in some food. And one day I found a huge tin of meat within the luggage and I decided I've got to take it through – if I had an opportunity to take it through into the camp, I must take it and I had to carry it between my legs. And there was an inspection at the gate – there was always an inspection at the gate – and they looked, and they touched you to see what you had before they let you in through the gate. And I was limping, and this one SS [officer] came up to me and prodded me and said 'why are you limping?' and the woman who was with me said 'it's ok, she just fell down'. And [the SS officer] let me go. And I had this huge tin of meat between my legs that I took to my mother. It was huge risks every time, but you risked – you learned to live with risk. You had to. If you didn't risk, you didn't live.

CP: For you and your mother, the day that you were able to leave...

KHM: The time after Auschwitz was possibly in some parts worse than being in Auschwitz.

CP: Could you have imagined that? Could you have imagined anything worse?

KHM: Yes, it was, I'm afraid so. [My mother and I] were on a death march [after leaving Auschwitz] and that was absolutely horrendous as you can imagine. I was carried at one time, my mother was carried by friends. Then we worked shafts underground in one place, we were seven days in open coal trucks, across Germany from where we were, south east of Germany to north-west, and that took seven days because the train went through sidings and stood for hours and we were in open coal trucks, and it was snowing. What saved us what that after our death march we were in some camp and in that particular camp I managed to get a loaf, a whole loaf. And my mother and I sat on this loaf for seven days and we ate little bits of it – that's all we had for seven days, that loaf. And drink we didn't worry about because it was snowing and we were just having the snow. We had little mugs still and we collected it – it was essential to have some mug or bowl or something and that's what we did. And then we worked in [eleven] shafts underground, in an electronics factory, and then we almost died, because at the last evacuation – I was at six camps altogether – in the seventh camp I was liberated. When we were evacuated from where we worked underground [unclear place name] to a place called Salzweidel we were in a siding outside Belsen and we were pushed into a train. At that point we'd been segregated as well – we lost some of our Auschwitz [companions], there were originally one hundred of us when we left [Auschwitz], and we lost some of them and we couldn't find the other fifty, we never knew what happened to the other fifty – and we were pushed into a train. Now there were many many trains at that siding and most of them were sealed with people inside, and they were abandoned. There was no sound whatsoever coming from [the trains]. People were dead inside. But our train actually moved. But my mother and I were pushed into a truck which was airtight, like a container, and soon people became unconscious. There was

condensation on the walls from people's breath. And I realised this was airtight, and I suddenly remembered that I had a knife. I always carried a knife. It was forbidden to carry a knife but I did. And I got to the bottom of the [truck], the floor, and I found some gaps there and I enlarged a gap with furious scraping and my mother and I took it in turns to breathe. So you had to hold your breath. We decided that was the end. We thought no way are we going to survive, people are dying in the truck. But our train moved and as fate would have it our train stopped somewhere and we could hear footsteps and at that point those of us who were still alive were banging against the side of the truck shouting 'open up, quick, help, help' and it opened! And I think you know what happened – there were three soldiers who had no idea that there were people inside. And we just tumbled out of there, we just threw ourselves down through the opening. And we said 'we're not going back inside that truck. You can just kill us here if you want to' but they obviously didn't want to. And one said – my mother said 'we demand to be taken into a camp'.

CP: These were German soldiers?

KHM: That's right. And one said well he knew there was a camp outside this town – we didn't know yet where we were, it was a place called Salzweidel – and he went, and came back and said 'the Kommandant will have you'. So that's how I got to the last camp. Twelve people got out, that's all, so a lot of people died. And if you go to that siding today there's a big memorial, there's a memorial garden there. I've got it on film somewhere because I did a death march programme and there's a plaque that says how many people died in this train.

CP: How many people died?

KHM: Around 260, something like that, in that train and perhaps other trains, we can't be sure if was just in our train or others too. But there's a memorial garden by that particular siding. And that's where I was liberated, by the Americans, not by the British. And I was only about 100 miles east of Belsen which was liberated by the British on 15th April and we were a little bit east so we were liberated on the 14th, I was liberated the day before. But the Russians were outside the town where we were liberated, and a few days after – I don't know if we talked about liberation, there was this rampage into the town, we were barefoot – my mother and I were barefoot for six months, and it was winter, walking in the snow, just wrapping our feet into rags that people discarded. So we went barefoot into the town.

I was barefoot still for four days. On the fourth day my mother said 'find some shoes!' and I did, I went back...[stops recording as Kitty's phone rings].

[Recording resumes]

KHM: I will just tell you what happened with these Russians...I was liberated by the Americans, I couldn't find any shoes...almost immediately both Mother and I were interpreting for the Americans - because my mother spoke perfect English, because she had an English degree and was always teaching English; I never learned English but I could speak a little bit. I went to English nursery school. We were interpreting for the Americans – later we were interpreting for the British army, first the American army. This town of Salzweidel was to be handed over to the Russians. It became in fact the border town between East Germany and West Germany. I was taken by the Americans to their headquarters which was former Gestapo headquarters, and there was an American general and the Russian general and they asked me to interpret and they put a big map on the table and all they did is drew a line on the map and one [half] was the British zone and one the Russian zone and and the Russian became the DDR, East Germany! So I was there when history was being made which was very interesting. The Americans took the town but they decided to hand it over to the Russians

and [the General] just drew a line [dividing the city] and said 'This is yours' just like that! And of course when Mother and I learned that the Russians [were] taking over the Americans took us on their tanks and we asked them to dump us in the British zone and that's how I came on to the British zone and worked for the British Military Government and for the Quaker relief teams...but that's another chapter when I worked establishing a big displaced persons camp and that was a big big job which was like organising a whole little city.

CP: That was right after you were liberated...

KHM: We were asked by the British army on the Rhine to help the Quaker relief team to set up this place and be their interpreters as [the army] couldn't do it, it was quite difficult as there were a lot of Poles, a lot of Germans, and all different nationalities and you had to have someone to speak English and interpret so that's what we did for the next two years.

[Interview ends]