Eva's Story

The following audio script is adapted primarily from *Eva's Story: A Holocaust Survivor's Tale by the Stepsister of Anne Frank*, shared with permission from Eva Schloss. Italicized text was edited out of the final exhibit audio but can be read here.

For a more detailed narrative, we encourage you to read her full memoir or explore the Holocaust collection at the Danville Station Library.

My name is Eva Schloss. I was born Eva Geiringer in 1929 in Vienna, Austria to Erich and Fritzi Geiringer, a Jewish family.

I have an older brother named Heinz. In 1938 after the annexation of Austria by Germany and increasing antisemitism, my family fled to Belgium and then to Amsterdam. In Amsterdam, we lived in the same apartment block as Anne and Margot Frank and Anne and I became playmates.

After the Nazis invaded Holland in May 1940, it became more and more dangerous to be Jewish. Finally in July 1942, to escape deportation by the Germans, my family, like the Frank family, went into hiding. I hid in one location with my mother, and my father and brother hid in another location.

In May 1944, when I was 15 years old, our hiding spots were betrayed, and we were all arrested.

The black prison van jolted us towards the local jail.

This was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. I could not see why I should be put into prison or why, at the age of 15, I was such an undesirable person because I was Jewish.

By the end of our second day the prison was completely overflowing, and we guessed that we would soon be sent to a Dutch holding camp for detainees away in the country at Westerbork.

13 May 1944, we were all called out by name, lined up and marched to the station under the heavy guard of the Gestapo.

We boarded a normal passenger train with seats and as I climbed up, I caught a glimpse of Pappy and Heinz on the platform.

A whistle blew and the train rolled away from Amsterdam, picking up speed and rushing through the spring countryside where fruit trees were in full bloom. I could see cows and sheep grazing, farmers working in their fields and I longed to be outside and free.

Inside the carriage we discussed our prospects. We were all afraid that we would be sent on to a concentration camp in the East. Perhaps even Auschwitz. Our only hope was that the war would finish soon and that we could remain in Westerbork till then.

When we eventually arrived, Franzi was proved right. The accommodation there was fairly reasonable. We had clean bunk beds, good toilet facilities and, even better, we were allowed to move around freely to talk to each other and mix with the men during the day. Pappy and Heinz soon found us and stayed close.

The detainees at Westerbork were mostly Jews and a few Christians who had sheltered Jews. There was also a group of gypsies, who, to the Nazis, were just as loathsome as the Jews.

Mutti and he considered our position. "If I can, I will make contact with people here I knew before the war," Pappy said. "Some of them are in influential positions. If they can get us suitable work, we could try to maneuver ourselves into protected positions. That way we might avoid being shipped out." He believed that was our only chance.

He did his best. Some friends recognized him and vowed to do all in their power to help us. We knew the most important thing was for us to remain in Holland as long as possible.

One of Pappy's friends, George Hirsch, worked in the main office. He promised to try to put us on a work schedule. He was a sincere and kind man. He shared his shirts with Pappy and Heinz because neither of them had a change of clothing.

To our dismay, we began to hear rumors that a large transport of gypsies was to be taken to Auschwitz on the following Sunday and as there were still a few cattle trucks (railway cars) to be filled, Jews would be loaded to make up the cargo. *Since we were among the newest arrivals, Mr. Hirsch had not had a change to secure work for us. We felt we were bound to be among the unlucky ones.*

We then realized that this was the step into the abyss. Auschwitz was in Poland, far away in enemy territory. We had heard on the BBC that it was known as an extermination camp.

We tried to keep each other's spirits up. Surely as long as we were fit and able to work they would not kill us?

There was little Pappy could do now except give us lectures on survival. He emphasized that caring and fellowship were important, that we would have to help each other to survive. He talked about our need for cleanliness and hygiene. He kept reminding me not to sit on a toilet seat and to wash my hands afterwards. Little did he realize that none of us would have any control over such refinements as these.

At dawn on Sunday morning, while we were still in our dormitory, a female prison guard appeared and read out a list of names for immediate deportation.

"…Fritzi Geiringer, Eva Geiringer…" our hearts sank as we heard our names called out.

Hundreds of us walked towards the railway sidings. As we made our way to the cattle trucks, carrying our cases and jostling against each other, Pappy and Heinz suddenly appeared close beside me.

As we drew nearer to the train, we could see the front part already filled with gypsies – unkempt-looking men and women carrying babies and toddlers, with older children hanging on to their mothers' skirts. Pappy, Mutti, Heinz and I clung together, too, so that we would not be separated. We pulled and pushed each other onto the boards of the truck (car) with little dignity and handed up our cases and blankets. The wagon (car) was so tightly packed that we could not sit down, and we huddled against each other in a corner. *Pappy's arms were tight around me, and Mutti help Heinz. The only comfort was that we were still together.*

As I looked up, I could see two tiny, barred windows near the ceiling of the truck. I also noticed two iron pails standing in the far corner. That was the only provision made for our needs.

Many people from the Westerbork camp had come down to see us off and give us courage. We waited for about an hour until, on a shouted command, the doors were slammed shut and bolted from the outside.

Now there was so little light in the truck that we could hardly see each other's faces. It was like descending into Hell. The wagons shuddered and the cattle train began to move. As the journey went on, people took turns to stand so that others could have a little more space to stretch out on the boards. We did what we could to help one another, but there wasn't much we could do.

During the day the doors were opened once, the buckets changed and some bread thrown in--- it was like feeding animals in cages. Several people became violently sick, and that added to the stench and stress in the carriage. Among us was a pregnant woman who was panic stricken; if she went into labor during the journey, who would help her with the baby?

Each time the doors were opened we tried to communicate with the guards, pleading for compassion and help, but all requests were ignored by the impassive and stony – faced SS men. Vicious dogs barked at us and rifles were pointed into the truck. The impulse to try to escape was very strong, but we knew there was little chance of succeeding. We were unarmed, defenseless civilians and would doubtless be shot in the back if we tried to run away.

When we said anything at all to our captors, the only words spat back at us in German were, "Halt das Maul, Sau Juden" ("Shut up, filthy Jews").

At one halt, when the doors were opened, we were faced with machine guns trained against the carriages. Guards shouted at us to hand over all the valuables we still possessed, including wedding rings and watches. They threatened to kill anyone who did not comply. After that stop we did not even know the time.

As the train rolled on, day and night merged. There were two, maybe three days of intermittent traveling. Sometimes we could sense that the train had stopped on a siding where it remained for

hours. Without movement the trucks became unbearably hot and airless. The stench from the buckets over-powered us, making many more people feel extremely ill.

After about three days of this existence the train jolted to a halt, and we could hear shouting outside and doors grating open. Violent commands were issued in German. *Many could not understand, but I was born in Austria and was nine years old when I left. German was my mother tongue.*

As our doors were pushed open, we could see lorries (trucks) waiting next to the train. The SS were shouting, "If there are any ill people or some too tired to walk a long way, they can now go on the lorry (truck) to the camp."

With great relief many people climbed down and walked straight over to a lorry, shouting back to their relatives, "We'll see you there!"

The rest of us watched them being driven away. Much later in the camp we learned that these people had been driven directly to the gas chambers.

We could see German guards with guns and dogs, ordering us to get out. There were few guards compared to the many Jews and gypsies, but we were so subdued that we never dreamt of doing anything but obey all their commands. I don't know why. Perhaps we truly thought that our conditions were going to improve. It seemed that nothing could get worse.

Just as I was about to climb down, Mutti handed me a long coat and a grown – up – looking felt hat. "Put this on," she instructed.

"I don't need it," I protested. It was a boiling hot day, and just to be outside in the air would be a relief.

"Put it on", she insisted. "It may be all that you'll be allowed to take in with you. They may take our cases."

At that point more commands came in German. "Get out, put all your belongings next to the train and stand in rows of five."

Very reluctantly I put the coat on. I was sure I looked silly in the hat. It was brown felt and far too grown-up for me. I would never wear such an awful hat by choice.

"You look a smart young lady now," Pappy said, trying to encourage me.

Heinz gave me a weak smile. He looked petrified, his face white with fear as he jumped down from the car, but he turned to help me. As I sprang down into his arms, I found mine around his

neck. Suddenly we were squeezing and hugging each other as if we would never see each other again.

It took about an hour of unloading and organization before the women were ordered to walk towards the front of the platform, while the men were separated and marched towards the back.

Pappy grabbed hold of my hands, looked deeply into my eyes and said, "God will protect you, Evertje."

Mutti clasped Heinz close to her, running her fingers through his hair and kissing his face. Then my parents embraced for the last time before being forced to turn and walk away from each other.

We moved along in lines of five for about ten minutes until we came to a group of SS men. They were dividing the line into right and left. All the old people and children up to about fifteen had to go to the right, while the rest of the women were directed to the left.

Sometimes a mother had to relinquish her young child to an older person who was sent to the right. As we came towards the selectors, the young woman in front of me began first to cry and then to scream wildly as she was forced to give her infant son of eight or nine months into the arms of a stranger, an elderly woman, whose eyes were filled with tears.

"I'll look after him," she said. Her arms were almost too feeble to hold him as he twisted back to grab at his mother. "I want to go with him!" the mother was screaming out, but she was pulled back roughly. The baby started to howl pitifully.

"I won't recognize him again," she pleaded, trying to calm down and make a reasonable protest. "He's growing so quickly."

The guards looked on impassively.

"Please…please don't take my son away!" She began to scream again and tried to grab the baby back while the guard pushed the old woman on and stood between them.

I watched helplessly, but then Mutti stepped forward and put her arms around the sobbing woman's shoulders.

"Even if you don't recognize your baby," she said, "the old lady will remember you and will know who to hand him back to."

This story seemed to pacify her. Her resistance faded, she became quiet and moved on in the line. No matter how much people began to protest or cry or try to go to the other side to be with families, it was to no avail. The process was relentless. Thus, families were systematically torn apart. At this stage, though, we still did not realize what "selection" really meant.

Then it was my turn. The SS officer looked me up and down and indicated left. Mutti was quickly able to come and stand beside me in line, holding on to my arm. I was only just fifteen. I noticed much later that I was the youngest person by far in our transport line. Many mothers had lost daughters of my age. Ridiculous though it had looked on me, that hat and the long coat had saved my life. Pappy's prayers had once more been answered.