

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Archives

Oral History Interviews of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center

**Interview with Luna Kaufman
1983
RG-50.002*0010**

PREFACE

In 1983, Luna Kaufman was interviewed on videotape by Sidney Langer on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

Summary of the
Interview with Luna Kaufman
1983

Luna Kaufman was born in Kraków, Poland in 1926. She was a member of an upper middle-class family that was very active in Jewish and intellectual life in Poland. Luna had a strong desire to identify with the Jewish community. She wore an arm-band with a Star of David despite the fact that her young age exempted her from the requirement, which was enforced by November 1939.

Luna recalls the Germans' use of psychological tactics and violence to undermine Kraków's Jewish community. Luna lived in the Kraków ghetto, with her family, for two years. Jews in the ghetto made efforts to retain intellectual and cultural livelihood, despite limited resources. Luna was transported from the Kraków ghetto to Plaszow, a concentration camp in Poland. She recalls acts of resistance while she was in the camp and the sense of solidarity that such acts fostered. Luna recalls the Red Cross's visit to and inspection of Plaszow and their refusal to give her medication when she had typhoid. Luna escaped from Plaszow with the help of the Jewish director of the camp. In the spring of 1945, Luna was shipped to Leipzig, Germany to the Hasag Ammunition Factory.

After her liberation by the Russians, Luna returned to Kraków with her mother and a friend. She met her husband while she was in school after the war. She lived in Kraków for five years until she moved to Israel in 1950. From Israel, Luna moved to the United States in 1952; first to New York, and then to New Jersey. Luna has lived in Watchong, New Jersey for 23 years. She lectures about the Holocaust at schools where children have problems functioning in society. She also worked on a national project with Governor Kean of New Jersey to pay tribute to liberators of Europe.

Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Luna Kaufman
1983

01:00:00

Born in Kraków, Poland in 1926. Luna was the third generation born in her house. She comes from an upper middle-class background. Most of her family members were highly educated. Luna's family was very active in Jewish life and intellectual life in Poland. They were still considered Jews from Poland. Even though her grandfather fought with the Polish army and her father was an officer in the Austrian army when Poland was under the Austrian occupation, their ancestry, loyalty to Poland and nationalism meant nothing to them.

01:04:00

When the war broke out, Luna was 12 years old. Despite her family's contribution to Polish life, they were still singled out as Jews. They could find no protection whatsoever. Luna had a large family—45 immediate family members were killed in the Holocaust and 45 survived. Luna's sister and father died. She and her mother survived.

01:07:00

Luna was one of only two Jewish students in her school. Luna was a reformed Jew, but was very independent and maintained a strong Jewish identity. She wanted to identify with the Jewish community. Even though Luna was not old enough to be required to wear the mandatory arm-band with the Jewish star, she chose to wear it. Luna's father was not allowed to work, use transportation, nor shop in stores. Their family was deprived of all services. If Luna had chosen not to put the arm-

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band on, she could have used her "non-Jewish" looks as an advantage. Luna chose not to have the advantage.

01:10:00

Germany invaded Poland in September of 1939 and by November of that same year, Jews were forced to wear arm-bands. Prior to the 1939 invasion, Luna's family received information from German refugees entering Poland about what was occurring to Jews, but her family did not believe the talk. Eastern Europe was anti-Semitic and the Jews were a minority—this was accepted. Germany was looked upon by Eastern European Jews as a country where the Jew had the most freedom, where one could attend the university in Berlin. They were shocked that the persecutions of these Jews could occur. Luna's father did not believe anything would happen in Poland to the Jews like it was happening in Germany. He believed that the talk was all propaganda.

01:13:00

Luna notes the sophistication of the psychological plan of the German strategy against the Jews. It was a step-by-step plan of oppression. Jews would comply with one step and then felt that nothing else would happen next. This was the essence of the plan. Luna recounts her realization that there was no place to run to, therefore, everyone made up excuses and intellectualized so that they could keep going. The Germans immediately rounded up all the leaders in the community which led to chaos and caused the community structure to fall in.

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There were no phones nor newspapers-no way to get information. Men who previously held highly respected positions in the Jewish community were refused work and, as a result, were degraded and humiliated. They were assigned jobs such as shovelling snow and coal or sweeping streets. Because of a strong class distinction, such tactics by the Germans were quite destructive for the community.

01:19:00

Because the Germans knew the importance of education in Jewish life, schools were immediately closed and attendance was made illegal. Parents began secret schools in their homes at great risk-if they were caught they would be subject to punishment by death. Step-by-step, the Germans chipped away at the dignity of the Jews and tried to break their spirit. The Jews tried to keep their own spirit intact.

01:22:00

Before the outbreak of the war, Luna attended an all-Catholic school and achieved an excellent rapport with teachers and the main priest. She never felt conflicted about being a Jew in a Catholic school.

01:25:00

Shortly after the invasion of German forces, violence and terrorization began. The Star of David was placed in store windows and people were taken off the streets. Luna recalls the brutality toward Orthodox Jews. She witnessed the public murder, on a street, of the parents of an Orthodox friend. Everyone kept assuring themselves that it would be better the next day. After six months or a year,

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the Germans decided to move all the Jews to small rural towns outside of the city. Friends and families became scattered.

01:28:00

The entire Jewish population shifted to the outskirts of the city and out of communication with immediate family members. They felt alienated because they had no transportation and their letters were censored. Luna received news about relocation to a Jewish ghetto. She felt a sense of relief that she would again be close to her family. She wanted this for moral support and to be united in some way. Luna did not deal with what tomorrow brought, she could only take that day's hope and breathe easier.

01:31:00

Luna lived in Bramovitz for one year and then moved to the ghetto. She was still with her family. They lived in cramped and uncomfortable conditions in the ghetto but tried to resume their cultural life. They needed intellectual stimulation. They would meet with friends to sing, read poetry, and listen to lectures. They would go from house to house and each would offer what they could in terms of culture.

01:34:00

During this time, deportations were also continuing. They did not know where people were going. Beatings occurred from time-to-time. People received work assignments in a brush factory. Luna's father and sister worked outside of the ghetto. They were exposed to more violence.

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01:37:00

Luna's job in the brush factory paid well, which was rare. She felt that the job was an opportunity to learn something new and found hope and pride in bringing home an income. Luna found a work assignment for her mother. Her mother received working papers which later saved her life. Luna recalls that when there was no food available she never felt hungry. Hunger was not an issue. Luna lived in the ghetto for two years, from approximately 1941 until approximately 1943.

01:40:00

Luna was 15-16 years old. She felt that the Judenrat (Jewish Council) was comprised of people from lower social classes. Luna also felt that even though they collaborated and enforced rules (never carried weapons) it was better that they do it than the Germans who would carry out more violence in the ghetto. Luna has mixed feelings; she reflects that it is very difficult to judge the situation.

01:43:00

Luna's father and sister were sent to work in a lumber camp outside of the ghetto. They received housing and food. When it was announced that the ghetto would be liquidated, Luna lost contact with her father and sister. Those people who did not have a "blue card" (working papers) wouldn't go to the concentration camp. Germans rounded up all those who did not have papers. Some were shot and some were deported, possibly to Bergen-Belsen, a concentration camp in Germany. The

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majority were killed. They marched to the concentration camp from the Kraków ghetto. It was a two to five mile walk to the camp, called Pwochev (Plaszow), a concentration camp in Poland.

01:46:00

Thousands of people marched to the camp amidst total chaos and violence. Mothers were forced to make choices between keeping one child and letting another go to be shot. Luna's mother lost her valise which contained her working papers. Miraculously, a neighbor found the valise before they entered the camp. Luna was assigned to barracks with 200 women to a room. She worked for 12 hours a day moving stones from one side of the road to the other side. They worked each day in order to keep from being idle. They suffered constant harassment and beatings. Luna began work in the brush factory again.

01:49:00

Luna developed an intense desire to defy the Germans. She made a vow to live; she never reached a point where she didn't want to live. Luna did not want to comply with what the Germans wanted.

01:52:00

Luna's father and sister were brought into the camp as her mother and sister were deported. Luna felt comforted that at least each parent had someone for support. There were some acts of resistance in the camp. Three boys tried to escape, but when they were caught they were penalized. For one act of resistance hundreds were threatened with death.

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01:55:00

Death threats were a strong deterrence to resistance. Punishment was always a mass punishment. However, when there was an act of resistance a sense of solidarity was felt throughout the camp.

01:58:00

People tried to stay civilized amidst unsanitary and inhuman conditions. Some evenings were devoted to poetry and discussion, but this was very rare. Luna came down with typhoid. The Red Cross refused to help because she was not a political prisoner and did not qualify for medication (aspirin). The Red Cross even came to inspect the camp and were fooled by artificial conditions. The Germans cleaned up the camp for the day of inspection.

02:01:00

Luna was shocked that the Red Cross did nothing. She never imagined that the Red Cross would not react. She wondered where the world was. Luna recovered from her fever. She began to work with P-acid—a highly toxic and dangerous substance. Those who worked with chemicals in the past were given six-hour shifts, gas masks, and milk. In Luna's case, she worked non-stop, without food. She worked in these conditions for three to four months and developed a serious lung disease. She was shipped to the sick room. Luna somehow recovered. She spent four years in the concentration camp.

02:04:00

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Luna recalls that she knew the war was ending because she could see the Russian front line advancing. The Germans organized a transport. Luna found out from the Jewish director of the camp, "Goldberg," that most people who were sickly would be exterminated. With the aid of Goldberg, Luna escaped the camp.

02:07:00

Luna still had no information about her father and sister until the spring of 1945 when she was shipped to Leipzig, Germany to the Hassack (Hasag) Ammunition Factory. 600-700 people went to the labor camp. Germans needed as many people as possible for labor at this time, spring 1945.

02:10:00

Luna did not have a clear understanding of what was occurring in Auschwitz, a concentration camp in Poland. Luna found out information about her sister from women who ended up in the same camp as her after leaving Auschwitz. Some of the women saw Luna's sister alive. Luna's sister was originally to be in the transport with these same women. However, with the help of a cousin who worked in Auschwitz, thinking the transport was going to be exterminated, her sister arranged for escape. Luna's sister remained in Auschwitz for three months and was then sent to Stutthof seaport in Poland. She was put on a ship with other women and she drowned in the last days of the war.

02:13:00

Luna didn't find out anything about her father until after the war. He was shipped into Auschwitz in 1944. Only recently (to the date of the interview) did Luna find out any more information about her

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father. Two shipments entered Auschwitz in May 1944. One shipment was from Hungary and the other was from Kraków. The Germans had planned to take the Hungarian shipment into the crematorium but they took the Kraków shipment by mistake. The prisoners were evacuated from the labor camp and they began the death march, walking in circles. They spent the night in a barn and in the morning they found piles of German uniforms. They searched for food.

02:16:00

They were still in prison garb. They had no information about the end of the war until the Russian soldiers arrived.

02:19:00

The Russians came in and raped and killed women. The Russians did what they wanted. Luna went back to Kraków with her mother and a friend to see if any of their family would show up. Normally the trip took seven or eight hours but at this time the trip took an entire week.

02:22:00

At the beginning of the war, Luna's family gave their apartment to Polish people to take care of. At the close of war, they could not get their apartment back. They found a room in a basement and lived there for five years, until 1950. Luna met her husband after the war while she was in school. She went to Israel in 1950. She went from Israel to the United States in 1952, but it was extremely difficult to get papers. It took one year to get working papers to enter the United States.

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02:25:00

Luna got help from the relief organization Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT). Luna found a sewing job and got help acquiring credit from a school. Luna lost six years of education, but she was able to receive her high school equivalency in one year and was then admitted to a university. She made up all of her lost years in five years time. She received her masters degree in musicology and she finds pride in such an achievement.

02:28:00

Luna arrived in the United States in 1952. She lived in New York for three months and then moved to New Jersey. Her mother arrived five years later. Luna had an apartment in Union City, New Jersey until her first child was born. Luna recalls her negative attitude about entering the United States.

02:31:00

Because of red tape and the difficulty she had in entering the country, Luna has a bad image of the United States and Americans. It took her some time to figure out what America is all about. She has spent 23 years in Watchong, New Jersey.

02:34:00

Luna cut off ties with the Jewish community and made an effort to get to know Americans. She took a job in a bank and moved to New Brunswick, New Jersey. She was interested in politics and

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joined the League of Women Voters. She was very involved in public life. It was not until her children were of school age that the question of Jewish community and Jewish life came up.

02:37:00

Luna presently lectures about the Holocaust at schools where children have problems functioning in society. She goes to schools in black ghettos [slums in the United States populated by African-Americans]. Luna stresses to children not to depend on society ... that anger prevents one from being constructive and that they must learn that it is their attitude and their desire to learn and create their own vision of what they want their life to be all about. Further, society can give the tools and should give the encouragement for children to achieve, but personal attitudes toward life and learning are the most important. Luna believes that the Holocaust should be taught without bitterness or viciousness.

02:40:00

Luna stresses that she will never forgive anyone for what occurred but will never take justice into her own hands. She believes that people are accountable for their actions and that the world must see this justice. Luna also believes that the Germans wanted Jews to emulate them by practicing hatred. If she would take justice into her own hands than she'd be acting just like the Germans.

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Luna attended the Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Washington, D.C. She believes that the gathering represented a very vocal, accomplished group of people who have rebuilt their lives with dignity.

02:45:00

Luna is presently working on a project that deals with the American soldier who went to Europe to give aid and liberation. She is working with Governor Kean of New Jersey on a national project to pay tribute to liberators of Europe.