

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

**Interview with Sally Levenstein
1983
RG-50.002*0018**

PREFACE

In 1983, Sally Levenstein 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 Sally

Levenstein

1983

Sally Levenstein was born in Kazimierza Wielka, Poland in 1909. Her family consisted of her parents, five sisters and three brothers. In 1931, she married Isak Levenstein and they moved to Kraków, Poland. At the beginning of the war, they and their two young children were forced into the Kraków ghetto. Sally worked in a factory making stockings for German soldiers. In 1942, the ghetto was liquidated and she and her children hid in a bunker several stories below ground. Her husband was sent to Plaszów concentration camp on the outskirts of Kraków. He was eventually able to smuggle the children into the camp and hide them for 14 months. Sally hid in the factory where she worked before joining her family in Plaszów. Sally and her husband were unable to save their children from a roundup of all the children in the camp. In September of 1944, after Plaszów was dissolved, Sally was sent to Birkenau, a sub camp of Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. She remembers seeing Dr. Josef Mengele making selections for the gas chamber. A few months later, she was transferred to Auschwitz and then put on a death march to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany on January 18, 1945. She was in the Bergen-Belsen hospital when the camp was liberated by the British. After the war, she was reunited with her husband in Kraków. They went to Vienna, Austria, and then to Bindermichl a displaced persons camp

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

2

in Austria. In 1949, they emigrated to the United States with their eight month old daughter. They settled in New Jersey where Sally's husband started a construction company.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

3

**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Sally Levenstein
1983**

01:01:00

Sally was born in 1909 in Kazimierza Wielka, a suburb of Kraków, Poland. The community had about 200 to 300 Jews. She had five sisters and three brothers. Her father bought and sold land. He died of diphtheria in 1918. Only two sisters survived the war. She was the youngest of the siblings.

01:06:00

Sally finished gymnasium, with the last two years spent in Kraków. She had private teachers for Hebrew. When she was in Kraków, she came home for weekends. Kraków was about two hours from Kazimierza Wielka. She and her siblings were involved in their studies but when their father died, the sons took over the business. One brother also became a rabbi.

01:11:00

There were good relations between the Jews and non-Jews in her town. Antisemitism was not felt much because the Gentiles made

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

4

their living through the Jews. Synagogues were Orthodox. Gentile neighbors mingled with the Jews, but sometimes antagonism surfaced. A Pole once bragged to her about having struck Jews. This upset her greatly. She married in 1931.

01:16:00

She is unsure of some dates because at the end of the war she was left with no documents. She finished gymnasium in 1928 and returned to her town. She married Isak Levenstein in her town. She remembers 30 relatives at her wedding, most of whom died in the Holocaust. She moved to Kraków after her wedding. Isak was a wholesaler for a brief time. Then he became a partner in a metal factory. Life in Kraków was comfortable during the early years of their marriage.

01:21:00

There were 70,000 to 80,000 Jews in Kraków before the war. The Kraków community was almost entirely Orthodox. She remembers the social life in Kraków and misses it. She was involved in Jewish organizations such as the Jewish National Fund. Every home had a box for donations. There was some tensions between the Zionist and non-Zionist organizations. Sally and Isak had two children; a girl born in 1932 and a boy born in 1937. They were on vacation

when the war commenced. Her husband returned home immediately to check on the business.

01:26:00

She did not experience antisemitism before 1939. When the war started, her sister in Kazimierza entrusted some property to a Polish neighbor who also promised to hide her but betrayed her to the SS upon gaining her property. She and her family did not survive. Sally, beforehand, hadn't believed what had happened in Germany. Native Polish Jews had been deported from Germany back to Poland. Other Jews were compelled to take them in. A Polish Jew who had lived in Germany warned her about the Germans but she did not believe him.

01:31:00

At the beginning of the war, a ghetto was set up in Kraków. She had to work in a factory making stockings for German soldiers. People were being taken away in selections. There was a Judenrat (Jewish council) in the ghetto. There was fear of betrayal everywhere.

01:36:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

6

The Judenrat was "good," but the "Jewish police" were "terrible." They pointed out Jews to the SS. Sally's family was living with other families in a single apartment. More people came into the apartment. She and her family were confined to the kitchen. In 1942, the Plaszów concentration camp was set up on the outskirts of Kraków. One day, she was told that the ghetto would be made Judenrein ("cleansed" of Jews). She hid in a bunker several stories below ground with her children and a few others.

01:41:00

When the ghetto first opened, there were approximately 2,000 people. Always, though, people were being sent out. Some had been given cards to enable them to stay in the ghetto and avoid deportation. Later, no more cards were given out. When the ghetto was made Judenrein, she fled with her children and a few others to the bunker.

01:46:00

The rest of her family was separated from her. She felt the separation deeply. Isak had gone to Plaszów. She was in the bunker for almost 70 days. Food was eventually depleted. She tells how she went to a building in the middle of the night foraging for food for her children, finding remnants in some

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

7

abandoned apartments. Three days later her husband returned. He was able to get to the bunker because he had pretended to bring a machine to the Plaszów factory. He bribed a Kapo, who had accompanied him, to keep his mouth shut as to the whereabouts of his family.

01:51:00

He took the children to the camp with him in order to hide them (only a Jewish policeman knew about this). The children were cautioned by their parents to be quiet and remain hidden. Sally, who had no card to go to Plaszów, escaped to a factory where she had worked and hid out there alone. She had wanted to get into Plaszów to be with her children.

01:56:00

Meanwhile, SS men were dissolving the ghetto. The Jewish policeman finally returned to the factory. He had put her on the list of those supposed to go to Plaszów. She arrived there and the children were brought to her and slept with her in the bunk. They were hidden under a quilt. During the day, a woman named Mrs. Rosner watched over them while Sally continued to work in the factory. This went on for 14 months.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

8

2:01:00

One Sunday, all the children were rounded up (including Sally's) and taken away. Twenty-five thousand people were forced to stand for several hours. Plaszów was being dissolved. She never saw her children again.

02:06:00

Her relatives were taken by German industrialist Oskar Schindler (among them was Sally's husband) to a place called Brännlitz, a "camp" set up to protect Jews. She was sent to Birkenau concentration camp in Poland. She describes being stripped of all of her possessions and seeing Dr. Josef Mengele making "selections" for the gas chamber. She was taken to the showers, given wooden shoes and a grey dress with a blue stripe. This was in September 1944.

02:11:00

Mengele looked over those in her group and made another selection. The survivors of that selection were assigned to move heavy stones from one place to another. Anyone who stopped in this aimless activity was shot. She describes the food and the clothing. She did not have proper clothing for the cold weather. She thinks

that the soup they were given had something in it to debilitate them. She talks about the "experiments" done by Mengele and others on men and women.

02:16:00

She was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland a few months later. She had to work outside in the winter. She was taken on a march on January 18, 1945. People who could not march were shot on the spot. She was sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. The marchers were so hungry that they ate grass. She was glad that her mother had died before the war.

02:21:00

She finally came to Bergen-Belsen. There was a typhoid epidemic. She wore the same dress that she worn in Auschwitz. She saw dead bodies thrown into a pile. When someone died, the other inmates looked for their bread. She was taken by a Jewish woman leader of her barracks to the kitchen to work. She was told that she could eat whatever she wanted in the kitchen, but would be shot if she took anything out.

02:26:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

10

A woman helped her by taking bread for her so she could feed her niece who had accompanied her to Bergen-Belsen. Her niece did not survive. Sally got typhus. She was sent to a hospital about the time that the British liberated the camp. British soldiers who spoke Yiddish or Polish came to see them.

02:31:00

She says that many people passed away from overeating. After being starved, there were very few survivors of Bergen-Belsen. In Bergen-Belsen, you "just waited for death." The French in Bergen-Belsen could not survive because of the cold weather. People were sadistically punished by the Germans by being issued improper clothing deliberately.

02:36:00

To this day, Sally says that she feels insecure if her husband is gone for long. After liberation, she remained in the hospital. She did not know who was alive but she had a feeling that her husband was alive. Survivors had been invited by the Queen of Portugal to come to that country. She refused to go because she wanted to look for her family. She met a man from Kraków who claimed that he had seen her husband.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

11

02:41:00

She decided to go to Kraków. She arranged to travel with others by hitchhiking. It was a two week trip from Bergen-Belsen to where she could take a train. She came to Kraków and met her husband. They went back to the apartment where they had lived. The woman living there treated them callously. Sally wanted to leave Kraków. Through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, they went to Vienna, Austria, and then to Bindermichl displaced persons camp in Austria. They were in Austria from 1945 to 1949.

02:46:00

They had a daughter. They did not want children but they had strong feelings that life had to continue. She had helped another woman with her child in Bindermichl and began to long for one of her own, in order to give some purpose to her life. In Bindermichel, she met some American Jewish GIs who helped her locate relatives in New York. When her daughter was eight months old, they came to the United States.

02:51:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0018

12

She learned English. Sally's brother in law was a builder in Canton, Ohio. He got Sally's husband involved in the building trades but Isak wanted to live in New York. They came to Newark, New Jersey where got credit, bought land and started building.

02:56:00

Concluding remarks: Sally wonders where God was during the Holocaust. She wonders if she sinned. She still does not know the answer as to why this happened. She wonders why some people do not believe it.