

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

Interview with Adela Sommer
1983
RG-50.002*0026

PREFACE

In 1983, Adela Sommer 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 Adela Sommer
1983

Adela Sommer was born in 1923 in Tluste, Poland (now Tolstoye, Ukraine). She came from a well-to-do family. None of her immediate family survived the Holocaust. She attended Hebrew school. The town's generally peaceful Jewish-Gentile relations were disrupted when the Germans invaded on June 22, 1941. The local population of the towns began killing Jews despite the vocal opposition of two priests.

The Germans created a ghetto in Tluste, and on May 27, 1943, 3,000 people were killed in an "Aktion." Adela's escaped such "aktionen" by hiding in a bunker with 32 other Jews.

During another Aktion, they were saved by Hungarian soldiers who sang and made other noises to cover up the sound of a crying baby in the bunker. During the winter of 1943, Adela survived by working as a knitter. When typhus swept through the ghetto, Adela nursed the sick. Her mother succumbed to the disease on February 17, 1944. When the Germans began to retreat. Adela and other Jews were saved by a relative of Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland.

After being liberated on February 17, 1944 Adela went to Katowice, Poland. After marrying, Adela joined her cousin who was director of a displaced persons camp in Ulm, Germany. She stayed there for three years and gave birth to twins in 1947. She moved on to Ebensee, Austria and to Föhrenwald, Germany a displaced persons camp's until the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

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brought her family to the United States on March 13, 1951. They moved to Flushing, NY, then Brooklyn, NY, and then Elizabeth NJ.

**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Adela Sommer
1983**

01:00:00

Adela was born in 1923 in the town of Tluste in Eastern Galicia, Poland, (now Tolstoye, Ukraine). The Ba'al Shem Tov once lived there. Many Jews (100 from the town, 400 from the vicinity) survived there. The day the Russians liberated the town in March 1944, however, the Germans bombed the town and 150 of these survivors were killed. Before the war there were 3,000 people in Tluste, 1,800 of whom were Jewish. Although most older people were strictly Orthodox, Zionism was booming. The drive to be modern and to be a Zionist was the goal of young people. Adela's father wouldn't let her join anything that boys and girls participated in together. She spoke Hebrew as well as Polish. She had a "wonderful" Hebrew teacher named Mordecai Spector.

01:06:00

Her family was well-to-do. Her father had a lumberyard. The house she lived in is still standing. Every Friday her mother made packages for needy families. There was no industry in the town. People earned a living from small businesses. Adela didn't really know very much about her family history. She was still considered a young child. Later, (in 1965), she wrote a book about her town which has

become her frame of reference. She wants her grandchildren to know about her life.

01:11:00

Many sects were represented in her town. The Jewish population was "all for education." All girls went to Hebrew school. Boys went to yeshiva and cheder. Everyone was literate. She recalls a crippled beggar in her town whose daughter went to Hebrew school with everyone else. "That's the kind of town it was," she recalls. People in Tluste knew what was happening in the outside world, (e.g. the Spanish Civil War). Education was most important. Tluste produced the first Jewish genealogist. Her big-city relatives thought she came from a "hick" town, but she disagreed.

01:16:00

Tluste was in the "bread basket of Eastern Europe." Everyone, however poor, could always find food, even if it was only bread and potatoes. One did not feel the same poverty as people felt in the big cities. Before the war, there was a peaceful coexistence between Jews and Gentiles, although there were always pockets of Antisemitism. Once the Germans invaded, the elements of friendship and coexistence were disrupted. The central part of town was largely Jewish. The villages around Tluste were mostly Gentile, with the majority of the Gentile population being Ukrainian. Ukrainians hated the Poles, the Poles hated the

Ukrainians, and privately, both hated the Jews. In school her nationality was listed as "Pole" and her religion as "Mosaic." One teacher gave private lessons to Poles, but not to Jews. The high school was in a neighboring town and Jews had to be especially competent to attend.

01:21:00

The Jews knew they had to live with discrimination, but they educated themselves, many in Germany. The Poles were not as democratic as they professed. The German invasion occurred on June 22, 1941. For ten days the Germans were not seen in the town, but the Christian population killed a few hundred Jews. Two priests--Polish and Ukrainian-- kept the Jews from being killed in their town. In other towns cemeteries were destroyed, but not in Tluste. For this she credits the two priests.

01:26:00

One of the priests sermonized that there were greedy people who coveted Jewish possessions, and that we are all of one God. Adela's maid heard the priest and told her about it. Killers of Jews from the villages were not allowed to enter. Adela could have passed herself off as a Ukrainian, but she was too frightened to do it. People from surrounding towns warned her family what was happening. People were constantly being betrayed by neighbors. Tluste was made into a ghetto. Jews were not allowed to go on the main street of the town.

01:31:00

Adela and other Jews were cut off from the water supply, which was on the other side of town. If Jews were caught

going for water, they were killed. She was with her mother and sister, (who was 14 years older than she). It is difficult to describe how one could survive. She was with her mother, her sister, and her sister's child. Peasants wouldn't hide them but would give them a loaf of bread. On May 27, 1943 there was an "Aktion" in which 3,000 people were killed. These included Jews who came to Tluste from other places.

01:36:00

In the meantime, Adela's family made a bunker in an attic which they could camouflage, because the door was covered by fallen plaster. Her mother, sister, nephew, and her future husband's family all lived together. Her father was already dead. They took in a woman with a baby from a town which had become "Judenrein." Over 32 people were in one bunker. During an "Aktion," her future husband's father was killed trying to reach Hungarian soldiers whom he knew. The baby was crying and no one knew what to do. The mother was desperate and willing to have the baby killed in order to silence it so that the people in hiding were not betrayed.

01:41:00

At 4 p.m. the killing stopped. Later, the Hungarian soldiers berated them for taking in the baby. When the baby began to cry, the soldiers whistled and sang loudly to disguise the noise the baby was making. Adela's future husband was already in a camp. The Germans needed rubber and

also able-bodied people who could work. Her future husband went with them. After the "Aktion" she went to work as a knitter. Gentiles would take her from house to house and feed her because they had known her father. That was in the winter of 1943. Older people were, in Adela's experience, more compassionate; younger ones were "brainwashed." Adela tells of a young woman who coveted her dress and tried to get her to trade it for an old one.

01:46:00

When the "Aktion" stopped, typhus took over. The Jews were deliberately infected to isolate them as "carriers." Her husband blames the "Judenrat" for cooperating with the Germans. She does not; she realizes they had to live too. Religious observance was still followed in the ghetto. Education went on and she still studied Latin. Down to the final minute, people still lived with hope, although "nobody cared" about the fate of the Jews, except for a few like the two priests. In the neighboring village where she was a knitter, people were decent to her, respecting the memory of her father. But people tended to emulate what they were told.

01:51:00

Older people seemed to know life better, but the young were callous. She retells the story of the girl who wanted her dress. Most able-bodied Poles were shipped to Germany to work. "Hillbillies" used to come down from mountainous regions to work in town. One young man remarked he hoped that she wouldn't be killed until the gloves she was knitting for him were completed.

01:56:00

The German retreat was beginning. In contrast to some of the younger Poles, a young German tried to protect the few

Jews who survived, by giving them a chance to get away. A German named Frank--a relative of Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland, protected them from an "Aktion."

02:01:00

Adela helped those who were sick, including her mother, who died two weeks later on February 17, 1944. Her mother told her to save herself, but Adela stayed with her. Her sister wasn't alive anymore. She had been shot along with her child. Her brother-in-law was shot two weeks later. Adela never discussed these tragic events with her mother. Two weeks later, following her mother's death, she was liberated. Frank warned them not to stay with villagers who would kill them. Five hundred Jews came together.

02:06:00

Adela always tried to look like a peasant. The Ukrainians would have killed them, but Wehrmacht soldiers chased them away. On March 23, 1944, the Russians came. The Germans bombed the barracks, where 150 Jews were killed. There were many tragedies associated with the liberation.

02:11:00

After liberation Adela was alone. She had to get a job, or under Russian rule, she would be accused of "vagrancy." A friend of her father became the head of a brewery on the Romanian side. Adela became the bookkeeper of the brewery.

There was no paper, so she wrote on old copies of Pravda with a crayon. As a Polish citizen, she had a right to emigrate, which she did in the fall of 1945. She went to Katowice, Poland, and then to Austria and Germany. She got married. In Austria, she lived in barracks.

02:16:00

Only one of Adela's cousins survived. He was in the Russian army. He had become the director of a displaced persons camp in Ulm, Germany. He invited her to come there. She was there for three years. She went to Ebensee, Austria, and Föhrenwald, Germany Displaced Person's Camp. All of this took five years. The Joint Distribution Committee brought them to the United States. They arrived there March 13, 1951. She only wanted her own "corner of the world." Her children were born in 1947 (twins). She was bitter and didn't want to be given things. She wanted a "normal" life. She thought she'd be free once she was liberated and didn't want to live in displaced persons camps. Now she wants her children to see where she stayed.

02:21:00

Adela came to the United States after wanting to go to Israel. But the war of liberation, (War of Independence), had begun and she feared her husband would be drafted into the Israeli Army. She registered to go to the United States. She had only one relative: an uncle who was disabled. She

had to wait for the quota. Nevertheless, she was glad to be here. When they first came to the United States, she worked days, and her husband worked nights.

02:26:00

They were screened and investigated before coming here. They came to Flushing, NY, then Brooklyn, NY, then Elizabeth NJ. She prays for good health and peace of mind. She feels the Jews were a "gentle people" and wonders how they could have organized any resistance. Her husband thinks there should have been more resistance. She believes their story must be told and people need to protect themselves.

03:01:00

Adela is glad for the Israeli Army. They diffused the notion of Jews as "cowards." Adela and other survivors were too busy and bitter to write down their memories. Now she's sorry about it. She feels the United States Jewish community at the time needed to support them, rather than say kaddish for them. "We were waiting for Entebbe, (Uganda)," referring to the rescue by Israelis in July 1976. She believes Romanian Jews survived because they were aided by the indigenous population. The Polish Jews had few people to help them, and they fared the worst.

03:06:00

Those who had something to barter fared better. The lesson is "you have to look out for yourself." "Israel is our lifeline." She feels we must know about the Holocaust. "I'm sorry so many American Jews are so ignorant about it," she says. She speaks of attending survivor gatherings. "I have to tell and share. . .the bad and the good." She remembers the priests who helped.

03:11:00

Adela feels that if a leader, (spiritual or lay), helps, people can be saved. One needs to tell what happened. Her children grew up without grandparents and wondered about that. They were raised in displaced persons camps where there were no old people or young children because these groups did not survive. She's glad her grandchildren asked questions and want to know about what happened to her and her husband.