

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Archives

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

Interview with Ida Schwarz  
February 1, 1989  
RG-50.002\*0049

## **PREFACE**

On February 1, 1989, Ida Schwarz was interviewed on videotape by Ruth Harris and Bernard Weinstein 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 Ida Schwarz**  
**February 1, 1989**

Ida Schwarz was born in Tarnów, Poland, on May 20, 1925. The German Army arrived in Tarnów on September 4, 1939. They created a ghetto there in the summer of 1942. As pressure from the Germans mounted, Ida went into hiding in August 1942, living in a sewer in the ghetto. After a short period, she moved to a cellar within a cellar. While hiding at night, she began to labor for the Germans by day. In November 1942 she was slated for deportation and put on a train to a concentration camp. She jumped from the train and returned to Tarnów with the help of a Polish peasant. She continued to labor for the Germans. The ghetto was liquidated in September of 1943, and Ida was sent to Plaszów concentration camp in Poland. In October of that year, she was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Ida remained in Auschwitz until January 1945, when she was a force march to a train which took her to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. While in Bergen-Belsen, she caught typhoid fever. A short time later, she was sent to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria, where she was liberated by the Americans. Ida returned to Tarnów to recover from typhus but caught tuberculosis in the hospital. A short stay in the mountains cured her. She decided to emigrate to the United States. After four years in Heidelberg, Germany, she emigrated to the United States with the help of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

**Time-coded notes of the  
Interview with Ida Schwarz  
February 1, 1989**

01:00:00

Ida was born on May 20, 1925 in Tarnów, Poland. She was one of 10 children. Her father was a Rabbi and ritual slaughterer. The family had a comfortable home. Poland was invaded by the Germans on September 1, 1939. The Germans reached Tarnów on September 4 of that year. At first the Jews only had to relinquish their valuable personal items such as furs, jewels and money, but soon after large Jewish businesses were confiscated and ritual slaughter was prohibited. Ida's father continued the practice as the Jews needed food, especially for the Fall holidays. Ida accompanied him, carrying his special knives. Her father shaved off his beard only after some other Jews were killed for refusing to shave their beards.

01:06:00

Forty percent of Tarnów's population was Jewish. Many of the youth belonged to large Zionist organizations and hoped to go to Palestine some day. There was also a large Socialist organization which worked to keep Jews in Poland. Tarnów had at least 30 Synagogues, a Jewish theater and a cinema. There was a genuine Jewish culture in the town. Ida attended public school and trade school. She became a

seamstress because she thought it would be a useful trade in Palestine. All the synagogues were destroyed, but it took two weeks to destroy the newest one, due to its sturdy construction. Many Jews left Tarnów, including her older married sister and brother. Life became more restricted with rationing, but the Germans did not begin their killing program. When the United States entered the war, the Germans started killing local Jews or sending them to Auschwitz. The families would receive the ashes of their dead relatives.

01:11:00

In December 1941 the Germans began to randomly kill Jews. In June 1942, the exterminations began. Ida had three brothers at home with her. on June 11, 1942 those without working permits were told to report to the town marketplace. Her three brothers went because the youngest of them did not have a permit. Ida was left home alone and her father hid in an attic. They lived on the third floor of an apartment building. The SS entered the building and removed the residents from the first and second floors. Ida could see that they were gathering up the elderly, women and children. Two thousand Jews were in the market place. Hundreds were shot on the spot, and others were put into trucks and sent to the cemetery and killed. Others were marched to the school on the main road. Blood ran in the gutter of the main road. It took three days to bury the dead. Ida is uncertain what

happened two her three brothers, she thinks they were probably sent to Belzec concentration camp in Poland.

01:16:00

The massacres started again. Twelve thousand Jews were killed in three days. A week later, a ghetto was set up. The Germans selected eight square blocks, and erected a 10-foot fence. There was only one entrance to the ghetto. Holes were made in some buildings so that people could get from one courtyard to another. Those in the ghetto were not allowed to know what was happening outside. Ida and her father were living with several other families in a three-room apartment. In August 1942, a notice was posted ordering everyone to remain at home. Ida decided to go into hiding in a sewer pipe with two other girls. They put rain coats and hats on. The pipe was smelly and damp, but they could stand upright. They could look up into openings which came from sinks and toilets.

01:21:00

Everything could be heard in the sewer. Sounds were magnified. They heard the Germans rounding up tenants. The Germans even shot some. Ida describes the unpleasant conditions in the sewer. She was 20 years old at the time. Late in the day her sister came to get her and Ida went into hiding in a cellar within a cellar with her sister and her husband. They remained there for four days. The ghetto was

divided into working and non-working sections. They left the ghetto each morning to go to work and returned each evening.

01:26:00

From August to November they went to work. They always took their belongings with them to work because they were never sure they would return to the ghetto at the day's end. In November, Sunday labor began. The SS came and took 60 people, including Ida, from their jobs. They were taken to a central place where there were already 2,000 others assembled. When it became dark, they were ordered to the train station and put on cattle cars. A guard collected their valuables. Ida had a chain watch given to her by her father. It had belonged to her mother. She refused to give it up and hid it. She suspected that they were going to Belzec concentration camp in Poland to be gassed. On the train, she spoke to a man and told him she wanted to try to escape. She had identification papers stating that she was a Gentile. He also wanted to escape and asked all the others if they wanted to try to join them at the small window.

01:31:00

Several were willing to try. They were told to jump in the direction of the train's motion to lessen the chances of serious injury. Ida was the fourth to jump. She was panicky, but then felt courage. She did not want to rejoin the others because she was concerned that Jewish males could

easily be identified. She found a shack where she spent the night. Ida was concerned about some barking dogs she heard because there was a curfew. The next day she looked for a peasant to bribe to take her back to the ghetto. Ida found one. It was cold and Ida borrowed a shawl from the peasant's wife. It started to snow.

01:36:00

The peasant told her that the snow and the cold prevented him from taking Ida to the ghetto. Ida persuaded him to stay with her. When they reached the ghetto she gave him the money and returned his wife's shawl. The gate guard recognized her and would not let her in because the Gestapo was nearby. He sent her to a clothes factory three blocks away where Jews were working. Four or five of the other train escapees arrived at the factory. They were all given armbands and blended in with a group of workers because the Germans hadn't started their counting system yet. There were about 4,000 Jews left in the ghetto. Ida's father was still there. Work continued until September 1943 when an announcement was made that the ghetto was to be liquidated. The Jews were divided into two groups. Ida scrambled to be near the group of strong, working men.

01:41:00

To survive you had to had to be alert and have some luck. The group that she was with was sent to Plaszów



concentration camp which was built on a cemetery. At first, Ida carried stones and laid them to create sidewalks. Later, she was assigned to the sewing barracks for repairing and mending uniforms. They had one meal daily, a watery soup with a potato and a piece of bread. The daily roll call took one-and-a-half hours each morning and again each evening. Ida's father hid in the ghetto until its final liquidation.

01:46:00

Hunger was at its worst at night. They often had to work at night which made them hungry and exhausted. If they fell asleep at work, the Germans shot them. There was no sleeping allowed during the day. Somehow they managed. "As long as they did not kill" is a recurring theme in Ida's interview. There were general fears of being moved to another concentration camp because of uncertainties. Ida and four other women avoided being sent to Auschwitz by changing their place in line. The Russians were getting closer to Plaszów. The best time in Plaszów was after a few thousand prisoners had been moved to Auschwitz, because there was more food to go around.

01:50:00

In October 1943, Ida was shipped to Auschwitz. She continued to smuggle her mother's watch and photos of her family. At Birkenau a sub-concentration camp of Auschwitz, they were stripped and their heads were shaved. Ida was given prison garments and wooden shoes. Twice she was in a group being marched to the crematorium, but each time the group was sent back. Those with number tatoos were sent to Auschwitz to work. They were forced to use public showers where they were observed by the Germans. Ida describes her embarrassment at being watched. Through it all, she successfully hid the watch.

01:56:00

Ida mentions that 99% of the women did not menstruate. The few who did used a piece of a slip which they constantly washed and rewashed. There was no toilet paper, and the inmates used weed leaves or wax paper. They shared whatever they could. The deprivation was unbelievable. Before going to Auschwitz they had showers and fairly decent clothes. Dr. Josef Mengele came in and wanted to know who could sew. Ida and her sister were assigned to sew, but she took a great risk pointing out her sister to Mengele. He could have sent her to the gas chamber. At least she and her sister worked inside (it was January). Ida and her sister used to smuggle out bits of material to keep other women warm.

02:01:00

One night an "appel" was organized. They saw four young girls hanged for sabotage. Everyone was forced to look. A building was used for medical experiments--surgery without anesthetics. Once the barracks head asked them if they wanted to see a "movie." They were actually taken to be told about experiments. This frightened them. One day in January, it was announced that their work was no longer needed. The Russians were 20 miles from Auschwitz. The prisoners had to walk to a railroad station. This took a full day. If you didn't walk, you were shot. En route, they thought of trying to hide in a barn.

02:06:00

Many were killed on the way to the station. It started to snow. Finally they got on the train. They were sent to Bergen Belsen concentration camp in Germany. There were no bunks or places to lie down. The prisoners sat in whatever space they could. They were told this was only a place where people were dying. The prisoners heard there were people looking for prisoners to work. Everyone wanted to get work, to avoid catching typhoid. Ida joined a group of potential workers. However, she and others already had typhoid and couldn't work.

02:11:00

They had to go back. Ida remembers she hallucinated. She had a high temperature. Ida felt herself to be in three places at once. Factories were already being bombed, so it did not pay to go to work. In Bergen-Belsen, one could get food by giving up possessions.

02:16:00

But Ida was unwilling to give up the mementos of her parents. The British were bombing, so the Germans put them back on trains and sent them through Czechoslovakia. Ida spent two weeks in closed cars. Dead people were thrown on the tracks. Czechs came and gave them food. All of them got food, thanks to the Czechs. Finally, they were taken to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. The Germans told them that there was no work anymore and that it was only a matter of time before they died.

02:21:00

There were 180 steps to the quarry at Mauthausen. If a prisoner tripped, they fell down. They were sent to the barracks from here. Mauthausen was the worst of all. They saw skeletons who were barely alive. Her barracks were near the crematorium. She was already very sick. She couldn't walk and was put on the top bunk of the barracks. Bodies were burnt outside. She used to hear about deaths. She felt as if she was close to death. Things were quiet and all the

Germans had left. The Americans came in. A soldier held Ida as if she was a little girl. The prisoners were disinfected.

02:26:00

They were put into hospitals. The doctors were all political prisoners. People started to eat. Many died because the food was too rich. A doctor from Yugoslavia thought she should have plasma. He took her to the hospital. The doctor could not find her vein. He finally injected her and stayed with her for many hours. She started to walk and to eat. She tried to eat peanut butter, but it was too rich. The American Army let the Russians take over Mauthausen. She was allowed to leave, but she was too weak. Later, she went back to Poland. She got a certificate attesting to her liberation which had her fingerprints on it. She shows this on the tape.

02:31:00

The Russians were brutal in contrast to the Americans. They raped women and committed other brutalities. Ida knew how to sew and she made a blouse which she shows on the tape. Ida also shows the underwear that she had worn. She still keeps these mementos. Ida also has an oblong scarf to cover her head because she lost her hair due to typhoid fever.

02:36:00

Later, Ida went back to Tarnów. She went into the hospital. Ida had tuberculosis. The doctor wanted her to go to a resort in the mountains. She went to the mountains and recovered. There were many children she met when she went there. They had been hidden from the Nazis. A woman who had survived with two daughters wanted some dresses made. Ida worked for her.

02:41:00

Ida was introduced to her future husband. She planned to go back to her hometown to secure furniture that her family had hidden. There was clothing and material there, as well as silver candelabras, menorahs, and coats. She hoped to sell these to go to Palestine.

02:46:00

When she was in Mauthausen, (at the end) she had a visitor from Palestine who knew her sister. Her sister found Ida's name on a list of survivors. Ida learned that her brother had survived in Siberia on packages that happened to be sent by Ida's sister. Her husband had relatives in the United States. The United States Jewish Joint Distribution Committee brought affidavits to her husband.

02:51:00

To get to the United States, you had to go through Germany. Ida was in Heidelberg for four years, from 1945 to

1949. Before that she went back to Poland to try to find things at home. Her son was born in Germany. Her brother went to France. When she first came to Germany she stayed in army barracks. They couldn't get homes easily.

02:56:00

Her husband wanted to go back to Poland in 1988. She wanted to find her grandmother's tombstone. Her husband found the place where his relatives had been killed during the war. He reburied them and set up a stone. Ida found her mother's grave. She does not know where her parents and brother died. Ida got pictures of Tarnów after the war. The town looks beautiful now, without a sign of Jewish blood. This upsets her. She talks with her children about her experiences. So does her granddaughter. Ida always talks about her experiences and can prove the truth of it. She wants people to know the truth. Ida is glad the Germans took pictures because it makes the survivor's case stronger.