

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Archives

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

Interview with Gertrude Sonnenberg  
January 25, 1989  
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## **PREFACE**

On January 25, 1989, Gertrude Sonnenberg was interviewed on videotape by Jodie Frank 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 Gertrude Sonnenberg**  
**January 25, 1989**

Gertrude Sonnenberg was born on February 1, 1919 in Hausberge, Germany. She describes her childhood as "normal" until Hitler came to power in 1933. By 1939, conditions had worsened and Gertrude's father lost his business forcing the family to move to Hesse, Germany, and then to Hannover, Germany. She remembers Kristallnacht after which their house was converted to a bank. The family was then put on a train to Riga, Latvia where they lived in the homes of Latvian Jews who had been forced out. The area was made into a ghetto and Gertrude and her family were put to work. Her parents were soon deported, leaving Gertrude and her sister behind. As the Russians approached, the ghetto was liquidated and Gertrude and her sister were sent to work in a factory. Soon after, they were sent to Germany and then put on a boat to Hamburg. The next day, they walked to Kiel-Hassee concentration camp in Germany. Gertrude was sick with blood poisoning but her sister, a nurse, helped to cure her infected arm. Kiel-Hassee was liberated by the Red Cross in 1945. Gertrude and her sister were taken to Denmark and then to Sweden. They remained there for three and a half years before emigrating to the United States in 1948.

**Time-coded notes of the**  
**Interview with Gertrude Sonnenberg**  
**January 25, 1989**

01:01:00

Gertrude shows a picture of herself at age 19 in 1938 and pictures of her taken by the police. She also has a picture of her father, taken by the police and two rings made for her in the ghetto by a friend. These rings were made from spoons. She had them for the entire time that she was in the ghetto. She also has a fragment of paper given to her by a Jewish policeman as her parents were taken away.

01:04:00

She and her sister had a normal childhood until 1933, when Hitler came to power. She and her sister were ostracized and cut off by their friends and teachers. She was born on February 1, 1919 in Hausberge, Germany (Westphalia region). Her father owned a quarry. Her father and uncle had fought in World War I. Her family had lived in Hausberge since the 1700's. They moved to Hesse, Germany because of her father's business. The town (Katlhoffend-not verified) was antisemitic, even before Hitler.

01:07:00

Gertrude could become a nurse, cleaning woman or dress maker but high school, universities and professions were closed to Jews. Her sister went to Cologne, Germany as a nurse. Gertrude went to Dortmund, Germany to be a dressmaker. She seemed to do everything but dressmaking. She returned home. Her mother was a dressmaker and taught her. Her family moved to Hannover, Germany.

01:10:00

After 1939, things got much worse. She remembers Kristallnacht. Stores were demolished. Everything Jewish was damaged. A young Jewish dentist was beaten on Kristallnacht and left with his family. (He now lives in Florida) Her grandfather had built a synagogue in Hannover, Germany. He refused to go back until his friends persuaded him to. The synagogue wasn't there anymore. It had been vandalized.

01:13:00

Their house was converted to a bank. When she went back, she searched for her birth certificate. The garden in back of what was their house was the same. The Jewish cemetery was

left unmarked; now a landmark. She saw many Michelsohns (her family name before she married).

01:16:00

She had a large and close family. Not long after the war began, they had to take pictures and get new passports. They had to show cards to get rations. There was no butter, no coffee and no luxury items. The Jews had to wear "Jude" star, that had to be bought . It had to be sewn on at a certain height, etc.

01:19:00

They were carefully scrutinized in public. The Jews were allowed out from eight in the morning to seven at night. They could not go on the sidewalk, only in the gutter. There was a Kulterbund Deutscher Juden (Culture Society of German Jews) which sponsored cultural activities such as theater, music, etc. They were first held in an older synagogue. A family lived in Hanover. Their house was emptied out and activities continued there. The Kulterbund eventually had to stop.

01:22:00

The British were flying over Germany, bombing. Gertrude went to Bavaria, Germany but had to return home. A time came when no one could live in an apartment anymore. You had to give up everything. Her sister came home from Cologne when it looked as though the family was being transferred. She went to a hospital in Hanover to work.

01:25:00

When she returned from Munich, Germany, her family was already moved to an attic. The SS were observing them to make sure that they did not escape. There was nowhere to escape to when the bombs were falling.

01:28:00

They had no money to get away. She had hoped to go to England as a maid so she could get her family out but it was not to be. They were rounded up in Hanover. There was a Jewish school preparing young people to go to Palestine. They were brought there and the school was surrounded by the SS.

01:31:00

Everything you had was collected. You had a 100 pound allowance, that was it. They did get everything back that

was collected from them later. Then the Jews were transported. First, they had to give up their jewelry. It took three days to process 1,000 people.

01:34:00

They were brought to a train. They actually got some food and seats in the train. They travelled three days and three nights. They were given water. She has no idea why they were treated this "well." They arrived at a suburb of Riga, Latvia, in bitter cold. They were asked if they could work. Her mother insisted on working with them. It was a good thing that she did.

01:37:00

The Latvian SS, who were worse than the Germans, gassed Jews who couldn't work. You were shot if you couldn't work anymore. They came to houses which still had food and clothing. Probably the previous inhabitants had been forced out. They were billeted in homes belonging to Latvian Jews.

01:40:00

Young people slept on the floor. The parents slept in chairs. Nothing happened the first night. The next day, an



appel was set up. They were given instructions. A ghetto, a city in itself, was set up. Jewish police were chosen. The Jews had a shack where they changed clothes. There was a place where you could get food. They got fish heads and fish eyes which they ground and ate.

01:43:00

They could not afford to light ovens because they needed wood and their allowance was sparse. Someone built an oven. One needed ingenuity just to survive. They had to go on Kommandos. They counted 50. They marched for one hour to an hour and a half. They had insufficient clothing.

01:46:00

If you had any extras, even a button, you were hanged. But everyone was willing to take risks. She was fearful to run the risk. At a hanging, you had to watch and then stand there for a half hour. You had to work in all sorts of weather. Once, her father was reported by a Latvian SS man. A doctor at the hospital where her sister worked intervened and he wasn't shot. He had to clean toilets.

01:49:00

She had to shovel snow. There was snow on the ground six months out of the year. They were still in houses. The ghetto was constantly being emptied out. In March and April of 1942, 2,000 people (volunteers) were sent to the woods to dig graves. They undressed and were shot. Jewish police had to go with the transport. If they came back, which they often did not, then they told about these things.

01:52:00

She learned not to volunteer. The Latvian Jewish police found means to obtain food and provisions. On October 30, 1942, they organized an uprising. All 41 of these people were, who had built an escape route and smuggled weapons in, were exposed and shot while running.

01:55:00

Sometimes, the SS asked for musicians, artists and actors. They wanted to put on a show to show their "friendship." There was a bizarre quality to all of this. The next morning, people were counted, taken somewhere, and ostensibly killed. Their clothes came back. One always knew that a performance signified an imminent extermination.

01:58:00

One day, Gertrude sensed that something was going to happen. She embraced her parents before she left for work. She saw some people that she had never seen before. She worked in a laundry which received apparel from the front, which they had to clean and count. She passed by the ghetto and saw people standing by the tracks.

02:01:00

When she returned at night, she saw no lights. She did not see her parents or her sister. She panicked. She was ready to jump when a girl friend grabbed her. Suddenly, her sister appeared. She told Gertrude that she wanted to go with their parents. Her mother sent her for a jacket but when she returned the train was gone.

02:04:00

Her parents gave a note to a man who delivered it to her. They gave her their blessings. She paraphrased it. The man who brought the letter now lives in Sweden. They are still friends.

02:07:00

Her sister worked as a hospital nurse. There was a Jewish doctor who was a "miserable person" who would kill people if

it pleased the Commandant. Jewish women could not have children in the ghetto. Abortions were performed without anaesthetic. The Commandant watched the abortions, mutilations. Only a boy who was androgynous was sent away for experiments with this doctor's help.

02:10:00

When the Russian front came closer, the ghetto was liquidated. They were sent to work in a factory for the war effort. They slept on bunk beds. They were generally treated better. They were bombed every night and they had to run to the bunkers. Her sister was with her. A big, heavy German soldier was shaking in his boots. He told them to "move luggage" which, of course, they didn't have.

02:13:00

People hid in trenches. An SS officer was killed in front of the trench where Gertrude's sister had been standing just a moment before. They were sent to Germany. Their heads were shaved and they were given striped uniforms with numbers. In the showers, she saw her sister who she did not recognize her.

02:16:00

They were put on a boat and taken to Hamburg, Germany. They were brought to a prison. Baking soda was put in their food to reduce sexual impulses. The next day, they were sent somewhere else.

02:19:00

They walked and walked for three days. She got sick and had a high fever. She walked between her sister and her girl friend. Once, her sister sat down and Gertrude and her girl friend sat with her but an SS man ordered them to get up. They continued walking.

02:22:00

She came to Kiel-Hasse, a terrible concentration camp in Germany full of suffering. They were overrun with lice. Her sister did not know that she was still alive. The SS man was giving fatal injections to those who were sick. This rallied Gertrude.

02:25:00

One woman forcibly took her to a doctor. The doctor wanted to operate on her arm. She got an injection. She wanted to live. The doctor asked her why. She said, "As long as you live, there is hope." The doctor gave her a hard-boiled egg.

02:28:00

Someone on their way to Kiel-Hassee brought them water. The SS did not allow it. They spilled it. Liberation from Kiel-Hassee finally came. They had to take their clothes off, put on uniforms and go out into the rain. It seemed like the end.

02:31:00

Suddenly, large red cross vans came. The SS ordered them in. They did not go of their own volition but were pushed in. The vans took off. They drove for miles. When the vans stopped, the doors opened and they were in Denmark.

02:34:00

They were given showers, deloused and given food. Two young men died from eating. Their stomachs could not handle it. Then, they came to Sweden. The Swedes stripped and scrubbed them and gave them new clothing.

02:37:00

They were sent to a school. The Swedish youth were unkind to them. Many were escapees from Germany. A Swedish rabbi treated them rather badly too. Gertrude weighed 90 pounds.

02:40:00

She managed to keep the rings that she was given all through the war. Once, she had some pictures and a letter from her parents. She could have been killed but a new Commandant let her go.

02:43:00

Afterwards, she often felt that she deprived someone else of life when she was saved. She had blood poisoning when she came to Sweden. She was told that her arm would have to be amputated. Her sister opened her arm, the poison ran out and her arm was saved.



02:46:00

She was in Sweden for three and a half years. She was well treated. She got an apartment and a job through the government. Her sister and she lived together. Her sister was a nurse while she was a dressmaker. Her sister got an offer to work as a nurse in Stockholm, Sweden so she went along.

02:49:00

She came to the United States in 1948. She met her husband in the Catskills, New York. She has a daughter who is 35 and a 14 year old grandson. Her daughter can't bear to hear about the Holocaust but her grandson is very curious. At Oneg Shabbat (Sabbath afternoon gathering) for her grandson's Bar Mitzvah, the rabbi started reading her story. Her grandson arranged it.

02:52:00

Her husband told her to write her story. Someone helped her write it. She swore to herself that she would speak about it. She wants to speak. She feels that school children need to know.