

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

Interview with Zelda Basch Peters
May 18, 1987
RG-50.002*0070

PREFACE

On May 18, 1987, Zelda Basch Peters was interviewed on videotape by Bernard Weinstein and Frances Farber 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 Zelda Basch Peters
May 18, 1987

Zelda Basch Peters was born in Sighet, Romania on May 29, 1921. Her father was a butcher. She went to Catholic school because the education was good. She started to work quite early in life. She worked for an import-export business, a lawyer, and an architectural firm. Sighet was handed over to the Hungarians in 1940, Antisemitism became more problematic for the Jewish population. It then became intolerable when the Germans took over in 1944. The establishment of ghettos and deportations quickly began. Her parents were sent with the first transport to Auschwitz and were immediately killed. In a German deception, she received a bogus postcard, supposedly from her parents, urging her to come to Auschwitz, a concentration camp in Poland. Upon her arrival at Auschwitz, she learned the terrible truth. She saw how people were taken to be exterminated. In September 1944, she was sent to a concentration camp outside of Frankfurt, Germany. In November 1944, she was transported to Ravensbrück, a concentration camp in Germany. She was often sick in the camps. She developed tuberculosis in Ravensbrück, as well as gum disease. Only the kindness of a nurse saved her from being killed as "unfit for work". She was liberated by the Russians on April 30, 1945. She then traveled to a displaced persons camp in Gabersee, Germany, where she met and married her husband and gave birth to her daughter. With the help of an American Quaker organization, she

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was able to emigrate to the United States. Her family came to the United States in 1951 and settled in Brooklyn, New York. In 1956, they moved to Highland Park, New Jersey.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Zelda Basch Peters
May 18, 1987**

01:00:00

Born in Sighet, Romania on May 29, 1921. She had three brothers and two sisters. Zelda Basch Peters was the youngest of six children. Three children went beyond grammar school. The oldest brother was studying medicine, but had to stop when the war broke out. After World War I her part of Transylvania was given to Romania, but in 1940 Hitler gave it to the Hungary. Although there was much Antisemitism between 1940 and 1944, things got really bad when the Germans took over in 1944. Ghettos and deportations soon began.

01:06:00

Her parents went with the first transport to Auschwitz. Zelda had worked for an architectural firm who wanted to hide her. But she received a printed "postcard" from Auschwitz (a deception used by the Nazis to trap unwitting Jews). She wanted to be with her parents and she went to Auschwitz with girlfriends. When she arrived at Auschwitz, she saw people lying in the streets with their possessions; she knew at that moment how terrible things

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were. Later she learned that her parents had been immediately executed. But now she saw people being taken for extermination.

01:11:00

She saw her older sister who was amazed to see her. She saw her only momentarily and then her sister was taken away. They were not to be reunited until 1956. Zelda developed gum disease. She became very thin and sick. In September she traveled to a camp, near Frankfurt. One day she found that she could not get up. But she had to work to live. She went to Ravensbrück in November. Many girls died there. To make the journey, she was put on the truck with the dead. During a British air raid, she thought she would die.

01:16:00

In Ravensbrück she developed tuberculosis. A Czechoslovakian nurse named Milka saved her life when she told a German doctor that Zelda's X-rays were unreadable, thus saving her from extermination for being "unfit." On April 30, 1945, she was liberated by the Russians. She remembers the white sheets and army boots which the soldiers wore. The prisoners literally kissed the boots of the Soviets. The Russians treated the women in the hospitals well, but many others they assaulted and raped.

01:21:00

She went over to the American side, where there was a deportation camp. In the camp (Gabersee), she married and gave birth to a daughter. Her daughter had many physical ailments, including rapidly oscillating body temperature and convulsions. Eventually, through the Quakers she was able to emigrate to the United States. She came to the United States in 1951. She was never able to go to Sighet again. Although she did visit Bucharest. She remembers that while she was in the Sighet ghetto (from April 1940 to August 1944) Gentile friends had stolen her clothes.

01:26:00

Parents, sister, brother, and their families were killed. Her mother was one of 15 children. Zelda's aunt was the only surviving sibling. When they came to America in 1951, they lived with her aunt in Brooklyn. She says she survived the camps by counting off the days. She describes what it was like to sleep in a bunk with five other girls. When one turned, the others had to. Her most vivid memory was of seeing her sister again. Her sister had lived in Sweden and Israel. Her brother came here in 1964. They all live in Highland Park, New Jersey.

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She doesn't like to talk about her Holocaust experiences, but dreams about them. She shielded her children from it. She spoke of many physical and mental residues of her war experiences: she developed rheumatic fever, sustained foot injuries which cause her to limp. She has had open heart surgery. She feels all of these are the result of her wartime ordeal. She suffered two nervous breakdowns in 1959 and in 1963. She never received reparations or compensation from the German government. She learned that anyone who worked in Germany was entitled to social security paid out by the German government. In order to qualify for reparations however one had to take an exam on German culture. But you had to live in an area where German culture was part of one's life. Sighet did not qualify for that.

01:36:00

Recalls going to Catholic schools because the education was good and because a student did not have to be Catholic to attend. Her religious education however was Jewish. Her family was very observant. Her father was a butcher. Her mother was sickly and looked older than she was. Zelda had gone to business school and began to work quite early in life. She worked for an export-import company, a lawyer, and an architectural firm. The

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architects risked their lives for her when she was in the ghetto because they employed her. She learned that her sister and brothers survived following liberation, but her mother, father, brother and his wife, sister and her husband and children all perished. Little was known in Rumania about what was happening to Jews elsewhere.

01:41:00

From Auschwitz she remembers how children were given to old people by their unwitting parents to be killed. Mothers, learning their children had been gassed frequently took their own lives on electrified barbed wire. She remembers how all her bunk mates in Auschwitz were taken to be gassed. Several times she just missed being killed. She was in bed with a bad leg following the war.

01:46:00

After coming to this country, she had a breakdown. She feels this country was good to her. She remembers her parent's struggle to stay alive. She has not told her daughter and grandchildren much. But her grandchildren do ask about events in her early life. In the concentration camps she recalled how the Nazis tried to separate families. Once a mother and daughter were together when the Germans found out they staged a "show" of the daughter beating

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the mother with a cane and being beaten herself by her mother when she didn't strike hard enough. Zelda's message to young people; do not let this happen again.