

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

Interview with Jola Hoffman
November 3, 1987
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PREFACE

On November 3, 1987, Jola Hoffman 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 Jola Hoffman
November 3, 1987

Jola Schulsinger Hoffman was born in Leipzig, Germany on June 13, 1931. Her family lived a happy, upper-middle class life. Things began to change with the establishment of the Nuremberg laws when Jola was forced to attend an all Jewish school. One night in 1938, her family was driven out of their home and deported to Poland. They lived in Łódź, Poland with her maternal grandparents. Jola's father was on a business trip in London, England during the time of deportation. He later joined his family in Łódź. After the city of Warsaw fell to the Germans, Jola's family moved to Lvov, Poland (Lviv, Ukraine) which was under Russian occupation until 1941. The family was forced into the Warsaw ghetto when the Germans invaded. Conditions were terrible. With the assistance of some gentile friends, they obtained false papers and escaped the ghetto before the start of the Warsaw ghetto uprising in the spring of 1943. On their way out of the ghetto, Jola was hit by a car and hospitalized. When she was released from the hospital, the family found a room in a peasant cottage. Her father believed that he was being followed so he left. The summer of 1943 was the last time Jola saw him. She was told later that he died in Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Jola and her mother next moved to an apartment in a town bordering Warsaw in a building with all Jewish tenants and a gentile landlady who was working for the Polish underground. In

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1944, after the Warsaw uprising, Jola was taken to Breslau work camp in Germany (Wroclaw, Poland). The Russians liberated the camp in 1945. In 1946, Jola went to England as part of Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld's effort to get children out of Poland. She came to the United States in 1949 to live with an aunt and uncle.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Jola Hoffman
November 3, 1987**

01:01:00

Jola was born in Leipzig, Germany on June 13, 1931. She describes her happy, upper middle class family life. Her mother was a concert pianist and her father was a wholesale fur dealer. She had a highly educated extended family. She only felt her Jewish identity when she went to Łódź, Poland to visit her grandparents on holidays. She remembers the Nuremberg laws in 1936 when Jewish children had to change to Jewish schools. Gentile housekeepers were replaced with Jewish ones. Jola's family had a sad parting with their gentile housekeeper. She does not recall any Antisemitism among gentile neighbors and friends. Her father's sister and her husband left Germany in 1933 because they felt it was safer.

01:06:00

She describes being dispossessed by the Gestapo in 1938. During the night, they were ordered to leave, not permitted to take a thing, not even a toy. Her father was in London, England on business. Her grandmother was also ordered out of her upstairs

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apartment. They joined other now homeless Jews outside. One woman's child fell and she was not permitted to pick up the child. All Jews were herded onto trains headed for the Polish border. The Polish government was not prepared to accept them. It was a cold, rainy night and they were frightened after riding for 24 hours. The Polish peasants fed them soup. Those with families in Poland were allowed to go there. Others faced major problems. Her mother's parents lived in Łódź, Poland so she took the family to their home. Jola's father returned from London on Kristallnacht. He was hidden for two days by German friends. He then joined the family in Łódź. A German friend broke the seal in their apartment and brought some things to them. He would not take payment.

01:11:00

Jola attended Polish school for one year. Her mother went to Warsaw, Poland seeking a way to earn money. Her father returned to London and tried to get his family to the United States. The Polish quota was filled. The British only accepted refugees who were in immediate danger. The family was not considered threatened. In August 1939, her father returned from London. He did not believe that war was imminent. Her mother wished that he had remained in London for his own safety. She describes the daily bombing of Warsaw. The Warsaw mayor urged all males to head

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East to avoid being captured by the Germans. Her father went to Lvov, Poland. (Lviv, Ukraine).

01:16:00

Warsaw fell and the Germans invaded. Jola describes staying overnight in a primitive cottage while traveling illegally to join her father in Lvov. Her mother found work playing for the opera. Her father could not find work. She tells of attending school with Ukrainian children, auditioning for the conservatory, a degree of normalcy. The conservatory was a source of cultural excellence in Lvov. There were many fine Jewish musicians there. After the war, there was only one Jewish pianist who survived.

01:21:00

She describes her family's cultural life. They had no Jewish affiliations. They considered Poland their "home." She mentions her father's attendance at Rabbi Prinz's lecture on Zionism in Berlin, Germany. In 1937, some family members left for Palestine. Her grandfather's brother left for the United States to practice medicine. Most believed, like her father, that war would not materialize. Between 1938 and 1939, all of the Jews were deported from Germany. Fear gripped the Jewish people. It was too late to leave without connections and money.

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01:26:00

During the Russian occupation of Lvov, volunteers were given the opportunity to leave for German-occupied Poland. Her mother suspected a trap. All the volunteers were taken to Russia, suspected of being German sympathizers. Many survived the war. The outbreak of the war was in 1941. No one anticipated the events. The Russians ran and the Germans invaded. Her family was at an outdoor concert and was not prepared for what followed. Her father joined his parents in the Warsaw ghetto. Her mother took Jola and her cousin and boarded a train transporting German troops in Poland between Lvov, Kraków, Poland and Warsaw. She pretended that she was joining her soldier-husband in Kraków. A sympathetic Gestapo agent made them feel comfortable in the second class cabin.

01:31:00

They needed overnight lodging because the connecting train was due in the morning. The Gestapo man made hotel accommodations, two rooms. Her mother stalled his advances ("the child"), she promised the "governess" would be available at 8 in the morning. To avoid a confrontation, they left at 6 in the morning. They ran for the train. The inspector asked for their papers. Jola's

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mother pointed to the overhead suitcases and said that the documents were in the bottom suitcase. "Women!" he shrugged and left. They arrived in Warsaw and joined their family in the ghetto. Her father worked as a foreman in a factory making fur jackets. This was made possible by a former client who was in charge of the operation. He gave employment to all of his family members. There were no food rations without work. Jews who were captured on the Aryan side of the fence, were publicly hanged. She never witnessed it but was fearful that the end was near.

01:36:00

She was frightened when she witnessed starvation and death daily, but was fortunate to have the comfort of her family's presence. Her mother pointed to a beggar. He was once a student at the Conservatory. She was upset to see someone reduced to such a state. The liquidation of the ghetto was scary, seeing houses being emptied one at a time. She was relieved to remain. She feared being sent away.

01:41:00

They lived with her mother's parents. They shared one filthy room that was infested with bed bugs and lice. She attended school one half of a day in the ghetto, a degree of normalcy in this abnormal

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environment. She saw children trying to cross the barbed wire fence looking for food. They were shot. The courtyard was in the center of the ghetto in a park-like setting where children would play when possible. Parents tried to create a degree of normalcy. Her mother did not work. The family moved to another street. Her mother had contacts with two gentile friends who made arrangements for them to leave.

01:46:00

Her mother's friends provided hiding places after they left the ghetto undetected. The guards must have been bribed. Their friends and a priest worked with the underground. The priest provided names of deceased persons for false papers. Her mother left the hiding place after getting these documents. She describes her mother's accident, after which she was taken to "umschlagplatz" (transport center). The factory official helped her father save her mother. They spent an unbelievable eight months in the ghetto. They could not talk about it after the war. She describes Orthodox Jews cutting into the flesh of dead horse for food for their families.

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Her father left the ghetto before the Warsaw uprising. She tells of speaking at Holocaust observances. This was emotionally draining and she could not speak about it with her children. They learned about the Holocaust in religious school, then asked questions. Her husband was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey. All of her friends are American-born. She lost track of her childhood friends. There was no continuity.

01:56:00

She feels a lack of old friendships. It is a void in her life. She suppressed her feelings in the ghetto. She hated to see Jewish policemen and questioned the integrity of the Jewish council. How could they do it? Some surely felt that they were helping their families. Some committed suicide and others died at an early age.

2:01:00

Pediatrician Janusz Korczak, a totally assimilated man known for his children's books, opened two non-Jewish orphanages. In 1938, he went to Palestine. He returned to get someone to be responsible for the running of the orphanages. He was caught and the Germans liquidated the orphanages. The Germans wanted to release him because they did not want a martyr. He went to his

death with his children. She describes visiting Poland seven years ago and seeing a sculpture of Janusz with his arms around children. She asked the artist to donate it to Israel. The artist did not know that Janusz was Jewish. He was regarded as a Polish hero.

02:06:00

One half hour before the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the family left the ghetto with false papers. While crossing the street, Jola was hit by a German driver. She was unconscious and hospitalized during the burning of the ghetto. Her father and grandfather were hidden. When their money ran out, news of the grandfather's "suicide" was reported. Parents visited during the one-month hospital stay. After she was released from the hospital, the family found a room in a peasant cottage. The father left because he feared that he was being followed. In the summer of 1943, she saw her father for the last time.

02:11:00

When their cultural life ended in 1939, her father's world stopped. His mother and other relatives were taken to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. He lost his desire to live. He could have passed as an Aryan. Friends provided housing for him

in Lvov. After the war, she heard from an old friend that her father died of typhoid in Auschwitz. While in the ghetto, she was shielded from knowledge of extermination, although people were being sent to Treblinka concentration camp in Poland, and were never heard from again.

02:16:00

She saw her father's gold watch being taken from him by a Ukrainian. She feared for her father. She was closer to him than she was to her mother. It was hard to accept his loss and that of the entire family. It was comforting to be with her mother but they never got close. After leaving the ghetto, they shared an apartment in a town bordering Warsaw. There were all Jewish tenants.

The landlady, a gentile, knew but must have been helping the underground.

02:21:00

The landlady baked cookies and packed them in boxes. Jola took cookies to the bakery and was paid. Concealed in the box was underground news from the BBC. Until the 1944 Warsaw uprising, Russian troops were on the other side of Vistula. The Polish

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underground resisted. When Warsaw was bombed, Jola worked in a hospital that. She spent nights in an air shelter. She was fortunate to get out. The entire Warsaw population was deported to Germany for slave labor. She was taken to Breslau work camp in Germany (Wroclaw, Poland). She spent one night in a prisoner of war camp. The Russians were treated like concentration camp inmates. Cannibalism existed. There were hellish living conditions. There were about 50 people to a bunk, three tiers, no privacy, outside open latrine. A German soldier stood and grinned as he watched. The quarters were lice infested. The food was bad so they were hungry all the time. Her job was in a factory in the city, drilling holes in tubes. Her mother threatened suicide daily. She was punished and became a dishwasher. The Gestapo asked if anyone knew French. She did and became a translator.

02:26:00

After she recovered from typhoid, the Russians liberated the camp in May of 1945. She and her mother saw "ghosts" in the street. The Germans had emptied Auschwitz. The population was aghast; the Germans pushed them away. This was an army of walking cadavers. There were shootings in the forest. When they were liberated, she tried to run out of the camp. She cut her hand on the barbed wire. She is still scarred today. The Germans and camp people went West. Her mother found an empty villa abandoned by a doctor.

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She got clothes from an empty apartment. When they were in Poland, they did not experience any Russian unkindness. Her mother entertained Russian soldiers who may have been Jewish.

02:31:00

She did not see any mistreatment of Germans. She would never go back to Germany. She wonders about contemporaries. What did they do? They must have helped. German girls slept with Russian soldiers and got venereal diseases. Before the war, the Germans did not understand why the Allies were with the Russians instead of the with the Germans. The Poles suffered under occupation. Poland was devastated. She describes the punishment of the Poles who helped the Jews. This was not the case in France or in other countries. Gentile friends who saved them, chose to do so. These friends made all the difference.

02:36:00

Conspiracy of goodness: It was known that 50,000 Jews lived on the other (Aryan) side. One hundred thousand non-Jews probably helped them. After the war, she describes living in Poland for one year, went to school and engaged in teenage activities. She did not want to leave but her mother knew that Poland was no place for Jews. She did not feel especially Jewish and traveled under

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Catholic papers. She developed negative feelings about Catholics. Rabbi Solomon Schoenfeld in England knew what was happening in Europe. He made it a mission to take surviving children to England.

02:41:00

The Chief Rabbi of London got permission from the British government to allow Rabbi Schoenfeld to go to Poland for the rescue of Jewish children. The Polish government agreed as well. She was in one of three transports in the fall of 1946. After a de-lousing stop-over in Sweden, the children arrived in London. Her father's sister met her. This aunt was the only survivor from her father's family. She had left Germany in 1933 because as a Jewish lawyer she was not permitted to argue cases in German courts. Jola's mother lived in Vienna, Austria and came to London in 1948. She came to the United States in 1949 without her mother.

02:46:00

She was received by her aunt and uncle on arrival to the United States. She attended high school at night and was offered a scholarship in 1950. She could not accept the offer because she was expecting her first child. She returned to Kean college of

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New Jersey and earned her degree. She taught elementary grades in the urban area. She describes herself as an activist. She marched to Washington in protest against the Vietnam War. She learned from her experiences, "Make your life worthwhile; you are responsible for your actions."