

RG-50.002.0080

Gertrude Lichtenfeld (interviewed in 1984)

Summary

Gertrude Lichtenfeld, born on April 3, 1925 in Niwka, Poland (probably the Niwka located in in Sosnowiec, Województwo Śląskie), describes being the youngest of four girls (Helen, Rose?, and Regina) in a happy family; how her parents were fairly well-educated; how her father made a nice living working in coal mining; attending public schools together with Jews and non-Jews; attending Jewish Hebrew school in the neighboring town of Modrzejów; life in her town being relatively stress free before the rise of the Nazis; antisemitic tensions growing as the Nazis gained power and her father refusing to leave Poland despite the increasing discomfort; feeling very frightened when German soldiers occupied her town on September 1, 1939, without warning; Jewish-owned businesses being taken away from their owners who were then forced to operate under the supervision of non-Jewish [troihandlers]; how the [troihandlers] started robbing from the businesses and sending all goods to Germany; how food became scarce for all Poles, who had to wait on long lines, and how Jews were hassled especially for trying to get food; citizens being killed by Germans within the first few weeks of occupation; the absence of any resistance, since there were no guns or ammunition available; Jewish households being looted and how it became very hard for Jews to make a living; the entire Jewish population of Niwka being moved in 1940 into ghettos in the much smaller neighboring towns, where they lived in cramped quarters — often two families being squeezed into one apartment; life as terrible there with very little food and no work for Jews; men being taken by the Germans for public works labor without pay; her next oldest sister (Regina) being caught on her way back to Niwka to get food and new clothes, being sent home and told a week later to report to the local police, and disappearing altogether; the entire population of the ghetto being taken on foot to Sosnowiec in May 1942 for selection by Germans, where they were separated by age and physical ability; being taken by train with other young women to Bernsdorf Concentration Camp (presently Bernartice, Trutnov District, Czech Republic), while her parents were sent to Auschwitz; her sister (Rose?) arriving at the camp later the same year; working 12-hour shifts in the textile mill making canvas; being fed two potatoes and grass or spinach soup for lunch and dinner, plus being given two pounds of bread and five ounces of margarine weekly; the work being dangerous — dusty, dirty and oily; an outbreak of typhus taking the lives of a few women; Joseph Mengele visiting the camp every month or so — being very nice and polite, selecting out women who had any kind of blemish on their skin and never returning to the camp; getting caught hiding a potato that she had picked up from the street and being beaten badly by the guards, breaking her spine; not knowing about mass-murders at other camps until women arrived from Auschwitz in 1944, talking about smelling human flesh burning and people “going in and never coming out;” food rations being cut in the months leading up to liberation; in winter 1945, SS guards waking the women in the middle of the night, moving them out of the barracks and walking them on the road; allied planes flying very low overhead, the guards hiding under the women after making them lie on the ground; finding out that the guards had mined the barracks — the terror of being in the barracks and the relief of being moved out for work; Bernsdorf being liberated by Soviet forces on May 9, 1945; hiding behind machinery in the factory, not knowing what might happen to them because liberation had come so suddenly;

Russian soldiers celebrating and giving the women food but finding that many could not eat because they were so malnourished, and the Russians immediately bringing in doctors and medication; several women leading Russian soldiers into the woods where they had seen Germans taking American POWs followed by the crackling of gun fire, finding a pile of bodies covered with leaves and branches; leaving Bernsdorf four-to-six weeks after liberation and going to Waldenburg (Wałbrzych, Poland); learning that her boyfriend from home (her future husband) had been in Bergen-Belsen, was alive, and being reunited with him; going back to Bergen-Belsen with her boyfriend and her sister; getting married in 1946; having their first child in 1948; moving to Hanover in 1949 and then to Frankfurt; emigrating to the U.S. in 1951 and settling in Bayonne, NJ; giving birth to twins in 1953.