

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **Archives**

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

**Interview with Halina Kleiner  
March 30 and July 23, 1987  
RG-50.002\*0087**

## **PREFACE**

On March 30 and July 23, 1987, Halina Kleiner was interviewed on videotape by Robin Rajs 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 Halina Kleiner**  
**March 30 and July 23, 1987**

Halina Kleiner was born on February 7, 1929 in Czestochowa, Poland. She was unaware of any danger before the war started in 1939. Halina and her mother returned from vacation to Czestochowa on the last train before the war broke out in August 1939.

Her family was forced into the Czestochowa ghetto. Halina and her father escaped from the ghetto when it was liquidated and went into hiding. She and her father eventually separated. When the Czestochowa ghetto became "Judenrein," Halina obtained false papers and joined her grandmother in the ghetto in Bedzin, Poland. Halina decided to volunteer for work camps rather than wait in the ghetto. She went to Bolkenhain labor camp in Poland and then to Landshut, Germany where she worked as a weaver. Halina went on to Grünberg in Schlesien, a concentration camp in Poland. When the camp was abandoned, Halina was sent on a death march through Dresden, Germany, which had been bombed by the Americans, and then into Czechoslovakia.

Halina was liberated by the Americans in Czechoslovakia, and entered a hospital there for surgery. After she recovered, she went to a displaced persons camp in Salzburg, Austria where they were cared for by Jewish-American organizations. She met her future husband in Salzburg.

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**Time-coded notes of the  
Interview with Halina Kleiner  
March 30 and July 23, 1987**

**TAPE #1, PART I, MARCH 30, 1987**

01:00:00

Born in Czestochowa, Poland, Halina Kleiner was ten years old when World War II started. Halina was an only child with grandparents and an extended family that lived in Bedzin, Silesia (Poland). Halina came from a well-to-do, close-knit family. Halina's father owned a lumber business. Her grandfather was Hasidic while the rest of her family was observant, but not as religious. Halina was unaware of danger before August 1939. She was on vacation with her mother and returned on the last train before the war broke out.

01:06:00

Czestochowa was close to the German border. Halina remembers they expected the hostilities to start there, thus they left for a "safer" haven. They went to her grandparents' home near Warsaw, Poland. By the time they discovered their error it was too late. Halina's father remained in Czestochowa to take care of business affairs, but she and her mother were trapped in Bedzin for six weeks.

01:11:00

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Halina's grandparents' home was near a railroad crossing. She remembers frequent bombings at this site. Halina ran for shelter downstairs at her grandparents' Christian neighbors. All Jews were ordered to gather in the town square. Halina and her mother decided to return to Czestochowa.

01:16:00

Local Jews were ordered to wear arm-bands. Their attempt to leave was not easy. The roads were clogged with German military. They had to abandon their horse and wagon and traveled on foot through the woods to find a train for home.

01:21:00

They found Halina's father in their apartment. Germans were also living there. The family's business was confiscated and there were food and clothing shortages. Schools were closed to Jewish children. Jews were evicted from their homes and forced into designated ghettos. The family lived in one room. There was no work. They existed on whatever their valuables could buy and a little help from relatives who sent things by mail. Halina describes living in constant fear.

01:26:00

Jewish teachers organized an underground school for the children. The ghetto was closed to Gentiles which cut off the bartering and the black market which were sources for food.

01:31:00

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Arm bands were mandatory, except for very young children. Halina was picked up for not wearing hers and was escorted home. Halina's mother was chastised. Halina remembers hearing disturbing news-daily transports, young men picked up and not heard from again. She remembers that tensions mounted and this took its toll mentally and physically.

01:36:00

Halina remembers the terrifying news of the gas chamber horrors. The Czestochowa ghetto was liquidated just before Yom Kippur, 1942. Everyone was ordered to report to the railroad station. Having heard of Auschwitz and Treblinka concentration camps in Poland, everyone was terrified. Halina's father managed to get work papers.

01:41:00

Halina's mother went into hiding because she had no work papers. Halina and her father left the ghetto carrying their belongings. People were herded together. Ukrainian police were helping the Germans. On an impulse, Halina's father took her and ran to hide in a lumber yard. Halina describes the ordeal of spending all night crouched under lumber, hearing sounds of barking dogs and shots nearby. Halina's father was concerned about her mother and wondered how they could find her.

01:46:00

Halina remembers going without food all day. They had an empty water bottle that they tried to fill. Policemen found them. Halina's father tried to bribe the policemen with a gold piece in Halina's shoe. The policemen left and asked them to wait. Halina ran and hid in another part of the yard.

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When the policemen returned, they did not discover her. Somehow, Halina had found her way back to their lodgings. She found everything pulled apart from a search. Halina remembers fearing that she'd find her mother dead. She left their lodgings without looking around any further.

01:51:00

Halina tells of a daring run toward the Polish side of an embankment, which was heavily guarded. Halina found a grocery store where her parents' friend lived. The friend was a Polish woman whom Halina's parents had entrusted with their fur coats.

01:56:00

The Germans ordered all furs to be surrendered when they invaded Czestochowa. The Polish woman took a big risk when she promised to hold the coats for safe-keeping. En route to the store, Halina was recognized as a "Jew-girl" by a Polish man. The man softly told Halina to run out of sight to avoid being apprehended. Halina finally reached her destination. The Polish woman was startled when she answered the door. The woman quickly took Halina in, fed her, and made her comfortable for the day. However, she told Halina that she must leave at the day's end. There were still Germans in the area.

**TAPE #1, PART II, MARCH 30, 1987**

01:00:00

Halina remembers feeling scared and alone. She clutched the bag of food, a bottle of tea, and a pair of wooden shoes, all of which the kind Polish lady had given her before she left. Heading toward the edge of Czestochowa, Halina found a secluded area under a church where she rested. She describes the quiet Sunday morning and the village that she found three miles away.

01:06:00

Halina recalls entering a burnt-out house that had charred walls. She figured out a way to get to the loft of the house through the chimney. Halina remembers finally feeling safe in this hide-away. She conserved her food and was finally able to sleep. Halina remembers being awakened by the sounds of people working in the field, digging potatoes.

01:11:00

The next day, a man came to Halina. She thought she was discovered. The man alleviated her fears with a promise of food. After dark, the man came with help so that he could bring her back to his home. They gave Halina hot food. She stayed in their home for almost a week until the man came with disturbing news one morning.

01:16:00



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The Germans were looking for Jews so Halina had to leave their home. She was tired of running and went back to Czestochowa. Halina mingled among the Jews in the holding area (a movie house) without being noticed. Halina put on her arm-band and got bread to eat. She was relieved to be among her own Jewish people. Halina knew that survival alone was impossible.

01:21:00

Everyone was asleep in the movie house. A man approached Halina and told her that her father was in the same building. Her father was so unnerved that he was afraid to come to her for fear of being noticed. Halina met her father in the morning. She remembers another "selection."

01:26:00

Halina had a short visit with her father before he was taken away. He told Halina that her mother had been found in hiding and taken. She never saw her. Halina was so young. Her father advised her to try to look older. The city was made "Judenrein." Those that survived selection were cramped into a tiny area of the ghetto and were ordered to clean out the ghetto. Halina had to clean out her own house. She discovered pictures that she smuggled out. Halina then received another work detail in a munitions factory. She peeled potatoes and later, worked on a machine.

01:31:00

Halina worked on a press making bullets. She felt dehumanized. Halina decided to run away from the munitions factory to find her family in Bedzin but she needed to be smuggled out. A Jewish man

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arranged to retrieve one of the fur coats from the Polish lady so that Halina could use it in exchange for Polish papers. Halina left her picture with the smuggler.

01:36:00

The smuggler took Halina's picture to a Polish area overnight. Schlesien was annexed and it was unsafe to cross the border, therefore he went to the next town. Halina boarded a train for Bedzin. Her family was no longer in their former residence. Halina had no German papers and had to enter the ghetto. Once in the ghetto she was directed to her family members and found them all in bad shape.

01:41:00

Halina's grandmother was also in the Bedzin ghetto. Halina searched to see if her mother was with her grandmother. The situation was worse than before. Halina was illegal and had to hide. Halina's maternal uncle was in the Jewish police and able to intervene when she was questioned on more than one occasion. Halina stayed in the Bedzin ghetto for a few months. She remembers frequent "selections." Halina observed the charade that working papers gave people mobility.

01:46:00

Halina's grandfather kept his beard tied in a handkerchief to avoid the torture of having S.S. men pull it out. Halina confided in her grandfather that she would volunteer to go to a work camp rather than wait for a "miracle" that would never come. A short while later, Halina left for a work camp.

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The Bedzin ghetto was liquidated shortly afterward. Halina was sent to a small labor camp in 1942 or 1943 that was staffed by Wehrmacht.

01:51:00

The work camp, Bolkenhain, in Poland, contained about 150 young women, most of them Polish. The camp had a weaving factory. Halina was taught to handle a weaving machine by old masters who were too old to serve in the army. In Bolkenhain, Halina lived in clean, decent bunks. She felt lucky. They worked 12 hours per day. Bolkenhain was soon converted into a munitions factory. Halina was transferred to a weaving factory in Landshut, Germany. She worked the night shift for nine months and slept during the day.

01:56:00

The conditions in Landshut were decent, but not as good as before. There were over 100 Jewish women in Landshut. There were bunk beds in one loft with two women to each bed. The food was a starvation diet.

**TAPE #2, PART III, JULY 23, 1987**

01:00:00

Halina developed lasting friendships with two girls with similar backgrounds to hers. They shared food and confidences. It was like an extended family for Halina. Halina learned that one of them was a distant relative of hers.

01:06:00

Halina remained together with both girls throughout the entire "unnatural" experience. All three were sent to Grünberg labor camp (Grünberg in Silesia concentration camp in Germany), a basic weaving factory, where they prepared fibers for weaving. There were about 100 women in Grünberg. At this camp there were decent quarters and they were able to keep clean. They did not shave their heads at Grünberg.

01:11:00

The girls at Grünberg were about 14 or 15 years old. Halina remembers a daily morning "appel," after which they marched to work under guard. The food at Grünberg was worse than in the last camp. They received black coffee, no sugar, and a small piece of bread.

01:16:00

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Grünberg was a camp for both sexes. One day there was no work. Everyone was standing at "appel." S.S. men were swarming in the area. A group of men sat at a table in an empty barracks, claiming they were doctors. Everyone was ordered to strip and was displayed before these S.S. voyeurs who were not doctors. Halina remembers this as a degrading and dehumanizing experience. They were given pieces of string with numbers on them in order to reclaim their clothing.

01:21:00

Grünberg work camp was designated as a concentration camp. Halina lived in terror. Work was the same, but "appels" were rougher. S.S. men abused people without cause. There was a Jewish contingent run by Jewish people. The heavier work was done by the heavier girls. They worked there until December 1944. Grünberg was close to the Polish border. In December 1944, as the Russians were moving closer it reverted to Poland.

01:26:00

Halina remembers workless days. Everyone was herded into an older part of the hall. Rumor had it that a group of Hungarian women were brought in, shaven, stripped, and further dehumanized, but were not near the prisoners gathered in the hall. In the morning, everyone was ordered to dress, to take all their belongings, and march out-doors. Halina remembers December 1944 as a very harsh winter. The Russians were getting closer so Grünberg was abandoned. The approximately 2,000 women from the camp were divided into two groups. One group marched to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. Halina's group marched 30 kilometers daily in the direction away from the Russians. S.S. men were standing with rifles at the ready.

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01:31:00

Those that lagged behind were shot. Everyone was sheltered in a stable. They had scant clothing, some had no shoes. They were given some bread, no sugar. They marched through the snow. The S.S. beat those who picked up snow for refreshment. They marched for weeks, and were seen by villagers along the way. At night, a few women escaped but the unsuccessful ones were held as examples for the rest of the group.

01:36:00

Halina remembers that survival seemed hopeless. Fear of being shot kept thoughts of hiding or running away well-hidden. Halina remembers marching thorough Dresden, Germany. The city was in shambles. Halina remembers U.S. bombs were falling. The S.S. men confiscated all the food. The marching women were emaciated and exhausted. Halina wondered if this death march was a shield for the S.S. men to be kept out of fighting at the front?

01:41:00

The S.S. did not know of the U.S. bombing of Dresden. Bombs fell as they marched. This cheered the marchers, some hoped to be hit by a bomb to end their misery. They crossed the Dresden bridge just before it was bombed out. Everyone was lice-infested and starving. There were no hygiene facilities.

01:46:00

The helpless marchers were no longer able to walk. They were picked up and put into a wagon. Those who died were left behind. After Dresden, everyone was herded into a concentration camp, Jews and non-Jews alike. They were ordered to strip and leave all possessions. Combs, toothbrushes and mirrors were confiscated. Halina hid a picture in her shoe, thus risking her life. They went through delousing, their clothes were boiled, after which no one got their own clothes back. Halina was physically exhausted and totally demoralized. She sat and waited, there was no work.

01:51:00

They were herded together and given little to eat. They got soup which was dirty water. A typhoid epidemic broke out. A "clinic" for the sick provided no medical care. Most of the patients died. Halina remembers unbearable hardships in the miserable winter. A woman was caught hiding family pictures. Her head was shaved and she was ordered to stand outside for 24 hours as they poured water over her head. The woman survived. After five or six weeks, they marched again. Halina remembers that Americans dropped leaflets. She asks, "Why didn't the Americans bomb Auschwitz?"

01:56:00

They were not permitted to keep the leaflets. The surviving marchers were very ragged, dirty, and sick. More girls died of exposure, hunger, or were killed trying to run away. The surviving marchers made it to Czechoslovakia. Halina's friend Helinka died there.

**TAPE #2, PART IV, JULY 23, 1987**

01:00:00

Halina recalls the death march and atrocities in Helmbrechts, Germany. She goes back in time to the 30 mile march when they only had raw potatoes or a few cooked ones to eat. Halina remembers loaves of bread arrived in a wagon, to be distributed among the girls, waiting in the courtyard.

01:06:00

The girls were herded to an "appel." Loaves of bread were reported missing, but no one owned up to the "theft." Every tenth person was taken to the woods and shot. The others were forced to bury them. Halina's friend Lilly was rewarded with a loaf of bread which she promptly devoured. The bread was tainted with blood. The living envied the dead because they no longer suffered.

01:11:00

Not a single person came forward to help them during their march throughout Germany. However, when they arrived in a small village in Czechoslovakia, the natives, in colorful dress, greeted them with an abundance of food.

01:16:00



The girls fought over a piece of bread. The S.S. men stood by in disbelief of so much food. Many girls became ill and some even died. For those too weak to walk they were dragged to a wagon. Most eventually died there. Halina's friend Helinka died in Lilly's arms.

01:21:00

Helinka was an only child. Her parents survived. On May 5, 1945, everyone knew that the Germans were pulling back. Regardless, the march continued with still fewer and weaker marchers. They marched at night because the retreating Germans were on the roads during the day. They slept in the Black Forest which was a pleasant environment. Halina's feet were frost-bitten and blistered. She had no more strength to go on. She and Lilly fell behind, but the group continued on.

01:26:00

Halina and Lilly rested a while and then found a house nearby. They were invited to come in. They were cautious not to reveal their identity because this was German-occupied Czechoslovakia. Their hostess fed them and gave them water to clean up. She allowed them to stay a while but they eventually had to leave because there was a German patrol in the area.

01:31:00

Halina and Lilly moved on to a mountainous area where they discovered a house which was the home of an old German man. The man was sympathetic to their plight. He had once been a Russian prisoner of war. The old man knew that they needed delousing and helped them. They were housed

in his stable where they felt comforted by the warmth of his animals. They received news of American arrival a few days later.

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The old man got Halina to the hospital where she had surgery. She was nursed by German nuns. Later, Halina learned that the mayor of the town had instructed the German doctors about their responsibility for Halina's recovery because she was a survivor.

01:41:00

The mayor came to visit Halina to reassure her. He instructed her to stay in the hospital for six weeks to heal and to gain weight. The nuns carried Halina to be weighed and fed her the best food which was hidden in the basement.

01:46:00

Lilly shared Halina's bed in the hospital. Her room was on the ground floor and she could see the American soldiers through her window. Halina spoke Polish to the Polish-American soldiers. Later, Jewish boys came and they spoke Yiddish. They brought chocolate bars, toothpaste, etc. They also took Halina for walks. Halina was upset to learn that the man who gave her and Lilly refuge was being accused of collaboration.

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The Czechs wanted to take revenge. The girls testified in the old German man's behalf, that he had saved their lives. He was absolved.

01:56:00

The Americans gave Czechoslovakia to the Russians. The girls were taken to a hospital established by the Americans. They were cared for by Jewish-American organizations in a displaced persons camp in Salzburg, Austria, where Halina met her future husband.