

**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Archives**

**Oral History Interviews of the  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Holocaust Documentation Archives**

**Interview with Selene Bruk  
March 6, 1983  
RG-50.005\*0006**

## **PREFACE**

On March 6, 1983, Selen Bruk was interviewed on videotape by Arnold Band on behalf of the University of California, Los Angeles, Holocaust Documentation Archives. The interview took place in Los Angeles, California and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Department of Oral History created time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that the time-coded notes attempts to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet has not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The time-coded notes should not be used in place of the interview itself.

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**Time-coded notes of the  
Interview with Selene Bruk  
March 6, 1983**

1:00

Selene Bruk, born in Bialystok, Poland. Population 100,000, 60,000 of which were Jewish. Her family was in business, and she lived with her mother, two brothers, grandparents, and an aunt and uncle.

2:00

She spoke Yiddish, Polish, and German. She was in the 5th grade when the war started. She remembers the day before the war started - she was with her best friend walking along the street, seeing their friends.

3:00

She awakened the next morning to bombs exploding. Germany had attacked Russia. For a week no one knew what was going on.

4:00

The following Friday the Germans entered Bialystok. They took about 2,000 men, put them into the largest temple there, and set it

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on fire. They burned alive. At this point the whole city was burning, and she and her family went to the non-Jewish section and stayed with friends there.

5:00

The next day the Germans were knocking on doors looking for Russian soldiers. A week later things calmed down and they went back to their own house.

6:00

Killing and shooting still took place, especially of the Orthodox Jews. It hurt her to see what they did to them. Soon they had to wear yellow stars and then the ghetto was formed.

7:00

The ghetto was enclosed with fences and wires. The Jewish police watched the ghetto from the inside, the SS watched it from the outside.

8:00

The Germans needed the Jews to work for them, so they opened

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factories. There was not much food, but at least they weren't starving. Then came the first Aktion.

9:00

The SS came into the ghetto and took 10,000 Jews. Her family hid in their attic for a week, and heard the shooting and killing from there. In their building there was a room where forty people hid, and among them was a young mother and her baby.

10:00

The people hiding there didn't want the baby to cry out, so they tried to muffle its sounds with a pillow. The baby suffocated and the mother went insane.

11:00

After the Aktion, life went back to 'normal'. Her brother was a photographer and the Germans let him develop film for them.

12:00

The police came to send Selene to work, and took her to jail to wait. She was only in the fifth grade.

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13:00

She was lucky because her brother managed to get her out of jail and onto his construction crew. It was a very frightening experience.

14:00

She carried bricks, mixed cement, etc. Her hands bled. There was another Aktion and 10,000 more people were taken. Her mother and brother hid in an attic again.

15:00

Her other brother managed to get work in a factory that was safe, and took Selene and her mother there. The Nazis came to get people, but they survived again. They found out that her grandfather and uncle were gone.

16:00

The Germans closed the ghetto. They went to her aunt's house because they knew there was a hiding place there.

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17:00

None of her family was there - only strangers. There was shooting outside and bullets were flying everywhere. Her grandmother was shot in the street.

18:00

She and her brother hid in a room under a bed. Her mother jumped into the closet just as the SS man walked in.

19:00

The SS didn't find them. The shooting and killing continued. Finally that night it became quiet.

20:00

Their whole family was gone. She remembers hearing children crying in the night - crying and screaming because they were all alone.

21:00

In the early morning they decided to go. They had to walk over the dead bodies.

22:00

They met up with partisans who wanted to break through the ghetto walls. They wanted to at least die fighting. The Germans came earlier than they had anticipated.

23:00

The Germans cut off water and electricity. They had to drink toilet water. They would boil the water and mix it with flour and that was their food. One partisan was shot with a 'dum dum' (ph.) bullet in the leg.

24:00

He developed gangrene and was in horrible pain. The others found some poison and gave it to him to put him out of his pain.

25:00

The partisans decided to make a break for it. She stayed with her mother but her brother went with the partisans. Later they heard shots and thought that everyone had died. A week later she and her mother were discovered by a Polish man. They tried to escape before



the Germans came.

26:00

She laid in water until she became numb. Finally everyone came out from their hiding places, but the Germans had been waiting for them. They were all arrested.

27:00

They were sent to jail and then to Stutthoff near Gdansk. They were each given a half loaf of bread. She ate hers all at once. They were led through the streets of Gdansk.

28:00

The Polish children were pointing and laughing. This hurt her very much - she was humiliated. She was a child just like they were.

29:00

They were only in Stutthoff for a little while. Then they were sent to Birkenau. It was wintertime and there was snow on the ground.

30:00

Their heads were shaved, their clothes taken, and then they were taken to the showers. She had heard about the gas, and was afraid.

31:00

She rubbed red paint on her mothers cheeks to make her look healthier because she was 45, and that was too old to live. She managed to push her mother in the direction of the young people. They worked putting bombs together.

32:00

She and her mother managed to stay together. They worked in the IG Farben factory building bombs.

33:00

She tried to ruin the things she was building. A girl she worked with was doing the same thing and got caught and was hanged. Her mother fell and broke her arm. She was taken to the hospital.

34:00

She assumed that her mother would be sent to a crematorium. She

went to see her. There were so many sick and dead people, and the smell was horrible. Her mother was brought back from the hospital.

35:00

The Russians were closing in, and Birkenau was closed. They were taken to Auschwitz. She was in a block next to Block 10. One night she heard a voice screaming from that block and recognized it as her aunt's.

36:00

Her aunt was in Block 10 being experimented on. She managed to see her once.

37:00

Then Auschwitz closed and they were made to march for 7 days and 7 nights. She heard her aunt's name and found her again. She was with both her aunt and her mother now. They still hoped and prayed that the war would end and that they would survive.

38:00

They were taken to Ravensbruck. It was horrible. The Ukrainians

killed the Jews here. Then they left again. They tried to take her mother away, but she dragged her back and they didn't get caught.

39:00

They were on a train again and someone stole her shoes. They were taken to Neustadt (ph.) and she had to stand in the snow with no shoes.

40:00

Her aunt became ill with fever.

41:00

She was taken to the hospital where she became sicker. She was not given water or food.

42:00

Five days before the war was over, her aunt was taken away on a truck. Selene and her mother survived, but in the small town they took refuge in they had to protect themselves from the Russian soldiers.

43:00

Her mother became ill and was in the hospital. Selene found a job working for the Russian army. Her mother wanted to go back to Poland, but Selene refused to live in a place whose dirt was mixed with Jewish blood.

44:00

They went back to Poland, and the Poles were amazed that Jews were still alive. She left her mother in Lodz and went to Bialystok to find the Jewish community.

45:00

Most of the people there were not originally from Bialystok as she had hoped. She needed food but didn't know anyone to ask for it.

46:00

She got a letter from her father who lived in the U.S. She wrote to him and found out that her brother was still alive.

47:00

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He was in the Russian army after having lived with partisans. He lived in Poland for 1 year, then he moved to Germany.

48:00

She arrived in the U.S. still a young girl. Her father sent her to high school, and she decided to start a new life.

49:00

She was fine until her husband wanted to go back to Poland to see his father's grave. They went to Bialystok, and she saw the house where her grandparents had lived.

50:00

Being there brought back memories of her childhood before the Holocaust.

51:00

They asked if there was a Jewish community house, and the Poles laughed at them.

52:00

All traces of the Jews were gone. A whole way of life was gone, and she wanted to leave. They went to Lodz to find her husband's father's grave.

53:00

Her husband was excited, but when they got to the cemetery the grass was as tall as they were.

54:00

Barry wouldn't give up until they found it, and he finally did. He said the Kaddish and left.

55:00

After they were back in the U.S., their children decided that they wanted to go to see where their parents had come from. She went with them because she wanted them to see Poland through her eyes, not the eyes of a Pole.

56:00

Her daughter thought Warsaw was beautiful, but Selene didn't want

her to think that.

57:00

She described the lifestyle of a shtetl to her daughter and tried to make her understand what was gone.

58:00

They went to Birkenau. She could hear the transports all over again. She described Birkenau to her daughter.

59:00

Then they went to the Auschwitz museum.

2:00

They saw the hair, eye glasses, clothes, the shoes, etc.

2:02

Selene shows her photo album with pictures from Poland. In Warsaw they met Carter's Holocaust Commission and were invited to join them.



2:03

She continues to show pictures from this trip. They went with the Commission everywhere.

2:04

They heard Elie Wiesel speak there. They went to Treblinka and saw where Anielevich (ph.) fell.

2:05

She shows pictures of Treblinka. When they entered Treblinka they saw 1800 stones which represent cities, but from a distance they looked like bodies to Selene.

2:06

The whistling wind sounded like people screaming for the injustices done to them.

2:08

At Auschwitz she found the bunk where she slept for 1 year.

2:09

Everything there was peaceful. She is glad she went with her daughter. She says that everything is so pretty because the ashes of the Jewish people made everything grow beautifully.

2:10

After the war she met her husband Barry on a train. She went to the U.S. before he did and before they were married, but she waited for him.

2:11

They went to Canada and married, and had two children. Now they live in California.

2:12

She has decided that her story is history. She doesn't want it to die with her, so she talks at schools so that the children won't be ignorant. She believes that anti semitism will never go away. we have to live with it and fight it.