

-TITLE- BARBARA GERSON  
-I\_DATE- MARCH 5, 1983  
-SOURCE- UCLA HOLOCAUST DOCUMENTATION ARCHIVES  
-RESTRICTIONS-  
-SOUND\_QUALITY- EXCELLENT  
-IMAGE\_QUALITY- EXCELLENT  
-DURATION-  
-LANGUAGES- ENGLISH  
-KEY\_SEGMENT-  
-GEOGRAPHIC\_NAME-  
-PERSONAL\_NAME-  
-CORPORATE\_NAME-  
-KEY\_WORDS-  
-NOTES-  
-CONTENTS-

00:01:00 Her name is Barbara Gerson from Lodz, Poland. Her maiden name was Branca Nomberg. Her childhood was happy until the problems started. She is the youngest of 3 children. She lost a brother on July 8, 1932. The surviving children were Mrs. Gerson and a brother.

00:02:00 She came from a strictly orthodox family. She attended a private school in Lodz. Her family was happy but things began to change in August of 1939. There were rumors that the war was near. In school there were refugees that were expelled from Germany in 1938.

00:03:00 She tutored one of the refugees and heard stories about how they had been taken out one night. However, these stories seemed so far away from home, from normal life. She discussed places like Buchenwald with her family but she did not know what it meant. She thought it was a place for enemies of the state.

00:04:00 Her family knew about the mobilizations. Her family was in the textile business. Her uncle was a prominent merchant and was advised to leave Lodz and go to Eastern Poland by a Pole of German descent who said that Germany would occupy Lodz.

00:05:00 On September 1, 1939 everything started to happen. Lodz was occupied by the Germans. There was no school for a few days. She was curious about the Germans--- the tanks, shiny uniforms, and faces full of hate.

00:06:00 There were Gestapo and SS units. She returned to school but there were few teachers or students. After a week there was an edict that required them to wear a yellow star of David on both

back and front.

00:07:00 Her family's textile business was taken away. Her mother found fabric and sewed the yellow star on her clothing. There was a food shortage so they had to wait in line at 4 a.m. for bread.

00:08:00 Her father was called to work on the Shabat and was beaten. Two weeks later Lodz was annexed to Germany. Her 21 year old brother had escaped with some of her other relatives. Her family received news from those who had escaped telling them that they must also escape.

00:09:00 Warsaw was taken. The family had contact with smugglers to help the family cross the Bug river to join the others who had already escaped. The family was contacted by her brother She was chosen to go to live with a family in Czestakhova (ph), in the occupied zone.

00:10:00 When she was 15 years old an SS grabbed her grandfather and pulled his beard until it was bleeding. They knew that they had to leave Lodz.

00:11:00 She was not afraid because she did not know what was waiting for her. She had a mission to get to Czestakhova with her grandparents. Her mother's brother was there. Then the plan was to meet her family in Warsaw and afterward they would join her brother in Eastern Poland.

00:12:00 They were smuggled over the Bug river. Her grandparents wanted the family to leave without them.

00:13:00 On December 18, 1939 her mother accompanied her to the train station and said goodbye. Her father said that she must survive, even if he does not, to see the end of Hitler.

00:14:00 Her father bought both for her mother and her chiffon scarves.

At the train station they were both wearing the scarves when she waved goodbye to her mother. That was the last time she saw her mother. She will remember her mother in that scarf forever. There were two women at the train station that day-- - one starting her life and one ending hers.

00:15:00 They still had to wear the yellow stars. There was a busy junction named Koluszki between Warsaw and Lodz where she was supposed to change trains.

00:16:00 During that time there were blackouts so the compartment of the train was dark. The train stopped and the SS ordered all of the Jews to go to the last car.

00:17:00 She went into the bathroom of another compartment and flushed her yellow star down the toilet. The SS came into every car, put flashlights under people's chins and questioned them to find out if they were Jewish.

00:18:00 She spoke good German and Polish. When the SS approached her and asked her if she was a Jewess she pretended that she did not understand and responded saying she was Polish.

00:19:00 She was able to get away with the trick because she did not have a Yiddish accent on her Polish like many did. She had refused to speak Yiddish with her father at home. In the compartment she heard people say that the Germans were going to get rid of them( the Jews). She felt she had to survive.

00:20:00 She arrived in Warsaw at 3 a.m. and it was so badly bombed that she did not recognize it. Her mother was from Warsaw. She stayed with her uncle there for a while and then on December 24, 1939 she went to Czestakhova which was still free.

00:21:00 She saw fire when she left the train and heard some Poles say that they were burning the Jewish synagogues. The family she was staying with feared what was to come. She received a letter from her family that told her not to come back because they were already in the Lodz Ghetto. They said that they would try to get out.

00:22:00 In January in Czestakhova they had to start wearing armbands with blue stars on them but the city was still pretty quiet. She lived in a Jewish section of the city that eventually all Jews moved to. It was then called the "Big Ghetto." There was a curfew of 8 pm but the family still had a business and was working.

00:23:00 She knitted items for the wives of German officers for extra money. This was between 1940 and 1941. She started hearing rumors. She received a card from her parents in the ghetto. They informed her that in 1941 her grandparents had died of starvation in the Lodz Ghetto. She was sad to hear the news but wanted even more to see her parents.

00:24:00 In 1941 she meet a boy in Czestakhova from Cracow.

He and other Jews had been expelled from Cracow who were not long time residents. They fell in love so that for a while she did not think about what was happening on the outside. He always said that after the war he would study in England and then he would come back to marry her.

00:25:00 Her boyfriend worked as a mechanic for the Germans and she continued to knit for German officers wives.

00:26:00 She and her boyfriend acquired special passes. She made her pass for 18 although she was really 17 because she had heard that 18 was a mature age. In 1940 she heard rumors about the extermination camps but she did not want to believe it. In May of 1942 she lost contact with her parents.

00:27:00 On Yom Kippur of 1942 her boyfriend told her there would be selections or aktions. That night there were selections on the street but not in her part of the city. Her boyfriends parents were selected and this was the last time that he saw his them.

00:28:00 She stood with her cousin behind the curtain in their house, watching columns of people being taken to the train station.

00:29:00 During the selection her boyfriend's sister Russha(ph) came over and asked her if she wanted to go with her family. She said no because she thought the right thing to do was to stay with her family. Russha asked her to take care of her brother (Bolek) if she did not survive.

00:30:00 She made the right decision. Her uncle's cousin was wealthy, decided not to go, and tried to bribe the policemen. There was a selection between right and left. Those selected to the right went to the factory.

00:31:00 The selection was at 2 pm and they were supposed to join the others in the town square at 4 pm. One of the Gestapo saw her when they were all joined together and told her to get away because she was too small. Her cousin told the Gestapo that she was his sister and then they left her alone. This group went to the factory. They had been lucky.

00:32:00 Her boyfriend's street saw the worst selections. His family was chosen to die except for his sister. His sister was blond and the officers liked that but she ran after her family anyway. The Gestapo picked young men and women for work. The others were transported.

00:33:00 Czestakhova was a holy city. There were cloisters. There was a religious movie theater across from where they were brought. She remembers lying on the floor and that there were no latrines so everyone relieved themselves wherever they had to. This was her first real shock. Out of the 35,000 Jews in the ghetto only 5,000 remained.

00:34:00 They were taken to a small ghetto. Because she was morally opposed to living with her boyfriend, although many did it, she and Bolek were married. They had to borrow everything for the wedding-- a dress, etc. There were 3 different streets in the ghetto--- one for married couples, one for singles, and one for all others.

00:35:00 She was chosen with some other women to clean the big ghetto which was the worst duty. They had to collect pillows, pots and pans for the Russian front. The job was so bad because by going into people's homes she could see what had happened to them on the day of the selection. There were half eaten meals and unmade beds. This duty lasted 2 weeks.

00:36 00 She then worked in a fabric factory where her hands became very swollen because of the acids they worked with. Her husband also worked in the same factory. He separated shells from the Russian front. Everyone worked.

00:37:00 She and her husband were on different shifts so they did not see each other very often. She developed a drinking habit. Her husband smuggled out furs from the ghetto which was punishable by death.

00:38:00 They knew about the death camps. She got hepatitis. There was an uprising in which 3 Gestapo were shot. Everyone had to go to the square to watch executions.

00:39:00 She was so sick that she could not hear. The police got her dressed because she had to go watch the executions. Every tenth man was killed. The onlookers could not look down or else they would be punished.

00:40:00 She was taken to a hospital. There was another selection and the liquidation of the ghetto. They had to get rid of their remaining possessions and assemble in the square. Children were taken from mothers. It was awful.

00:41:00 She went to the factory which became a guarded camp. She was still with her husband but they were in separate barracks which were still unfinished.

00:42:00 She and her husband were not working together because they had different shifts. He worked as a mechanic making bullets for guns. He was in charge. There were only two Jews in the factory, the rest were Poles.

00:43:00 She was transferred to a part of the factory that was involved with calibrating machinery. She wanted the factory to be bombed. In 1943 she wondered if there were any Jews left. She heard the Poles say that the Jews were being burned at Auschwitz and other camps.

00:44:00 They were so isolated there that they did not know a lot of what was going on. They did not speak of the future because they knew that they were doomed.

00:45:00 She was starving. They were served coffee made of dehydrated red beets, bread (made of a little wheat, and dehydrated potato skins) and marmelade. At night she could not eat the soup that they served so she rationed her piece of bread and would cut it up for dinner.

00:46:00 Bolek would come and ate with her at night. He brought a canteen of soup from the bottom of the barrel. It would, therefore, contain some horse meat, potato and barley. She could still not eat the soup but seeing her husband every night kept her going.

00:47:00 Bolek got typhoid.

00:48:00 The women lost their periods but did not know why. The women had very few relations with men. Their beds were planks of wood that had lice.

00:49:00 Her husband conferred with his supervisor. He asked to be placed on the same shift as his wife. The supervisor had her transferred to her husband's factory. She was the only Jew that worked on the scale. The rest were Poles who were not prisoners. The factory was called the "Labor" and it was closed up and guarded.

00:50:00 They were frisked and slapped there. In June of 1944 when her husband came over they made love. She was dreaming of white bread and told her husband that she could not eat the brown bread anymore.

00:51:00 She thought that she better go to the clinic because she thought that she might be pregnant. She could not believe it because she had stopped menstruating months before. One of her relatives was married to the chief doctor at the clinic but she was too embarrassed to go to him so she found another doctor.

00:52:00 The doctor told her that she could have the baby and then the nurse could kill it. She asked if she could have an abortion. He said yes but that she would have to be brave. He would not tell the other doctor.

00:53:00 She did not want to talk to her husband because she blamed him. Although they were married she thought it was a crime that she had let him near her. She was ashamed. Such a thing should not happen at the camp because they should just think about work.

00:54:00 Men could not have sex. They were not supposed to be able to because there was some sort of powder put into the soup.

00:55:00 She was angry at her husband. He waited outside while she had the abortion without anesthesia because they had no ether. She did not care because she needed to live.

00:56:00 She has had two children since then and she has never experienced greater pain than that day. He was a butcher and told her not to squirm. Only the nurse was sympathetic. She rested for 15 minutes after the operation and then left. For 2 days she did not have to go to work.

00:57:00 The next day she had a fever. She went to the chief doctor's wife, her relative. Mrs. Gerson told her what had happened. Her relative told her that if she had come to them they would have found anesthesia for her. Sheppling (ph), the chief doctor, took over her case.

00:58:00 When the Gestapo came in her charts said that she had pneumonia, not that she had an abortion. She got better and went back to work.

00:59:00 She later went back to the clinic with a toothache. The nurse told her that Bolek had smuggled in the medicine that had saved her life.

01:00:00 There had been a shooting of a Gestapo by a Pole. They

knew that the bullets came from the factory but they did not know who from whom. It was Bolek who had given them and risked the death penalty.

01:01:00 She never knew until later on that Bolek had risked his life to save hers. He smuggled the bullets to the underground.

01:02:00 She would have wanted him to be with her today to better explain the story.

## TAPE 2

01:04:00 She decided to have the abortion because she knew that she had no chance to survive if she did not. There were rumors that the war was nearing.

01:05:00 She heard that the Sonderkommandos were being sent there because the eastern camps were liquidated. People were saying that the Jews would be tattooed and that they would be surrounded by wires.

01:06:00 She asked the doctors wife if she would be able to have more children. She told her not to worry about it now. But she still thought about it. Many of the things on this tape will be a surprise to her children.

01:07:00 Both she and her husband decided for her to have the abortion. He also worried that they may not be able to have children. She is still embarrassed to talk about that event. This is the first time she has talked about it. Maybe now that her daughter is a mother she will be able to talk about it with her. She was 19 when all of this happened.

01:08:00 In November, December and January the SS police and the Gestapo came. One night they took them out of their beds and made them stand outside in the freezing cold. Eventually they were sent back to the barracks.

01:09:00 In January the Russians started their offensive. On January 15 the SS took the night shift to Germany.

01:10:00 On January 15, the night shift had to walk to Leipzig and other camps. She and her husband were on the day shift.

01:11:00 The director of the factory was in civilian clothes. They were guarded by Ukrainian guards. They heard that the factory was mined. They heard a lot of artillery and were happy that the



Russians were coming.

01:12:00 They thought that they would be burned alive because the factory was mined. Her husband and some others decided to risk their lives and try to break out. They thought that even if they were killed they could save the women. They broke out when the guard was not looking.

01:13:00 They opened the door and all of the people went out. A few decided not to go back to the barracks because they thought they were mined and instead decided to go to an old factory.

01:14:00 They huddled together half frozen and waiting. She said that they better go back to the barracks because they were being frozen alive. When they began to return they saw the two or three hundred people left being marched around for roll call.

01:15:00 The guards were marching the people out to the trains. It was dark so her group was able to get to the latrines that were made of stone; fifty to sixty people hid there with her and her husband.

01:16:00 Many of her friends who were forced to march died because there were actually no trains but they were put on a death march. Some escaped. There were two washrooms with people in them. The artillery was strong. They could hear a battle. At 12 o'clock all was quiet.

01:17:00 The Colony was the name of the place where the guards lived. Some of the people went to see what was going on. They came back with artillery. The Germans had already evacuated the camp. The people in the washrooms were the only ones left. This was January 17th.

01:18:00 Some people went into the streets where there were tanks. They put their arms in the air and said they were Jews. They were told that they could go to the German warehouses. There were some fatalities because people ate so much food.

01:19:00 After the liberation she went back to Lodz and to her house. The caretaker of the house said that her brother had just been there. He had been in Siberia and had returned. She was reunited with her brother. She later found out that her parents and relatives had been transported and gassed.

01:20:00 After the liberation she and her husband stayed at the displaced persons camp in Lanzberg Commer (ph). They got an

apartment in Lanzberg that was ironically only 2 blocks away from the prison where Hitler wrote "Mein Kampf". Then in early 1949 she came to the United States with her husband who had family here.

01:21:00 It was hard to answer questions from her Children as to why they did not have any grandparents as other children do.

01:22:00 Although it was difficult to talk to the children about her experiences she could always talk to her husband about everything except the abortion. She first told her children that the Germans were bad people. Then she exposed her children to movies such as "The Diary of Anne Frank." Now her daughter is very active in a 2nd generation survivor association.

01:23:00 She said that you cannot blame the young Germans but she is uncomfortable hearing the German language. She said, however, that we should not forget, that we should talk about it so that it does not happen again. It was a dark period in human history. She hopes that by talking people will listen and will think twice about what happened because history can repeat itself.  
.END.