

Translation/Summary of Oral History Interview with Elizabeth Abt

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Oral History | Accession Number: 1992.A.0124.89 | RG-50.028.0089

Elżbieta (E.) Abt was born in 1914. Her father died in 1917 during World War I, and she never saw him. She was raised by her mother. Her mother was not a Jehovah's Witness and, in fact she was quite opposed to them. On account of this conflict between mother and daughter, Elżbieta still harbors resentment towards her for not receiving the maternal support to which she felt that she was entitled. She became independent of her mother in 1938 when she married. Her husband was a Master Engineer. He was studying in Gdańsk where they met and married. Elżbieta was first to learn the Truth (accept the faith of the Jehovah's Witnesses) and then her husband followed in her footsteps.

E.'s mother was so opposed to the Jehovah's Witnesses that she refused to take care of Elżbieta's daughter, when she was initially arrested by the Germans. She argued that E. could have been released from prison if she renounced her faith. So, why should she take responsibility for raising her child? That ultimately, according to E., turned out for the best, since she was raised by her 'brothers' who raised the child as E. would have done.

Interviewer: (I). Could you explain what was it that you could have signed to be freed?

When she and her husband were first arrested, the Gestapo officer first lectured them and then sat down to type a document which, if they were willing to sign it, would attest to their willingness to renounce their faith. They both refused this offer. E.'s husband was detained, while E., because she was still breast feeding her child, was allowed to go home. They were given 2 weeks to change their mind and to start cooperating with the Germans. Instead, they left their spacious apartment with all their belongings and fled from Gdańsk to Łódź. Half a year later, in Łódź, they were arrested again. This time, E.'s husband was jailed, while E. remained free for another year and a half, until 1942. When E. was taken away, her daughter remained with her 'brothers' in the same building. E. remained separated from her daughter for 3 years. [This chronology, later in the narrative didn't reconcile, since E. states that she was separated from her daughter and husband for 5 years. L.W.]

In May 1942, the Germans launched a major operation against the Jehovah's Witnesses. The members of this faith were arrested all over the country.

I.: How did the Germans find out about the whereabouts of the sect?

There was an individual who pretended to be a 'brother', who travelled with another member of the Jehovah's Witnesses and it was he who betrayed them. He did a lot of damage to the sect in Łódź and in Poznań.

While the Gestapo tried everything to break the will of the Jehovah's Witnesses, they were frustrated and ultimately failed. For E. and other Jehovah's Witnesses this period of interrogation, pressure, threats and persuasion by the Gestapo lasted half a year. At this point E. interjected that by comparison, the Gestapo was gentler and kinder on them than the Communists (Russians), who came later.

In the end, E. and 11 'sisters' were deported from Łódź to Oświęcim. Once they arrived there, they were again tempted with offers to renounce their faith and thus saving their lives. No one had agreed, and instead accepted the fate that awaited them. Later during their confinement in Oświęcim, from time to time they were called up again to see whether anyone changed his or her mind. No one did. In the end, the Germans stopped trying to persuade them.

I.: During your stay in concentration camp were you together?

For a short period of time they were. But then they were separated because they had to work as domestics in different houses. They were chosen for this work because they could be trusted. They wouldn't steal and they wouldn't poison anyone. They even had a separate ID card with their photo which allowed them to go everywhere on the territory of the camp.

I.: Were you aware of what was going on in the camp?

They knew and saw everything. And what they might not know, they were astute and could sniff it out. For example, in 1944, when the crematoria ovens were insufficient and the outcome of the war was not favoring the Reich, the Germans resorted to mass burning of human bodies. And then the air smelled of burned human flesh. And everyone knew what was going on and lived in fear of the same fate.

During that time E. worked in the home of the camp's director. She slept in the basement of the house. When she wasn't needed, she would run to the hotel for the SS. There, a few of her 'sisters' worked. This gave them a chance to secretly meet and thus strengthen their faith.

I.: What was your relationship with the Germans? Were you persecuted and humiliated?

We, humans were nothing but a number to the Germans. When speaking to an SS-man, they were required to stand at attention, identify themselves not by name but by their prison number, before asking permission to enter or exit or request permission to do something. Relations were worse vis à vis the *kapos*. They seemed to be people who were chosen for their role because they seemed to derive pleasure from tormenting their charges; in doing so, they, as if, absolved the SS from being directly responsible for the mistreatment of the prisoners. Here E. makes a point that not all inmates had an equal status in the camp. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses wore purple triangles on their camp attire. Political inmates wore red triangles. 'Anti-social' inmates were identified by black triangles.

I.: How did you manage to keep your faith throughout your existence in camp?

There were 'brothers' who wrote religious/biblical texts from memory. Occasionally, when doing errands for the household, E. would meet with other 'sisters.' A number of times, because of her shortsightedness, she sought to see an optometrist, who was available only in the men's part of the camp. On those occasions, she managed to meet with 'brother'/inmates. They were easily identifiable by their purple triangle. The Jehovah's Witnesses also managed to receive some religious literature clandestinely. The transfer point was a bathroom in the hotel for the SS-men, where a number of the 'sisters' worked. [Timestamp: 00:20:41]

I.: Did conditions begin to change when the Germans started to lose the war?

Things did not change. The Germans just started to move the inmates from one camp to another. Their first destination was Gross-Rosen. They were marched non-stop day and night. Anyone who couldn't continue walking was killed along the way. None of the Jehovah's Witnesses was killed during this march, not even the Elders. The younger sect members helped them along. They weren't able to reach Gross-Rosen by the end of that march. They managed to stop and rest in a barn and then they were able to continue by train as far as Wrocław. From there they had to ask some SS-men for directions to Gross-Rosen. The fact that they did that and did not try to run away, made the SS-men laugh. But they had to find their way back in order not to abandon their 'brothers' and 'sisters'. Their final destination was Neuengamme—a camp near Hamburg. But, before reaching that camp, their escort of 2 SS-men discarded their uniforms, changed into civilian clothing that they brought with them and abandoned their prisoners in the middle of a field. Since E. was in charge of the Jehovah's Witnesses contingent, she turned for assistance to the English forces that were in the area. The English were soon replaced by the Americans. They remained in Germany until rail traffic was restored. However, before returning to Poland, E. learned that her husband was looking for her in Buchenwald. E. made her way there and met up with him and their daughter after 5 years of separation. Their daughter did not recognize either one of them. By then she was 6-years old.

I.: Could you speak about how you were persecuted subsequently by the Russians?

This was a difficult time. E. was gravely ill, while her investigation by the Russians lasted for a year and a half. She was close to death. She was losing her vision and her memory. Still, the Russian authorities would not allow her to seek help in a hospital. She underwent 5 days of continuous interrogation.

I.: What experience in concentration camp did you find most difficult to endure?

Before becoming a domestic, E. had to do laundry every day. The skin on all her fingers was torn or worn off. But Jehovah (God) came to help her. She was sent to a baker's house, where the lady of the house gave E. a choice to clean the house or to do laundry. E. obviously chose to clean the house.

E. avers that members of the Jehovah's Witnesses gained strength in their faith through suffering and that they always stood out from the others in the camps by their proud posture and dignified deportment. [Timestamp: 00:39:27].

At this point E. is given some photos of her that was taken in Oświęcim and is asked to describe what was going through her mind looking at these photos.

These last two minutes of the interview were conducted in English and E. with the help of the Interviewer manages to provide answers in broken English.