

## INTERVIEW WITH ELSE ABT

ROBERT BUCKLEY: 1995. We're outside of Warsaw in Poland at the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses and we're doing an interview of:

INT: : Mrs. Elzbieta Abt (*switches to Polish*) Maybe you could tell us briefly about yourself and your family.

ELSE: I was born in 1914 and my father is died by the war.

INT: : You can speak Polish, if you'd like.

ELSE: Hi died.....My Polish and German get mixed up...My father (*starts speaking German*) Yes, German, again...My father died in 1917 when I was little, so I never saw my father, only my mother. And my mother is not and was not a Jehovah's Witness. On the contrary, she was very opposed. And that is why I never got my dowry, that was my right and what was the custom in my family. I became independent. I got married in 1938. My husband was an engineer, he studied in Gdańsk. And we met there. I got the truth first, then him.

INT: : Did you have any siblings?

ELSE: Yes, a brother. My brother has passed away, and he had been opposed as well. My mother was so opposed that she didn't take my child when I was arrested. She kept saying that I didn't have to by arrested, I could just sign and get out. And she will not take the child. But this was very good. The child was with our brothers that raised her the same way I would at that time.

2:30

INT: : And could you explain this issue of you (plural) being able to sign something and then you (plural) could leave?

ELSE: Yes, exactly. When we were arrested then they gave us right away....When I was first time, with my husband, at the beginning he (*the Gestapo officer*) had a speech and then he sat behind a typewriter.

INTEPRETER: In a court room?

ELSE: No, at a Gestapo. Yes, he sat by the typewriter and started to write. And we were to sign it that we are renouncing our faith and all that we have we will pass on to the police. But we did not agree and, therefore, they kept my husband. And when they were writing my investigation report, then they asked about the child. I said, "The child is at home." "Yes, but who is feeding it?" I said that no one can feed it because I am breastfeeding the child. Then they said that they will try. He left and came back and then they allowed me to go home. They kept my husband, though. And I was at home for another year and a half. Later they arrested me.

3:51

INT: : Was that still before the war?

ELSE: No, it was already 1942 when I was (arrested.) 1940 when my husband (was arrested.)

INT: Before you were arrested, were Jehovah's Witnesses being persecuted already?

ELSE: Yes, yes, in Gdansk they were. In Gdansk we were. They just came to us and said that they need engineers and we have to collaborate with them, because that is what they want. And since we have a little child, they were sure that we will come. They gave us two weeks to think it over. And our daughter was born on September 24, and two weeks, so instead to stay there, the whole apartment, a big three room apartment, we left everything the way it was and escaped, left. And one brother wrote to us that we could stay in Lodz, in the old Bethel. And we stayed in Lodz. That

was 1939. And a little bit, and then half a year later we were arrested again, but they released me again, but not my husband, in 1940.

5:20

INT: : In 1940....Maybe then you could you tell us about this incident, about your daughter and your separation.

ELSE: I was telling the story in Brooklyn when we were there. We were the only ones that had such an experience, because we had a training in Brooklyn.

INT: : But maybe it would be worthy to tell this story.

ELSE: Indeed, that...the daughter when they came, strangely, she was two and a half, and she was asking this Gestapo man to leave her mommy here...being so little she still understood that there was something wrong. And he (Gestapo man) didn't hear. She went around to the other side -he was a very tall man - and says, "Please sir, leave my mommy." That was irritating him and then (he said): "Take this child away! And take this child's stuff." And right away they took the bed, and the child's clothes, and then they locked down the apartment, they sealed it. And they took me.

INT: And what happened to your daughter?

ELSE: She stayed with the brothers in the same apartment building, but with the brothers.

INT: So they let her stay?

ELSE: Yes. They (Gestapo) wanted me to write to my mother, for her to take the child. I didn't write and they were yelling at me that I am such a bad daughter. Knowing my mother, I didn't want to ask her. And it turned out good. Then they allowed for the neighbours to keep her and I agreed and I was content.

INT: So a separation began that lasted how long?

ELSE: It was three years.

INT: Three years?

ELSE: Yes.

7:13

INT: And could you tell us what happened next, where did they take you, how was that?

ELSE: Gestapo. To the Gestapo. There were already many brothers there, because it was May 7, 1942 and there was a big roundup in the whole country, the brothers were arrested everywhere. Along with me was Wiktor Schnell, that is now known, and others that are in Germany, my friend, no....her later....And others from Poland. They have all passed away, except Wiktor Schnell.

7:55

INT: Where did the Germans get the information from about who was a Jehovah's Witness?

ELSE: There was a man that pretended to be a Jehovah's Witness and he was traveling with another brother, and that is how they knew. He also knew that I knew where something is, but I did not confess it. But this man betrayed a lot. We know he did in Lodz, and Poznan as well, etc. In any case, the Gestapo was very busy to arrest everywhere. There were roundups all over the country.

INT: Did you time at the Gestapo start with the interrogations?

ELSE: Gestapo? Well, they tried different things. At the end one (of them)....It was them rather, losing their patience.....At the end one came up to me and says: "What are we to do with you! We have no strength with you! We arrest you, you don't care. We put you in jail, you go. To the concentration camp, too, you go. You are just.....What are we to do with you! You receive death

sentence, then to death you go. What are we to do with you!" I was very happy when I heard it. They knew they were powerless.

INT: How long this lasted for, at the Gestapo?

ELSE: Half a year.

INT: Half a year!

ELSE: Yes, and then to the camp. Half a year in prison. They were grilling us.

9:40

INT: Do you know what was happening with others who were with you at that time?

ELSE: Yes, just like me they were being constantly interrogated and threatened, and so on.

INT: Could you tell us some details? What kind of pressure?

ELSE: No, no, Gestapo not so much. Communists yes, they were different. Gestapo, also, who was to talk....but not one from us talked and....that is why they (Gestapo) had no hope.

10:17

INT: So finally a decision came. You were told that you will end up in a camp. What was that like? From where you departed?

ELSE: Well, then it was a transport.

INT: But from where were you transported?

ELSE: From Lodz. From the prison. We were 12 sisters.

INT: And you were going to....

ELSE: By train, to Auschwitz.

INT: To Auschwitz....

ELSE: And in Auschwitz he says: "For what" - curious SS were asking. "We are Jehovah's Witnesses." "Ah, so you should sign and go home. If not, you will die. No one can survive here." "We know, we are ready for anything, but we will not sign." And in the camp still, after being there for some time, they would call us from time to time, in case someone would sign. We all had to do it. But one sister was ahead of me. Then me, and then nothing, nothing will come out of it (*meaning: the SS knew not to keep on asking the rest as they all would refuse to sign anyway.*)

INT: Because you were an eye-witness and a participant of these events for you arrival at the camp seem normal. But if you were to describe it to someone, what was that like....

ELSE: It was so long ago, and later I had dealings with the communists, and that....they were worse, they were worse.

11:51

INT: At that time in the camp, were you together?

ELSE: Yes, for a short time. Then, all separate. Because all our sisters were to work in the homes of the SS.

INT: Why?

ELSE: Because they trusted us. They would not steal, will not poison anyone.

INT: So the SS men knew about that?

ELSE: SS had assurance (12:18) We had a pass and a picture. And we could go anywhere with that pass. Only Jehovah's Witnesses, no others. Political, no (*political prisoners.*) Only Jehovah's Witnesses could work in homes.

12:35

INT: The atmosphere and the events, did you know what was happening at that time in the camp?

ELSE: Well....We knew everything. And what we did not know, our noses smelled. Because in 1944, towards the end, the crematoriums were not enough. Then they were burning...and the air was horrendous, like burnt flesh...it was....a horrible stench.

INT: I understand. Everyone lived in fear that they can end up in a crematorium....

ELSE: Yes, yes....

13:12

INT: How were you (*plural female*) able to cope at that time?

ELSE: Everyone where they had to work. I was working for a high official. He was the head of the whole camp administration.

*Obersturmführer*. And I was in this house, I slept in the basement. At first, I had to walk to that house, but later I slept in the house's basement. But one time, when they were not there, I quickly escaped to a nearby SS hotel, and there our sisters worked, only sisters. And my friend worked there as well. I escaped to there and we talked a little bit and strengthened each other, in secret. Then, I had to be back before they came back. So I had no permission to do that. Many worked in that hotel.

14:20

INT: A little bit of information about your time in there. When it comes to humiliating, as a part of the persecution. What was that like?

ELSE: A person was a number. Required to stay at attention and say....."Prisoner number 24402 – me – is asking permission to (*Speaks in German*) to go there", when the boss was calling....Then, again, "Prisoner number 24402 is asking permission to leave." Not a person, only a number.

INT: Was there anything else they would do to make the prisoners feel inferior?

ELSE: Yes, those kapos, above us...

INT: Who were the kapos?

ELSE: A kapo was a person who had a number of prisoners under him and who was abusing them. Generally, they were black (*triangle*)...but yes, need to say what, because we had a purple triangle, political had red triangle and asocial had black triangle. In any case, generally political (*prisoners*) were not taken for that, only those who were abusers.

INT: Only asocials would do this job.

ELSE: Those who knew how to abuse others. Then, the SS were justified. These (*asocial*) would do that.

16:27

INT: Did you often see fellow prisoners being beaten?

ELSE: I did not see it myself, only heard....one of our German sisters was beaten. She received 25 stokes, it was horrible. They would beat others. This female-*oberofficer*, I saw her beat other sisters. Not me, but only by a chance. I saw her, she was a pretty lady. I saw her and I knew that she could see my eyes' expression telling her that she was a pretty woman. Later, when I went down to the basement, to the sisters where we were sleeping, they asked me if I saw that female *uberofficer*. I said, "No, but I did see one with beautiful hair and beautiful eyes." They said, "What!? And she didn't shave your hair?" Because I was told that she would do that. I had French curls the whole time. I told them that, nothing, she just smiled and nothing. They answered, "You were unusually lucky."

17:54

INT: Were there times when they would shave some?

ELSE: Yes, yes, yes... to the skin.

INT: To the skin?

ELSE: Yes, you were not allowed....but I was lucky. It was because I liked the way she looked not knowing (*who she was.*) Later, I would never look at her again, because I saw her beating a sister.

18:20

INT: Would you be able to tell how many prisoners were Jehovah's Witnesses?

ELSE: No, I am not able to tell.

INT: Why am I asking this question....How were you able to keep your faith? How were you able to endure in these unusual conditions?

ELSE: There was a time that brothers would write a daily text. And there was a brother who had come from another camp and he had extraordinary memory. He would say: "In 1925 this and this *Watchtower* had this and this text." Extraordinary. Unfortunately, this brother who had this amazing memory, when liberated, left. He was disfellowshipped.

INT: Were you able to meet together to...

ELSE: Exactly, exactly. At times I had to go somewhere, my boss would order me to go. And then I would see the sisters. And the brothers as well. I am nearsighted and I would tell him (the boss) that I need to see an optometrist. He (the optometrist) was in the male camp. And I went there. And I would meet the brothers, not once, a few times. Then I would talk to them, they all had the same triangle. And in general, other prisoners would say, "There is your sister." So I would meet the brothers there as well.

19:58

INT: Was smuggling of (Bible) literature or the Bible possible?

ELSE: Yes, as I said... My friend was working at the hotel and she was cleaning the windows. And the sisters from Silesia were walking by her and said to her, "We are Jehovah's Witnesses too." And on their way back she said to them, "Go quickly to the washroom" - because this was an SS hotel. And after they had done that, she went in as well. And from that time on we had the literature. (Inaudible)

20:46

INT: Did situation began to change with Germans losing the war?

ELSE: No, no. We had to walk from Auschwitz, from camp to camp.

ELSE: No, no, we walked from camp to camp, on foot.

INT: From Auschwitz you went where?

ELSE: We were to go to Gross-Rosen. We had to walk night and day. And who couldn't walk was killed. Either shot or killed by...they had these *Panzerfaust*???? on a stick, it looked like this and that and they would kill using this. It was horrible.

INT: How long this lasted?

ELSE: Day and night. Nonstop. And then I myself thought that I cannot do this anymore, and then, it was Jehovah's guidance, I thought that if I can make three steps to the left or right, then I can make three steps forward.....and if I fall then I can say that is God's will. And after that I walked and walked. I didn't feel my feet. I was walking automatically. Many felt similar. Not one of ours was killed. Older ones didn't. The younger ones would drag them behind. So, nothing happened.

INT: You ended up in Gross-Rosen?

ELSE: Not exactly. Later, a doctor came, for whom I had worked for a short time and called for the Bibelforschers to step out. So, we did that. Then he asked me if wasn't there one (female) missing. And then one sister who later lived in former GDR.....then he called her up and we were all transported on a separate transport. Only Bible Students. We would not have made it otherwise....At one other time we were allowed to overnight in a barn and we thought: Today our end will come, no one will be able to go on....It was such a blessing, that we were crying for joy at that time.

INT: You came to the camp....

ELSE: Then, we were transported by a train, overcrowded, and they told us where to sit. There were three sisters with me and we didn't know where to get off and we went all the way to Breslau. And what to do now? I saw the SS were there and I asked them how to get to Gross-Rosen. So they took us back to Gross-Rosen. And they were laughing so hard at us....But had we not gone back, then our sisters would have suffered horrible difficulties. And later this doctor from Auschwitz, Dr. Wirths, who knew me as a Jehovah's Witness, he asked me if one of us died on the way, but not then, later, yes.

24:16

INT: And in the camp they must have been surprised that you came back?

ELSE: Yes, the SS were laughing at this. But we had to. We couldn't...for the world it wasn't important what was happening ....but we couldn't do that. It would be a great shame....Because that doctor asked about it later. And later, towards the end, in another camp, the same doctor was there. It was at Dora-Nordhausen. He was looking after us then, the same doctor. So.....

ELSE: And in this camp....

ELSE: We had.....It was a male camp. Before our transport, there had been another transport of women that was meant for the men in there. And when we got there, this doctor told the capo woman not to forget that we were different kind (of women.) That is why he said that I was to be responsible for what our sisters did, and if any escapes I would be made responsible for it. And if there is a need of anything, I am to look after that. Because I knew him from Auschwitz. And that is what it was. And from that camp we went further.

25:50

INT: To where?

ELSE: We had to (go) to Hamburg. To Neuengamme, near Hamburg, and on the way there were British first, that liberated us. And the SS that were to transport us...Then something else was.....because from this camp we were to be transported to the next camp, but two of the SS were smart and told us that they would lead us thru a different, shorter way and separate from others. And the permission was granted. And they took us....Two sisters got very sick, but survived. Then later, the SS ran away, they had clothes with them, and they left us there in an open field.

INT: So British, then, yes?

ELSE: I had to go to British. To get something so we could overnight and to get some food. British did that. And later British left and Americans came.

INT: How long did you stay in German territory?

ELSE: Well, after all that, we were there from March...no...April, in April we were liberated, April 11. Later, my husband was looking for me but didn't find me. Later, one brother, Janek Lorek, you for sure don't know him, he was a district overseer here, he went to look for my husband.

And he found him in Buchenwald, and then an older brother, Adler, was making a phone call, "Quick, we have sister Else Abt." Because my husband was looking for me in Dora-Nordhausen camp but I was there no longer. So he was worried, but later great joy of all the brothers.....

INT: And you met where?

ELSE: In Weimar, Buchenwald.

28:20

INT: In Buchenwald....And that second meeting, in Poland?

ELSE: It was a meeting after five years.

INT: Was that in your home town?

ELSE: No, we couldn't right away, the trains were not going. Only later, we when trains were going, we went on a....what do you call it?....

INT: Cattle train?

ELSE: For things...logged trees.

INT: Freight trains?

ELSE: Yes, something like that...And wherever we could on this....we went back. And on our way back, around Kalisz, everything was taken away from us by the Russians, they took all we had. Because in Germany, as camp survivors, we were given some things. But they (Russians) took everything.

29:13

INT: Your daughter recognized you?

ELSE: No, no. She was six years old. Neither me nor my husband.

INT: You mentioned Russians few times. Would you tell us a little bit about the persecutions that came later.

ELSE: Hmm..... It was very difficult. I was very sick. I had been interrogated for one year and a half they almost finished me off. That was their goal, they were saying it, that they don't want to kill you, they just want to ruin your health. I was really sick, then. I don't know what it was. Only one day, in the morning, I lost my sight. I could still hear, I was stiff and my arms went into a spasm. My mouth stayed opened. They called a doctor. From the outside, not the prison doctor, because they thought I was dying. I felt that he (*the doctor*) was trying to close my mouth and that he wanted to straighten my arms, but they kept on bending back. And the sweat ... totally wet. He told them to wipe it off. They didn't do anything. Only when he said that it was (*inaudible*) attack, I got some injections. But the attack happened again the same day in the afternoon. And then the prison doctor said that I need the hospital, but the UB (*secret police, Polish version of KGB*) did not allow for that. The doctor started to swear. I couldn't see anything, nothing at all, but I could hear. I was losing my sight and I was losing my memory then...

INT: Were there any other forms of persecutions, like frequent beatings?

ELSE: No, Yes, I....beaten. Yes... They did hit me. Yes. Did not allow me to sleep. I was interrogated for five days and nights nonstop. They took turns but I was constantly (*interrogated*). They wouldn't allow me to use the washroom. Nothing....I thought that I couldn't take it anymore, but Jehovah always directs. This one (*UB policeman*) left, another came, and told him that he had been called to go somewhere. He answered that he was in the middle of interrogation. "I will do it." Then I asked this other policeman if I could go to the washroom. "Yes, of course you can." So I went. Then the other one returned. "You went." Yes, I went to the washroom.

INT: Were they asking you, for instance, about your stay in concentration camps?

ELSE: I had my tonsils taken out in a camp.

INT: But I am talking about your interrogations, later, if they would ask about your stay in the camp.

ELSE: They would call up everyone in the camp to talk sense into us – as they would put it - and to renounce our faith and then we could leave right away. There was a sister, then me, and then, it was pointless, they sent us all back. They knew this will accomplish nothing.

32:50

INT: We would like to recap these experiences. If you are able to call back to your memory those years, which of your camp experiences you consider the hardest?

ELSE: At first....that was the worst....forget who you are...Not who you are but who you are in this world. We are the Witnesses, not in this sense. The conditions were very hard there. We had no water. The toilets were only being built in 1942, in Auschwitz. I was afraid to go relieve myself, because I could fall in and then you just stay there in this.....

INT: Maybe a specific incident?

ELSE: I had to do the laundry in homes. Before I was assigned to work for that *führer's* home, I had had to do laundry. Everyday at a different place and the skin on all my fingers was gone. The sisters kept telling me to wrap rags around my fingers, but it was difficult to do laundry like that. That was very difficult. But Jehovah always helped. Later, I had to work for a baker and his wife was good, only one day there. And she asked us, “ Do you want to do the laundry or clean the entire house?” I said that I prefer to clean the house. And she also fed me. First she gave me food and then work. So, on one occasion, I had a little bit of relief from doing laundry. But later, again. And later, one can get used to the circumstances. Doesn't think about the freedom at all. We thought that Jehovah will remove Hitler and we will be freed. And 1945 year text was: “Go make disciples.” And when the brothers in the camp had heard about that they said that a year text like this means that we will be set free still. Lest there be no peace, because during peace it is easy to fall asleep. And that is what happened to some.

35:57

INT: I understand that this surely painful experience no doubt strengthen your faith.

ELSE: Yes, yes, yes. Because here we were standing as Jehovah's Witnesses. A man is only a man and cries only when no one can see him cry, but never to them.... I never showed them my tears. When I walked (inaudible) to our sister, “Look at the way she walks, as if the whole camp belonged to her.” Always upright, head up high. I didn't show anything.

INT: Knowing that it is because of your faith, because of God's name.... that strengthened you.

ELSE: Yes, yes. You could tell when men were walking upright ...these are our brothers, and (inaudible.)

INT: You could recognize Witnesses in a crowd.

ELSE: Yes, the posture. And this woman, the mother-in-law of this *führer (that Else worked for)*, she said, “You all, your eyes are different.” And that was so. We were not discouraged despite the circumstances. All will be forgotten. Only our stand as Witnesses. And at the very beginning, we were to go have our picture taken. There was a barrack where doctors stayed, also prisoners. An older one says to the younger, “You can always recognize these Bible students.” The younger one says, “Show me, then.” And he pointed at me. I had already passed them. He came up to me, looked (*at the sleeve where triangle was*) and sure enough. You could always recognize....they are different people.



INT: Let us look at these events from a different perspective. Today, the world is facing a huge unknown. People do not know what will happen. Would you like to say something to the young ones, what kind of life they should live and what they should think of these past events today.

ELSE: All I can say is that it was a great privilege to be there for Jehovah's name and I never had any regrets because of that. Either then or later. Because it was for His name all that. From the beginning....sign, renounce....But we did not.

39:08

*With the camp mug shot:*

INT 1: A little higher.

INT 2: Ask her what she thought when her picture was being taken of her in Auschwitz. Ask her what was going through her mind, if she can remember that.

INT1: If you can remember, can you say what was going through your mind when they were taking this picture?

ELSE: I knew that they were taking those in case we would escape. That is why with the glasses and without. With a headscarf and without it as well. But we were required to wear a headscarf and an apron.

INT 1: You can see there is both with glasses and without. That was for the purpose of running away, in case they wanted to escape.

INT 2: Did they shave your hair?

ELSE: No, not mine. Many, many sisters had their hair shaved. I was lucky. I had nice, long hair. Here (pointing at her mug shot) my hair wasn't brushed.

INT 2: Did you meet other prisoners like the gypsies and Jewish people, and so on.

ELSE: Yes, many, many. In Auschwitz.

INT 2: OK, we would like to thank you very much. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum would like to thank you for taking the time to share with us your experiences as this is a very important part of history and the museum is hoping that people will learn from it. But it seems like they have not learned from the past. But we hope. So we like to thank you very much.

ELSE: Please (*meaning: You're welcome.*)