

Schnell M RG-50.028.0100
01.01 Summary of Interview

Mary Schnell Born in 1914 in Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A. Father: Walter **Barschowsky**, born in Poland. Mother: Victoria **Barschowsky**, born in Poland. Siblings: Sophie and Helen.

Mary was born in Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A, after her parents relocated from Poland. Her father, Walter, worked at the Ford Motor Company. Mary never forgot a slide and film program they attended in Detroit called the "Photo-Drama of Creation" produced by the International Bible Students Association. She was especially interested in a slide depicting a scene of Armageddon. Mary learned from the Bible that Armageddon is God's war to end all wickedness on earth. The family returned to Poland when Mary was eight years old and eventually settled in Gdynia, near Danzig.

On Sundays, Mary was required to attend the Catholic church connected to her school as well as religious instruction classes conducted by priests during the week. When she was ten years old, Mary stopped attending church when the school no longer required her to do so. After completing her schooling, Mary became a legal secretary in a law office in Danzig. After the war started, a priest offered to help Mary get out of the office to safety during an air raid. Mary felt that because the priest was not a servant of God, he couldn't offer her much protection, so she declined his offer. Mary regularly prayed to God, but she did not believe in using the rosary for repetitious prayers. She met Jehovah's Witnesses in 1943 through a Russian friend and studied the Bible with them. Although the work of Jehovah's Witnesses was by then under ban, Mary was baptized in the Baltic Sea as a Witness. She later became a typist for a German company, but her conscience did not allow her to type "Heil Hitler" in the course of her work. For this, she was reported to the Gestapo and arrested.

At Gestapo headquarters, Mary refused to sign a declaration renouncing her faith, so she was put into a dark cell with only a little bread and water. The Gestapo again tried and failed to get Mary to sign the declaration before putting her on a transport to Danzig. Many prisoners died on the transport because of the poor conditions and overcrowding. At the police headquarters in Danzig, Mary was very sick with fever, and she felt that she might die in the small, cold prison cell. Before long, she was transferred to another cell with Hermina Hirsch, one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Mary and Hermina were happy to share a cell together for a few weeks, chatting and singing. Later they were both transported to Stutthof concentration camp. Wilhelm Scheider, a Witnesses prisoner working in the office where prisoners were registered, informed other Witness prisoners of Mary's arrival. Mary had brought soap from home with her, and it was shared with the other Witnesses in the camp.

As a new arrival, Mary had to be inspected for lice and had to stand naked as the camp doctor examined her. Mary shared her faith with the doctor, explaining how God will remove all wickedness from the earth by means of the Kingdom. Afterwards, Mary was given a striped uniform with a purple triangle that identified her as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Mary became friends with Nadya, a Russian girl, who later was baptized as a Witness in the concentration camp. After the war, when Nadya returned to Russia, she was exiled to Siberia by the Communists. There were about 20 Jehovah's Witnesses in Stutthof concentration camp with Mary.

Mary worked mending clothing, but because the clothes were full of lice, she would completely undress after work and remove any lice from her body before going to bed. There was only one wood-burning stove to heat the barrack, so it was very cold in wintertime. Compared with Jewish prisoners who had to share a bunk with four others, Mary slept head to toe with only one other woman in the

bunk. At one point, Mary was put in charge of a team of ten female prisoners and she prayed that she would be able to share her faith with someone. One Jewish woman from Poland was so interested in what she was learning from Mary that she shared it with other Jewish women in the camp. When there was some free time after work, the Witnesses would gather together in the yard and sing Witness songs. The female guard so enjoyed hearing their singing that she even stopped other prisoners from singing their hymns so that she could hear the Witnesses.

Roll call at Stutthof concentration camp was at seven in the morning after the breakfast of black coffee and bread. Lunch consisted of poor-quality soup, and once a week they might get a sausage. Once, Mary saw that the sausage she had been given had blood in it, and she decided that she could not eat it because of the Bible's prohibition on eating blood.

In January 1945, Mary and other prisoners were evacuated from Stutthof in open train cars. Mary did not know where they were going, but she had heard that they might be sent to board boats that would then be sunk in order to drown them. Because of heavy bombing, the prisoners had to get off the train and stand for 24 hours in open fields before returning to Stutthof. Many prisoners and *kapos* had been injured in the bombardment, so the camp hospital was full of the wounded. In May, the prisoners were evacuated for a second time and put on barges after spending a night in the forest. The prisoners were moved from barge to barge, but then suddenly the guards all disappeared, leaving behind their uniforms, and many of the prisoners escaped. Mary and some other Witnesses stayed on the barge and spoke to the captain about their Bible-based faith. The captain decided not to obey the order to sink the barge but instead to sail it to Denmark. Mary met Jehovah's Witnesses there and spent ten months working in the branch office translating literature from Danish to Polish.

Mary went to Germany after being invited to work at the German branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses. She worked there for four years until the Witnesses were banned by the Communists in 1949. Four months after Mary married Victor Schnell, a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp, they were both arrested and put in prison. Mary spent one year in a prison in Warsaw and Victor was in prison for two years. After being released, Mary was able to obtain American passports because she had been born in the U.S.A., and she and Victor travelled to New York. They were met by a Witness Mary had known when he was a missionary in Poland. Mary had especially wanted to visit the headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in Brooklyn, New York, and they eventually settled in the area. After eight years they moved to Cary, North Carolina. Mary's father was baptized as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Both of her parents died in Poland after the war.

Keywords

Auschwitz concentration camp
Declaration of renunciation of faith
Jehovah's Witnesses
Jehovah's Witnesses-Branch office
Jehovah's Witnesses-literature
Stutthof concentration camp