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Laughlin, Estelle

Taped on March 1, 1992

One Video Cassette

**Abstract:** Born in July of 1929 in Warsaw, Poland, Estelle Laughlin was raised in a middle class family of four. During the war her family was forced to move into the Warsaw Ghetto and she describes the underground bunkers of the ghetto. When her family was put on a cattle train and sent to Majdanek, her father was separated from the women of their family and later died in a gas chamber. Estelle, her mother and sister worked at different labor camps, manufacturing ammunition until they were liberated by the Russian Army in 1945.

1:01:01 Estelle was born in July of 1929 in Warsaw, Poland. She had one sister. Her earliest memory was of blue skies and summertime in Warsaw. Her father was a jeweler. Life was harmonious and good and she was part of a warm, middle class family.

00:02:54 Estelle remembers a sense of warmth and security from her community, an all Jewish neighborhood. However, even at an early age, she felt hostility at school, where the non-Jewish children would chant anti-Semitic jingles. The parents of these children did nothing to stop the children. She used to fear these children so much that she would vomit on the way to school every morning.

00:08:09 Estelle's parents were not very religious people. She describes them as humanists who placed faith in the goodness of men triumphing over other primal instincts. Her parents were very politically active.

00:10:00 When war broke out, it was like a gradual upheaval of paradise. At that time, the war was frightening but exciting as well. Estelle and her friend were wishing for war; they assumed they would be protected. They did not understand the reality of what was to happen.

00:14:30 War finally struck close to home when one day a nearby factory was bombed. For the next three weeks, the sky was lit up with bombs and buildings exploded. Her family barricaded themselves in their apartment. They realized the absurdity of such a small gesture but felt that they had to do something.

00:19:00 Some Poles became spies for the Germans. They would climb up on roofs at night with flashlights and signal German bombers where to strike.

00:22:00 At one point, Poles took over the radio and told the Polish men to throw down their arms and flee because they were being slaughtered. All the men of the community left. Estelle's father left for a week while the rest of her family moved in with her aunt.

- 00:25:31 Estelle cries because the injustice that occurred was so great. Even during all the explosions and raids, the children played games and remained children. She remembers wondering how people who love their family could destroy life the way the Germans did. The German soldiers were like machines; they had abandoned humaneness. Even though they witnessed the cruelty of the German soldiers, they could not have imagined how much worse things would get.
- 00:32:02 Their family had to surrender all valuable possessions: fur coats, gold, jewelry, etc. Estelle asks how could the Germans accuse the Jews of being greedy when they themselves were doing the things they accused the Jews of doing.
- 00:35:23 When a child was caught with a book or a notebook, the parents were shot. Nevertheless, education went on and children hid books under their clothes. There was a conscious effort to keep life as normal as possible.
- 00:35:47 Food became more and more scarce. Estelle was so hungry that the taste of bread and potatoes became life's greatest pleasure. Even today, she loves the taste of bread and potatoes. The only gift parents could give their children was food; once in their bodies, it could not be stolen.
- 00:38:30 Hitler declared war and Jews from all over Poland were sent to Warsaw. There were heaps of dead and frozen people in the Warsaw Ghetto.
- 00:44:35 It is upsetting to Estelle to hear people ask why the Jews did not offer more resistance. To just go on living and maintaining humanity and sending children to school was a form of resistance. It took a great deal of courage, fighting, and energy, to live. To survive meant trying to maintain a sense of humanity.
- 00:45:42 Winter time in Warsaw was miserable. It was very cold and the water was rationed and they didn't have heat, food, or warm clothing.
- 00:47:51 In 1943, the Germans began to round up people from the ghetto and send them off to "work." Most were never heard from again. There was one opera singer who escaped from Treblinka and told Estelle's father about the "cooking" of the Jews. The man escaped by lying under the dead corpses. He was discovered by a German soldier but sang so beautifully that the soldier helped him escape.
- 00:51:03 The German raids of the ghettos became more extensive, organized, and serious. At the same time, resistance began to organize and grow. Sewers were used as a network, a link to the outside world. The roofs of buildings were another means of secret travel and communication.
- 00:53:45 Children under the age of 13 had no right to work and therefore had no right to live. Thus, Estelle (who was 12 at the time) had her hair cut and clothes fitted so she would pass as a 13-year old.

- 00:57:37 Estelle remembers the raids as being frightening. She could hear people in other apartments screaming while she was in hiding. She remembers hearing, and later seeing, a pregnant woman who was stabbed with a bayonet in the stomach. She lived in constant fear.
- 01:02:14 Umschlagplatz was a big field which served as the central place that all Jews were to report to. Estelle's family thought it was better to do this than remain in hiding. They packed their bags and were told they were going to a place where they would have work. They would live.
- 01:04:48 Estelle still has nightmares today about hiding. When she has a nightmare she thinks of places to hide. She was always thinking of places to hide where no one would look. She would hide in drawers, in cupboards; always planning ahead and trying to anticipate the next German raid.
- 01:09:04 The Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto constructed bunkers. They basically consisted of secret, hidden doors to basements. The Germans took in several young Jewish boys and took care of them. In exchange these young Jewish boys worked as spies, exposing these Jewish bunkers. Those constructing the bunkers knew the boys and knew what they were doing. So when the boys came around they stopped building the bunker and became alert because they could not kill a child.
- 01:11:35 Mr. Sabatnik maintained Estelle's faith in humanity. SS officers took him and told him to knock on apartment doors and say in Polish "Open up, it's only a friend." Instead, he said "Don't open up - danger." When the SS officers figured out what he was doing, they beat him so badly he could hardly walk. But he had protected the lives of his neighbors. His core of good and right did not break down. Estelle also talks about Janusz Korczak, a famous Polish writer of children's books. In his books the children ran the world.
- 01:18:11 In April of 1943, Estelle was finally taken from the ghetto. There was no more work to be done. They were marched past buildings that did not look like buildings but skeletons. The ghetto stank of rotting flesh and there were mountains of bodies in the streets.
- 01:19:47 They were packed so tightly on the trains that many choked and died. The train arrived at Majdanek and it was what you would imagine hell to be like. Fires shot towards the black sky. It was beautiful yet murderous. They were all overcome with thirst. The Germans gave them water by hosing down the ground and forcing the Jews to lick it up.
- 01:22:58 Estelle, her family, and others had tucked cyanide under their lapels. As a last resort, they could take it to avoid the gas chamber. When Estelle's father learned that she had cyanide too, he told her "No - you must live!"

- 01:25:49 Estelle remained with her sister and mother but was separated from her father, who later died in the gas chamber. The three of them made a pact that if one goes, they all go. There were daily selections - whenever there was an opening in the gas chamber.
- 01:30:53 Estelle admits that her survival was due in large part to blind luck. Her family stuck together and was sent to work at an ammunition factory. While on the train transporting them to the factory, Estelle's older sister had to relieve herself. The three of them got out of the car and were put back into a different car. The car they had been in was destined for work in the gunpowder factory, a place where people died within a few weeks from breathing all the toxic substances. The car they got into was destined for shell sorting, a much easier and safer job.
- 01:33:26 Skarzysko was the name of the ammunition factory. They worked long hours and were given little food. They looked awful. Her sister came down with typhus and would have been gassed were she not warned of an impending selection in the hospital. She had time to hide and was saved.
- 01:41:05 Estelle, her sister and mother were transferred to another factory: Charstonow. They sometimes worked 24 hours straight. Their quarters were directly across from the gas chamber and they lived with the smell of gas and burning flesh.
- 01:42:00 In January of 1945, they began to hear Allied bombs falling and thought "Wouldn't it be wonderful to be killed by one of those bombs". Soon thereafter, the Russian Army liberated the camp. Everyone who could move left the camp quickly because they were on the front line and didn't want to risk the Germans returning. They had no food and it was a very cold January. What was ironic was that just because they were liberated did not mean they were saved. There was no relief effort, no immediate medical care. They were on their own, and most people in the area resented and shunned them.
- 01:49:32 Estelle, her sister and mother begged in the streets and dug in the fields for potatoes. Finally, they were taken in by a Russian Jewish family.
- 01:51:54 They were stateless people; for all intents and purposes they were nobodies. They made their way to the American front line. From there they contacted relatives in the United States and came to America in 1946. Estelle had three children and five grandchildren. She went to school, received a college degree, and worked as a teacher.
- 01:58:10 Estelle did this oral history to bear witness. Especially for those revisionists who deny the horrors of Nazi Germany. She feels a pent up indignation against everything that happened. She thinks about what happened to her on a daily basis.
- 02:00:20 The rise of the skinheads scares her. It is frightening that those who are filled

with hatred are so much more committed than those who are pacifists. The ones for peace are quiet. This scares her.