

KRISPIN, Hanni
October 3, 1993
RG-50.029*0034

Abstract

Hanni Krispin was born in Memel, Lithuania in March of 1924. She was the only child of an established Memel family; her father was a successful businessman and her mother was a Zionist with relatives living in Palestine. Hanni grew up with few anti-Semitic experiences and was active in Jewish organizations. In 1938, she had to move to Kaunas to attend a Jewish school. Her story then parallels the German and Russian invasions, along with the Lithuanian terror, and life in the Kaunas Ghetto where she was somewhat involved in underground activities. Hanni and her mother endured transfers to Stutthof and Malken with many escapes from the crematoria lines. Their final war days were spent aboard tank ships, from one of which they were rescued. Hanni's interview concludes with the time she spent in Germany and her eventual settlement in Palestine.

Tape 1

1:00 Hanni states that she was born on March 23, 1924 in Memel, Lithuania. She was an only child and very attached to her father.

1:40 Hanni relates information about her childhood. Her family was observant and kept a kosher home. During her first four years in elementary school, she did not attend school on Saturdays. During high school, she attended on Saturdays, but did not write in class.

Hanni describes her parents. Her mother was a born Zionist, but her father was not. Because her maternal grandfather died at an early age, her mother was educated in Minsk, living with an aunt. Hanni's maternal grandmother emigrated to Palestine with two sisters in 1924. Hanni visited Palestine with her mother before she was five years old and attended school there; her memories of the eight months spent there are very pleasant.

6:07 Hanni talks about life in her community in 1933. She had both Jewish and Christian friends. At her German public school, the books came from Germany and included photos of Hitler, whose picture was framed and hung in the classroom. Hanni's mother went to Czechoslovakia every summer, while Hanni stayed with a nurse who spoke some Hebrew.

8:17 Hanni began high school in 1934 in a strict German school where she did not sense much anti-Semitism. She was very involved in Jewish activities, as a member of Herzliah and a Jewish sporting club.

9:19 Hanni relates that her father went to Paris in 1935 for an international exhibition, and from there, he went to Palestine for two weeks, but felt that the living conditions in Palestine were very difficult. Nonetheless, he purchased a house and made investments there. In 1937, Hanni's mother went to visit Palestine,

taking Hanni along for six months. Hanni, now age thirteen, did not want to leave Palestine. She had seen the formation of Hitler youth groups and was alert to changes, but her father insisted that they return to Memel so that Hanni could complete school.

- 12:58** Hanni describes Memel: a city of 45,000 which was very German because it had once been part of Germany. The Jewish community was not large, but there was an active Jewish life, and the community was well respected.
- 14:41** Hanni talks about changes toward the end of 1937. School classes now began with the class standing to do the "Heil Hitler" salute. There were thirteen Jewish students in Hanni's class of 39, and although relations between the two groups were cordial, she found much anti-Semitism at school. She excelled in physical education, which the Germans admired. A teacher at the school was imprisoned in 1938 for anti-Nazi actions.
- 18:16** Hanni describes events in 1938. The Memel Jewish community had wanted to form a Jewish school. Hanni was admitted to a Jewish school in Kaunas, although she had little prior Jewish education; she was happy to be going to a Jewish school and living with a Jewish family while her family stayed in Memel with her father continuing in the international export/import business. By the end of 1938, Jews were being arrested, including a doctor who hung himself in prison because of the harassment that Jews were experiencing. A businessman also committed suicide. At that time, Hanni's father was not affected by the Nazi policies regarding businesses. Hanni saw some anti-Semitic signs, including swastikas and the boycotting of Jewish stores. Wanting to return to Palestine, Hanni secretly (due to her father's opposition) corresponded with an uncle in Tel Aviv. Her parents were awaiting final papers to immigrate to Palestine.
- 24:34** Hanni speaks about the Russian occupation of Kaunas (Kovno) in June, 1940. She states that this ended any plans to go to Palestine. The Russians gave the Jews twenty-four hours to evacuate, but said that Communists could remain. Money was requisitioned by the Russians and the family stayed in hotels. Schools were reopened after two months, and Hanni could continue at her Jewish school, where Hebrew was forbidden, Yiddish was allowed, and Russian had to be learned. The Russians allowed some families to buy small flats outside the city. Four Jewish families from Memel did this, but three of the flats were taken by the Russian army. Although it was a long distance to the school, Hanni was glad to go. It was known, via spies, that Hanni was Zionist and not a member of the communist party. Her father was unemployed and sold lottery tickets. Hanni was told to be more involved in school life - she joined two gymnastics groups, and sang in the choir. The Russians required that the students attend school on Yom Kippur.
- 32:30** Hanni relates that the underground was very active in trying to keep Zionist ideas alive and not succumb to Russian brainwashing - their meetings, conducted in Hebrew, also focused on how to fight the Russian occupation. On June 21, 1941,

the first German bombs were heard, and the exodus of Jews began. Hanni's mother, who could speak Russian, begged the Russians to take her family with them. Although Hanni saw Jews leaving with bundles, her father said that Hitler would catch them anyway.

35:50 Hanni recalls June 25, 1941, two or three days before the official German occupation, when the Lithuanian soldiers came to her home because someone said that shooting had been occurring from her house. The Lithuanians wanted to take revenge on Jews who were Communists. The soldiers made the family stand in the courtyard with their hands behind their backs. Hanni had two small rings, she gave one to her father and put the other into the sand where she was standing. The family was marched to the school and made to stand there for some time. Hanni states that her father totally lost his pride and "presence of mind" and turned white within an hour. He was separated from the rest of the family by the Lithuanians, and they never saw him again. After seven days in the municipal prison, with little food, Hanni's cell members were released for unknown reasons. Women in a nearby cell were raped, and others were taken to the Ninth Fort. Their jewels had been taken from them. Hanni's mother could hardly walk, but they were able to reach the home of a Christian doctor who gave them a cane, some food, and money, but would not shelter them because of Nazi regulations. Although these regulations also stated that Jews were not allowed to use public transportation, Hanni and her mother used the cable car and then a small cab to reach their home after curfew, when it was dark. A poor Jewish family lived in the front of Hanni's family's yard, and the father came to sleep with them. In their cellar were packages of household items for shipping to Palestine - they would hear someone breaking the dishes nightly.

45:58 Hanni's narration continues with the German occupation in early July, 1941. An announcement stated that Jews had to wear the yellow star. Rumors began to circulate that Jewish men were being used for labor. Hanni went every day for a week to see if she could find her father; she later learned that he was one of the 10,000 arrested Jews who were shot in early July at the Seventh Fort. She stresses that the Lithuanians were very helpful to the Germans and were in control of the Fort when the Jews were killed.

48:48 Hanni describes the Kaunas Ghetto: Lithuanian officials told Hanni and her mother that they would have to leave their house. Upon arrival to the large part of the ghetto in Slobodka, they found two rooms with a kitchen to share and a toilet and well outside. Hanni volunteered to work in the small part of the ghetto with orphaned children. One day when she was too ill to go to work, that part of the ghetto was annulled, including the children.

56:18 Hanni talks about conditions in the ghetto. There were people in the ghetto that lived quite well, while others were hungry. Hanni was able to sell some clothes for food. Because the police lived near where she lived, Hanni got a job cleaning Gestapo rooms two days a week, but had to quit after a few weeks because the Gestapo officer wanted to touch her. Because she refused, he made her clean

toilets with her hands. She usually worked in the ghetto workshop, mending socks, making toys, and straightening tin cans. Hanni went once or twice a week to work at the airport so that her mother's work card could be signed. Hanni states that she felt lucky to be in the Kaunas Ghetto with very admirable leaders (Dr. Elkes, Avraham Tory, a friend of her mother, and Lipstak, a neighbor who joined the Gestapo). She says that the atmosphere in the ghetto was quite wonderful with no bribes or cheating that occurred in other ghettos. Ghetto police refused to tell the Nazis where children were.

- 1:02** The interviewer asks about the October 28, 1941, "Gross Aktion" which began by assembling the Jews at 5:00 am while the Gestapo official, Rauca ate a sandwich. (Helmet Rauca was found in Canada after the war, and Hanni had worked for him.) When Rauca saw the "cleaning women", he sent them to the right, while others were sent to the fort. Leaders of the Jewish Aeltestenrat (Council of Jewish Elders) would not select the 10,000 Jews as demanded by the Germans; therefore, the Germans took 12,000. After this, the Zionists reorganized in the ghetto. The group was not involved in fighting, but in a battle for the human spirit. The preservation of Hebrew culture and language was their focus, and they taught Hebrew literature to children when possible.
- 1:06** The interviewer asks if Hanni thinks that ghetto leaders always acted in the best interests of the people. She responds yes when considering the very stressful conditions. She mentions that the leadership, including Dr. Elkes, had helped to establish good relations with the Germans, even with the police. There were several underground groups, including Abezia (?). Ika Klingberg shot a man in the ghetto because he was a spy who had done terrible things.
- 1:10** In speaking about the underground, Hanni says that some groups worked together in forests, but Hanni did not, because of her mother. She recalls hearing Hitler's speech about the destruction of the Jews on Christmas Day 1941, on a secret radio. The role of the underground was to be there for each other, and to revive the spirit of Zionism. They wrote secret newspapers which had been buried and were found after the war.
- 1:12** In response to a question about life in the ghetto, Hanni talks about curfews, and the third Seder with twenty people in bunker. She mentions Avram Wilamet, who was in the same underground as Hanni, and who helped her twice to save her mother.
- 1:13** Regarding life in 1942, Hanni states that there were always selections, and areas being cut. Her area was not cut and they stayed in one flat until late 1942, after which she had to find another flat. She worked in the toy shop department of a workshop. Every day someone was missing; every day was a struggle for survival.
- 1:15** Hanni says that she heard about the bombing of Warsaw from a Christian girl who came from Warsaw to inform them. They knew that the Russians would

counterattack and that the Vilnius Ghetto had been liquidated. Kaunas Ghetto prisoners began building bunkers, to one of which Hanni was assigned. This bunker had two rooms, electricity, and an entrance through a wall cupboard. Among the fifty inhabitants of this bunker were Mr. Litstak and his wife, Dr. Finklestein and his wife, and Mr. Molesky (head of ORT international in Kaunas). They that knew they would be denounced because Mr. Litstak was in this bunker and the Nazis were searching for him. When the bunker was found, Hanni refused to leave and the Gestapo took her out on July 13, 1944. The prisoners were then assembled and told to lie on the ground and not raise their heads.

1:20 The interviewer asks if Hanni recalls any festivals in 1943. She talks about the Seder and an orchestra which they could attend, Zionist cultural activities and meetings. She mentions taking people into her room to hide them and then finding them places to stay.

1:22 The interviewer names a number of individuals and asks if Hanni knew them. She had met Avraham Torey, who was quite outgoing. She speaks about two Levine's; one is Zvi Hersch Levine whose family she knew from Memel. The other was known as the "yellow" Levine (because of his hair) who was a ghetto policeman, and helped the underground a great deal. Hanni also mentions Esther Lowe who created black and white drawings of life in the ghetto - she was able to get out this documentation out of the ghetto. Hirsh Kadushim fled the ghetto with a film of life inside Kaunas and she met him in Landsberg after the war

1:26 Hanni relates the trip to Stutthof. All night, the prisoners waited in the rain on the ground. They were then taken to a big barn for the night. Next morning they began walking in rows of five, which was very difficult for Hanni's mother who asked to be left, but was helped by the others. They walked out of the ghetto and into a cattle wagon for the ride to Stutthof.

Tape 2

1:28 Upon arrival at Stutthof, men and women were separated for selection. They had to undress and their bodies were inspected, after which they showered. Hanni was able to find her own Bally (high quality) shoes which she says saved her life. These were shoes which she had saved and not worn until she went into the bunker. Although her body was searched by a gynecologist, Hanni was able to hide in her anus four gold coins, two of which she gave to her mother and the other two she kept in a skirt. They were brought to a barrack with three rows of wooden planks. There she met friends who had arrived earlier and learned of a rumor that the remaining people in the barn at Kaunas had been burned. At Stutthof, there were 45,000 prisoners, not all of whom were Jewish. Numbers were written on their arms with pens, but they were not shaved or given striped uniforms.

- 5:28** Hanni heard from another prisoner about the attempted assassination of Hitler in July, 1944. She talks about how joyous the prisoners were to learn this. Rumors were circulating that it was better to work in trenches, even if very sick, than to wait to be selected, which meant going to the crematorium. Hanni had hurt her knee, it became infected, and she was seen by a Jewish doctor. This doctor also showed her mother how to limp as little as possible. On the following day, when a selection occurred, Hanni put her mother ten rows in front of her so that they were in the same row upon arrival at the front of the line. They were both selected to go to a labor camp, Derbeck (?), where the work was not too difficult; this labor camp was reached by cattle car. There were one thousand women in ten rows of tents, with ten women per tent, and Hanni was selected to be the tent foreman. Hanni was told she could have extra food by shining a German commandant's shoes; she refused, but was not shot. Because the weather was somewhat warm in July and August, they were able to wash their clothes. Their bucket served as their mess kit, washing bowl, and bathroom. They had to dig trenches one meter deep and they did not have to go far for this work; they were not shouted at. Sometimes Hanni's mother could stay in the camp and peel potatoes.
- 12:13** Hanni talks about being transferred to Malken where conditions were worse, with more people per barrack. They were given wet coats and blankets. They worked digging large trenches, designed for tanks that were more than three meters deep. The commandant was vicious, and liked using a whip. The walk to the work was very far, ten kilometers. Hanni made sure that her mother worked on a part of the digging that was somewhat easy.
- 16:00** Hanni relates a conversation with a German soldier who was patrolling where she was working; he heard her speaking German, and asked why the women were working as slaves. He was an opera singer over seventy years, recently drafted. She told him about the mass killings, but never saw him again. (The Nazis drafted older men in the later war years.)
- 18:48** Hanni talks about conditions in December, 1944. Because of her mother's deteriorating legs, she wore shoes made from blankets. Among the detainees, the atmosphere was good. They heard about a train going back to Stutthof with sick people, but were informed by a Hungarian doctor that the train was going to the crematorium. Because of their weak physical condition, Hanni and her mother got on this train. They were fortunate that the crematorium was not functioning that day (either Christmas or New Years) and the soldiers were drunk. Therefore, the prisoners were assigned to blocks; her mother was sent to Block 5, from where prisoners would be taken on the next day to the crematoria. Hanni was in a barrack with one thousand Polish Jewish women, who spoke only Polish. Her feet were bleeding and she had no shoes. The Appell was at 4:15 am, and the detainees had to stand barefoot in the cold outside. A Czech Christian Kapo ordered that wooden shoes be brought to her.

- 22:00** Hanni describes how a “runner” who lived in the revier (concentration camp hospital) would go around the camp, collecting people who needed to go to the hospital. Hanni’s mother was met by one of these runners (someone who had gone to school with Hanni) who took her to the revier and had her legs bandaged. This runner found Hanni and brought her to see her mother. Hanni was able to get into this revier and be with her mother because a runner did not have to identify the individuals she moved, only to have the numbers going in and out of the revier match. In January, 1945, in a German experiment, Hanni was injected with typhus. She survived the disease without medicine. Hanni returned to the barrack, but got sick again and had swollen legs. Not being able to walk, Hanni was taken again to the hospital where her mother was; somehow, her mother was not sent to the crematorium. A British plane shot them and the whole barrack collapsed in the middle, but Hanni and her mother survived.
- 27:40** By April 1945, the Jews were being taken to the crematorium every day. An order was issued that those who can walk will leave on a forced march, and the others will be gassed. Hanni’s mother, now 44 years old, begged another woman to take Hanni. The next day, Hanni hid under some straw, but was not found when Germans entered the barrack with two dogs. At night, as searchlights movements crept through her barrack, Hanni was able to reach her mother. Next day, there was much confusion, but no gassings, because the Russians were getting nearer. The Germans placed the prisoners in cattle cars. Hanni used the two gold coins to buy bread. From the cattle cars, the prisoners were thrown onto tank ships, and some fell into the water because the Germans were moving people very quickly.
- 32:00** Hanni continues with events on April 24, 1945: two groups, Gestapo and Navy, were in command. On the tank ship, there was no water, and if one climbed up for air, there was a danger of being thrown overboard. Although there were rumors that Sweden would take the Jewish refugees in, this did not happen. The tank ship on which Hanni was placed passed a German luxury liner with 300 passengers; this ship was sunk two days later. Sudden bombings caused the Gestapo to use three lifeboats, one of which turned over. Despite the dark and the confusion, Hanni, burned from the explosion, found her mother. Although one part of the ship was burned, this wreck was not left by the Navy.
- 36:00** Hanni continues with events of May 3 to 5. The wreck, floating in the sea, neared another ship and when 150 prisoners were ordered to board it, Hanni and her mother managed to be among the 150 pushed onto this other ship on which some of the detainees were non-Jews. The men on the ship looked at the Jews as if they were black monsters (due to burning and their deprived looking bodies.) They spoke to the men about the camps and the bombings; although they did not understand what happened, they knew they were hungry (they had had no food or water for ten days) and that many were ill or wounded. The men shared food with them and told them that Hitler was dead and that the German army was finished. With some blankets for warmth, they spent the night in the ship on the water.

- 38:20** Hanni speaks about a new attitude on May 6, after two nights on the ship with continuous bombing. In the morning, they were taken by ferry to Kiel in northern Germany, and were told that they would be taken to a house and fed until the British arrived. Her mother was carried by a German and they were given Luftwaffe uniforms, wooden shoes, and food. They were able to sleep on benches and Hanni's mother was taken to a hospital. On May 8, the other prisoners were put on a boat to Bedřichov, a camp for foreign workers. There they were met by French and Czech workers who had been in labor camps. They were given beds and DDT. With the arrival of the British army, Hanni realized that the war was really over. The small rations they received allowed Hanni to recover, and she was able to visit her mother in hospital.
- 43:25** Hanni describes what happened to the other prisoners on the boat in Kiel and how a distinguished, wealthy German (Moltke) assisted people in being rescued. She also details a 1981 trip to that town (?) when en route to Denmark, and how she visited this man who had never before had a visit from one of the survivors. In trying to find him, most people she asked claimed not to know him. A saleslady whispered to Hanni where to find his estate.
- 53:00** The interviewer asks how Hanni came to Palestine. She replies that as a lifelong Zionist, she knew she wanted to go there. While in Celle, she heard that there would be a meeting of the Jewish Brigade for those who had been in the underground, and she walked to this meeting at Bergen-Belsen. While waiting in Feldafing for her mother to be strong enough to travel, Hanni married another survivor. In May 1947, Hanni and her mother obtained permission to enter Palestine, where she eventually found work in a factory office.
- 1:02** In response to the question of what she would like to add, Hanni expressed gratitude for being able to tell her story. She noted that she was proud to have had her mother with her and that her mother was able to die with dignity. She dedicates her story to her husband and all those who perished.