

## Oral history interview with Lenore Lichtman RG-50.030.0933

### Summary

Lenore Lichtman, born Lieba Libuše Gelb on May 30, 1930 in Silce, Czechoslovakia (today: Ukraine), discusses speaking Yiddish at home and learning Czech at school; her parents and siblings; Silce and living in the center of town; growing up in an observant Jewish home, as most Jews in Silce did; her family's origins in either Russia or Lithuania; the post-World War I looting of her grandmother's general store; her family's lumber business; her grandfather being wounded during service in World War I; her extended family; her grandparents' home in Dorobratovo, Czechoslovakia (today: Ukraine); speaking Ruthenian with children in town; the influx of Ukrainian occupation forces and pogroms against the Jews; Hungary annexing Silce as part of the Munich Agreement and First Vienna Award of 1938; Hungarian forces occupying Silce and many older people treating them as liberators from the Ukrainians; her father being very open with her and her siblings about what was happening; not having running water or electricity at home; her family's traditions for Sukkot; an uncle who served in the Czech army; the many Volksdeutsche who lived in the area; an aunt who got a visa to the United States in 1938 and an uncle who got one in 1940 and was drafted into the U.S. Army after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941; being slapped by a Ukrainian teacher when she refused to say "Slava Ukrajini!" ("Glory to Ukraine!"), which she perceived as the equivalent of "Heil Hitler!;" aryanization under Hungarian occupation; her father's conscription into forced labor in 1942; her brother joining a Hungarian youth group and being required to raise silkworms (for parachutes) for the war effort; the start of the war on September 1, 1939; Czech v. Hungarian gendarmes; switching to a Hungarian school in a neighboring town, attended by Jews and non-Jews; Miklós Horthy of Hungary; rationing; her father's imprisonment in Košice; her father being sent to the Eastern Front with the Hungarian army; the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944; travel restrictions for Jews; having to wear the Star of David badge; the expulsion of Jews from town who could not prove residence back to 1860; a massacre in Kamianets-Podilskyi, Ukraine; a Hungarian officer warning her father not to stay in a barn on the front in Belarus, which was later burned with many Jewish forced laborers still inside; the Battle of Stalingrad; her father and other forced laborers being sent to the Ebensee camp in Austria and remaining there until liberation by American troops; the arrival of Adolf Eichmann and the SS in Hungary in 1944 and the mass deportations to Auschwitz; the Nyilas Party (Arrow Cross Party) and Ferenc Szálasi; hearing about the Warsaw Uprising and ghettos; her mother securing an extension so that the town's Jews would not yet have to move to the neighboring town's ghetto; her brother and his friend smuggling food into the ghetto; being taken with her family by Hungarian gendarmes to the local school; a neighbor who came to the house with the gendarmes to ask if he could take many of their belongings; staying with an aunt in the ghetto before transport to Munkács; living in the ghetto, a brick factory, near the train station for a month; conditions in the ghetto and the abusive gendarmes; being told they were going to a "resettlement place" before deportation by cattle car to Auschwitz; making stops in Košice, Slovakia and Krakow, Poland before arriving at Auschwitz; her mother being warned by a political prisoner, or "Häftling," to tell the SS guards her children were older than their true ages; Josef Mengele; the family being separated and staying with her mother and aunt; having her head shaved; being assigned to Auschwitz II, or Auschwitz-Birkenau; roll calls, or Appelle; the leader, or Blockälteste, of her barracks; a Kapo telling them about the crematoria in response to her mother's question about her younger children; initially refusing to eat the camp food; being transported to Stutthof near Gdańsk, Poland after about two months; being selected for building roads and digging trenches for Organization Todt; bromide in the prisoners' food; taking part in a death march in January 1945; arriving at the Praust concentration camp in February 1945; suffering from frostbite along with her mother and aunt; her

mother's death in Praust; liberation by Soviet forces; having part of her frostbitten toe amputated at a Soviet field hospital; moving into an abandoned schoolhouse in the town of Praust with some other women survivors; hitchhiking to the transit camp in Toruń, Poland; a Jewish Soviet officer who ensured that the group had enough to eat; registering as a Czech national and taking a transport train back home; stopping in Lublin, Poland on the way and seeing Majdanek; reuniting with two brothers of one of the girls in the group in Munkács and celebrating Shavuot; reuniting with an uncle; her difficulties adjusting to life outside the camps; learning that her family's home in Silce had been used as a storage site for confiscated furniture during the war; the return of her brother and aunt to Dorobratovo; her brother recovering family jewelry he had hidden in Silce before deportation; her father's return; her brother's experiences in Auschwitz, Mittelbau-Dora, a hospital in the American zone of Germany after liberation, and in Budapest, Hungary; visiting Bucharest, Romania before her father's and brother's return home and staying with a Jewish couple; her father arranging for the entire family to illegally cross into Czechoslovakia to the city of Ústí nad Labem in January 1946; enrolling in high school; assistance provided to survivors by the city; officially regaining Czech citizenship; applying to immigrate to the United States in 1946 and arriving in 1948; the parliamentary election in 1948 and Jan Masaryk; traveling to Gothenburg, Sweden to take a ship to the United States; living with an aunt in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York; working as a dental technician; feeling grateful to her family in helping her to adjust to life after the war; only talking to other survivors about her camp experiences; her memory of an antisemitic teacher in Ústí nad Labem; meeting her husband, a survivor of Auschwitz and Ebensee, in Ústí nad Labem and his arrival in the United States in 1949; marrying in 1950; and her husband's and his family's wartime experiences.

Family photographs and descriptions follow the interview.