

Oral history interview with Dr. Kaja Finkler RG-50.030.0969

Summary

Dr. Kaja Finkler, born on January 4, 1935 in Warsaw, Poland, describes her family's birth name traditions; her parents, Chaim and Golda; her family's Hasidic background; the history of Hasidism; the importance of music within her family and having a strong Jewish identity from an early age; her family members and history; being an only child; the many rabbis in her family; growing up speaking Polish and Yiddish; her mother's refusal to speak Polish after the war; speaking Polish, Yiddish, Swedish, and German by the time of her arrival in the United States; living in an apartment in the Jewish neighborhood of the town of Otwock, Poland before the war; her mother's modern habits and decision to attend university to study law; Raphael Lemkin, his creation of the word "genocide," and the United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948; her and her mother's loss of social status upon their immigration to the United States; moving to her step-grandfather's apartment in Warsaw across the street from the Pawiak prison; being separated from her father, who was sitting Shiva for a family member in his hometown of Piotrków Trybunalski, Poland, during the invasion of Poland in September 1939; the bombs and fires in Warsaw during the invasion; her aunt's flight to the Soviet Union after the invasion; German antisemitism; the ghettoization of Warsaw and her family's apartment falling within the Warsaw Ghetto borders; attending the Ghetto's kindergarten; her mother's oral history interview about her wartime experiences before her death in 1991; the construction of walls surrounding the Ghetto; having the physical appearance of an Aryan; her two uncles working in the black market and her family being relatively well off; starvation; seeing bodies in the streets; confiscation of jewelry and other items; claiming that an uncle was her father when German soldiers came to get him for forced labor and the soldiers then leaving; missing her father, who was unable to travel to Warsaw to be with the family; her mother's relationships with her siblings; her mother's work as a forced laborer in an ammunition factory; the widespread belief in the Warsaw Ghetto that there would be a war, but no one foreseeing deportations; a typhus epidemic and her mother's decision to send her to live with her father and his mother in her apartment in Piotrków Trybunalski; being smuggled out of the Ghetto and traveling with a Polish woman by train to Piotrków Trybunalski in 1942 or 1943; her neglectful grandmother; her mother joining her and her father in Piotrków Trybunalski; the town's ghetto; the family's attempt to go to Switzerland; her parents' disagreement over whether or not to send her to live with a Polish family; going into hiding with twelve other people—including her parents, grandmother, other relatives, and two other Jewish couples—in a small, closed-off section of the apartment building's attic for two or three weeks; a Jewish woman, who had been hiding and caught in the building's basement, giving up the family's attic hiding location; a German soldier who allowed his dog to attack children; joining the rest of the Jews who had been rounded up in the town's synagogue; a member of the Judenrat who paid the Germans not to deport her and her grandmother; being moved to a smaller ghetto; the confiscation of goods; her mother, uncle, and grandmother being sent to a forced labor camp in Skarżysko-Kamienna, Poland and their work at the ammunition factory there; German soldiers beating her father and his subsequent death; the head of the Judenrat sending her to live with a family, who treated her like a servant; working at a lumber mill; her memory of nearly being smothered to death while hiding in the Piotrków Trybunalski apartment building attic; her

deportation to Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany in winter 1943 or 1944; lying about her age and having her head shaved upon arrival; her job as a potato peeler; roll calls, or Appelle; rationing her food; trading bread for a pair of boots and a German guard helping her to put them on; her mother's transport to an ammunitions factory in Leipzig, Germany; her mother managing to maintain her religious practices and traditions; rumors that the war was coming to an end; her transport to the camp at Bergen-Belsen by cattle car in 1945; liberation by British troops; the death of a girl from overeating upon liberation; wanting revenge for her family members immediately after liberation; her estranged grandfather who had escaped Poland before the start of the war with the help of a visa issued by Chiune Sugihara and via the Trans-Siberian Railway, eventually coming to Japan and the United States right before the attack on Pearl Harbor; contacting this grandfather with the help of a British chaplain; the efforts of Swede Folke Bernadotte, Count of Wisborg, and the White Buses operation; traveling to Sweden with the White Buses and her recovery; her mother surviving a death march; learning via her grandfather that her mother was alive and back in Poland; reuniting with her mother in Stockholm before they traveled together to the United States; talking about their wartime experiences right after reuniting and then only rarely afterwards; being greeted by her grandfather, other relatives, and the press upon arrival in New York; living at her grandfather's house in Williamsburg, Brooklyn; her mother's difficulties adjusting to life in New York; her mother recording her experiences on audio tapes after her retirement around 1969, eventually recording about 100 tapes; inheriting the tapes and using them to write her 2012 work *Lives Lived and Lost: East European History Before, During, and After World War II as Experienced by an Anthropologist and Her Mother*; her reaction to listening to the tapes after her mother's death in 1991; the importance of memory in Judaism; traveling all over the world; the events in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017; antisemitism in the United States today; and the importance of diversity.