United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Lily Blayer
August 21, 1988
RG-50.031*0005

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Lily Blayer, conducted on August 21, 1988 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

LILY BLAYER
August 21, 1988

Dr. Elliot Lefkovitz: I guess the best place to start is where you were born and the date of your birth.

Lily Blayer: I was born in Czechoslovakia in 1916, March 8.

EL: And your family lived in what town?

LB: Berehove.

EL: And what kind of business was your father in?

LB: My father was in business, a kosher delicatessen and bakery.

EL: As you were growing up, do you remember any anti-Semitism in your town?

LB: No.

EL: So you had non-Jewish friends, Jewish friends?

LB: Yes.

EL: And you did not live in a particularly Jewish neighborhood?

LB: No, very mixed.

EL: Was your family observant?

LB: Yes, Orthodox.

EL: How many were in your family?

LB: Immediate family?

EL: Yes.

LB: Four of us. My brother, my parents. But the family was one hundred people altogether, aunts and cousins, the next immediate family.

EL: Just to jump ahead a little bit, out of those one hundred people, how many survived?

LB: About twenty-five.

EL: When war broke out, what were you doing? Were you working or were you a student?

LB: I was working in my father's business.

EL: And so you were selling? A sales person? Before war broke out, had you heard anything about antisemitism in Germany, about Hitler?

LB: Yes, not all the details of what happened.

EL: And what happened after war came?

LB: After the war came, we were aware of it. Poland was occupied in 1939 and everyone was running away from Poland -- civilians and military -- and then we found out when they came into the store and started to ask questions. Jewish people...what happened to the Jewish people? Many had not crossed the border, but the military didn't know who were the Jewish people and who weren't.

EL: But you were in the part of Czechoslovakia, you were in Slovakia?

LB: Czechoslovakia, that was one country like the United States has fifty states, we had five states. I was in the Eastern part close to Poland on the northern part and south, Rumania and Hungary

EL: Hungary occupied that part of Czechoslovakia where you...

LB: Yes.

EL: And that was right after the war began?

LB: Yes.

EL: And so for a number of years, you lived under Hungarians?

LB: Yes, for many years, under Hungary, very bad conditions.

EL: How did life change for you?

LB: It was a...revoked license, any freedom to go out on the streets at certain time, beaten up on the street. Jewish people, they saw...kicked in the head. What a bad day. They could show off, coming to ring the doorbell, you were to serve them or the business would be taken away. "You want to sell your House?" and so forth.
EL: And what about the attitudes of your neighbors? Of the non-Jewish population?

LB: Turned against. Absolute nothing. Either for fear, or feeling.

EL: So there was little help?

LB: Absolutely no help. If we were inside they thought we were hiding and if we were outside, we were looking for Russian planes. Accusations.

EL: But your father continued in business?

LB: Business until 1942 and from then on, nothing.

EL: What happened in 1942?

LB: In 1942, first the license was taken away from all the delis then we tried to make a living from the bakery and they gave a ruling that no Jewish people should be bakery owners -- distributors of flour...and that ended our business completely..

EL: Then how did you live?

LB: We had some savings and we sold some jewelry and we had part of the equipment from the bakery we had left. Cutting down everything, cutting down to the necessities. Even the necessities, we didn't know where they were coming from...

EL: During those years, did you hear of camps, mass murders, what was happening?

LB: No, we didn't have any radios, newspapers and we could not go out from the state. We were not in a ghetto but the whole city was a ghetto for the Jews.

EL: How many Jews were there?

LB: 6000.

EL: And in the whole town?

LB: 22,000.

EL: Out of 22,000?

LB: Yes.

EL: Then in 1944, Hungary was occupied by Germans. What happened then?

LB: Then it worsened. It was real fast. It was occupied March 19 and May 15th, we were taken out of Berehove. It was a short period because the Russians were close.

EL: What happened that time? Were you placed in a ghetto?

LB: We were placed in a ghetto three weeks after. My father was taken three days earlier, as a hostage because two families went into hiding and they would not come out. They would kill one by one the hostages. Doctors, lawyers, business men. I Don't know how they took the names. Everyone was there in the hostage place which was a Jewish club, a very prominent Jewish club. Every day, we had to take food. Absolutely nothing was provided. No sleeping facilities, no food, no sanitary -- absolutely nothing. Then it took four weeks and then one day they said they would get all the Jews, in the whole city...everybody.

EL: They never found the two families?

LB: No. The families returned. The whole family returned. That was the only Jewish family to hide.

EL: Did you ever think of going into hiding?

LB: There was a time when we could have gone into hiding but I didn't want to take my father.

EL: What about your brother?

LB: My brother was taken so early, he was taken first to Sortov, Leiberg and each one was not like a military thing and it didn't sound like he was going to be taken away and we were satisfied with that but there was no other choice.

EL: When was that?

LB: That was in about 1941.

EL: So he was in the labor camps all those years?

LB: All those years...but it got worse and worse because the Hungarian government always had new rulings, new written laws and that was put under people whatever they were doing. First there were military and then they took every uniform there to have their own clothing. All the men, they were all young men. No women. And then they were taken from one place to another. Some were shipped to Poland. My brother, somehow he got a medical...

EL: Getting back to 1944, eventually everyone was ordered to assemble for deportation?

LB: They did it more horribly than it could have been done. I'm not sure that I can explain it. They came with a horse and buggy to put things on -- your personal things. And they allowed us to take mattresses to the ghetto, besides personal things. And they said you wanted to walk after the buggy and they said "no, H., sit on the top. Just humiliating the people. That was the main purpose. Humiliating always.

EL: And the non-Jewish population was watching this?

LB: Oh, with pleasure. With pleasure. And we came back, they said only that more came back than went. Because I was home before the war was over and that they didn't like it that I came back before the war was over.

EL: You were in the ghetto then for about a month?

LB: A month.

EL: What was...the ghetto was a part of the rundown city?

LB: No. That was a big factory and at that time it was dried by air in the open like a carport and vacated. They put everyone there on the clay floor, like the brick, and that's what we put our mattresses on. And we were able to cook something. That was a community kitchen. And there were meals served too. That...Everything was provided by Jewish organizations. The government, local, didn't supply anything and then we just got down our food because we thought we just had just a certain amount of food with us. It should last longer. We could eat much better but we got afraid to eat and one day came at...that everybody should turn in their jewelry and they would search everyone and if they should find something, then they would shoot the head of the family and they put everything out. That was the end of our...Earrings were taken from the ear. They marched in there. The Hungarian army...it was the Hungarian army. It was enough for them. They didn't need the Nazis. They did a good Job.

EL: So this was all Hungarian controlling?

LB: Cooperation naturally with the Germans. But from the outside, they didn't come in. We were already taken then, transferred to cattle wagons and the SS was there.

EL: Do you remember the date?

LB: May 15th.

EL: So everyone was ordered out of the brick factory to assemble at the railroad station?

LB: Yes, at the big factory, there was a railroad for the business that came into the ghetto. It was standing there for four weeks because negotiations were going on. The government or something...6000 tanks, or 600...or how many the Hungarians were asking from the United States.

EL: Some kind of deal?

LB: Yes. Some kind of dealing was going on and the US government didn't trust the Nazis and this was how they planned it.

EL: Did you have any idea where you were going?

LB: No, but we knew we were coming to this.

EL: Did anyone try to escape? Did anyone...

LB: From there? No. From the ghetto we had a chance to escape, as I told you. But there were so many odds against it, I don't know anyone who did it.

EL: What was the train ride like?

LB: Horrible. Three days. We got there on the 18th and they gave us water and little bread, opened the door and threw us the bread. It was unbelievable. People dying -- an infant died -- with mothers there. It was a horrible experience. But we knew it. My father told us. He said it was the end for us.

EL: When you got to Auschwitz, what happened then?

LB: Then there were Jewish inmates doing the dirty work -- telling us to keep the children -- they were whispering, give the children to the grandmothers. We didn't know what that meant. But we knew they were to be killed. First my father was separated from us. The men and the women were separated and then I was separated from my mother. That was Mengele. I wanted to kiss my mother but he said, "No, you will see her, don't worry." And that was it. I didn't see my father or anything. We didn't know where my brother was, absolutely nothing.

EL: How did Auschwitz look to you? Did you smell anything? Did you see anything?

LB: The chimneys were going continuously. The Jewish inmates who were head of the buildings with the SS, they told us the story, some of them told us something else. "Don't worry." But some of them told the truth, that we'd be in there, that's it. You will see nothing.

EL: And so after being separated from your parents, what happened?

LB: They took us to a place to take a shower, took away everything and gave us a gray garb to wear, like a uniform type of thing. They shaved our heads and put a number. And that was going fast, driving us back and forth, it was going fast, because they knew another transport was coming.

EL: You were in a state of shock?

LB: Somehow, we were in a trance. Everybody. Everybody was crying and absolutely going crazy. Crying for food, their fathers, mothers, sisters.

EL: Because out of the transport, only a few had been selected to live?

LB: Sure. Some of the sisters were maybe limping a little bit and didn't know...

EL: Once you had gotten your prison clothes, where did you go?

LB: They put us in the barracks. Like you see in the picture of a sleeping hall. 1200 slept in one room and they put a big barrel in front of the door and that was the facility. Sanitary facility and you have to carry that out every morning.

EL: How long were you there?

LB: In this one, four weeks. That was the quarantine. I don't know. The Hungarian Jews had this quarantine...

EL: To see if you had typhus?

LB: But I don't know because no doctors showed up and they didn't care if you got typhus. What was the difference? Then They started to take us out to work -- and taking transport people. Constantly selection. We never knew when we'd be taken to another place, because Auschwitz was very close to the Russian side, so they wanted to take us inside Germany, inside Poland because Auschwitz is on the south side.

EL: But there were also selections for gas chambers?

LB: That's what the purpose of selection was. That's enough if you had a pimple on your body, a little nothing and I get sick to my stomach and I don't want to go. I got hurt by a shovel and it was draining constantly but still I didn't come home. And I had best called the selection, I don't know. I put a bandage on it [her leg]. I was in and out of the hospital and I slept in the hospital one night but then tomorrow, there were selections and they said to get out so I was working in the building and there were selections and we came back from work and we started selections. We didn't have to jump, just step out of the building, in the main floor and we didn't know where we were going so we went into the washroom.

EL: To hide from the soldiers?

LB: Yes. We thought what could happen? We can survive that or we can go to selection and have less chance to survive that.

EL: Who did selecting?

LB: Mengele did, with a nurse and the SS woman. We just walked. They just let you walk.

EL: And this went on constantly?

LB: Constantly. When we came home from work, we'd see someone standing there in the barrack and we knew it was selection and we tried to get away. We couldn't mingle with the other one, if you mingle with the other block, you don't know if the same thing is happening. And that [her leg] was always draining and full of puss and everything. And just, they said "Couldn't you do something?" How could you so something when you are surrounded with electric fence all over and the SS with big German shepherds chasing you and pulling you? You can't hide or run. There is no way. We couldn't run nowhere, in the beginning because one by one, every country was taken. If you went to Belgium, then Belgium was taken. We knew it would be taken because soon when Austria was taken, we knew we'd be taken because we heard some news from British radio. Some people had something, I don't know, it wasn't short wave, something, and we heard something -- but we knew something was happening but it was like being locked in a room and you try to get out.

EL: And it was the same once you got into the camp?

LB: There was no way. A lot of people tried to get away then we had to stand and then we had to stand and they came in and blew the whistle. "Out! Out!" It could be 2:00, 3:00 in the morning, because they found out someone escaped. We'd be standing out in the snow, rain, sunshine until they found the person, or couldn't find the person. Naturally, if they found a person, they'd get shot, because we were always counted. Three, four times a day, we were counted in groups and before work, after work, when we got to work...always counted.

EL: How did prisoners act towards each other? Was there help?

LB: There was some help. But some were special there, because they were there for so many years because we came the last year of the war. They were there since 1939, the Polish, the Germans. They were bitter. They were not too nice. But when it came to greed, they were so hungry that they'd steal their sister's bread. They became enemies. No more human feeling.

EL: Did you ever have an experience when you were helped by someone else, another prisoner?

LB: Yes, but that was a relative. I was helped and she risked her life. There were three lagers, ABC. I was in the A and she came from the C at 4:00 AM or 3:00 AM and brought something for us because her brother was in the gas chamber and so he was a commander and they have a chance to get some food so she brought me. It was the only person who helped and some others didn't have any and you couldn't get a contact and the best food. If they pass by, you were afraid to talk to somebody because the dog was right there.

EL: What kind of work were you doing most of the time there?

LB: In the beginning, we were just carrying stones from one block and back and forth. It was just tormenting -- no purpose -- and it was in the fog, and the men. But that was terrible. The shoes were never tied. It was terrible. When we would get back, everything was moist and smelled and the mice...maybe rats...who knows? When they woke us up walking on us, we just pushed them off and we didn't care and went back to sleep.

EL: When you went out, every night you went back to the camp? Or was there another camp?

LB: No. Always the same. And then we were transferred to another camp, to the C-lager. There were gypsies and before that they killed others gypsies. And they put in the Jews. And from there, until there, I was in the hospital, in and out, because of my leg mainly, that was my hiding place.

EL: What did you have to do to get into the hospital?

LB: Just apply for it and if I was qualified then I could go I couldn't go in winter or in very bad conditions. They said you have a temperature to get in the hospital and the doctor said that was a Jew inmate was helping the SS doctor. I will help you in, but you will have to have a temperature or something. If I get caught, I'll be in trouble and it will be on your record. So go out onto the ice, where you can get real cold and frozen and don't get warm, so you can come in. I couldn't get a temperature so one day I said I couldn't work and he said, "Let's see your temperature." It was a little bit and he said that it was good enough. That's when I got into the hospital and then I was liberated. It took quite long.

EL: When the Russians came, you were in the hospital?

LB: Yes.

EL: Did the SS try to evacuate the hospital before the Russians came?

LB: Yes. They tried to evacuate the hospital, they came back but not forcefully. Just voluntarily. They said, "Do you want to go? Because we will bomb it, explode the hospital. It is your choice. Do you want to stay here and die or walk?" I didn't walk. I couldn't walk. I didn't think I could make it and I had my cousin and she was very sick. I thought we might survive. She was more sick than I.

EL: So you stayed?

LB: I stayed.

EL: And then the Russians came and liberated you there?

LB: The Russians came and they didn't bring anything, any facilities for inmates, food, and people were dying constantly. To carry out every day, to carry out the dead. They called me

"strong one" because I had a lot of clothes on, because when all the facilities were opened, we broke open the doors, we meant to get clothes, blankets. In the beginning, we just walked in. But the Russians gave us things, warm clothes. We had absolutely nothing. That was Birkenau. Then somebody came to look for family. They were in bad condition. They were three men I knew from my home town. They said if they could, they would come back with a sled because Auschwitz was provided, they had food. The Russians had food. They had a kitchen. They came back. They were pulling the sled...

EL: From Birkenau to Auschwitz?

LB: Yes. My cousin was on the sled. There were four of us. We couldn't do it because the three men's hands were frozen. They couldn't pull a little bit. And then we stopped. It was very cold. It was January. And when you don't have enough nourishment, then you feel cold. You shiver all the time. But we made it. We made it. We didn't have any heat, and we were in the dark. No heat, no light after they left, the Germans.

EL: And eventually, you went to Berehove and the neighbors weren't happy to see you?

LB: No. They were very shocked. They thought nobody would come back.

EL: You mentioned before why you survived. What enabled you to survive? Do you feel basically it was luck?

LB: It was luck. Just luck. A matter of luck. There was no way to get out. I feel that if I had to wait for the US to liberate, I didn't have any strength left. I was fading away. I was 60 pounds when I came back. I am now 126 pounds. There was no way. Some people are asking, "Why didn't you try to get away?" But there was no way. Okay, some people tried, but it was a very low
percentage. We didn't get help from anywhere.

EL: How do you think that the experience you had, how do you think it changed the way you look at things? How did it change your attitude? What effects did it have on you?

LB: Certain times I'm very bitter. Honestly, the US didn't come to help early and we had to wait. And something else, they were asking to bomb Auschwitz's tracks and they were there. They could have bombed but they were there. They didn't have to walk there!

EL: You could hear the bombing?

LB: Yes. We heard the bombing. It was at the time I was in the Hospital. Some, they were bombing...but they were already dead, but the inmates, the Jews. But that was Russia. They were closer, the Americans. But we blame the other inmates when we had a little time and we were back to human a little bit there and where are they? And there was a God. We looked up many times and thought it was the same sky that we saw at home.

EL: Your family was an observant family, before Auschwitz, before living in Berehove, your family was observant?

LB: Yes, my father's family and my mother's family -- both very observant.

EL: Did you lose faith in Auschwitz?

LB: Yes, definitely. I tried to keep it. Mainly, when I came back and saw what happened because you don't visualize. You see it but you don't visualize it when you come back to the emptiness. And I said, "What is this all about?" I was first fasting on Yom Kippur in Auschwitz, but I haven't fasted since I came back. I don't feel guilty. I talked to others a long time ago, we don't talk about it now and we do the same thing.

EL: Survivors?

B We fasted enough. We did our share and we don't want to fast. That's all. It's not that we're convinced that they don't have to do this. It's just bitterness. It will stay with us until the end.

EL: What would you say to future generations?

LB: Try to do everything so that it shouldn't happen again. That's why I am here. I will come because I can't take this... [Starts crying]

EL: I know it's horrible.

LB: Excuse me.

EL: We are grateful because I know how hard it is.

LB: It is very difficult.

EL: But I think it's important...

LB: It's very important that people should know what happened and that it shouldn't happen again because we allowed evidence and experience in our life. It's very scary. Very many...and it's very hard to see it going on again and fight again...

EL: Let's hope and pray.

LB: That it shouldn't. Maybe in modern society, it makes it worse and so many things available, you know what the other side is doing. That's the point. It will always be with us. And it will be very difficult. We try to lead a normal life -- every survivor -- but it's not the same. We just schlep. You do things and that's it.

EL: What has always bothered me is that the murderers are the ones who went back, so many of them, to normal lives...but not the survivors.

LB: But one satisfaction, I don't know if you want to hear it, it's not interesting...when I came back, from the concentration camp....Before we went, one man was bothering our parents, not physically but mentally, and when I was in Auschwitz, I always thought there was another reason why I had to survive, I thought that I would get even with him. When we came back, I asked my brother where this man was, and he said that he's in a good place, the Russians took him. There was a place, called Oswego, and they took them and fed them, and made them sick. The Russians know how to torment people, just like the Germans. He found there was no available medication, you couldn't get penicillin, just all primitive. In our store, we sold what was available to see, to eat! And the drugstore didn't have penicillin, but we had it. This woman came by. Her husband was dying and she needed penicillin. I was there when she came in. My brother and cousins knew about it. He said that it was good he was dying. A lot of people died. We needed the penicillin for the people who came back. They are sick. And he died. That one thing is satisfaction. He couldn't be free again.

EL: So, at least it was something?

LB: It felt good at the time that if he was terrible. I had to take over and I didn't want my father to get sick so I had to go out. My brother wasn't home. I had no regrets. I couldn't hurt anyone but I could do that. With pleasure.

EL: Well, I really thank you, for giving me this.

LB: I wish I could tell you some better things. We survived and we lead a normal life...we call it normal. I have a very good husband who takes all the trouble with me and I have a son who is nice and we have grandchildren and we try to enjoy what we have. That's all we can do. Life is for living. A normal condition...you have to go on living.

EL: I know it's so difficult to go back to this part of the past, it's better to do it now.

LB: I never want to see a film that is so dramatic, I want to see comedy. I want every minute of my life to be cheerful because I had so many deterrents in my young life.

EL: It's totally understandable.

LB: Yes, and not exactly only in camp, but before...before Hungarian occupation.. .

EL: Just your total life...

LB: The Czechoslovakian government was okay. But before, we had a wonderful life: freedom like here. You pick the school of your choice if you have the money to pay for it. It was

wonderful people. It was mid-Europe. It's different. It was East Europe. There were always problems. We didn't know anything. My great grandfather ordered a move in Czechoslovakia, it was from Poland...they came from Poland. Naturally, I don't know how many generations down. But we didn't experience me growing up -- absolutely nothing. The only thing that we experienced when we visited Hungary...we knew there was more--

EL: Antisemitism?

LB: Obviously, it was tight and there were a number of scholars in school. All the Hungarian Jew students were studying in Prague. The children at the university.

EL: One of the greatest tragedies was what happened to Czechoslovakia...1938...1968...and today there is horrible repression.

LB: Horrible, and there is no Judaism there. There are 5000 Jew survivors there, altogether, and two and a half are closet Jews, 2500.

EL: Yes.

LB: And Hungary is the same. We were in Hungary and it's the same thing there. There are just a few Jews and that's it. That's it. Hungary is better. It's more cheerful and the government is sort of stable, and very communist. But they are leaning, sort of. The synagogue, there are a lot going to the synagogue and remodeling the synagogue. The government is contributing for the remodeling of the synagogue. How much money there is from contribution, they match it. It's a little bit more cheerful there but it's not the same. But there was always a shadow, always a shadow. But we knew it because we weren't there. Who didn't go there didn't see it. As a child, it was...It is because it smelled already, the antisemitism...from the First World War. In Hungary, because all those, since the King Franz Josef died...then it was just history we learned. It is fading all away. It was a long time ago when I went to university.

EL: Well, thank you.

LB: You're welcome. I hope they get good use of it.

Conclusion of Interview