

Time-coded notes of Interview with Felicia Brunner
November 24, 1985

Felicia Brunner is a survivor of the Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen camps as well as a work camp at Salzburg. She was deported from a Ghetto near the end of the war, in 1944, with her parents. She lost both parents upon arrival in Auschwitz and her entire family perished in the Holocaust. Although she managed to survive, she remains very angry and bitter, towards the Nazis and towards the world.

0.00.36. Felicia Brunner was born on June 18, 1925 in Poland in a very industrial city. Her home life was very nice and charming. Her family was rather well-to-do thanks to her father's business. There were seven kids in the family. Her mother was a housewife. "It was a way of life that I don't have anymore."

0.01.36 Aside from herself, no one in the family survived; no one died a natural death.

0.01.46 When she thinks back on her childhood, she thinks mostly of her mother (she begins to cry). She still cannot talk about her mother too well, without crying. She remembers that on Friday nights, her mother would light the candles and hold her hands up to her face. She remembers how beautiful her mother's hands were.

0.02.25 She went to a private Hebrew school. Her formal education did not last too long because the war. She was fourteen when war broke out.

0.02.42 She first noticed a change after returning from a summer at her sister's house in Kraków. There was an anger towards Jewish people. When she arrived in October, German soldiers were pushing Jews to the side, separating them from the crowd. As Jews had dark hair, and looked different from the Polish people, the Germans were able to spot them immediately.

0.03.35 She was afraid; most Jews were scared. All of this was occurring in the month of October, 1939.

0.04.00 Her family still lived in their apartment in the city. There was no talk, at this time, of moving to a Ghetto though many around them were trying to get away. These others thought that a designated zone would be safer. Her two brothers left. Her dad's business was already closed so no money was coming in.

0.04.45 There was a restlessness and a fear among the Jews. Felicia remembers seeing her father cry when her two brothers left. Up to that point, her father had always seemed an imposing figure--a businessman.

0.05.14 She was afraid when she first saw the Nazis. From this point on there was no freedom of movement, though there was no hunger yet. She was very afraid.

0.05.42 She does not remember being aware of any antisemitism before the arrival of the Nazis. But, she says that her young age and her Hebrew School sheltered her from this. The first

symptoms of antisemitism that she did notice occurred when the non-Jewish domestic help that her family had hired left them.

0.06.16 Her family lived in a section of the city concentrated with Jews.

0.06.26 They eventually had to move to a Ghetto. They brought only a few possessions because the transportation systems were very poor. Whatever they could carry by hand, they brought. They made several trips.

0.07.06 They were eventually closed into the Ghetto. In the Ghetto, life was very hard. Children had to start work at a very young age. She made German straw boots and had children working under her. These children were between 10-11 years old.

0.07.49 The Jews in the Ghetto felt that their survival was directly dependent on their productivity. If they worked hard enough for the Germans, they would survive. There was hardly any food to speak of. At one Passover, the meal consisted of one frozen potato, to be shared among four people.

0.08.21 Her family was dispersed by this time. There was just herself, her younger brother, and her parents in the Ghetto. One sister was in Kraków when the Ghetto closed; one brother was in another part of Poland. People just went wherever they could in order to survive. She felt very responsible for her parents.

0.08.44 She had to get up very early to go to work. Because she had a far walk, she got an extra ration of soup, which she brought home to her parents. Originally, she worked inside the Ghetto, but later, she worked outside.

0.09.17 The distance was very long. She had to be back before curfew. Sometimes, she would arrive home late, to find her mother waiting and worrying that she had been taken to a labor camp. In order to save her mother the anxiety, she would always try to make it back on time.

0.09.58 The Nazis were beginning to deport from the Ghetto. At times, they would close a certain section and come with weapons to take away the older people and the very young children. Such measures were always done in sections (a few streets at a time). Eventually, Felicia knew that they would reach her street. Her parents would be considered "old" and subsequently deported. When the time came for the Germans to "close" her section, her family moved, under the cover of dark, to another section, one that had already been "closed". She had an uncle who lived there and they all moved in with him until the sweep was over in their section. Lots of people were hiding out there. On the first night, she heard crying coming from the next house. She later found out that the Nazis had come that night and asked for the children. The father had gone into hiding, so there was only the mother and children. The mother hid the little boy and gave the little girl over to the Nazis. The little girl was screaming. The mother had given the girl in order to save the boy.

0.11.42 When the dad returned and asked for the little girl, the mother told him what she had done. He started to scream and cry. Felicia begins to cry, nearing the end of the story. She thought that it was terrible that a mother had to surrender her children.

0.11.55 The years in the Ghetto were hard. She had typhus. Her brother was eventually taken away--he was fourteen at the time; she was sixteen.

0.12.30 One day she was standing in a vegetable line. When it became her turn, she arrived at the stand only to see a big sign, in German, that announced that the Ghetto was going to be disbanded. She ran home; everyone was scared because they did not know what this would mean.

0.13.01 The Germans soon announced that they were going to liquidate the Ghetto. The young would be sent to work camps and no one should be afraid.

0.13.25 Felicia feared that if she was deported, her parents would starve. Therefore, when the Germans ordered everyone into the central courtyard, she hid herself under a large wardrobe. Her parent went into the courtyard.

0.14.00 Shortly thereafter, Felicia, still in hiding, heard the sound of people returning from the courtyard. She ran to the stairs, thinking that her parents would be among the returnees. She could not find them; people asked her if she was ashamed as the Nazis had taken her mother and father while she hid. Felicia became crazed with worry and managed to climb into the last wagon leaving the courtyard.

0.14.35 The wagon arrived at the train depot. There were many cattle wagons standing on the track. Felicia went to find her parents and asked a German officer for aid, explaining that she had come to the depot voluntarily to find her mother.

0.15.02 The officer knocked on each door of each wagon to find Felicia's mother. Finally, she heard her mother's voice. It was August, and very hot, so her mother was sweaty and tired.

0.15.36 (Felicia begins to cry) The German officer ordered a man out of the wagon so that Felicia could be with her mother. There was no place to sit, so she sat on the floor and supported her mother with her back.

0.16.00 The train was very slow-moving; it was filled to capacity. People were trying to get a little water out of a common bucket. No one talked much.

0.16.30 Time passed--a day, a night? She can't remember. She looked out and saw barracks. It was Auschwitz, though she didn't know that at the time. The train stopped. The doors opened, and prisoners began to grab suitcases. She fought with them, but eventually gave up.

0.17.00 She held her mother, who was weak with exhaustion. They moved closer to the gate. A soldier ordered them to separate: she was young and could walk; her mother was old and would get transportation. For a moment, Felicia thought that sounded plausible; she released her

mother. Then, she turned back and thought, "God, in Heaven, what have I done. I promised myself never to leave her."

0.17.28 (Felicia is crying at this point). She turned back to grab her mother, but the soldier waved for her to go on. She could no longer see her mother because the crowd was getting thick. She knew that she would never see her mother again. She could still see her father; he called to them from the distance, but she didn't answer.

0.18.06 She arrived at the camp toward the end of the war, so there was no time for them to be tattooed. (It was August, 1944). She was in Auschwitz long enough to lose her parents.

0.18.47 Asked about the ovens, she replied that she had heard of them, but she could not comprehend them after losing her mother.

0.19.00 She felt that the war would be ending soon. She felt responsible, as if she had betrayed her mother. She tried not to think of it, of how scared her mother must have been.

0.19.30 She was very numb. She did not care about herself. She remained in Auschwitz for two weeks, then moved to Bergen-Belsen. She does not know why she was moved--it was pure chance.

0.20.00 She stayed in Bergen-Belsen through the beginning of winter. They lived in tents deep in the woods. The conditions were very primitive. Food was scarce--they were always walking with their heads down low, searching in vain for food.

0.20.36 The starvation was unbearable. Later, she learned that people were eating corpses. They were all very skinny. The tents did not keep out the cold--a wind would lift the tents. There was no protection, but somehow she survived.

0.21.02 From there, she went to a working camp. The guards were mostly German. There was limited contact between the guards and the prisoners. At Bergen-Belsen, there was minimal contact with anyone; the little rations of food would arrive in wagons and people would just lick it up.

0.21.35 At the work camp, Selzfrid (sp?), there was a munitions factory. The camp was surrounded with German people.

0.22.00 There was a garbage pit where the prisoners would try to find rotten potatoes and peelings. Felicia was nearsighted. One time, she was searching for food, unaware that she was being watched by a Nazi guard. This guard later kicked her around, until she fainted.

0.22.35 Most of the guards whom she encountered were SS women, though there were some Czechoslovakian female guards at the Auschwitz camp. She could understand them a little.

0.23.05 At Auschwitz, there were also Slovaks who cut people's hair. She is unsure of their status--but they were in a better position than most prisoners.

0.23.20 She knew that it would all end, even while in the Ghetto; she hoped that the U.S. could come. Her mom used to remind her of the U.S. intervention in World War I. After her parents' death, she didn't care about the war or about its end. In Auschwitz, she could hear the bombs dropped from the Russian planes. She would become hysterical--happy and sad at the same time. She no longer cared about her own death, but she wanted the planes to kill the Nazis. That was her main wish--that the Nazis suffer and die like they had forced others to do.

0.24.18 Liberation occurred around Passover. There were religious women who always knew how to figure out the time.

0.24.32 One morning, the gates all opened. The SS men and women disappeared. People ran out into the streets. The U.S. Army entered the camp.

0.24.54 She was in the hospital for a while, recovering physically.

0.25.11 She remains very bitter. During the war, German kids would spit on the Jewish prisoners and call them names. At the end of the war, the children waved white little flags at the prisoners. To Felicia, they were "hypocrites". After the war, everyone said "we didn't know." But, Felicia recalls the image of the German children who knew.

0.26.02 Felicia bitterly calls the Germans "notorious liars." She does not trust them.

0.26.30 The first days following the Liberation, the Americans told the prisoners to take whatever they wanted from the German stores. But, as the prisoners were too weak to move, most of the looting was done by German civilians. Felicia went to a jewelry store. It was full of Germans, looting. She just took a knife (she laughs at this memory)--she didn't know why--she just took it.

0.27.07 She asked for directions back to the camp and returned there. Eventually, the Americans burned it down. She was placed in a hospital--areas became zones, placed under national jurisdictions, first British, then Russian.

0.27.29 She was back in Salszag, in a hospital for displaced people. She didn't go home (to Poland) because she had heard a warning that the Poles were killing all the Jews who were returning to find family or to reclaim properties. A Rabbi told her not to go back.

0.28.00 She later found out that this rumor was true. The Polish people were killing Jews. She calls the Poles a good right-hand of the Germans. She tried to trace her family through the Red Cross. The youngest brother, who was with her in the Ghetto, died in Buchenwald, of starvation. He was moved there from another camp on the eve of the Russian liberation of the first camp (Transnau?) One sister, the one with the baby, was gassed. Another sister and the youngest brother were found in hiding by the Nazis and shot.

0.29.00 Two brothers had disappeared after being sent to Wieliczka. She tried hard to find them, but could not. She had witnessed the fate of both her parents.

0.29.42 She remains very bitter, not only about the Germans and the Nazis but also about the war, the U.S., about the countries that abandoned the Jews.

0.30.00 She says that the Jews gave the West their civilization, the Ten Commandments, their Jesus--what more does the West demand of the Jews? She thinks very often that the Jews must be very careful and watch for any symptom of antisemitism.

0.30.30 She lost faith in the human race and in God. Why did God let this happen to innocent people, to children?" she thinks. She reasons that there must be a God, for without one, the world would be a terrible jungle. She figures that God must have lost his battle with the devil, Hitler. She calls Hitler's followers the devil's disciples, along with those who accuse the Jews of killing Jesus.

0.31.12 She says that the Jews are crucified over and over again. She does not believe in the existence of ten just men in the world.

0.31.20 She is angry that they (the World) let the mad dogs (the German Nazis) do what they did. These latter now live in prosperity and remain unpunished. This is what hurts her most.