

TARNOFF

Interviewer: Where did you come from?

Aileen: I was born in Tarnoff, Poland...raised in Chamich, Poland.

(It was difficult to understand these names, so this is my best attempt at what was said)

I: When were you born. What was the date?

A: June 20, 1922.

I: Where did you go to school?

A: I went to school in Chamich, graduated from high school the year of the war, 1939.

I: What was home like? How was the life? How were your girlfriends? How were your freinds? Tell us a little bit about your home.

A: When I look back it was happy, carefree. Um, comfortable. I have a sister, mother and father, household help. Vacations in summer, vacations in winter in mountains. My parents used to travel abroad. My father was a well-known Zionist in Poland. He has travelled to Israel since 1933, even bought some property there. He was a delegate to the Zionist Congress in Switzerland, Warsaw. When I graduated high school the plans were for me to go to college in Cambridge, England, where my father had business associates. Unfortunately this just never worked out.

I: What kind of business was your father in?

A: He had electricity and plumbing installations for, construction for buildings.

I: Could you remember one of the most cherished memories from your childhood?

A: Probably visiting with my grandparents in Tarnoff. I was the only granddaughter among all boys and of course I was pampered and very spoiled and these were just wonderful memories.

I: You said you have a sister.

A: Six years younger and I always treated her as my baby.

I: When did it begin to change for you? When did you find out any changes with your girlfriends? Did you feel any antisemitism in the time when you went to school.

A: I personally did not because I went always to private school. My last two years of high school there was a new school built by Jewish friends, starting from grammar school, going all through high school, and this is where I graduated from, was a Hebrew private school. However, the reason I was going to be sent to college abroad was because colleges in Poland definitely discriminated against Jews. If the students were accepted many times they were hurt, there were incidents where burning matches were thrown on their clothes, they were called names, they were beaten or they were simply not admitted. My father was a member of the City Council, the only Jewish member of the City Council, so in turn we did

have many Christian friends in the city. We used to invite them for Jewish holidays for them to learn our customs and we used to sometimes celebrate the Christmas tree at their house.

I: So you did not really feel any changes, any anti-Semitism personally?

A: Not personally, I knew of it, but I never felt it personally.

I: How about in town. Could you tell us what happened in town? Do you have any recollection?

A: Yes. I did have friends who came from definitely a Jewish section of town where the population was very orthodox and many times there were stones thrown after them if they waded into any other parts of the city. Businesses, the windows were broken in their stores and incidences like this.

I: So your family wasn't Orthodox, your family was reformed?

A: No, conservative.

I: Conservative, okay, so you belonged to a conservative temple?

A: Yes.

I: What happened to your family? When the Nazis first came in, when did they come in and how was your encounter with the Nazis?

A: The war broke out September 1, 1939 and we had packed our belongings into one of our cars, one of them was donated by my patriotic father to the Polish army, and we all started moving southeast towards the Romanian border to escape the advancing Nazis. In about two weeks that part where we were was invaded by the Russians and we had spent almost a year and a half under Russian occupation. We moved back to our town. Our father never come back because he was politically involved, being a Zionist. He was afraid of the Communists. He would have been persecuted. I went to college...

I: Under the Russians..

A: Under the Russians and then the Russians and Germans, (my history is very mottled at this point) had some kind of a pact or agreement, I could not find it in the history book, where the Russians moved back and the Germans came in. We were in Voofe (again, this is my best interpretation of what city she was saying), in Lemberg, in the bigger city, not too far from Charnich, and this is where we first encountered the Nazis.

I: Well, keeping the history, getting the history straight, when the Russians went back and the Germans came forward, the war started between the Soviet Union and Germany. That's how it happened.

A: I know but, um, then second time, the move was, I absolutely could not find it in history book and I cannot remember exactly when that happened. It must have been in...um...1941?

I: Correct. That's right. 1941, June. The Germans advanced into

~~Voofe~~ verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.

A: '41, right. Voofe. I just could not remember exactly.

I: The war started between the Soviet Union and Germany.

A: and Germany, that's right.  
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I: So now, you were living the time in Voofe.

A: We were living in Voofe. My father worked for the Jewish community and speaking fluent German, he was a good mediator for both sides.

I: So when did you see your father again? I mean, you said...

A: We moved to Voofe eventually to be with him and that's when I was united.

I: When the Nazis came to Voofe in 1941, what were you doing there? What was the family...

A: I had to quit school and I just stayed home and helped at home because my mother was so frightened of the Germans. When she heard the boots on the sidewalk she was shaking. She never went outside, so I did all the shopping and tried to keep house and we had a small apartment and my father had made papers that we were exempt and nothing was ever going to happen to us, which was not so because when they announced the so called "action" and they were supposed to form a ghetto in Voofe, um, we went into hiding and my mother stayed home.

I: But before we go on to that. There is a time between. The action was in 1942 and there was a time from 1941, what neighborhood did you live in in Voofe.

A: We lived in a Gentile neighborhood. There were other Jewish people.

I: In the Gentile neighborhood?

A: In the Gentile neighborhood. Our landlord was a Ukrainian man, but he was very friendly to us and very friendly to my father.

I: Was your father at the time the Jewish Unirach (once, again, this is the way it sounded to me as she said the word) in Lemberg too?

A: Yes, yes. He went to work everyday.

I: He went to work, but was he the Jewish Committee, the Unirach? He was an official of the Unirach.

A: Yes, yes.

I: That's why you stayed where you were.

A: Right.

I: And you did not work at all during that time?

A: No.

I: Okay so then the action started and you just went shopping. The whole family was together.

A: Yes.

I: And you did not work.

A: No.

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A: And your mother did not work.

A: No.

I: But your father was working.

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I: And he was an official of the Unirach.

A: Yes.

I: Now, next, when did you feel personally persecuted?

A: Well, when the announcement came, well, I'm sorry, I skipped something...

I: Okay.

A: When the Germans first came, I could not get used to wearing an arm band and I was young and very impatient and of course when I wanted to take a seatcar I just simply went into a doorway and took off my arm band, and I was caught and put in prison for three weeks. Now the two Polish young men who denounced me...

I: Yes..

A: Were carrying gold coins or something. When they were searched we were all brought together, they too were imprisoned.

I: Also.

A: Also. While this does not make anybody happy to see this, however, there was a certain satisfaction.

I: What prison were you in?

A: In Lemberg.

I: Okay.

A: There was a guard who was an Austrian older man and he used to bring me food and also he carried the message to my father and so my father started working on paying somebody to get me out. And in three weeks, just before I was in jail when Pearl Harbor news came and he had brought me a piece of newspaper and put it through the hole where you look through in the door?

I: Yes, yes.

A: With the news of Pearl Harbor 1941 and in about three weeks a young man came and he said 'I will take you home'. So he brought me home. I don't know, whatever my father paid.

I: Yes, who else was with you in the cell?

A: 60 other women.

I: All Jewish women?

A: No, prostitutes, everybody from all walks of life. Some Jewish, some older, young. All women and we were marched out for meals, water with one potato, one piece of dry bread, black coffee.

I: Were you ever beaten or mistreated?

A: The only time if I did not move fast enough or came out of line or some such thing. We all had to, whoever was stronger, had the place to sleep otherwise you almost have to either sit or stand. The cell was very small. There was not room for all these women.

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I: Was anybody able to get out, before you? From the 60 women?

A: There were some women taken out. But to this day I have no idea

why or where.

I: And then you after three weeks you were taken out and you went back home.

A: I was brought home by this man.

I: And now you were doing the same thing like shopping.

A: I just stayed home and helped my mother.

I: Stayed home and you were wearing your arm band.

A: Yes.

I: From that time on. Well now lets go. When did you first have any persecution of the family? When was the family separated or how did you escape and withdraw? Were you in a concentration camp?

A: No. Labor camp as an Arian, as a Polish...

I: How did you get there?

A: Uh, in August 13, 1942, they announced that the ghetto was being formed and all the Jews will have to leave and so the German trucks and police went through the city practically coming from house to house and my father sure that my mother was safe having the certificate that he was with the Jewish community and working. Um, we had some friends, Jewish men married to a Polish younger woman, was a second marriage, the son was about 20 and they had a small baby and they also had a nurse, a Polish nurse, taking care of the baby. They had all kinds of connections, where to hide, where to make papers, very much into this. And so they found the place for me to hide and the night of the 13th I went to someone's apartment, one room apartment where I was supposed to just sit quietly so noone would know I was hiding there. My sister went, this was a man's apartment, some guy's apartment. My sister went to the nurses friends house but my mother stayed home. But the next day, it was so severe they had really went door to door. The man got very frightened. He came and opened the door and said 'off you go'. Um, I remember walking practically throughout the whole city, walking home. Noone bothered me.

I: Without the arm band?

A: Without the arm band. Noone bothered me and at the same time, when I came home my father was home looking absolutely terrible and he said mother is gone. They had come to the building and mother had gotten all dressed up in her best clothes, jewelry...and they had taken her away and the landlord had gotten into you know, a horsecarriage?

I: Yes.

A: And went to the Jewish Community building to tell my father. After I came home, maybe half an hour later, the woman brought my sister home. She was also afraid. My sister was just very young then. Maybe 11 or something. We didn't want any neighbors to know that we were home. We were not sure if we ever were coming back or not. Anyway, when my father found out, he tried to go and look for my mother but he couldn't find her and my sister was really hysterical. We had to hold a pillow over

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her head so she wouldn't scream, and the next day we had gotten in touch with these friends with the nurse and somebody came and in two days we all had papers made out and I brought them with me. They were authentic papers from the churches that no longer existed, so my name was Aileena

Kuvswaska (best spelling I could determine), my sister was Geswava Kuvswaska. Our father was became Mr. Volak. He was our uncle, and we had split up. My sister and my father went to Warsaw. I went to Tarnoff, because we had communicated with my aunt and my one uncle. By the time I came to Tarnoff my uncle was gone and one of my aunts' husbands was taken away also and they found me a place with a very old lady who took me to church with her every Sunday. I wore a chain with a Madonna and everything. Um, after a couple months, neighbors...it was an apartment like in a courtyard where you didn't have to go the front way or something...but people started wondering. She never had anybody there and all of a sudden she was walking with somebody. You know, also shopping maybe more and so it got very uncomfortable. So I went to Warsaw. I took a train to Warsaw and the nurse met me. They had since also moved to Warsaw. The whole family and they had found the place for my sister and I to live. The woman was a beautiful young woman. She was a prostitute and she lived with her pimp. I never understood what really went on. They had a beautiful very modern apartment and of course for money it was no problem. Um, she had told me I should bleach my hair and she told me how to do it. So I did it by myself and then somebody came to visit. I wrapped a towel around my head and we sat around coffee and when they left I went to wash my hair and my whole hair came off. Maybe an inch was left. It just got burned off completely. So I was like a white hair platinum blonde with practically no hair. But I used to...we would go out and just mix with the crowds and everything. Then my father got a job with the German distillery near Warsaw.

I: As a Polish man?

A: As a Polish man, as a bookkeeper. Being bilingual and a good bookkeeper and he used to come and visit us every week when he had the day off. Um, I had gotten a job in a German jewelry store and it was wonderful because I was paid and I was so secure. I just thought nothing could ever happen. Until two young Polish men must have been watching me coming and going. One day they followed me home and said that I was Jewish. Well, I said no and all this and they of course wanted money. It was simply blackmail and I said I didn't have any but I would get it the next day and of course by next day, we had to look for a place to move my sister and I. We moved to an apartment of a wife of a Polish officer who was in Russia as a prisoner, and of course the lady needed money so she you know, took us in and I no longer went outside. However, she had, um, two grown children, and they said that she shouldn't keep us. They were afraid. So, she gave us other names and in the evening I went to a couple places to look and then I found another wife of a Polish officer who was

with Anderson's army. He was at the time in England and she came to the door in a Warsaw that Part of Warsaw had electricity for the two weeks and then the other part another two weeks. This was a blackout because there was not enough power. So she came to the door with a candle and

she looked at me and she said, 'I think that I would like to help you'. You know, so the next evening my sister and I moved in there and we stayed with her, her son and daughter-in-law, for almost a year, until the Warsaw uprising, and we never went outside.

I: Never went outside?

A: Never went outside. Only when we had to. She fed us and we called her mother, she was wonderful.

I: Did you pay her?

A: Yes. Yes we paid and my father used to come and bring Vodka.

I: But although you paid her she risked her life.

A: The risk was...yes...definitely, but I would say that we were truly fond of each other. We were very close with her daughter-in-law and her son. By the way, her son was caught on the Warsaw street because he looked Jewish and he was in Auschwitz. He came home practically crippled because he was hanging and the dogs bit the flesh out of his legs. He had terrible wounds., and so they were very sympathetic and you know, and also we stayed friends throughout and after the war.

I: Now you stayed with her until the end of the war?

A: No until the Warsaw uprising.

I: Until the Warsaw uprising. Now, what happened during the Warsaw uprising? Not during the ghetto uprising...you were out of it.

A: No, I was out of the ghetto, and saw the feathers flying in April all over Warsaw that looked like snow because the windows were barricaded with pillows.

I: Yes, so now you were then on the Polish side and the uprising was the Polish uprising.

A: Yes, the Polish uprising, um, we just simply moved on to the best and my father made his way by foot and he came so we were all together. Part of our building was...a German tank came and not knowing who was hiding or where the shooting came from, just knocked off the whole corner, and all the corner balconies from the whole building. (Which I went to see by the way, in 1975) When finally the Germans had taken over Warsaw, the uprising, the Polish underground was defeated. We were all separated. The couple and my sister and I were together and put on a cattle train with the doors locked. We travelled for about three days or whatever. We ended up in a labor camp near Schwerin, Leuberg, somewhere in that area, and my father and the young man's mother went to Krackau. Through their family we wrote to them from camp and found my father. I still have postcards that he wrote to camp to us. Now, by the way, I started growing out because I was blonde and did it every week so nobody

could ever tell. So however, my friend who was the young man who looked more Jewish than we did, I guess people started talking in camp...

I: That he is Jewish?

A: That he is Jewish. So he and his wife asked for a transfer and they went to another camp, maybe like 30 kilometers away or something. We were building an airport for German army. We were laying cable, digging ditches and that's when we experienced a lot of physical abuse because we were really not prepared and not strong enough. This was fall and winter...

I: Of 1945

A: '44, and it was cold and wet and we would wear blankets tied with a rope and it was hard to move around and we slept under those same blankets and we often were kicked or beaten.

I: By the guards?

A: By the guards, because we just...

I: Who were the guards?

A: German guards.

I: Just German guards?

A: Just German guards because this was a government project.

I: Gestapo, SS, who were the guards?

A: SS. Then our camp was being rebuilt and prepared to take prisoners of war, so they built towers with the lights like a concentration camp would have. We moved to another camp and we landed a wonderful job. We were cleaning German barracks. So it was my sister, myself and another Polish young woman. We ate well and we had to be clean. So they tried to delouse us as much as they could, you know, we were allowed to wash our clothes.

I: What about your hair?

A: Well it was half and half. By then and I remember helping this German, the director of the camp. His name was Thompson and I will never forget the name and I don't know why a German would have that kind of name. He had a girlfriend who's name was Claire, and they would, when they went to their office and I went to clean, they would leave something for me to eat. Maybe something sweet, like even maple syrup in a bottle and they said to drink it.

I: So they tried to help.

A: So they tried to help. I had the feeling that he knew. I don't know why.

I: With all the other Polish people that you were with, had he ever suspected that you were Jewish?

A: It might be, but you know, the rumors at that time were already that the war was going to come to an end and the armies from the East were moving. So at this point we were not as afraid or maybe as cautious.

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I: Did your father look Jewish?

A: Yes and no. He had a long nose like I do but he had green eyes and



lightish brown hair, a lot of silver.

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I: So when were you liberated then?  
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A: Uh, we were...just before we were liberated, my friends stole two

bikes. No, something else had happened. Our camp was close to a forest that had, um, a munition storage under the trees in the forest and an English spitfire came over, not knowing what was in the train and shot the train and blew up the whole train, and the camp was levelled except we were like the only ones that survived. Us, the people that were for the German barracks, cleaning. If I show you my papers, they are burned, the edges are burned because I found them in the ruins.

I: We will look at the papers and then...

A: Right after that happened, my friends stole two bikes from their camp and they came to be with us. We just simply waited to be liberated. Mr. Thompson and Claire got in the car and they did say goodbye to us and we hugged and we kissed and they left. It was just like total disorder, and we were liberated by Americans.

I: What month was that?

A: April.

I: 19...

A: 45.

I: So you were the whole winter in the camp?

A: Yes, yes, between the two camps. Before we transferred and then in the other one.

I: So, you and your sister were in the camps...

A: Together.

I: And your father also survived?

A: Yes. He was in Krackau and then he went to Prague.

I: And where did you meet him?

A: We had a terrible time finding him because we sort of lost...when we were liberated, I would say it was a nightmare. I never saw anything worse organized than the American army. They didn't know what to do with us. They decided since we came from Poland, we belonged to the Russian zone. We did not want to go. They put us on the truck. They shipped us to the Russian zone. Wherever we came, we just got off the trucks and started walking. We did not know where we were going to and we encountered many Jewish people who were marched out of camps and of course they couldn't make it so they were either shot or beaten or whatever. They were just laying across the road with the flies on their bodies. Nightmare, really a horrible experience. We found another American convoy and we talked them into, I spoke English, and we talked them into taking us back to American zone and then when we came back we transferred to English zone and finally we had gotten clean clothes and

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Some food and a place to live, in the English zone. The Americans...an American officer came over on the motorcycle to us and asked us

questions. I was the translator, and said we came from Poland and this and that and he said, <sup>http://collections.ushmm.org</sup> do you have any papers? So I have a 50 dollar bill that my father gave me when we separated. I also had this diamond. I did

not wear my diamond, I was going to show you but I was afraid to take it on the subway today! I had my mother's pin, her engagement pin that had survived in my raggedy coat. It was sewn in the corner of it. So these were the two things I had so when I opened the papers to show him, he grabbed my 50 dollars and drove away! I just can't to this day forget this. After all we've been through and you're looking to your liberators.

I: So he grabbed the 50 dollars?

A: He grabbed the 50 dollars and drove away. We were in the English zone for probably two or three weeks and we were flown with the first transport to Belgium and we were sitting on the military plane, sitting on parachutes.

I: As Jews?

A: As Jews.

I: Who did that, the American flying?

A: No, the English Occupational Forces, but then we came to an American joint in Brussels, and of course then it was, 'What nationality are you?' 'I am Polish'. 'Aren't you Jewish?' You know, we went through all this and now, I didn't have any proof. All my papers were gone.

I: I don't think you needed proof! So they didn't believe you?

A: So at first we really had a hard time getting back, to be what we really were to begin with.

I: So how did you meet your father?

A: Um, we wrote to, again to Poland to the family where they had a big, like a gentleman farm, big farm...and my father wrote to them and our letters met, so we found him and from Brussels, before we came to the States to the family here, we went to Prague to visit my father.

I: So, did he come with you to the United States?

A: No, we came, and the quarter was closed. The Polish quarter was closed which was the most ridiculous thing when you have all these people homeless people, and the quarter was closed. So we and some other Polish friends, there was a whole group of us, in Belgium, had found out that you could go to

Brazil and you could get a transit Visa to just visit in the

States. So we sincerely wanted to go to Brazil, because we thought we could make a fortune there, after the war, but we had gotten a transit Visa to come through. But my family wouldn't let us leave when we arrived. So I came first and then I got married in two months.

I: In the United States?

A: Yes. Not in two months, in five months, and then when I became a citizen in two years, then my father came. He in the meantime has lived in Prague, in Paris and then Israel. He came from Israel.

I: So you are one of the very few lucky ones that survived, mostly intact. You lost your mother but your sister stayed intact and so you are a very lucky lady...

A: That's true.

I: One of the very few.

Aileena Wintergreen came from what seemed to be a well off Jewish family. A family in which she was happy, comfortable and found stability in her relationships with her parents and her younger sister. Her father worked on the Jewish Council in her home town of Chamich, Poland. Aileena was housed in a gentile neighborhood, sent to the best in private schools for her early education and planned a college career in Cambridge, England. What had once seemed to be an untouchable and perfect life was turned around violently in a wave of hardship.

Aileena's neighborhood was invaded by the German armies in the early years of the war. Forced to separate, Aileena and her sister went off to unfamiliar households, while their mother and father stayed at home. The years that followed marked a series of unsettling moves from place to place in an attempt to avoid capture by the Germans. Life continued this way until the year 1944 and the approach of the Warsaw uprising. Quickly the Poles were defeated however, and consequently, Aileena and her sister were shipped off to labor camp, once again becoming separated from their father. It was at this point that personal hardships and abuse were experienced, yet never was death faced.

Liberation came when the camp that Aileena had been transferred to was accidentally blown up by an unknowing English soldier. The camp was ruined and consequently, American soldiers came in and rescued the prisoners. Throughout this time period, Aileena remained with her sister. Weeks later they were reunited with their father and a move to the United States followed shortly. Two years later, Aileena and her sister were joined by their father in the States. While the whole experience was a trying one, Aileena was considerably lucky. The only major catastrophe was the capture of her mother. She was never seen again.