

Summary of Oral History: Oral History Interview with Hannah (Chana Kastan at birth) Weiss

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This Summary was written by a USHMM Volunteer on [05/2022]

Hannah (Chana Kastan at birth) Weiss b.11/23/1938 raised by loving paternal grandparents during the week and by her parents on the weekends when they were off of work; at age 4 ½, her parents deported late Feb 1943 Fabrikaktion; Hannah shares family stories handed down of how she was saved and a NY Herald article 9/2/1947 supporting one of the stories; German family friend (member of Nazi party) gave grandfather advance notice of roundups so they knew when to hide; Hannah shows German ration stamps (Jewish mark Jude); since Hannah's mother was a Gentile and her grandparents looked young, a family friend was able to obtain papers citing Hannah as their daughter so she could obtain ration stamps; neighbors were aware that Hannah was posing as her grandparents daughter, and teasingly threatened to inform the Nazis so her grandparents organized hiding places even though she had papers; Having several different hiding places depending on the threat, moving every 6-8 weeks; 1944, memories of air raids, sirens, bunkers, bomb striking close to home blowing out windows; Apr 1945 liberation, Mongolians entering, one holding gun to grandmother to give up leather coat since he was cold; Hannah shows yellow Jude stars they were required to purchase, sew to clothing; Russians enter bunkers raping women in revenge for what Germans had done to Russian people; witnessing a German woman who also spoke Russian diffusing a Russian officer threatening to kill everyone in the bunker, upset because his fellow officer had been killed by a snipers shooting from houses; emerging from the bunker, Hannah describes bodies everywhere on street, entering other bunkers, stepping over bodies; witnessing Russian pouring gasoline on a 13 year old German soldier, setting him on fire alive; recalling some Germans cheering that the war was over; photograph of parents: father (electrician) deported 1943 age 29, killed 1945 death march from Auschwitz III Buna-Monowitz Block 4; throughout the war, the family believed that their father was alive since a Polish woman had mailed letters from 1943-1945; father's friend John Fink provided for Hannah, after her father had been on Berlin's 34th Transport deported 3/4/1943; Mother (Sonya age 29) had been in Auschwitz-Birkenau with sister Lula (age 22), they do not know how she died; heavy burden Hannah feels from later hearing she could have been cause of mother's death since mothers with children were often sent straight to gas chamber; 8/1941 maternal grandparents taken to Auschwitz; after war, none of paternal grandfathers' ten brothers and sisters returned; father's sister (age 22) had an abortion because she didn't want to go to workcamp pregnant, died from unsafe abortion, abortionists were known as "angel makers"; mother's three brothers immigrated to the U.S. 1939; learning that her father died in a death march on 1/18/1945, from the butt of gun crushing his skull before being shot; Fall 1945 grandmother had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized; grandfather feeling he could no longer live in Germany, applied for immigration in 1946 with the assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; Hannah held German documents declaring that she and her grandmother were victims of fascism; shows other documents, letter written by US Army Chaplain Herbert Freidman 6/1946 requesting milk for Hannah, immigration papers 7/1947 to Bram, deloused; fares on Marine flasher transport ship, sea sickness but people were happy; ebullience in landing at New York, 8/3/1947, seeing the Statue of Liberty; being housed at Hotel Marseille 6 weeks; first memories of US, her first bubblegum, happiness, "new life" in NY, learning English, experiencing ice cream cone, automat; The Joint transferred Hannah and grandparents to Chicago, feared going there because of Al Capone's reputation, grandmother got cold feet and wanted to return to Germany but grandfather rejected.