

Time-coded Notes for Oral history Interview with Ben and Bernice Muler 1986

TAPE 1

Bernice`s Story

4:00:37

Bernice was born in 1925 by the name Braha Fogul (known as Bronia) to an average Jewish family and had a brother and sister, they all lived in Tomashov Poland, 90 miles outside Lublin. She splits her life in to 4 stages, the first being her childhood in the public school, prior to the Nazi invasion. She describes the neighbourhood as average with not much antisemitic feeling. Prior to the invasion she was hoping to become a teacher and had no real knowledge of the horror that was awaiting her.

4:03:20

With the arrival of the Germans to Poland Bernice begins the second stage of her life. Because of political agreements the Germans pulled back and allowed the Russians to occupy that area in Poland. This was a short lived stay and when the Russians were about to move, her family together with others were advised to leave with them because of the atrocities that the Germans were committing. People were given only 20 minutes to pack up and go, which caused many to stay especially when they either did not believe the atrocities or felt that the war would not last long. It was not until the concentration camps were built that more Jews understood the real ideals of Hitler.

4:07:30

2000 people including her immediate family and some of the neighbours left in army trucks bound for Russia to start the life of a refugee. Out of the 12000 strong Jewish population in the area only three who stayed behind remained the rest including 150 of her parents families did not survive.

4:08:58

Everybody including groups from other areas went to a sort of school to stay, Bernice and her family stayed in a small hut with a dirt floor for six months. She was 14 her sister 16 and the brother 19 who also got work on account of the father being in his sixties, and she with her sister delivered bread. For reasons of border closures they were told they could no longer stay there and could register to live in any city they chose, their mother chose Odessa.

4:11:35

In January 1940 they travelled by rail packed in twenties into each "cattle car" and after 20 days of travel (no matter where they had registered to go) they arrived at some wood cabins by the Ural mountains, close to Siberia. Conditions were bad during the trip but not like that of which others had experienced by the Nazis. For a year they lived there where everybody's chores, if over sixteen consisted of forest clearing, Bernice being younger just cleared snow from around the huts.

4:13:25

The following year her family moved to a city where she attended eighth and ninth grades in a Russian school, and out of 1100 students Bernice was the only foreign and Jewish student. In

school she learnt the Russian language and kept up with her fellow students thanks to their help at times, so all in all she was kindly and fairly treated by her peers.

4:14:19

With the escalation of the war, at sixteen she had to go and work in a factory for twelve hours a day, one week 7-7 am, the next 7-7 pm. Her brother was sent to a labour army about 200 kilometres away, and after her father's death she and her mother got permission to go and see him. Bernice makes a point of saying how good and helpful the Russian people were to them.

4:16:10

Bernice and her mother went to (ph)-Sunza (town over which the U-2 was shot down) where her brother was, and worked there in an office job. The winters were cold and times were hard, the only good thing was that Bernice met Ben there, later husband Ben, who on their third date promised to take her to America one day. This was the beginning of a new stage in her life.

TAPE 2

Ben's Story

5:00:18

Ben Muler was born in Vilnius Poland and had a sister and a grandmother. Both his parents worked, his mother in an office supply store and his father was a co-op printer and printed newspapers. After the seventh grade Ben went in to newspaper printing as well and kept up with the news of the rise of Nazism. The rise of antisemitism in the thirties was clear, not only locally but it was also visible in the escalation of German Jewish refugees arriving in Poland. In 1939 with the split of Poland between Germany and Russia, life for Ben would no longer be the same, thankfully however, his area went to Russia, and given to Lithuania as its historical capital.

5:03:06

The Lithuanians immediately were highly abusive of the Jewish population, to the point where the Jews asked for assistance from the Russian army, and by 1940 the Russians helped calm matters on the streets slightly.

5:03:35

In 1941 the war between Russia and Germany began, with the bombing of the city of Vilnius, resulting in numerous civilian deaths. On the second day the Germans were close to town and some of Ben's friends suggested he join them and leave before matters got worse. Ben attempted to convince his family to leave with him. His mother would go if it were not for his father, who was not willing because he thought he would not make it. She would of liked to see his sister who had left with her husband, on account of him working for a radio factory that was completely relocated in Minsk. Ben's mother packed a bag for him and asked him to bring back his sister after the war was over, which would probably only last a couple of weeks.

5:06:51

He and his friends left for the actual Russian border 120 kilometres away. On the road they saw numerous people killed, including friends, by Lithuanian snipers who were happy to shoot fleeing Jews. When they arrived at a town called (ph)-Osmiany they saw a Russian army convoy retreating and decided to split up in an attempt to catch a ride, and agreed to meet again in Minsk.

5:08:02

Ben jumped on the back of a kitchen trailer. When it stopped and he got out, he was confronted and asked to show his papers. When he was found to be in order the driver fed him and told him to find his way to Minsk because he was obliged to stay there. After arriving in Minsk he met his friends and slept the night there.

5:09:30

The next day they went to the train station where all the refugees from all parts were being mounted on trains bound for the Ukraine. All ten and the girl arrived there and stayed on a collective farm. Ben was by now nineteen years old.

5:10:01

At the farm they worked until the Germans were getting closer and were told to leave for they did not need to stay there any longer. At this point their clothes and shoes were torn and the farm had no more to give them.

5:10:29

Ben and his friends made it to (ph)-Koibishov by the river Volga and got on a boat bound for the Ural mountains. They had no food with them and the boat had no food to give them. Luckily Ben talked to some soldiers who shared some of their bread with them.

5:11:37

On arrival at (ph)-Orsk by the Ural mountains Ben worked at a factory. Ben tells a horrifying story of thirty families mainly women. They were all from Ben's home town and had fled in 1932 from the rise of antisemitism and crossed the border to Russia with their families. On arriving in Russia, they were all arrested and sent to that town. A day later all the men were taken away, out of which only one returned and never said what had happened to the rest.

5:12:41

Ben was later drafted in to the labour army and sent to work cutting timber for a copper mine. They had no idea how to do this and as a result two people died in the process. The conditions were terrible, 63 below, they had to work every day. This was the hardest time in Ben's life.

5:13:37

They were then sent to build from scratch the biggest smelter in Russia. Here times were hard but the Russians treated Ben well. Ben met Bernice's brother there, who had been drafted to the same army, and after her father's death when she came over, he met her for the first time. They then started to court each other.

5:14:38

Until late 1944, when soldiers started returning, they had no idea of what was going on in Poland, and the Russian government only started publicizing events in 1945. The only correspondence he had was from an aunt in Mississippi who promised to go and take him out of Russia and bring him back to the US.

5:15:36

They were dreaming of going to the US but they hoped to go back to Poland since they still held Polish citizenship. They only were sure of the end of the war from people celebrating rather than a government announcement. This was their sign that it was time to go home.

TAPE 3

Ben & Bernice Together

6:00:21

Bernice and her mother went to find her brother at (ph) Soms where at a New Year's party they met, became friends, and finally fell in love. There was an agreement between Poland and Russia that would allow Polish citizens to return. After a year, in 1946, they were finally able to return to Poland.

6:01:21

When Ben's home town was liberated, at the end of the war, he applied to return to his town to see if any of his family had survived. He found no one, but at the central Synagogue where all the letters ever sent were collected. He found five letters from his sister who apparently had moved deep into Russia close to the Afghan border. Ben also met a cousin of his who told him of what went on there for the last five years and described how his parents were rounded up and sent to separate concentration camps.

6:02:46

His mother was sent to a prison and all she had with her was an album of the family, which she looked at constantly till she went mad. The Germans then shot her on the spot.

6:03:19

He met some people who were with his father in a camp in Estonia called (ph)-Clug. There people caught typhoid fever and so, together with his father, were rounded up and burned alive. Also ten uncles and aunts were gone and nowhere to be found. A broken man, Ben then went to find his sister. He found and spent some time with her and then returned to Bernice and her mother and brother at the Ural mountains.

6:04:55

After meeting his sister, Ben told her they would meet back in Poland, because it was not possible to stay or travel together without proper papers. Ben then travelled with Bernice and her family by train, under similar conditions as on the move from Poland. Only now it was summer and they were given some facilities and provisions.

6:05:53

Bernice's uncle, who was the only other member of her family to survive because he also fled to Russia, put them up for a while until they got their own apartment. Conditions were not good, because of the (ph)-Pogramen Keltz and Ben who only had a sister, was still adamant on going to America.

6:06:37

Ben had promised to take Bernice to America and since she had no relatives in America they had to go through the underground. The Jewish underground helped them cross the border illegally in to Czechoslovakia, Austria and then Germany. In Germany they went to the "P Camp" Displaced Persons Camp, where he got in to contact with his family. In these camps they were treated well even if the food was not quite adequate.

6:07:31

Here everyone was in limbo waiting to go primarily to the US, or Israel, then still Palestine. Here they met people who told them of the true horror stories, which made them realise that they had gone through practically nothing in comparison to others, relatives and friends.

6:08:08

It took three years and four P Camps for them to resolve the problems, and get through the red tape. A major problem being the Germans who had infiltrated the camps impersonating Jews so as to get out. In the mean time they had a son named Leon born in the P Camp at (ph)-Deigendorf.

6:08:51

On Oct.14th 1949 after finally getting their permits, they arrived on USS General Hershey into the port of Boston.

6:09:25

After visiting a relative in New York they went on to a small town in Mississippi. Here he finally got a job in a newspaper where pay was bad, but with time he got better paying jobs in printing and ended up in Dayton Ohio where they had a daughter and still reside in to this day.

6:13:41

The hardest thing for them was that they had no relatives for their children to enjoy while growing up, but at least they had a happy ending to their ordeal, and wish that others had the same.