

## **Summary of Oral History Interview with Lucy Cripps July 1990**

Lucy Cripps was born in Vilna in 1922. She comes from a close-knit Jewish family and had a brother 3 years older and a sister 6 years older. Her father was a salesman for leather goods and her mother was a housewife. Their grandparents always lived with them, and they had a happy home. She went to Public School where the language was Polish, at home, they spoke Yiddish and Russian, so that she was fluent in three languages.

In 1939, the Russians took over and for seven months, the school language was changed to Russian. Then, Vilna was given to Lithuania and the language changed to Lithuanian. In 1941, the Germans declared war on Russia and came there 10 days later. There was a lot of bombing but there were no shelters. Laws changed every day, there was a curfew and many restrictions. They had to wear a star first on the left side, then on the right side and finally on the back. All Jewelry was confiscated by the Germans. They started to round up people on the street, at first mostly men, who were allowed to take along only soap and a tooth brush. They said the men were going to work but were never seen again. Once, they came to their building to look for Jewish men but her father was hiding and luckily was not found. Six thousand were taken from the old ghetto to a nearby resort place and shot. One woman escaped from under the dead bodies, but nobody wanted to believe her. On September 6th, everybody had to go to the ghetto and they could take only little clothing along. There were 16 people in a room without beds and they stayed until October 1943.

Life was very difficult. She worked 12-hour days at the airport to shovel snow off the runways. Her sister was a nurse in the ghetto. There was little food. She was not afraid to go outside the ghetto, although she was easily recognized as a Jew because of her black hair. (Polish people were mostly blond.)

When the Jewish holidays came, the Germans took the older people and said they would go to a nursing home but instead they were exterminated. People with money were told that they would be taken to a safe place. Although they believed the Germans, they also were exterminated. Once while trying to smuggle potatoes into the ghetto, she was stopped at the gate by a guard who said she looked just like his wife and wanted her as a model for a fur coat. It was a particularly scary experience.

In September 1943, they were taken to a working camp where they were divided: 4000 for work while the others were sent to Auschwitz. She managed to keep her sister with her. The father had died in the ghetto in 1942. They were taken to Riga, Latvia, in cattle cars, 60 persons per car, to Kaiserwald camp that had not yet been finished. There they had to go to showers, which was frightening, because they had heard about the "showers" in other concentration camps. However she always felt confident that she would survive. She had to work particularly hard to do work also for her sister who was much weaker.

Once, 35 women, including her and her sister, worked at the railroad in a group of about 250, and few people from Riga survived. They had to repair bombed railroad cars. Railroad workers stayed in, so that they did not have to go to the front. They had to organize to get some food.

Once, 8 men were caught stealing cigarettes and were hanged in front of the others. At the beginning of 1944, the Russians approached. They were evacuated, again 60 to a car, traveled around for about a week, and finally taken to a "small" camp near the Baltic Sea where altogether 85000 people were killed. Only a few got back to the working camp, where they were badly treated by the SS. About 450 were moved around between several camps and ended up in the previous camp where many people had typhus and 200 died there. Those who were still able then were taken on a ship with a yellow flag (contagious), there was no food and many were dying. Near the end of the war, the British tried to bomb an adjacent German ship but hit their ship instead. She was injured and her sister was sick. The ship with the few survivors run aground at the beach, and the SS guards escaped. Then they found a lot of food in the Cargo space of the ship but many ate too much and died. Later, the SS came back and tried to blow up the ship but were prevented by the British. Survivors were taken to a hospital.

The first English soldier she saw was Frank Cripps, Who had come from Germany, and later (1953) became her husband. In 1946, through some people in the hospital, she located her brother who had joined the Foreign Legion. She joined him in France in July 1946 and came to the United States with her husband in 1954. They have a son, Stephen, who now is a lawyer in Florida.

She always talks about her experiences and believes it is a mistake not to tell. The events of the war are hard to believe even for herself, and she stressed that everybody should know. Such a crises could happen again, but she hopes that it will not.

In various camps and witnessed some horrible atrocities. At the end of the war she, her sister and some survivors were taken on a ship and eventually rescued by the British. The first English soldiers she saw later became her husband. She also found her brother again who had joined the Foreign Legion.