

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Interview With Simone Schwartz  
Richmond, Virginia

Simone Schwartz was born on September 8, 1927 in a town 80 kilometers from Vilna, Poland. It was a town of about 5,000 inhabitants, half Jewish and half Gentile. Simone was the youngest of four girls; she also had a younger brother. The family was not rich, but they were comfortable. Her father owned a shoe store, and they had a cow which provided milk and cheese. There was always plenty to eat.

She went to public school in the mornings and Hebrew school in the afternoons. She remembers feeling different because children did not go to Hebrew school, only she and her sister. Jews were called "Christ Killers." She did not know what that meant, but her mother once explained it to her when she was eight or nine years old. Still, she has good memories of her childhood; many friends and the forest nearby was very pretty.

Her father was very concerned about what was happening in Germany, it was in all the newspapers. Jews being expelled from professions and institutions. In 1939, the Russians invaded Poland. ("The Russians came to us.") She did not think the Germans would invade. German-Jewish families, refugees, fled to her town and told of what was happening.

In 1941, the Germans invaded. She remembers a lot of noise, nazis using shouting and beating people, saying: "Damn Jews, we're going to kill you all." The first day they took six young men and shot them. Simone saw this. One of the young men was a friend of her oldest sister. (This sister had previously gone away to college.) They were not buried, they were left lying in a ditch. Everyone had to put on yellow arm bands. There was no school, everyone was ordered to stay at home and not to walk on the sidewalks. They were warned never to go near the windows. A lot of people ran to join the partisans in the forest, including her middle sister who was fifteen years old. She was killed right away. At one point, a Polish family offered to hide Simone and her remaining sister in their attic and take care of them. But they were very attached to their parents. Her mother said no.

They remained in their home a few weeks. She remembers soldiers knocking on their door every night and making her and her sister stand outside and undress. They were beaten but were not raped. The first time this happened, her father ran out the back door and spent the night in the streets. The soldiers looked for him. He came back in the morning, and that night when the soldiers returned, they put a gun to his head and warned him not to leave. The soldiers demanded what ever her family had; they were looking for gold. They beat her parents because they didn't have anything. There was a lot of looting. Polish people who she thought were friends broke into her father's store and took everything.

A few weeks later, the Germans, using loudspeakers, told everyone to gather their belongings. They were going to a ghetto. For hours, people stood outside being counted. At the ghetto, she, her mother, father, sister and brother shared two rooms with another family. Her oldest sister was in another city. When the Germans invaded, the Russians took everyone away. Her sister spent the entire four years of the war in Russia. Her father became very sick. They asked for medicine, but were not given it. Her father died in the ghetto. There was no funeral. They obtained a horse and buggy somehow, and had to take his body themselves and throw it in a hole. There were no rituals.

They were treated worse than dogs. There was no food. Every day people were shot. Once they were told to walk for hours to a little town. They walked a whole day. Anyone who fell down was shot and kicked in a ditch. Then they walked back. They were in the ghetto for four months. They lived with hope because over the radio they heard that the Russians and the Americans were not far away. But after four months, they were taken to a concentration camp.

They had to walk for days to get to the train station. Again, anyone who fell down was shot. They were pushed into cattle cars, pressed in like sardines. It was very hot and dirty. There was no food or water for days. A lot of people died on the trains. They were thrown out by the nazis while the train was moving. She remembers some people trying to escape by jumping off. They were told they were going to work and that if they obeyed orders they would be okay. She didn't really believe them, but life was so precious, she wanted to believe.

They travelled for days by train to Riga. They were given a shower, had their head shaved, and given a two piece uniform, with white and blue stripes. She wore this the entire four years; it was filled with lice. After they were given uniforms, they were taken to the barracks. Simone slept on the top bunk, her sister and mother on the bottom. Her brother was separated.

They were given pieces of bread. You had to hold onto it because the inmates were so hungry, they stole it. Her first piece of bread was stolen. But from then on, she ate it right away. At night, they had "soup." It was mostly water. Every day, people died of starvation or were killed. If one person tried to escape, ten people were killed and everyone had to watch.

Simone survived many camps: Riga, Plaszow, Stutthof, Stuttgart, Kaufering(ph)(near Dachau), and Bergen-Belsen. In Bergen-Belsen, she saw piles of bodies, as high as three stories. She worked on a farm near Bergen-Belsen and always found something to eat; a potato, a beat.

One day in Stuttgart, they were counted for hours. Her mother was taken away on a transport and her brother was taken away on the next one. She was told that they were pushed into the sea. Simone

told her sister that this was the end. She cursed the day she was born. At night they pushed into another train, there beatings and screaming. They went to Kaufering, a small camp for girls. She didn't believe she would survive. She was very weak and dirty. But there, the soup was better. She worked on the railroad tracks for two and half years, unloading and shoveling gravel. She was able to find some food in the trash cans. She and her sister were beaten for it but the beatings were a way of life. There were two roll calls a day. They stood for hours in wooden shoes and were beaten.

There was an SS man there who said she did not look like a Jew; she had blond hair and blue eyes. He said she was a pupya, a beauty. When he was on duty, he did not beat her. Once he gave her bread. An old German Jew was the cook. He gave her a better portion of soup, and said that if they survived, they would marry.

She saw many shootings in the camps. The bodies were not burned, but thrown in ditches. (But in Bergen-Belsen she saw the smoke.) She never made an attempt at escape because she was inside electric barbed wire fences. And people were killed if anyone tried to escape. The inmates slept on straw and were awakened very early by loudspeaker. They had to go outside for roll call, and then had to line up again for bread. They had to look straight ahead, never to look someone in the eyes. If someone got sick, they were pulled out and killed. So you never admitted if you were sick. After eating, they had to line up again, in the cold, until they were told to go back in the barracks.

The Germans always told them that if they lost the war, they would all be killed. But one day, at Bergen-Belsen, they woke up in the morning, but it was very quiet. No one was shouting. They waited until two or three o'clock in the afternoon before they came out. They were afraid to come out before that. On the loudspeaker they heard a voice telling them they were free, to come out. But no one believed it. They were liberated by the British. They came in the barracks and disinfected them and gave them food. The British took them by trucks to a cleaner camp. They were told they were free and could do whatever they wanted, but Simone did not know what to do.

Her sister begged her to go back home with her, to see if anyone survived. She did not want to go back. Her sister went, and met a man there. They were married and had two children. Five or six years later they moved to Israel.

Simone met her husband at Bergen-Belsen. He came to find his sisters. She knew them. After only a few days, he asked her to come with him and she did. They were married one year later.