

HELEN DREKSLER ZIMM

Helen Zimm was born in 1924, in Lodz, Poland. Helen was the oldest of three sisters. Her father owned a soap factory. After the Germans attacked Poland in 1939, they took over all Jewish businesses. Helen and her family fled from Lodz to Czarnow, a town between Lodz and Warsaw. In 1942, Helen's father heard that the Jews in the town to which they had fled were to be deported to labor camps. He then bought false papers for Helen and her youngest sister and remained in Czarnow until liberation in 1944, when she returned to Lodz.

Name: Helen Zimm
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Jewish Community Federation of Richmond
2 Tapes

- 1:01:00 Helen Drexler Zimm. Born in Lodz, Poland in 1924. Lodz was the second largest city in Poland. It was very vibrant and cultural. Her parents names were Regina and Solomon, and her sisters are Nanna and Harina, both of whom survived the war. She lived a very carefree life in Lodz.
- 1:02:00 Her family had a soap factory. They were very well off, and they even had a telephone. She attended a gymnasium (high school).
- 1:03:00 Her father was a very modern thinking man, and he believed that women should be as well educated as men. She attended a private hebrew school that had very few women as well. She had many friends. They lived in a very Polish section of Lodz.
- 1:04:00 She remembers seeing signs around 1939 that said "Don't buy from a Jew." She was very spoiled as a child, and her life was cut down by the war "like when you cut down a rose."
- 1:05:00 The war broke out in September 1939. She could no longer go to school. Announcements were made by the Germans everyday. Every Jew had to wear a star, and she felt ashamed wearing it. They were not allowed to go out at night. It was very dehumanizing.
- 1:06:00 Her father said that they should leave Lodz and run from the Germans to Warsaw. He left the store to the maid.
- 1:07:00 They walked to Warsaw. The Germans were bombing during the day so they kept having to hide. She remembers seeing all of the dead bodies around them. They walked for days, and rested at night.
- 1:08:00 One night it was extremely silent, so they figured something was wrong. The Germans approached them and said that all Jews had to be killed. All of the men were arrested.
- 1:09:00 They took civilian prisoners, and one was her father. The family returned to Lodz without him. They found her father's name on a list when they returned, and saw that he was being held in Krakow.
- 1:10:00 Since she was the oldest child, she was sent to liberate him. She brought his birth certificate and got

him out. They did not really make a fuss about letting him go. When they returned to Lodz he told the family that they had to leave because it was getting too dangerous.

1:11:00 Across the street from her home lived a German. He was one of the Nazi favorites, and would have had many rights after the war if the Germans had won. The Germans began to liquidate all of the Jewish businesses and they became poor overnight.

1:12:00 When they went to Czarnow, they were broke. It is located between Lodz and Warsaw.

1:13:00 They went from affluence to an apartment with one room and two beds. Her parents were in one, and she and her two sisters were in the other. They started making soap in the apartment.

1:14:00 Her mother would sell the soap for necessities, like food, although they often went to bed hungry anyway because of the war.
1940--The Lodz ghetto was erected shortly after they left.

1:15:00 They were forced to wear stars of David, but it was better than living in a ghetto. They stayed in Czarnow until 1942. Times were bad, but they were happy to be together.

1:16:00 Her family received letters from family and friends saying that they were being transported from the ghetto to labor camps. Her father couldn't believe that they were killing the Jews, and said that he would do anything in his power for his children to survive. They had a lot of family, like grandparents and aunts, in Czarnow with them.

1:17:00 The Germans were very organized. They went to all of the larger cities first. This brought people from outside of Czarnow in, and a typhus epidemic broke out because there were so many people crammed in together.

1:19:00 Times were very hard, but she still dated and went out. The Germans set up a Jewish center. Every day, the Germans sent out Jews to camps to do work for them, yet they were sent back home at night.

1:20:00 1942--Times got very bad. They had Jewish friends in the police force who told them that Czarnow was going to be resettled, and they would be going to labor camps in two weeks.

1:21:00 Her father panicked because he knew that meant that

they were being sent to their deaths. He thought that they should pose as gentiles, which meant blonde hair, blue eyes, and very little body language.

- 1:22:00 Her father bought three phony birth certificates for his daughters, but he was never given them. He knew that he would never survive the war because if the Nazis stripped him, they would see that he was circumcised. He told them to never trust a Pole.
- 1:23:00 Her father knew a lot of people, and was very open-minded. He would have sent her to live with a man if he had to. He knew a woman named Mrs. Kaszusczyk. He told her that he would pay her for her daughters' birth certificates.
- 1:24:00 She was a righteous gentile--she was paid a little money, but she risked her life. One night she came with the two certificates. They were for the oldest and youngest daughters, because the middle one looked too Jewish.
- 1:25:00 The next day she was supposed to come to pick up the two girls, and take them to her mother's house in Warsaw. She said good-bye to her parents, and knew that she would never see them again. Her father said, "You are going into a very hostile world. Beware of people and try not to trust the Poles."
- 1:26:00 He also said not to reveal her identity because were very bad, and people would do very bad things. "Remember, I have a feeling that you will survive because you are strong and brave." He also told her to remember that she had two aunts in Toronto, Canada. If she survived, she should contact them, and she did.
- 1:27:00 They went with the woman on the train around Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Her father gave them a little money tucked away in their coats. The Germans were always doing things on the holidays to defy the Jews and their God. The woman took them at night because they were scared to death of being recognized. She was shivering cold.
- 1:28:00 The next day they arrived in Warsaw at the woman's home. She was poor and lived in a small home. The four of them all slept in one bed, and there were bed bugs so they scratched all night. One night they heard a knock on the door and it was her middle sister. She walked in and told them what happened to her parents.
- 1:29:00 When they rounded up all of the Jews on a Monday in September, the Germans went into all of the homes and s

shot whoever was still in them. One woman had a newborn baby and they shot it.

- 1:30:00 They were told that they were going to work. Her father, mother, sister, and another couple decided to defy the Germans, so they never went to the market where everyone was, but hid out in a barn for two nights. Someone heard voices of two boys grazing their cattle. The boys called the police to tell them that Jews were there.
- 1:31:00 The police took them out, but her father was well known, and the police knew him. He begged the police to spare his daughter and take him, but they let them all go.
It was getting colder in Poland, and the days were getting shorter.
- 1:32:00 They decided to go and hide in the forest. He thought that they might be able to join a band of partisans, but they couldn't find them. He was cold and hungry and it grew dark when he realized he had lost his wife. He began to cry and call for her, but she had probably gotten sick and couldn't go.
- 1:33:00 He had to continue. He met a survivor from Czarnow in the forest. She was on her way to Warsaw, so he asked her to take his daughter with her to her sisters. She had the address of where they were.
- 1:34:00 She helped her find them. Helen was very thankful that they were all together, but told them that they should split up because it wasn't safe. They each had to find their own destiny. She was the oldest, so she felt responsible for them.
- 1:35:00 The woman they stayed with found Harina a job in a store, and the other sister got a job working for a Polish policeman. She couldn't stay in Warsaw because the girl whose information she had was also in Warsaw, and there could not be two people with the same identity in one city. She was frantic.
- 1:36:00 She went to the train station and went knowing that the partisans were coming to sell eggs and cheese and things. She went up to a woman that seemed nice. She made up a story about her father not wanting her to work for the Germans but for the Poles, so she left the city.
- 1:37:00 She also told the woman she could help her because she knew how to make soap. The woman seemed interested, and Helen thanked God for looking out for her. She told the train conductor that she lived in Warsaw, so when

she heard the name of that town, she got off.

- 1:38:00 When she got off the train, the woman was gone. It was Christmas time and she was cold and hungry, and didn't know what to do. All she had was her birth certificate.
- 1:39:00 She knocked on peoples' doors and asked to come in as Nasha Kaszusczek. No one would take her in because they feared someone would tell the gestapo about her if she went to the sheriff. God was always looking out for her when she least expected it. She saw a light in the distance in a store and went in. She could no longer speak, she just cried.
- 1:40:00 She begged for help in the name of Jesus Christ. She asked if she could help the woman with her children and food, and the woman felt sorry for her and let her in.
- 1:41:00 For the first time in months she had a bed, without bed bugs, to herself. She was very grateful to the woman. She took care of the kids, cooked, and went to midnight mass.
- 1:42:00 She stayed for a few months, but she wasn't needed after Christmas. She was very upset, but the woman promised to help her find a new place to stay.
- 1:43:00 She remembers the second woman. She was an old seamstress and was poor, but shared what little she had with Helen. She ate so little that she didn't even menstruate. She had to go to a doctor to find out what was wrong.
- 1:44:00 After a few months, she left and went to a new home. The people were very well off, and the husband was a butcher. The woman was very friendly, and they had a baby boy. They lived on the second floor.
- 1:45:00 She had to get water from the well each day and bring it upstairs. It was very hard for her, and it gave her back problems, but she had no choice. She stayed from 1942 at least until the end of 1943. One day she got terrified.
- 1:46:00 She could not reveal anything to the woman about her identity, because she was taught not to trust Poles, and she would endanger both of their lives by doing that. She always suffered in silence. Her sister lived next to the Warsaw Ghetto, and she used to go visit her often. She was heart broken when she saw other Jews behind a nine foot brick wall and barbed wire, and her heart went out to them.

1:47:00 She realized how lucky she was. She also visited the middle sister who lived with a polish soldier and had a miserable life. She took Nanna back with her, and asked the woman to give her "cousin" money.

1:48:00 Her life was a struggle in Poland, because people seemed to recognize that she was a Jew. One day later on she came to Helen and the lady didn't like it. She went to Warsaw and, like a miracle, saw a sign that said "go with us to Germany."

1:49:00 She urged her sister to go because it would be easier for her to go unrecognized in Germany. She went to find out more about it.

1:50:00 She was interrogated and then accepted to go, and was very grateful to her sister. She lived for her sister's letters.
One day, the woman Helen worked for told her that Jews who had been hiding were discovered, and would now have to dig their own graves. Helen got shivers.

1:51:00 Poles hid Jews, and the Jews gave them their possessions in return. When the possessions ran out, the Poles turned them in to the gestapo.

1:52:00 After staying with the lady for a while, she heard that the Russians were liberating many places, and Lublin had already been liberated. She went to Lublin, went to the employment office, and asked for a job. She said she wanted to be a governess.

1:53:00 She found a job working for a professor in a wonderful family in a beautiful home. They were very nice to her.

1:54:00 She was taking care of the boy. She was very well-liked by them. She told the professor that she was born in Lodz and wanted to go back.

1:55:00 On Sundays, when she was supposed to be in church, she went looking for other Jewish people. She found out where some of them were staying.
One day, when she was taking the little boy for a walk, she heard an announcement. It said that a terrible thing had happened to the people who had survived the Holocaust who had been in gas chambers and death camps. They had been killed in a polish pogrom.

1:56:00 She heard that Lodz was being liberated. Her younger sister found her, and she left the professor, and together they went to Lodz.

1:57:00 The first thing they tried to do was see who else was still alive. They went into a Jewish center to find

information, and they found that their other sister had survived, but no one else.

1:58:00 She got very sad when she thought about how terribly her family died, and it still haunts her. How tragic it must have felt in the gas chambers, and then they went to the crematoria, but she knows that you cannot live in the past. It is very important to go on. She found her sister and some of her friends, and stayed with her friends in their home.

1:59:00 She got a job in a prominent Jewish business, but she did not type, even though she learned how when she lived with the professor. She did very well working in the department store, and met many Jewish people working there.

2:00:00 Liberated in late 1944, but there was no literal liberation.

2:01:00 She was very happy to be back in Lodz. She practiced Judaism, but was not very religious. She remembered what her father had told her.

2:02:00 If she survived, she was supposed to get in touch with her aunts.
She worked in a very luxurious store that sold dates and nuts and chocolate. Her sister met her husband Alan while working there.

2:03:00 Helen wanted to get out of Poland because she felt like it was a prison without bars. She remembered what her father had said: to put an ad in the Jewish paper that the daughters of Regina and Solomon Drexler were alive. Like a miracle, her aunt read the magazine, saw the letter, and sent her a telegram.

2:04:00 They said that they would get them out of Poland and to Canada. She would have married someone while she was still there, but he was a communist who wouldn't leave Poland, and she refused to stay.

2:05:00 Alan, her brother-in-law, knew some people, and they helped she and Nanna get smuggled out of Poland by boat at night to a D.P. camp in Berlin. Jews had no place to go, although some got smuggled to Palestine.

2:06:00 She and her sister stayed in one room, slept on one military cot, and lived on food rations with some help from joint distributions.

2:07:00 Helen got work, but her sister didn't. A lot of people were there, and many things were going on then. They even erected a monument to the six million who died.

She would often go to the movies---Jewish people love culture. In Berlin, she always loved movies.

- 2:08:00 They had very little food, but a lot of hope. They stayed there until 1948. The Russians made a blockade in Berlin. Americans had to liquidate their camp, and they took them to another american D.P. camp.
- 2:09:00 She flew on a plane for the first time. There were some gorgeous americans on the plane. The second D.P. camp was worse because there were even more people than at the first one. She kept in touch with her aunt the whole time.
- 2:10:00 They stayed in the D.P. camp until July 1949, when they got visas to Toronto, Canada. She felt free for the first time. She felt like a new born person. She stayed with her aunt and cousins for a month or so.
- 2:11:00 She decided to go to work again and learn the language. She went to school. She hated not knowing the language.
- 2:12:00 She met her husband, Saul, at her sister's wedding in Germany. He went to America in 1949, and she went to Toronto. He went to visit her, and they kept in touch. She visited her sister in 1952, and they got married the week she was there.
- 2:13:00 She was very grateful to this country because of her experiences. She has built a wonderful life and raised wonderful children. She gave them an education, which is the best thing you can do, and this country gave her the opportunity to do it. Her son is a very successful lawyer at 37 years old. Her daughter is married and lives in Cleveland, Ohio. She has a daughter named Rachel, and is expecting again.
- 2:14:00 Israel is very dear to her, and to every Jew, but she says especially to Holocaust survivors. If they had had Israel in 1939, six million Jews wouldn't have died because they would have had somewhere to go. In 1981, there was a gathering of all of the Holocaust survivors and she took her whole family. It was unforgettable because she took her children.
- 2:15:00 They were able to learn their history and the beauty of their victory. They survived the biggest atrocity of the world, and they need to know one thing: that they have to remember her painful legacy, because when history is forgotten, it is destined to be repeated. When injustice is done to one people, it is done to all people. The Germans began the war with the Jews, but it became everyone.

2:16:00 We must treasure Israel and shalom.

PHOTOGRAPHS:

#1: right--Mrs. Piasetzka. She worked for her and took care of her baby. "Good luck" is written on the back of the picture. She never knew her true identity.

#2: left--picture of the baby.

#3: picture of her mother's family. Mother in front on the left. All died in the Holocaust.