

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
PHOENIX, ARIZONA
ADLER, ELLA

Ella was born in Cracow, Poland in 1924. Her immediate family consisted of a mother and father and two elder sisters. Her eldest sister, Lilta (pj) was from her mother's first marriage and she was 15 years older than Ella. Then came her sister, Ida, who was three years older than Ella.

She remembers her place as being "the little one who always had to be helped". Her middle sister was the achiever in the family. Others helped her so much that she was not as independent as she could have been. She felt she was too dependent. She wished that her parents had developed more self-confidence in herself.

The children attended a public school which was close to their house, called a crezimyetsh (ph). It was a public school but she doesn't remember it being for non-Jewish children. The families in her area seemed to live in contact with non-Jews until high school. It was a very closed environment; it gave her the feeling of being at home that she also felt when she visited Israel. There were many orthodox families in the community; she would see many men with a beard, a strummel, piez, (ph), with white stockings, black shoes. Those were part of the scenery.

The family was Orthodox, with the principal influence being her mother. Her father would latefelling (ph) every morning but he did it mainly for the mother's sake.

Ella never met her grandmother or grandfather but her grandfathers was a very well-respected man. She has a picture of him; he looks very dignified. He was important in the community, he was a tsadc (ph) - a righteous man. He was a cohen; he sat next to the rabbi, he donated the Torah; he was a well-to-do business man; he had a textile business. He passed his business on to his children. His family name was Sirra (ph). His fathers name was Ebbinger.

Her father helped her uncle run the family business. She had a paper bag from the family firm that a friend saved for her. It is the kind of bag from the family firm that a friend saved for her. It is the kind of bag that would be used to help a purchase handkerchiefs; it must be over 50 years old.

The grandfather died when he was 45. There was a four story family house where several of the families lived. It was a close, happy, family. There was a courtyard and the cousins could play

together. Until Ella was 15 years old that was her whole life.

Ella went to an all-Jewish school until the eight grade. At that point she had contact with non-Jews for the first time. She changed schools at that point and had a 20 min. walk to school and began to see how beautiful the city Cracow was. One contact with non-Jews was with their maid who lived with them. During that first year at school she experienced some anti-semitic feeling with children calling her names, like "dirty Jew".

Ella described herself as "scholastically only average" with her older sister being a better student. Her sister had even gotten to the university level when the war broke out. High school was stopped two months after Hitler took over Poland. Some parents hid teachers in order to continue their children's studies.

Nazis issued orders that all Jews were to give up all their property. Her father was imprisoned and threatened with death as a tactic to make sure that all property was turned over.

After her father was returned, the Nazis took over the area called Kazimir (ph) and additional surrounding property and moved all Jews into a walled compound. This happened about 6 or 7 months after the invasion of Poland. At this point most of her extended family was within the compound. There were 3 or 4 families living together in one apartment. Conditions were very crowded and there was a lot of general animosity.

Her older sister had been dating a Christian boy and had felt assimilated into the Christian community. She had moved away even before the Nazis had taken over. She had gotten papers indicating she was Christian. She had dark hair but didn't look Jewish.

After about one year, her boyfriend's family denounced her as a Jew because they did not want their son to marry her. She was imprisoned and while in prison, made a pair of slippers and had them sent to Ella with a note asking for forgiveness of past wrongs. Later, Ella learned that her sister had been taken to Treblinka and killed there.

Life in the ghetto was hell. Every morning they could see bodies of women and children being carted away. There was no way to live; the rations were so little that people would starve. People had to stand in line all the time for rations. Her family survived at first because her father was required by the Nazis to go out of the ghetto to run his business, so he had a pass to get out and in and he would smuggle food in by bribing the guards. It seems that

perhaps as many as half of the initial residents of the ghetto died of illness and starvation in the ghetto.

Many mothers and children had no work permit and therefore had no way to get food. Her family would share their food, but not many people had anything to share. They ate beets, borscht.

Every few days a group of Nazis would go into an apartment and take away the women and children. The Nazis would throw small children into carts below the apartment windows, one on top of another. Parents were told the children were being taken to camps where they would be cared for but the parents did not believe that.

The winter was very hard, workers were required to shovel snow and because of so little nourishment, the workers would drop down dead in the snow. She feels she wouldn't have been able to survive that kind of physical demand. She was spared because she had a camp card saying that she worked but her father actually paid someone else to work for her. At the beginning of the interment, if you had a work card they wouldn't take you out and shoot you.

Ella had an uncle who helped protect her and her family because he was a leader in a Jewish organization which the Nazis instituted to help in governing the citizens of the ghetto. Jews who spoke German were needed by the Nazis because many Poles did not speak German.

The Jews who helped were put in uniforms, like a policeman uniform. It was intended that they would do the dirty work for the Nazis.

It was an awful position to be in. For example, the Nazis would tell these people, "tomorrow we will be coming into the ghetto and you will have to help us get the people and transport them out. The Nazis gave these helpers food and they were guaranteed security, given an apt. to themselves, given sticks.

Some of these Jews in the militia were mean and cruel; some seemed to identify with the Nazis and they believed that they would be the next to be killed if they didn't do their job. She found it hard to justify their behavior, "How could people help Hitler?" "How could they not know what their behavior meant?"

Her uncle volunteered for the militia and became the leader. It

distressed her a great deal. He had been raised with all the traditional values of his father. He took his work seriously, he was proud of his position. His uniform had medals. He was promised that if he followed orders, his family would be moved to Hungary (which was still free).

Many times it was the position of the uncle which spared her life. Many times the Nazis would come in and ask for a 1000 inmates and the Jewish militia would deliver them. It was known that her family was related to the Jewish commander and she would be pulled out of lines destined to be transported. The inmates would be gathered in the central plaza, the Appenplatza (ph).

Her uncle helped her mother who had had a complete breakdown at the beginning of the invasion. She became almost demented. Ella had to stay with her constantly. I was becoming ill with trying to care for her. They couldn't put her in the ghetto hospital, that was raided once a week and all the people killed, so her uncle helped his sister and had her put in a regular hospital outside the ghetto, however, after a point she was taken out and shot.

Her eldest half-sister also was in the ghetto with her two children and husband. When the ghetto was liquidated in 1941, Cracow was to be considered "Judenfrei" (ph) - free of Jews.

People were told to meet in the Plaza with any belongings they could carry. They were told "if you are a mother with children under 16 and you choose to go you must leave your children and they will be cared for". Her sister's husband refused to leave without her and her choice was to go or stay and be killed. Her sister thought that perhaps the children would be protected by the uncle. The sister and husband were taken to a concentration camp called Plasha(ph) about 20 miles away from Cracow. The children were never heard of again. There was also a cousin with a two month old infant who stayed in the ghetto and was killed.

She regrets feeling so hardened against that sister. She saw her once in a camp and refused to speak to her.

She and her father were marched with the others to a nearby camp set up on graves. Conditions were too bad to even be concerned.

There were 5 to 6 people in a small area with little food. Her father was sent to do hard labor; the men and women were separated. The worst part was the not knowing what will happen to them; they were in constant fear of being killed. The commander of the camp went around with a gun and an attack dog killing people

for no reason.

We were required to carry heavy stones from inside the camp and out again, repetitively.

There were about 500 women working in the field. Suddenly we were surrounded by about 50 Nazis with guns. We thought that we would be shot. The leader lined us up and went along selecting individuals to step out of the group; these women were then beaten unconscious over long tables.

All who had been selected to live were beaten. I was one of those and I remember the blood running down my back. We were forced to get up; we weren't allowed to recover. We had to go out and work the next day. Two of the women tried to escape but failed and the rest of us had to take turns hanging them again and again.

After about a year in the camp we were gathered to dig up a grave. This camp was both a labor and extermination camp. It was also used to kill some Germans who were rebelling against the Nazis, or Jews found hiding in Cracow.

There was no gas chamber so people would take off their clothes and they would be shot and then would fall into graves, even if they were not dead. Then the graves would be bulldozed over.

One day, the Nazis decided that they didn't want the graves to be discovered so the inmates were forced to dig up the graves and burn the bodies. The worst part was the stench - for a few weeks there was an awful smell.

Most of the men were shot or taken away (her father in 1943). There were children that were hidden. Some people would work with a backpack on that held a child, Also there were militia who had been allowed to bring children there.

One day we were gathered in a valley surrounded by hills. Any children that had been found in camp were taken and killed in front of the mothers while lullaby music was played over the loudspeaker.

"One day there was a fire on a hill, we heard that the family of Spira was being killed. That was my uncle and his family".

She was moved to Auschwitz in 1944 in winter. They arrived dazed, without food or water.

Mengele came in, he did the selection. It was clear which ones were being discarded. She was next to a young daughter, in the discarded section when the mother of the girl worked herself around to the window where her daughter was and told her to get out or she would be killed. Ella realized that even though she had no strength she had to go out of the window with the girl or she would also perish. It was a miracle that Mengele did not catch them. She feels she survived by not really accepting the reality, she just denied the horrible things that were happening. "She just followed orders and in her thoughts kept the memory of close, family times uppermost.

After three weeks at Auschwitz, she was taken to Birkenau, given meager clothes - not enough to keep warm in the winter she began to be ill. She saw her sister briefly, after about 3 years. It gave her hope and she saw her again at the end of the war.

She was part of a transport of 350 women who were sent to Freudentau(ph) which had a factory where they were spinning thread and making coats for the soldiers. She believes she was saved because of a German named Schindler who requested women from the camps be given to him to make coats. There was a book called "Schindler's list" and it was about her experience.

She worked in that factory for about 1 year. She was ill but protected by the fact that she was a worker and could not be shot without the permission of higher-ups.

Auschwitz was liquidated in 1944. At that time Russia had invaded Poland. She was in hospital and could not eat. Next to her was an infant taken from its Mother and left to die; they didn't even have something to kill the infant with. Terrible memory of that suffering.

They were liberated by the Russians in May. She was expecting to be joyous at that point was really afraid to be free. The Russians took her into homes and told her to take what she wanted but she took only a few things. She went to Cracow and waited for father but finally found he had been forced on a death march and had died.

It was painful to think that they had been killed and how they had died but she is happy she is alive to keep alive their memory. In Cracow, all their property was taken over by others, they did not want her to even go in the house and friends wouldn't return jewelry they had been keeping for her. She got a picture of her

mother and father and a pair of candelabra. She was ill and depressed and not able to work. She found an aunt who took her in. Many Poles were very anti-semitic and said they were sorry that any Jews had survived. She had to wear long sleeves to hide her number on her arm.

She married an old boyfriend who was good in languages and had themselves smuggled into Germany; he worked for the Americans. After a year of waiting they went to America. She didn't speak English and husband helped her but he developed heart problems and died after two years. She felt suicidal and needed to find a way and purpose to live. She started an English class and started working toward a degree. She married in 1950 and moved to Arizona and she continued her education through a Masters Degree in 1974. She has two children and two grandchildren.