

PHOENIX TAPE HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR MAGDA WILLINGER

TAPE I

1988

She was born June 1, 1928 in Czechoslovakia "a wonderful Democratic country." Her mother's name was Charl Weisberger. Her father was Solomon..She had two sisters Lillian and . Her town had about 7,000 Jewish people.

Czechoslovakia was a Democratic country - freedom. They never felt anti-semitism until the late 1930's when things were on the rise.

Her father was a butcher and had a grocery store. They were hard-working people.

In 1939, they were invaded by Hungary. Hitler felt they had a right to this part of the country. She only knew her grandmother - her grandfather died before she was born. Her aunts were seamstresses. Her grandmother ran a small hotel. In the town was a central railroad station for travel east and west.

In 1939, she was forced to change to a Hungarian school. She had to take a test. Now started very turbulent years. Jews were being denied a right to business men were sent to forced labor camps. Her father went to forced-labor camps starting 1940 - year after year. Her mother was forced to go to illegal enterprises to support her children.

At one time she was able to procure soap which was very difficult to get. She (her mother) smuggled it in from another town. She carried it in a suitcase and was eventually caught and tortured by - beaten up until she was bruised - but she never revealed the source for the soap. She then started buying fabrics in Rumania and started smuggling the fabrics on her own body - wrapping them under clothes she sold them to make a living. Her father would come home on furlough~ from the forced-labor camps in worse condition every year. By 1942, he was coming home in terrible condition and every time he would leave, they would wonder if he would ever return.

In her hometown, things kept getting worse all the time. After the Jews lost their livelihood and were forced to wear a yellow star so that the non-Jewish population could scorn them and call them names. The same friends she went to school with now became their enemies. In 1944, Hitler no longer trusted the Hungarian government to carry out his orders. He brought in troops to collect Jews. In April of 1944, they woke up one morning and found Hungarian gendarmes at their gate ordering them to take whatever belongings they could. They saw families being led on the street. These were the more affluent families. They thought they were the only ones being collected, but they then realized that they systematically collected every Jewish family. In every Jewish home, they descended and ordered the people to collect whatever they could. Very little food was available...they took whatever they could and were marched off to the local synagogue. There they met all their loved ones, grandparents, aunts, uncles. People pushed into a small area. The Jewish population of their town, 7,000 - the entire town population was about 10,000. The entire Jewish population was squeezed into a small synagogue. It was horrendous. The Elderly and the children were very uncomfortable. Cries of discomfort. It was a night of total chaos. In the morning, some kind neighbors and the Catholic priest had collected food and brought it to the synagogue. They spent another night there until the Gendarmes and SS people

had organized horses and wagons to transport them to
designated to be

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the Jewish ghetto for the whole state. It was a small area and they were forced in - some Jewish homes were there. The entire family was still together. Children and the elderly were put on the wagon, others walked. They tried to carry their two year old sister. When they arrived, they were assigned a room with her aunt, her grandmother, uncle and his family. Food was very scarce. They found some in the homes. Children were always hungry and didn't understand why they were denied food. They lived like this about 6 - 8 weeks when they began transporting people. Also were under the impression they were being resettled to another country - to another land. People went willingly because conditions were so bad in the ghetto. They were herded into railroad cars, freight trains...children, elderly adults, all into freight trains - 70-80 people. They travelled several days, two days and two nights. Food and water were not available. Human waste was being disposed of in a pot - if a pot was available. Children became numb and could no longer cry. Her grandmother, about 74 years old, totally lost her mind. She was babbling incoherently. This journey - once the doors were sealed, they were never opened. They heard some shots when they stopped. People were crying out for food and water - they were automatically shot. They finally arrived at Auschwitz and were herded out of the cars. Some could hardly walk.

They were immediately approached by men who were organizing lines. Her mother was holding her two-year old sister. A man in stripped clothing came and took the child from her mother's arms and put it into her grandmother's arms and asked her (Magda) how old she was. She was sixteen at the time and he told her to say that she was 18 years old. She followed his order. She and her mother were in one line and her grandmother and two sisters were in the other. They were, of course, hoping that they would be taken to a camp where elderly and children would be taken care of. They willingly proceeded. She and her mother went through the process of the showers. The belongings they brought with them were dropped right at the train. The clothing they walked in with, they undressed. They were shaven - the most humiliating process, and examined by men. Heads and unmentionable places were shaven. After they were herded into showers and then given civilian clothing. Sizes didn't matter. They no longer recognized each other because they were completely shaved. Everyone looked hideous. They looked like the people they had seen behind the fences when they came to the camp - who were begging for bread.

At this point, they were put into a camp which was Block 6, Birkenau. In their section were 30 barracks with about 1,000 women in each barracks. This was only a small portion of Birkenau or Auschwitz. They had some views of camps with men which were approximately the same types of arrangement. Occasionally, women who worked outside would come back and tell them there were similar camps in the area. Existence in Auschwitz was indescribable. Barracks were made up of wooden bunks and there were three to a bunk. On each bunk were 30-60 women. Enough room to lay on one side only. They could not stand up. They received a piece of bread and a bowl of soup (if you can call it soup). In the morning, they got a bowl of coffee - this was usually done after the counting which was called every morning about four, five or six-o'clock - before dawn. They were marched out and counted. The counting procedure was to make sure there were no escapees. There were many other incidents. Those who died were deducted, or emaciated or sick people were immediately chosen or separated. At that time, the first two - three weeks they were still naive and did not know the reason for the choosing. Later they found out that these people went to the crematorium.

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Her aunt was very despondent. One morning she willingly stepped out so that the SS men could include her with those being chosen. She was taken and went to the crematorium.

Her mother and she existed at Auschwitz. Even the climate was terrible in Auschwitz. In April and March, there was a lot of rain. They used to stand for the counting in the mud. Their conditions were worsened - both physically and mentally. Learning about catastrophes and becoming aware of burning flesh - it was very demoralizing. During the appels, she was chosen. She was chosen because she was underdeveloped. However, when the SS turned away, her mother managed to pull her back into the line. The SS counted the line and found an additional girl and took that girl at the end of the line. This kept going on, day by day - she was chosen again and again her mother pulled her back. Finally, a month later, they were told a transport was being collected to go to a workcamp. They were put into the transport. Again, they went through the delousing program and given striped clothing. They were assigned a number. Hers was 39,440 and her mother's 39,439. They were put into freight cars which were not as crowded as the freight cars when they went to Auschwitz. They were transported through the night - it was still cold - they were transported through Stutthof (ph) to another camp where they were unloaded again, counted again. Here they got some food, deloused again and put onto a new freight train. This was the only time when they were guarded by the army, not the SS, but the Wehrmacht (ph). They were elderly men who treated them very humanely. It was a very cold night. They were quite cold. One of the Wehrmacht took off his coat and covered them. It was the first and only human being they had encountered. They arrived in Poland - at a town called , in German, Bronberg (ph). They were unloaded and put into a camp which was much smaller. It consisted of about 1,000 women. Barracks, single bunk beds, blanket. They could shower here and keep sanitary and were assigned to work. Appels continued every morning. Women were assigned to different jobs. She was assigned to factory work. Every morning after appel and black coffee, they were marched out with guards through a beautiful forest area. In this forest was a chain of factories which were so beautifully camouflaged that no one ever knew what was there. Towards the end of the war, they heard many planes flying over, but the factories were so well camouflaged, that no bombs were ever dropped. These were ammunition factories. Her duty, with another young girl, was to carry ammunition power in sacks - to load them on a wagon to be pushed to an elevator where they went to the next process. It was a chain of factories. Working conditions were difficult. They were working through the winter months with very little clothing. There were civilian Polish people working there. Occasionally, a good-hearted soul threw a piece of bread into their wagon. The factory provided no food at all.

Her mother was selected to be a cook for the SS men. She couldn't believe her good fortune. Even though they were being watched, they were able to eat themselves. She cooked Hungarian style and managed to smuggle a pail of soup into the barracks at night. This helped to build up their strength - She only worked one month in the kitchen - she was caught handing out something to another inmate and thrown out. She had to stand on a bunker with a pail of water in each hand as punishment. After that she was assigned to factory work. She came every morning. Conditions were more bearable than in Auschwitz. They had better sanitation. Her mother one day was coming from the factory and got the idea to steal one of the sacks and bring it back. The sacks were made of nylon fabric with rubberized lining. She peeled away the rubber and had the nylon fabric. She told girls in the kitchen she would make underwear in exchange for bread. She was very resourceful and worked there until January 1945. The Germans were then retreating. Food which had been rationed to them was now being

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stolen by the camp commandant who were sellin~ it. Factories no longer functioned. They were not being herded into the snow to pick up pieces of wood - for no reason - just to torture them. They were told to make piles of wood for no reason at all. This went on until the end of January when they were ordered to line up and were marched out of the camp. It was almost impossible to walk in the snow. Those who lagged behind were beaten or shot. Food was not to be had. They were walking like this for days and started seeing civilian people fleeing in wagons with suitcases and anything they could carry. It became chaotic on the road and before they knew it, the SS men were disappearing. At this point her mother and a group of them started lagging behind. They saw a farmhouse and her mother told them they were going to the farmhouse... so they went. There they found Polish people who were very kind to them. They took them in and gave them food and drink. The fleeing SS men and Germans also came in. Everyone was so worried about himselfJ that they didn't care about the Jews anymore. The front line was closing in from both sides. Russians from one and Germans from the other ...still fighting. The Polish people were very afraid. At night, they went to the Forest and would hide in the forest because of the artillery (the Polish people). They invited the rest of them to go with them, but they said no "we're not afraid of gund we've gone through Hell and we will stay in the house." This went on for two-three days until the Russian Army came. They were wild - asking for Vodka - . There were some inmates who were shot. The Polish family was grateful...they said their house was saved because the Jews were in it. Because God saved the house for the Jews.

After the Russians came, they wanted to return to their hometown. They were hoping her father would still be alive. He had been sent to the front line to do forced labor. They started walking back to Brumberg from the farmhouse and saw horrible sights... dead bodies, etc. They took clothing off of the bodies. It took a long time to walk back. They still had a fear of encountering Germans. At Brumberg, they found a desolate town. The population had left town and had gone deeper into Germany, hoping to save themselves. Homes were abandoned. The Russian soldiers gave them the freedom to choose any home or apartment they wished. They found a comfortable apartment. There were no Germans around. There were about 700 girls. Her mother acted as elder stateswoman. Their apartment was given to them by the Russians over the objection of the woman who then lived there.

Their hair was growing back and they were starting once more to be human beings. They wanted to go home. Transportation was not to be had. There was chaos. From Bromberg, the heard that there was a Jewish agency in Krakow that set up a home for those returning from the concentration camps. They tried to reach Krakow. They found a guide and bargained with him to lead them through the forest. On the other side, they found another village and found a family of Jews who were in hiding through the War. They got food and lodging there and then took a freight train, a coal carrying train, which took them to Krakow. In Krakow, they found an agency for Refugees. Conditions were very bad. They picked up lice. They managed to go into the marketplace and bartered for linens and bought food.

Here, they kept track of and registered everyone. Again, they walked part time and part-time traveled on coal freight trains. It was winter - February. They traveled from one destination to another until they reached the Slovak border. Better transportation then became available and they took a train to their hometown. They had great anticipation and high hopes, but were afraid of what they would find.

They arrived at night. It was winter and there was freshly fallen snow. They went to her grandmother's hotel, near the railroad station but there was no sign of life there, so

they decided to go to their home. There was one other girl who came with them. When they got to their house, they found nothing but a shell of a house. All of the windows were out. There were no furnishings - nothing was left. The few wooden doors were even being burned by the Russian soldiers. They wondered where to go from there. They had a neighbor who had a Jewish husband. She was of Russian origin. They knocked on her door and she answered. She couldn't believe it. Her husband had also

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been taken and never returned. She took them in and fed them and wanted to give them beds. They said they didn't want to contaminate her beds, but she insisted. She told them that her cousin was back in town and lived in their grandmother's building. They said they had knocked and noone answered and the woman told them that all the people in the town were afraid to answer doors at night. In the morning, she went and got her cousin. It was her cousin Joe who was also in the labor camp and had escaped and made his way home before the war ended. He was a tailor and found some of her grandmother's belongings and established a tailor shop and they were fortunate....he took them in and gave them food. Her mother started cooking.

Day by day, people started returning. There were 35 survivors who came back to their town. One day, one of the neighbors returned to tell her that her father died in Wells (?) in Austria of typhoid fever in the hospital. So, they had no reason or hope. Another cousin returned. In the meantime, food was so scarce. The trainloads of Russian soldiers returning to Russia from the war demanded food so much, so her cousin went into the neighboring villages and got whatever he could - eggs, potatoes,

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and her mother and he were cooking pots of soup and whatever they could sell. The Russian soldiers would give you a watch for a bowl of soup - anything for a little food. They had watches up their arms - all the way up - they had confiscated them from the Germans. They made a tremendous amount of inflated money which didn't have much value in those days. They accumulated some jewelry and money and alot of Russian soldiers of Jewish ancestry told them not to remain there. They said "you will never get used to Communish." "Go west - to anywhere, but don't stay here." So they picked up one day. Her cousin and she went to Prague. Her mother remained with her cousin behind and tried to liquidate whatever they could. In the meantime, the Iron Curtain was put down and she had to be smuggled out of Prague. She came in a locomotive coal bin. The locomotive engineer took her across the border this way. They all united in Prague and in Prague, her mother remembered her aunt's address in Philadelphia and she wrote and they were happy to hear that they were alive and started proceedings to send her affidavits. So they had to get on the Czech quota this took about a year. In the meantime, to sustain themselves, she went to work for a furrier - Her aunt sent her some money from the U. S. and they managed to sustain themselves. In June of 1946, they received the papers to come to the U. S. Her aunt sent her airplane tickets. They came first class - had to go to Paris - and from Paris flew to New York. After some difficulty in Paris, they arrived in 1946. Her aunts and uncles welcomed them. Mother and sister were reunited after thirty years. They wanted to know what had happened to Blanche...the youngest sister in the family who was also in a work camp. They heard from a returning neighbor that she survived the entire war. During evacuation, there were some potatoes to be had and Blanche tried to pick a potato and was hit on the head with a bayonet. She got an infection and died. Almost at liberation.

So, on her mother's side of the family, there were no survivors at all except for two sisters in the US who came before the war. The horrendous realization of an entire town that was wiped out, not even considering the entire country - of the Jewish population.

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QUESTION: Was the synagogue still there when you returned?

ANSWER: Yes, still there. The local population consisted of Lithuanian, Hungarian, and Czech people. Unfortunately, the Czechs fled. So Hungarian and Lithuanians remained. When they came back, they were not happy to see them. Her mother was walking on the street and saw a woman wearing her dress. She went up to her and asked her where did you get that dress? The woman was hesitant and said she bought it from the store. Her mother said "that's very interesting, because I made this dress. I recognize my own handiwork." Her mother became enraged and she ripped the dress off the woman. They had all of their belongings, so they were not happy to see the survivors who had come back. They wondered: "How come Hitler didn't get rid of all of you?"

Her mother had the opportunity to find out where one of the gendarmes who heat her was after the war. She went there in Hungary. He was working for a Jewish firm. She got a summons from the local police and went to his home to get him. Her cousin who was with her recognized some of the Persian rugs on the fllow and some of the furnishings. The Police found his Hungarian gendarme uniforms under his mattress and when they questionned him, naturally he denied it. This same man was a customer in his mother's store - she had given him credit for many years. When he became a big wig he became so cruel and didn't care about any of that past history. The local police did. He was tried in a legal court. Unfortunately, they did not attend - but this was one case where they were able to get a little satisfaction. At least some justice was done. He was prosecuted.

In Philadelphia they were reunited with family. Some had been in the U. S. since World War I. They felt they had no future in Philadelphia. Her mother had another sister in Chicago and they went there. She worked in an electronic factory. Her mother was a seamstress and worked in a men's shirt factory. They were able to earn a living and start learning the language. Her mother also had been reunited with one of the neighbors who had survived - had lost his family and came to the U. S. and started corresponding with her. He married her.

They started a new life. He was a custom tailor and worked in a factory. Her mother had another child by him. She has a brother who is 20 years younger than she is. Her brother, a doctor lives in Philadelphia - married with two sons.

Her mother's new husband opened a repair and cleaning store and had a good livelihood. He mother worked along with him.

In the meantime, Magda married - in 1948. She was introduced to her husband by her mother-in-law. He (her future husband) didn't want a blind date and came as a customer to her father's shop. They have two daughters, 3 grandchildren. One daughter is living in Phoenix, one in Los Vegas. Magda and her husband went to Phoenix from Chicago in 1958. After some trials and tribulations, her husband established a sod-growing budiness - worked hard and was very successful. They have been there thirty years and hope to continue with the Holocaust story - to perpetuate the experience, so that it will never be forgotten and so that it may never happen again.

QUESTION: Do you think it could happen again?

ANSWER: Unfortunately, those of us who experienced it are always on the lookout and feel

that there is a hidden anti-semitism that lurks. Because these very same people that she played with in her childhood turned against them and were not happy to see them after the war. These very same people had a deep-seated hate

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for the Jews. She is afraid that there is some of it that exists even now. If it should ever come - "fortunately we are more organized" and hope to prevent anything like that from happening again. But if the people should become blind and start to follow a fanatic like Hitler - one can't tell what could happen. If there are people like Kohmejni who could turn a people from modern day back to Islam - a 100 years...one can't tell.

I hope that someday my grandchild will watch this tape.

I forgot to mention that when we came to the U. S., my mother wrote down our whole experience in Hungarian. These notes lay in a drawer up until about 5 years ago. Five years ago, her husband counseled her mother to take out these notes and they translated them into English. They wrote and cried. Then her mother hired a ghost writer with a good command of English and wrote the history in book form which she has tried to publish several times without success. Each time, they send back a letter and say it's a beautiful story, but we don't deal in the Holocaust. It seems people want to forget and don't want to read about it. They are grateful to have the book for family history because when they will no longer be here it will be down on the pages. Someday, who knows, it may be published.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW