

## IRENE FURST

Irene Furst was born and lived in Lodz, Poland until she was deported from the Lodz Ghetto to Aushwitz Concentration Camp in 1944. After spending five days in Aushwitz, she was transported to a concentration camp in Stuttgaard. There, with a sister and a close friend, she worked cleaning out the camp barracks. She contracted typhus while in the camp. She stayed in the concentration camp (Stuttkopf?) until the Germans liquidated the camp in anticipation of the Russian army coming. The prisoners of the camp walked for two days until they came to a boat onto which they were forced. The boat took them to a small town in Germany where they were eventually freed by the British army on May 3, 1945. She emigrated to Baltimore, Maryland in 1947.

0 min She was born in 1921. Lived and went to school in Lodz, Poland. Went to Crakow to study. Her father was born in Russia. Her mother had been born in Poland. Her father was a bookkeeper and a merchant. There were two children in the family; she had a younger sister.

5 min Lodz was the second largest city in Poland. It was an industrial city. There were approximately 250,000 Jews in Lodz -- about 1/3 of the city's population.

Her family spoke Polish, not Yiddish, at home. She learned Yiddish in the ghetto and the camps. Her parents were not observant. They did not belong to a synagogue.

Once a week a teacher came to her Polish public school to give instruction in Jewish history and traditions. Some of her relatives were very active in the "Bund" -- a Jewish labor organization. She had lots of Polish friends growing up, but her two best friends were Jewish.

She was always aware that she was a "Jewish minority."

10 min She remembers as a teenager on a school trip in 1936 seeing in a store window a small casket. The sign said that in the casket laid a Polish child who had been killed by Jews the week before Passover. Next to the casket was a picture of bearded Jews around a table. This caused a great deal of commotion among the children.

She always felt anti-semitism in subtle ways.

Education in Lodz was not co-educational.

15 min One of her uncles was a captain in the Polish army.

One more story about anti-semitism during her days as a student:

She went to a university in Crakow when she was 17. It was one of the rare schools that accepted Jewish students. The anti-semitic group on campus prevailed in prohibiting the Jewish students from sitting in classes with non-Jews. When the Jewish students stood in class, the anti-semites had a rule passed that no one could stand during class. It ended up that the Jewish students sat in a separate section of the classroom. At first, she felt humiliated by this. After a while, it wasn't a big issue because Polish students began to sit in the Jewish section, too.

20 min The Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. They came into Lodz after a few days. The persecution of the Jews began almost immediately. The immediate effect on her family was that they had to give up their business to a German friend who gave them money each week to live on before they went into the ghetto. Most Jews had to give up all their valuables. Synagogues were burnt down. Jews were not allowed to assemble. Religious Jews were humiliated.

25 min When she went out to shop, she posed as a Polish girl. It was safer for her to go out than for the men to go out.

In early December 1939, a friend persuaded her family to try to go to the Russian occupied part of Poland. When they got to Warsaw, they realized the Russian border was closed.

While in Warsaw with a friend, they heard that thousands of people in Lodz were being evacuated. She felt she needed to go back to her family. While posing as a Pole, she took a train back to Lodz. Jews were not allowed to travel.

Curfews were in effect. She tells the story of how she got back to her house even though she shouldn't have been out on the streets.

30 min She instinctively knew that staying in Warsaw wouldn't be good and she wanted to be in Lodz with her family.

After she came back from Warsaw, the Nazis said all the Jews would be moved to a ghetto. The Germans renamed Lodz "Litsmonstadt (?)".

Her parents had both finished high school. They were well educated.

They were told by May 1, 1940, every Jew had to be in the ghetto. This gave them 3 or 4 months time.

The ghetto conditions were very cramped. It was a delapidated section of the city. Conditions were very primitive. No indoor toilets. No running water.

35 min She was in the ghetto until August 1944. Her most vivid memory is of September 1, 1942 -- the "Sperrer." For two years in the ghetto she had worked as a pediatric nurse in the hospital. On September 1, 1942, the Germans emptied all the hospitals. They announced that all children under 10 and all old people would be evacuated from the ghetto. Only able-bodied men and women would stay in the ghetto. In order to get a food ration card, you had to work. For two weeks, all activities in the ghetto stopped.

40 min Blocks were closed off. The Germans selected who would go and who would stay. The survivors of smaller ghettos were brought to the Lodz ghetto. It was the longest remaining ghetto.

Her family was still together. Her mother died of typhus in the ghetto in October 1942.

There had been other selections over the years, but not in the same way.

Since there were no more hospitals, she worked as a sanitation inspector in a factory.

Her grandparents died in the ghetto.

The last two years in the ghetto were a little better than the first two years because conditions were less crowded.

45 min She doesn't know of any organized efforts in the ghetto. There was some schooling in the ghetto, but not much. The winters of 1940 and 1941 were particularly cold.

There was neither food nor fuel. There was no heat.

Her father worked as a bookkeeper in the office of a factory. Her sister had typhus, then tuberculosis. She died in Stuttgart at the age of 18.

50 min After her mother died, her father broke down. Until then he had been a strong man. After her mother's death, she became the head of the family.

There were no rabbis left in the ghetto. The head of the ghetto, Chaim Rumkovsky, performed all the marriage ceremonies. She remembers that he was very fond of children. One of the first things he did was organize an orphanage. He also established a sanitarium for children.

55 min Jewish police ran the ghetto. Some were good; some were not. People came in 1941 from Prague, Germany, and Austria. In 1942, people came from the small towns surrounding Lodz.

At the end of 1944, she was told about a small underground movement. She was approached to hide, but her father talked her out of it. He said that if she hid and was found she'd be killed. If she didn't hide, she'd work for the Germans and be saved.

60 min The Jewish police didn't help hide Jews. The police didn't receive more food than anyone else.

The Lodz ghetto didn't have much contact with the outside world.

At first, there were about 160,000 people in the ghetto. When it was liquidated, there were probably 100,000 people. It took 4 or 5 months to liquidate the ghetto. They were given advance notice. She left on the second to the last transport -- August 30, 1944. Her father and her sister left with her. She was on the same train with Chaim Rumkovsky. She travelled to Aushwitz in a cattle car.

65 min When they arrived in Aushwitz, there was an immediate selection. Men and women were separated. She doesn't remember any women in her barracks older than 40 years. She was told later that her father hanged himself after his glasses were broken because he knew without his glasses he was blind and there would be no way for him to survive. Her sister was with her until she died in Stuttgart. She was in Aushwitz only five days. She talks about her impressions during that time.

TAPE 2

0 min After selection, they were led down a dusty road. Behind the dusty road, they saw "creatures" -- people with shaved heads and prison uniforms behaving crazily. They didn't realize that after a few months, they, too, would look like these "creatures."

The commando told them that their leader was now burning in the crematorium and that was the fate awaiting them.

After selection and showers, they were given rags to wear as dresses.

5 min Two instances of kindness at Aushwitz:

The police woman who shaved her head said she'd try to get Irene to the Polish camp rather than the Jewish one. Irene said, "No," because she wanted to stay with her sister.

An undercommando was a friend of hers from her university days. He brought her food everyday and checked on her everyday.

She remembers standing outside naked for inspection for a whole day.

On the fifth day, they were taken again for showers. They were given different clothes, shoes (at random), and a small loaf of bread. They were on a train all night. They were taken to Stuttgaard.

10 min There was no selection in Stuttgaard (Stuttkopft?). No work was done there, but transports were taken for work assignments elsewhere.

When they lined up outside, they lined up five across. She, her sister, and her friend worked at the camp cleaning out the barracks.

She was one of the first ones to get typhus when it broke out in the camp. Among her symptoms were a high fever and hallucinations. Her friend, Dorka, took care of her by bringing her something to drink.

15 min One day she heard her sister crying, "Somebody, please help me!" Irene was still very, very weak. When she heard her sister, she crawled to her. Her sister's legs were so swollen she couldn't pick herself up. Irene willed herself to live so she could take care of her sister. Although she wasn't able to save her sister, because of her desire to do so, she saved herself.

20 min By this time she'd been in Stuttkopft for five months. 1200 to 1400 women were living in accommodations for 500. Because of such conditions, many of the women she'd arrived with had died. Approximately 30 or 40 women died each day.

They knew the Russians were coming closer. One day an order was given that the next day the camp was to be evacuated. Irene didn't want to go because she didn't want to leave her sister. Her sister told her to go and save herself. She says this was her biggest dilemma -- whether to go on the march or to stay with her sister.

25 min In the morning, she decided to stay with her sister rather than going on the march. Fifteen or 20 healthy women in her barracks stayed, too. Rumors circulated that the Germans were going to burn down the camp. They stayed up all night, but the camp wasn't burned down. In the morning, a man from the kitchen brought them a bucket of soup.

The camp remained in operation until the end of April.

30 min In her barracks, all the women were Jewish.

The Russian men in the camp encouraged the women to have the will to live. They kept saying the Russians were going to liberate them and Germany would fall.

The first transport was in early February. The last evacuation was at the end of April.

Dorka, her friend, died in the camp.

At the end of April, they were told the camp was being liquidated. She was very weak. They were told the sick ones would be taken on a wagon. She wanted to go on a wagon, but a friend forced her to walk because she said the sick ones never reached their destination.

25 min They walked for two days until they came to the Baltic Sea. There were two ships waiting for them. POWs were on the march, too. Men and women were together. They were packed onto the ships so tightly there wasn't enough room to lie down. They were on the ships for four or five days.

[She talks about her experiences on the ship.]

The Germans had left the ship. Everyone was free to go. They were near the shore. She and a friend left the ship and got to the shore.

40 min She and her friend walked until they got to a house. They told the people in the house they were refugees running away. The men in the house gave them some bread, but he said he didn't have any more room.

They continued walking toward the town. A woman let them into her home. She was very kind.

They were in a small town in Germany. The woman told them that Berlin had fallen and the war would be over in a few days.

The SA -- Germans -- picked up all the refugees and took them back to the shore. Most of the refugees were there. The Germans were shooting the people who were coming off the ships.

45 min The refugees were lined up and walked toward the city. They arrived at the city square. The Red Cross was there distributing soup. They didn't know what was awaiting them. They heard an air raid. They hoped for bombs.

British tanks arrived. They then realized that they were free. There were hundreds of refugees. This was May 3, 1945.

50 min She stayed in the town until October 1945. Then she went to Hanover, then to Frankfurt on Meine, then to the United States.

When she was liberated, she was very sick. She was in the hospital for a while.

In Germany, she worked for the Joint Distribution Committee.

She came to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1947.

55 min She doesn't know why she survived. As a survivor, she feels an obligation to tell her story so it will never happen again. [She talks about what America and Israel mean to her.] Today, she belongs to a Reformed synagogue. She wanted her children to feel comfortable as Jews.

60 min [She talks about her feelings about God, her feelings about the Polish people, responsibilities of survivors, and her hopes for the future.]