

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN, CLEVELAND SECTION

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	SIDONIA BENEDEK	
Name of Interviewer	Abraham Kay	Date 9/10/84
Name of Interviewer	Michelle Heyer	Date 5/11/87

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Sidonia Benedek was born in 1924 in Karascu, Rumania, in the region of Transylvania. Hers was a large, religious family - her father was the spiritual leader of the community. She remembers a happy childhood, having many friends and doing well in school. The family supported themselves through agriculture, and were very well-respected by both Jews and gentiles.

Sidonia's first recollection of anti-Semitism is the slaughter of Jews in Bucharest in 1937. Although overt anti-Semitism was not apparent at that time in Karascu, she remembers that her teachers had to fight for her status as class valedictorian; the other teachers did not want that honor given to a Jew.

By that time, the Jews of Karascu were aware of problems. There was fear and sadness, but a feeling that nothing could be done. Gradually, as Germany's influence in the region grew, Jews suffered the loss of rights and privileges.

In 1944, the family was split up and deported. Two brothers were sent to work camps, the others were sent to a ghetto at Sotmar. After five weeks, they were transported to Auschwitz. Her parents, a sister, and the sister's children were killed immediately. One sister died later, and Sidonia, her younger sister and younger brother survived the camps. One of her older brothers survived forced labor, the other was killed in Russia.

After six weeks, Sidonia was sent to work. Later, she was among 500 women transported to Stutthof, and then to Prost to build an airport.

As the Russian army neared Prost, Sidonia and her fellow prisoners were evacuated in a two-week march during January 1945. Near the end of the march, Sidonia and her sister escaped, and were finally liberated by the Russian army.

Sidonia returned to Karascu, where she was reunited with her brother and a childhood friend, who she married in September 1948. Her brother moved to N. Y., and Sidonia and her husband received permission to leave Rumania in 1965. They currently live in Cleveland, Ohio, and have three children.

Sidonia Benedek

ABSTRACT

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PRESENT LIFE

Sidonia Benedek has lived in Cleveland for 19 years with her husband, Les. She has three children - Alice, Michael and Vera. She works at Zayre's.

EARLY LIFE

Born in 1924 in Karascu, Rumania - area of Transylvania. Had nice home life. Began school at seven - went seven years. As a Jew, had to go to Rumanian school. Hungarians went to Hungarian school.

FATHER IS SPIRITUAL LEADER OF COMMUNITY

85 Jews in town (eight survived war). Young boys studied for Bar Mitzvah with him. Services held in back yard of a wealthy member of community.

BROTHER HAS VISITED KARASCU RECENTLY

Sidonia has no desire to go - nothing is left.

HAS CLOSE HUNGARIAN FRIEND

Played together every day. But feeling changed when Sidonia taken away. Sidonia gave personal items to friend to keep during war. She did not give them back when Sidonia returned.

SIDONIA HAS NO JEWISH GIRLFRIENDS AT SCHOOL

She was only Jewish girl there.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Four sisters, three brothers. Oldest brother, Michael, died of heart condition when Sidonia was nine. Sara, married with son - husband in labor camp in Russia. One other sister married with daughter. Another older brother died in Russian labor camp. Younger brother - Martin. Younger sister - Rosa. One other younger sister died.

FAMILY VERY RELIGIOUS

Spoke Yiddish at home.

FAMILY'S ECONOMIC LIFE

Had vegetable garden, cows, geese. Had kosher butter business.

FATHER'S PLANS TO GO TO ISRAEL

He planned to go after all children were married. Didn't work out.

FIRST NOTICE ANTI-SEMITISM - 1937

Iron Guard began slaughtering Jews. Nothing happened in Karascu but saw pictures of dead Jews in Bucharest in anti-Semitic newspaper.

GENTILES IN KARASCU VERY NICE

Still, Sidonia found it difficult to hear about anti-Semitism elsewhere.

SIDONIA'S TEACHERS MUST FIGHT FOR HER GRADUATION HONORS

Several schools held joint graduation ceremony. Other teachers did not want a Jewish girl to be named best student.

FAMILY DISCUSSES ANTI-SEMITISM

Upset, but couldn't do anything. Father still optimistic.

LIFE IMPROVES WHEN IRON GUARD IS DEPOSED

Another government took over and the killings stopped.

FIRST HEAR ABOUT WAR 1938-39

Rumanian soldiers occupied town. Economy got bad. No Jews tried to leave.

HEAR ABOUT INVASION OF POLAND

Felt it would soon reach them.

OLDER SISTER MARRIES - 1937

Had big, Hasidic wedding. Very happy.

SIDONIA HAS PHOTO OF RABBI IN SOTMAR SHAKING HANDS WITH KING IN 1936

He came to town, was greeted by dignitaries, including rabbi.

TRANSYLVANIA NOT INVOLVED IN WAR FROM 1937-40

Hitler had made a pact to return it to Hungary.

WHEN HUNGARY TAKES OVER, JEWS SUFFER

Rights were revoked. Couldn't own businesses. Many took on gentile partners, remain silent partners.

MANY MEN TAKEN TO LABOR CAMPS - 1942

FATHER ABLE TO CONTINUE RELIGIOUS DUTIES UNTIL THE END

He even took on responsibilities for two other towns.

GERMAN SOLDIERS SPEND THE NIGHT WITH SIDONIA'S FAMILY

Were very nice. House had been cleaned for Passover. Germans had lice and volunteered to stay in one room and sleep on floor.

FAMILY HAS A HUNGARIAN SOLDIER STAYING WITH THEM ON PERMANENT BASIS

He was also very nice.

SIDONIA HAS KNOWN HUSBAND SINCE CHILDHOOD

Went to school together, but were just friends. Families were close - sometimes he has clearer memories of Sidonia's family than she does.

FATHER IS WELL-RESPECTED BY GENTILES

He was invited to every gentile wedding. One Rumanian priest wept when he heard of father's death.

1941-42 JEWS ARE DEPRESSED AND FRIGHTENED

But could not do anything. Sidonia says that people who don't understand why Jews allowed it to happen can't understand because they were not there. Jews were really powerless to resist.

RUSSIANS TAKE OVER BESSARABIA - 1939

Brother lost Rumanian citizenship. Had to go to Russia.

AFTER 1943, JEWS MUST HAVE PAPERS

Mother and father must return to birthplace to get theirs.
Papers must list past four generations.

GERMANS OCCUPY SOTMAR

Hungarians occupied Karascu, took orders from Germans.

SIDONIA'S GRANDFATHER TOLD HE CANNOT WALK OUTSIDE

He had been policeman during WW I - was very resentful.

JEWS ARE PLACED UNDER CURFEW - 1943

Cannot leave house before 10 a.m.

TWO MOST PROMINENT JEWS ARE DEPORTED - 1943

One was businessman and landowner. Other was pharmacist.
Accused of being communists. Hungarian soldiers picked them up.

VIDEO 2 OF 3

NEVER TOLD HER CHILDREN ABOUT THE ATROCITIES SHE SUFFERED

One day son confronted her. She can only talk about the positive aspects of how she survived. Cannot discuss bad things with them.

SIDONIA'S FAMILY TAKEN AWAY - APRIL 19, 1944

Taken to school. Stayed one week. Was just after Passover.
Seder was very sad - Sidonia saw father cry for first time.

BROTHER DRAFTED TO A WORK CAMP

Had one message from him, brought by soldiers on leave.
Later found out he died in Russia.

ANOTHER BROTHER ALSO SENT TO WORK CAMP

His commander promised no Jews in his brigade would be sent to concentration camp. All survived.

SENT TO GHETTO IN SOTMAR

FAMILY CONSIDERS OBTAINING FORGED PAPERS

Man forging them was arrested before they could get them.

A GENTILE FAMILY WANTS TO HIDE SIDONIA'S SISTER AND HER CHILD

Sister refused to stay without other family members.

HUNGARIAN POLICE NOTIFY FAMILY THEY MUST GO TO THE SCHOOL THE NEXT DAY

Allowed to bring all the clothes and food they want. Total of 65 people went to school.

FATHER HAS NERVOUS BREAKDOWN AT TRAIN STATION IN SOTMAR

FAMILY HAS CLOSE FRIENDS IN SOTMAR

Stayed with them in ghetto.

MORE THAN 1,000 JEWS IN SOTMAR GHETTO

Father spent most of his time studying Torah. Women cooked and cleaned.

SELECTION UPON ARRIVAL AT AUSCHWITZ

Young mothers advised to give babies to older women. One of Sidonia's sisters gave her child to mother. Sister sent to the right. Other sister kept baby. Sent to left.

TRAIN TO AUSCHWITZ

On train several days. Hungry and thirsty, no sanitation. One night several people escaped. Sidonia doesn't know what happened to them.

ARRIVAL AT AUSCHWITZ

Father pushed to left. Never saw him again. Sidonia, one older sister and younger sister stayed together. Mother sent to left. Didn't see where younger brother went.

SIDONIA SEES OTHER INMATES

Saw thin people in rags, with shaved heads. Thought "they must be the crazy people."

TAKEN TO SHOWERS

Hair was cut, given rags to wear, kept their own shoes.

SIDONIA AND SISTERS SENT TO BARRACKS

1,000 people, sleeping on floor. No food for several days. Horrible sanitation. Roll call every morning for 4-5 hours.

THEY MEET POLES WHO HAD BEEN THERE 5-6 YEARS

When Sidonia and sisters were selected for work after six weeks, the Poles told them how lucky they are.

OLDER SISTER BECOMES SICK

Sidonia and younger sister protected her, gave her their food. Despite illness, she was also selected for work.

JEWISH GUARDS TRY TO GIVE THEM COURAGE

Told them "your parents are dead, but you have to live for yourself."

FOOD IS VERY BAD

One day Sidonia assigned to bring food from kitchen. Was able to get a potato. A pregnant woman was unable to eat most of the food. Sidonia and sisters give her what food of theirs she could eat.

WORK AT AUSCHWITZ

Sidonia and sisters worked with two Czech women filling a large hole with dirt. Older sister and one Czech were sick, so others worked harder.

500 WOMEN ARE SELECTED, INCLUDING SIDONIA

Told to form another line. Sat in sun all day without food. At dark, taken to another part of Auschwitz. Given steam baths.

TAKEN TO STUTTHOF

In a beautiful forest, but camp was terrible. Stayed three days. Saw people tortured - beaten.

FEMALE SS GUARDS AT STUTTHOF

Very brutal. Beat prisoners on their sunburned skin.

TAKEN TO PROST

20 kilometers from Gdansk. There from June through next January. Built an airport. Ten people died every day. Total of 800 prisoners - all women age 16 to 30.

OLDER SISTER BECOMES VERY SICK

Had infection on chest. Did not heal properly. Taken back to Auschwitz in September. Sidonia never saw her again.

MALE AND FEMALE SS AT PROST

Women more cruel. One very nice male guard. Told them not to worry - war would be over soon.

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CONDITIONS AT PROST

New barracks. Worked filling mattresses. Got three meals, including a hot dinner. Still, was always hungry.

WORKED IN FIELDS

One guard allowed them to dig and eat potatoes. Were building an airport. In winter, when finished, worked clearing runway of snow.

SIDONIA DISCUSSES WHY SHE SURVIVED

She was optimistic. Most pessimistic woman was first one to die.

SIDONIA RECALLS SEEING WOMEN TOUCH ELECTRIFIED FENCE AT AUSCHWITZ

U.S. PRISONERS OF WAR BEING HELD NEARBY

Couldn't talk to them, but Americans dropped things for them - combs, soap, etc.

PRISONERS FROM OTHER CAMPS BROUGHT IN

Look like skeletons. Told them Russians advancing, so Sidonia began preparing. Traded bread for needle and thread. Made pants from blankets.

EVACUATED IN JANUARY 1945

Walked for two weeks - because of hunger, has little memory of it. 800 left Prost - many died, one went insane.

CAME TO LARGE BARN

Slept there. Went days without food. Found building full of potatoes, SS threatened to shoot anyone who ate them. One woman shot.

ONE NIGHT SIDONIA ENTERS A HOUSE

Had uncontrollable urge to go in. Occupants terrified. Gave her two pieces of bread, told her to leave.

PRISONERS PULLED SLEDS WITH SS BELONGINGS

When Sidonia's turn to pull, she dragged behind. SS guard gave her a sandwich. Later a rabbi told her it was that man's mission in life to save her life.

STAYED IN BARN UNTIL END OF MARCH 1945

Given food occasionally - usually bread. Once Sidonia was hit for trying to get second potato.

SIDONIA STILL WITH SISTER

Sidonia washed every day but sister couldn't - too cold.

TYPHUS SPREAD

Many died.

SIDONIA AND SISTER ESCAPE

Russians in shooting range. SS decided to evacuate prisoners. Sidonia saw house, grabbed sister and ran inside. Old man inside told them to hide in hay upstairs. Many who hid there were shot. Hid 2-1/2 days. Germans had left.

A GERMAN WOMAN TAKES THEM IN

All Sidonia wanted was hot tea and place to sleep. Remembering soldiers who stayed with her family, she refused bed so as not to spread her lice. Hid from Russian shooting in basement, but very cold. Ran to outhouse, kept warm by barn burning nearby. Hid in outdoor oven for two days, then Russian soldiers told them they were free.

SIDONIA AND SISTER GET TYPHOID FEVER

In Russian hospital in Gdansk.

BACK TO RUMANIA, JUNE 1945

Many had gone to Israel, but Sidonia wanted to go home. Found brother, future husband, brother-in-law. A neighbor had saved father's books.

SIDONIA'S BROTHER

Now in N. Y. Married, very religious. Went to Austria until 1952, then to America.

SIDONIA'S LIFE AFTER WAR

Married, 1945. Husband's parents' house saved by neighbors - recovered everything. Husband dealt in livestock until 1948, then had to work for communist government. All their children born in Rumania.

RECALLS REFUGEE CAMP NEAR WARSAW

People from all over - Italy, Czechoslovakia, etc. Feels young people have a survival mechanism - this saved her. After coming home, many young people went wild, trying to forget.

SIDONIA AND HUSBAND APPLY FOR PERMISSION TO GO TO ISRAEL

Deal between Rumania and Israel that Jews with family in Israel could go. Began applying in 1950. In 1965 got permission. Went to Italy first, decided to join brother in America.

SIDONIA STILL FEELS PAIN

Doesn't talk about it often, but feels stabbed when she hears about anti-Semitism.

MAKES A POINT OF DISCUSSING EXPERIENCES WITH FRIENDS WHO ARE SURVIVORS

DISCUSSES ONLY POSITIVE ASPECTS OF HER SURVIVAL WITH CHILDREN - NEVER THE ATROCITIES.

FEELS LIKE JEWS WHO ARE SURVIVORS ARE FROM DIFFERENT WORLD THAN JEWS WHO DID NOT EXPERIENCE HOLOCAUST

FEELS IT IS HER OBLIGATION TO SHARE HER EXPERIENCES