

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN, CLEVELAND SECTION

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	ALICE BEN-HURIN		
Name of Interviewer	Doris Landau	Date	7/24/84
Name of Abstractor	Michelle Heyer	Date	6/25/87

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Alice Ben-Hurin was born in Hungary, the youngest of three children. Her father was in the import-export business and her mother assisted him with the bookkeeping. The family had a large apartment with a live-in nurse and a maid. They also had a farm outside the town, where they grew a lot of their food and took vacations.

Education was very important to the family, and several cousins stayed with them while attending school in the city. Alice had hopes of becoming a scholar, but anti-Semitic laws prevented her from accepting a scholarship to the Sorbonne or attending a university in her own country.

Alice first became aware that the war would affect her one night as she returned from Budapest; German tanks were entering the city. Her father was arrested that night, and returned several days later.

Both Alice and her older sister, who spoke German, went to work for the local Jewish committee. Her brother joined the army, and he was forbidden from attending medical school. He believed that, as a college educated man, he would become an officer. Instead, he was assigned to a Jewish unit which picked up land mines. In 1942 the family was notified that he was missing-in-action.

As anti-Jewish laws became more severe, Alice tried to persuade her family to escape from Hungary. Her father refused, and one day, the family was sent to a ghetto. The night before they left their apartment, her brother returned.

The family was sent to an old army post with Jews from the city and the surrounding countryside. Many relatives from Alice's extended family were together. Adolf Eichmann was in charge of the camp.

Shortly, her brother returned to the army. Later, his entire Jewish unit was thrown into the Danube and shot. He was the only survivor.

Along with the others from the camp, Alice and her family were deported to Auschwitz. They were separated, and Alice, her cousin and sister were the only ones not killed immediately.

Not long after her arrival, Alice was sent to Germany to work. Her sister had taken some food to the hospital to share with the patients, and while she was there, the hospital was cleared - everyone in the building was taken to be killed.

Alice was sent to Dresden, where she worked in a munitions factory. Later, as air raids got closer, she and her fellow prisoners were evacuated in a march to Bergen-Belsen. Before they reached the death camp, however, they were liberated by American and British troops.

She worked for the Red Cross for a short time, then was taken to Austria by a friend's brother who worked for the U.S. Army.

Alice worked as a high school teacher in Philadelphia after coming to the U.S. She lives in Cleveland and has three children and three grandchildren.

ABSTRACTOR'S NOTE

Alice never mentions the name of the city where she was born - only that it was along the Danube between Vienna and Budapest.

Alice Ben-Hurin

ABSTRACT

VIDEO 1 OF 3

PRESENT LIFE

Retired - taught high school in Philadelphia. Three children, three grandchildren.

LIFE IN 1939

Had just finished high school, graduated first in class, summa cum laude. Hoped to become scholar, awarded scholarship to Sorbonne, but anti-Jewish laws prevented her from leaving country. Also not allowed to go to university in her country.

FAMILY AND HOME

Born between Budapest and Vienna in an old city important commercially and academically.

ALICE DISCUSSES THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION TO HER FAMILY AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN HER COUNTRY.

FAMILY HOME

Owned very large apartment. Had live-in nurse, a maid, cousins lived with them so they could attend Alice's school.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Family was considered reformed, but that corresponded more to American idea of conservative. Kept kosher, observed shabbat. Could not write on shabbat, but had to attend school on Saturday. Some teachers made it difficult by assigning extra work that day.

FAMILY HAS FARM OUTSIDE TOWN

Grew much of their food there. Went there on vacations. Children who were nice other times became nasty on Sundays. On way home from church they teased Alice. Father told her to say that when their ancestors were killing each other, hers were writing the Torah.

RELATIONSHIP WITH BROTHER AND SISTER

Very close to sister - sister protected her. As youngest, Alice was spoiled. Some sibling rivalry between brother and sister.

FIRST AWARE OF WAR

Alice went to Budapest for weekend. On the way home from train station, heard German tanks rolling in. Father arrested that night, came home a few days later.

ALICE WORKS FOR JEWISH COMMITTEE

She was very useful because she typed, knew shorthand, spoke German.

WOMEN TAKEN OUT TO WASH STREETS

GERMAN OFFICERS HAVE ROOMS IN FAMILY APARTMENT

BROTHER IS MISSING IN ACTION

Had wanted to go to medical school, but not allowed. Decided to go to officer's school while he waited. After finishing, instead of receiving officer's stripes, he got a yellow armband. Sent to Ukraine to pick up land mines. In 1942 family got a letter saying he was missing in action.

BROTHER COMES HOME ONE DAY BEFORE DEPORTATION

Had stepped on mine, left for dead by army. Saved by peasants. Got typhus, spent winter in state of delirium. In spring went to military hospital.

FATHER IN IMPORT/EXPORT BUSINESS

Sister was a secretary. Mother bookkeeper for father. Alice's grandfather was rabbi, great-grandfather was Torah scribe. Father was secretary of Chamber of Commerce.

ALICE RECALLS HER CHILDHOOD

Privileged life. Large, close family. Wednesday was market day - relatives from countryside come in for dinner. Family played a lot - skiing, swimming.

ALICE'S WORK WITH JEWISH COMMITTEE SAVED HER FROM DEPORTATION

Many girls sent to work camps.

MOTHER EDUCATED IN VIENNA

When German officers lived with them, they were surprised to see such a cultured woman. She treated them as boarders, asked them to respect family's decent home.

MARCH 1944 - MANY PEOPLE THOUGHT WAR ENDING FOR HUNGARY

Many tried to flee to Hungary. Mother's brother was dentist in Berlin. He came to Hungary, was sent back to Dachau.

ANTI-JEWISH RULES

Could not have radios. Seemed that every day new law was passed.

ALICE TRIES TO PERSUADE FAMILY TO ESCAPE

Had friends from Vienna who had escaped the Anschluss. Alice urged father to escape, but he couldn't imagine breaking the law.

ALICE DESCRIBES SCHOOL CONTESTS SHE WON

MORE ON URGING FAMILY TO ESCAPE

FAMILY FORCED TO LEAVE APARTMENT

Germans faked an Allied bombing raid. Jews sent to former ghetto. As family was going to air-raid shelter, brother walked in.

FAMILY SENT TO GHETTO

Soon after, all Jews from ghetto and surrounding countryside taken to old army barracks. Eichmann in charge.

BROTHER RETURNS TO ARMY

Mother felt it was best. His unit was later thrown into Danube and shot. Brother and one other man survived.

WHOLE FAMILY TOGETHER IN BARRACKS

Cousins, aunts and uncles from countryside there, too.

STAYED IN BARRACKS ONE WEEK, THEN WENT TO AUSCHWITZ.

VIDEO 2 OF 3

FAMILY MARCHES FROM GHETTO TO BARRACKS

Took only what they could carry. Heard they were going to do agricultural work in a cold climate so carried heavy winter coats although it was June. Also carried canned fruits and vegetables - very heavy.

HUNGARIAN GENDARMES GUARD BARRACKS. ALICE RECOGNIZED ONE

He pushed her mother. Alice told him if he touched her again she'd slap him. Embarrassed, he turned away. Alice shocked by that treatment of her family. Alice had tutored guard's fiancée.

ALICE DISCUSSES HER TUTORING AND IMPORTANCE OF DIPLOMAS FOR GIRLS FROM NOBLE FAMILIES

DOES NOT HAVE ANY PICTURES OF HER FAMILY

That is very painful for her.

EXTENDED FAMILY STILL TOGETHER IN BARRACKS

Barracks fenced in. Jews from all over area were there, so relatives from country were with them. Still had a lot of food, cooked together.

ALICE DESCRIBES INCIDENT WITH EICHMANN AND SHABBAT SERVICE

One Saturday, all rabbis met to hold service. Alice's rabbi, too - very young, very well educated. Eichmann walked in and said if they wanted to "play priest" it was fine with him and he shaved their heads, tattooed Stars of David on them.

DEPORTATION BEGINS

Older people told that if they wanted to stay with their children, they should volunteer to leave. Many of Alice's relatives went on first transport.

ALICE'S FAMILY LEAVES ON LATER TRANSPORT

As they were leaving, they saw former maid and neighbors crying. Gave them food - said it was kosher. Gendarmes and Germans hit them.

CONDITIONS ON TRANSPORT

90 people in space for 30. One aunt with Alice. Several pregnant women gave birth. Stopped train several times, told if they didn't give up possessions they'd be shot. Family took turns sitting down, keeping sister's two-year-old child quiet. Did not eat their food - wanted to save it for future. Does not remember how long trip lasted.

SAW "AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU" SIGN IN GOTHIC GERMAN LETTERING

Had never heard of it. Did not know where they were.

IMPRESSIONS UPON ARRIVAL AT AUSCHWITZ

Saw sign - "Arbeit Macht Frei." Heard orchestra playing. Saw what looked like animal pens with human animals in them, thought they were criminals. Now feels guilty that she didn't throw some of her food to them.

FAMILY IS SEPARATED

Father slapped and pushed away. Women underwent selection. Grandmother, mother and cousin who was holding another cousin's baby sent to gas chambers. Alice, sisters and a cousin (baby's mother) sent to showers, then shaved.

ALICE AND OTHERS RECEIVE CLOTHING

Alice given an evening gown - tried to exchange it with taller woman, stopped by SS. Later, she was grateful for long dress - tore it up and used for head scarves and sanitary napkins.

TAKEN TO BARRACKS

Marked for extermination, so not tattooed. Not killed immediately because too many arrived at once. Placed in huge barracks. All had dysentery - had to climb over each other to go out to toilets. Constant fighting. 6,000 women in barracks - no room to lie down.

ALICE DESCRIBES ROLL CALL

Woke up at 2 a.m. Freezing cold. When sun came up got very hot. No grass in area - all stones. Stood for hours. Those who collapsed taken away. One girl ran to touch electrified fence. Girl who pulled her off was also electrocuted.

INMATES ARE EMOTIONALLY BLACKMAILED

Told that if they don't work, older women and children would not be fed.

FOR APPROXIMATELY TEN MINUTES, ALICE DISCUSSES HER GUILT OVER SURVIVING, HER FEELINGS ABOUT LOSS OF HUMANITY IN THE CAMPS, AND THE QUALITIES WHICH ENABLED SURVIVAL

ALICE'S SHOES FALL APART

Given painful, wooden shoes. For many years could not look at modern shoes which reminded her of them.

ALICE IS TAKEN TO GERMANY TO WORK

Was not in Auschwitz long. 1,000 workers needed in Germany. Given overalls, put in a wagon.

ALICE ESCAPES SELECTION BY MENGELE

Experienced two selections with Mengele. At one, Alice selected for death. She and some others snuck back into line, but Mengele knew, asked who had done it. Alice was only one to step forward. He let her go, pulled others out and sent them to gas chambers.

SISTER IS NOT TAKEN TO GERMANY

Day before had been a day of fasting. Sister gave her food to people in hospital. While there, all people in hospital - including sister - taken away.

ALICE RECALLS HOW HER SISTER TOOK CARE OF HER, HELPED HER GO ON

THOSE CHOSEN FOR WORK ARE TAKEN TO LIPPSTADT, IN WESTPHALIA

Were not given food. Heard rumor of allied raid on Dresden where trainload of workers were killed. Heard they were to replace them.

VIDEO 3 OF 3

ALICE SHOCKED BY APPEARANCE OF DRESDEN

Not prepared to see clean city with well-dressed people.

GERMANS DO NOT LOOK AT ALICE AND HER FELLOW PRISONERS

TAKEN TO WOODEN BARRACKS

Compared to Auschwitz, did not look like a concentration camp. 28-32 women in one room, wooden beds with straw. Prisoners were responsible for keeping it clean, but had no cleaning supplies.

WORK CONDITIONS

Worked 12 hours per day in a munitions factory. Alice's job was drilling hand grenades. Had "coffee" (brewed grass) in morning, soup once a day, daily bread ration. Shared bread among four people - later had to share with seven or eight. On weekends got a slice of margarine.

ALICE SAYS THAT PEOPLE WERE TURNED INTO MACHINES

It was terrible to be killed, but worse to give in to death yourself. People became machines - it wasn't you with a headache, who was tired, etc.

GUARDED BY FEMALE SS

Crueler than men. Female guards often involved romantically with male guards, took out their frustrations on the prisoners.

ALICE DOES NOT AGREE WITH DESIGNATING HOLOCAUST AS "WAR ON THE JEWS" BECAUSE ONLY ONE SIDE WAS FIGHTING. JEWS WERE NOT GIVEN OPPORTUNITY TO FIGHT BACK

ALICE SABOTAGES THE GRENADES

Other women refused to join her. Alice drilled some of her grenade holes unevenly, making them useless.

ALICE'S MACHINE BREAKS, HER SABOTAGE COULD BE DISCOVERED

She asked permission to work a few minutes at a time at other machines. Made sure same number of grenades were defective as when she worked at her own machine.

THE WOMEN PLAY IMAGINATION GAMES TO EASE SUFFERING

Played trivia games, talked about home lives before war.

THEY WORK IN TWO SHIFTS. SOME WORK DAYS, SOME NIGHTS

Night workers got less sleep. Had to stand for roll call after returning to camp. Women in top bunks usually too tired to climb up to bed.

AFTER AIR RAIDS, PRISONERS HAVE TO CLEAR DEBRIS

A soldier once forced Alice to climb five stories up the side of a building to get a faucet from a sink.

BY MARCH, MANY AIR RAIDS. PRISONERS ARE HAPPY, EVEN THOUGH THEY ARE NOT ALLOWED IN SHELTERS

BEING IN A BEAUTIFUL CITY MAKES EXPERIENCE WORSE

Alice would not have minded working, but contrast between her living conditions and city made it difficult.

ALICE RECALLS LAST SHABBAT WITH HER FAMILY

AIR RAIDS CLOSER, PRISONERS ARE EVACUATED

Chaotic scene. One guard took off belt, swung it at women. Alice hit in temple by death's head buckle. Bled slowly during the whole evacuation march. Had no water. Given one potato as emergency ration - shot if it was eaten. Marched at night, hid in barns by day. Knew Americans were near.

ALICE LOSES A SHOE IN THE MUD, FOOT BECOMES INFECTED

DESTINATION OF THE MARCH IS BERGEN-BELSEN

They were to be killed before Allies could find them. Some older and sick women taken by truck. They did reach Bergen-Belsen before liberation and were killed.

LIBERATED BY AMERICAN TANKERS ON EASTER SUNDAY

Could not stop. Threw them chocolate, cigarettes. The women asked for soap and toothpaste. They were at edge of small German city. Went into an abandoned restaurant, ate leftover food, were sick for three days.

GERMANS AND AMERICANS STILL FIGHTING. ALICE AND OTHERS CAUGHT IN CROSSFIRE

A FEW DAYS LATER, BRITISH TROOPS ARRIVE

BEFORE BRITISH ARRIVE, ALICE AND FRIENDS SLEEP IN ABANDONED HOUSE

They brought in water, refused to eat food left there because it belonged to someone else. A few days later a Polish girl asked "Do you think the Germans left food in our house?" After leaving, they made beds and cleaned house.

ALICE WORKS FOR RED CROSS

Had problems getting hired, but did not want to stand in line and be given food ever again. Told Red Cross about her language skills. She and six others chosen to work.

ALICE AND CO-WORKERS GIVEN VILLA TO LIVE IN AND ARE PICKED UP FOR WORK EVERY MORNING

ALICE TEACHES HERSELF ENGLISH

Read all English printed material she could find. Three weeks later became secretary to a major.

ALICE IS TAKEN TO AUSTRIA BY A FRIEND'S BROTHER WHO IS SERVING IN U.S. ARMY

ALICE RECALLS HER WORK FOR RED CROSS AND HOW SHE TRIED TO HELP THE GERMAN CIVILIANS

She always tried to get them extra supplies. Now she wishes she had retaliated in some way.

THE ONLY THING THAT KEPT THEM GOING WAS THOUGHT OF GOING HOME - SHOWING THEIR FAMILIES THEY HAD BEEN ABLE TO TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES. ALICE NEVER GOT THAT CHANCE

ALICE FEELS THE JEWS WERE TOO INNOCENT. BRUTALITY WAS TOO FOREIGN TO THEM

WHEN ALICE IS ASKED HOW SHE CAN FORGIVE THE GERMANS, SHE RESPONDS THAT IT'S EASY FOR HER TO FORGIVE THEM - BUT CAN THEY FORGIVE THEMSELVES? IF THEY CAN LIVE WITH WHAT THEY DID, SHE CAN LIVE WITH WHAT SHE SUFFERED

ALICE CANNOT THINK OF HER EXPERIENCES TOO OFTEN - SHE MUST BE ABLE TO SMILE SOMETIMES

SHE DOES NOT UNDERSTAND HOW PEOPLE WITH PROBLEMS CAN INFLICT THEM ON OTHERS THROUGH THEIR BEHAVIOR. LIFE IS TOO SHORT FOR PEOPLE TO FEEL SORRY FOR THEMSELVES

DOES NOT LIKE INDISCRIMINATE USE OF WORD "HOLOCAUST" - THERE WAS ONLY ONE

CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHY PEOPLE QUESTION THE HUNTING OF NAZI WAR CRIMINALS. HOW CAN THEY FORGET THE SIX MILLION WHO WERE SLAUGHTERED?