

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN, CLEVELAND SECTION

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	LEAH BINSTOCK	
Name of Interviewer	Toby Lewis	Date 10/30/84
Name of Abstractor	Michelle Heyer	Date 7/19/88

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Leah Binstock was born in Yaroslaw, Poland, a town of 30,000 residents. Although there was a great deal of pre-war anti-Semitism, the Jewish community was large and active, with many synagogues, Jewish schools and Zionist organization.

Leah's family was well-to-do. Her parents owned a candy factory and later a candy store. She had a sister and her grandmother also lived in Yaroslaw.

The family was very religious and Leah attended a private Jewish school. She belonged to a Zionist organization and hoped to someday go to Palestine.

The German invasion of Poland came as a surprise to the residents of Yaroslaw. They awoke one morning to find that the town was occupied by Nazi soldiers. Leah was 14 years old.

Immediately after the invasion, anti-Jewish measures were enacted and Jewish businesses and property were confiscated. After a short time, a new border was declared and all Jews were forced to move to Krakow, in the Russian-occupied zone.

When Krakow fell to the Germans there was much starvation and people began disappearing. Just before all Jews were imprisoned in a ghetto, Leah's mother decided that Leah and her sister should escape.

They left one morning before dawn without any identification papers. They noticed a group of Polish girls, carrying suitcases, marching behind German soldiers, and joined them. The group was taken to a work camp in Germany.

On the train to Germany, Leah and her sister met two Ukrainian girls who were planning to escape. When the Ukrainians jumped off the train, Leah and her sister took their identification papers.

They lived as Christians in Terezin, where they worked for the telephone company. Leah's sister learned to speak German and was given a better job. This inspired jealousy among some of their co-workers, who decided that she must be Jewish, and Leah and her sister were denounced to the Gestapo.

The Nazis originally planned to shoot them, but then decided to deport them with a group of German Jews going to Auschwitz. They arrived there in February 1943.

The sisters remained in Auschwitz until the Russian front approached. Then they were evacuated on foot with the other prisoners. The second night of the march, when the Nazi guards decided to stop at a farm to rest, Leah, her sister and four others escaped. They hid in a hay loft until they were discovered by a priest living on the farm. He hid them in his house for several days until the war officially ended in May 1945.

Leah and her sister returned to Yaroslav, hoping to find their parents. Instead, however, they learned that their parents had died in the Krakow ghetto - their father of typhus and their mother in a fire.

Not wanting to remain in Yaroslav, the sisters moved to Germany, where they opened a grocery business. Leah met her husband there through a girl she knew in Auschwitz. This girl decided that Leah must meet her brother after the war, because she had a feeling they would marry.

Leah and her new husband registered with a Zionist organization which helped refugees emigrate to the U.S. and they settled in St. Louis. They moved to Cleveland when Leah discovered that Jews were not welcome at St. Louis's public swimming pool.

Leah presently lives in Mayfield Heights, Ohio. She works in her husband's business and has three children and four grandchildren.

ABSTRACT

VIDEO 1 OF 2

PRESENT LIFE

58 years old. Lives in Mayfield Heights, Ohio. Works in husband's business. Has three children, four grandchildren. Son, Alan, works for government; daughter is a physical therapist; son, Fred, is a CPA.

LIFE BEFORE THE WAR

Leah was 14 when war began. Family was well-off. Had one sister.

PRE-WAR ANTI-SEMITISM IS VERY BAD

They felt it in all aspects of life. Leah took train to school - gentiles tried to push Jews off.

LEAH'S HOMETOWN IS YAROSLAW, POLAND

Population was 30,000.

LEAH BELONGS TO A ZIONIST ORGANIZATION

She hoped to go to Palestine

JEWISH COMMUNITY OF YAROSLAW

Very large, active community. Many synagogues, Zionist groups, private Jewish schools.

LEAH'S SISTER LIVES IN U.S. NOW

FAMILY LIFE

Parents owned a candy factory, then a candy store. Very religious. Leah went to private Jewish school, had private Hebrew tutor. Mother was very intelligent, active in family decisions. Family was close and loving. Grandmother lived in Yaroslavl, Mother's family lived nearby in Krakow.

LEAH AND SISTER GO TO ZIONIST CAMPS IN THE SUMMER

THE TOWN'S JEWISH AND GENTILE POPULATIONS ARE SOMEWHAT SEGREGATED

Leah didn't have many gentile friends because she went to Jewish school.

THE FAMILY'S RELIGIOUS LIFE

Mother was very religious. Father less so. Best holiday was Purim. Members of Jewish organizations dressed up, passed out gifts, danced and sang.

JEWES ARE AFRAID TO GO OUT DURING EASTER PARADES

Leah was curious to go into a church, but was too afraid.

FAMILY LANGUAGES

Spoke Polish at home. Didn't speak Yiddish at all. Leah spoke Hebrew well.

CULTURAL LIFE AND ENTERTAINMENT

Leah went to movies every week. Jewish theater groups came from Warsaw. Went to circus whenever it came to town. Went skating and sledding.

LEAH'S EDUCATION

Mother very interested in their education. Leah learned to sew at Jewish school, which was very useful when war broke out.

LEAH'S MEMORIES OF HER MOTHER

Mother was a very strong influence on Leah. Just before the ghetto was created, she sent Leah and her sister away, saving their lives. Whenever Leah had troubles, she thought of her mother. Mother's name was Gittel.

HELP FROM GENTILES

When Leah and sister were in a camp for Polish gentile girls, they saw three girls from hometown. These girls did not betray them. One gentile customer offered to hide Leah's family.

GERMAN INVASION

War came as a surprise. Awoke one morning to German occupation.

LIFE CHANGES FOR JEWS

Businesses were closed, property confiscated.

THE FAMILY IS FORCED TO LEAVE

A new border was created, Jews had to leave. Went to Krakow. Allowed to take only what they could carry. Leah and father go together. Germans shot at them as they crossed a field. Mother was stopped at a bridge, forced to swim across a river. She survived only because a woman on opposite side helped her.

THEY SETTLE IN KRAKOWIA, IN RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED ZONE

Leah's father worked in a store. Leah and sister attended school.

KRAKOWIA FALLS INTO GERMAN HANDS

Life was very difficult. Much starvation, forced labor, disappearances.

JUST BEFORE JEWS OF KRAKOWIA ARE SENT TO GHETTOS, MOTHER TELLS LEAH AND SISTER TO LEAVE

MOTHER AND FATHER ARE SENT TO GHETTO

After the war, Leah learned that they did well until a typhus epidemic. Father died, mother lost will to live. When ghetto was destroyed by a fire, mother was killed.

LEAH'S ESCAPE

She was 14 years old. She and sister left at dawn, without papers. Came to a bridge guarded by Germans. They began singing and were not stopped.

THEY JOIN A GROUP OF POLISH GIRLS

In one town, they saw girls with suitcases following German soldiers. Joined them, were taken to a camp. Girls were being taken to work in Germany.

LEAH AND SISTER OBTAIN UKRAINIAN PAPERS

Two Ukrainian girls planned to jump off train. Leah and sister arranged to join them, hold their papers while the girls jumped. Instead they kept the papers and stayed on train.

THEY GO TO A CAMP IN TEREZIN

Worked in a telephone company. Lived as Christians - went to church, celebrated Christmas.

THEY ARE DENOUNCED TO THE NAZIS, ARRESTED

Sister learned German, got a better job. Ukrainian girls decided she was too smart, must be Jewish. They denounced Leah and sister. Gestapo arrested them.

NAZIS PLAN TO SHOOT THEM, THEN DECIDE TO SEND THEM TO AUSCHWITZ

They were deported with a group of German Jews.

ARRIVAL AT AUSCHWITZ - FEBRUARY 1943

They passed selection, were taken to barracks.

THEY WORK LAYING TRAIN TRACKS

After a few weeks only a few of the original 60 prisoners were left.

LEAH MAKES FRIENDS WITH KAPO, IS ALLOWED TO STAY IN BARRACKS

She bribed stronger girls with bread to help her sister.

THEY ARE IN A PUNISHMENT CAMP. NO ONE IS MEANT TO SURVIVE

THEY ARE TRANSFERRED TO BIRKENAU

Leah befriended the Kapo there, and is allowed to stay in barracks.

SISTER CATCHES TYPHUS

Was sent to hospital. Leah snuck in to see her. Sister dreamt she was burned in crematorium, asked Leah to get her out. Leah bribed someone with bread, sister was released.

THEY ARE TRANSFERRED TO AN AMMUNITIONS FACTORY AT AUSCHWITZ

A commission of Germans came to find workers. Leah told them she was German, wanted to go. Kapo, a Jewish girl named Suzy, told Leah the only way she'd leave was through the chimney. But she and sister go. After liberation, Suzy was hanged by Jewish prisoners.

CONDITIONS AT AUSCHWITZ ARE BETTER, BUT THE KAPO DOES NOT LIKE LEAH, BEATS HER

THEY ARE EVACUATED WHEN THE RUSSIAN FRONT APPROACHES

Marched all day and all night. The second night the Germans decided to stop at a farm to rest.

LEAH, HER SISTER AND FOUR OTHERS ESCAPE

Hid in hay loft at night. In the morning the Germans left and they were discovered by a priest.

THEY STAY WITH THE PRIEST UNTIL THE WAR ENDS

Even when Germans took over the second floor of his house, he hid them in the basement and did not betray them.

TWO DAYS LATER, THE RUSSIANS COME

LEAH AND SISTER WANT ONLY TO FIND OUT IF PARENTS ARE ALIVE. THEY RETURN TO YAROSLAW

Discovered that parents were dead. Had no desire to stay.

THEY GO TO GERMANY, START A GROCERY BUSINESS

LIBERATION COMES IN MAY 1945

THERE IS STILL ANTI-SEMITISM AFTER WAR

Especially bad in Poland. Many Jews killed after war by organization called "AK."

LEAH MEETS HER HUSBAND

Met a girl she had known in Auschwitz. Girl had always said she wanted Leah to meet her brother - knew they'd get married.

LEAH RECALLS HANGINGS AS PUNISHMENT FOR PLANNED UPRISING AT AUSCHWITZ

Workers in the ammunitions factory were stealing explosives, planned to use it against guards. But they were caught and hanged in front of other workers. Two of Leah's best friends were hanged.

LEAH FEELS SHE SURVIVED THROUGH LUCK

VIDEO 2 OF 2

LEAH MARRIES, MOVES TO WALDENBURG, GERMANY

Sister also married and moved there.

THEY ARE COMFORTABLE FINANCIALLY, BUT STILL WANT TO LEAVE EUROPE

THEY REGISTER WITH A ZIONIST ORGANIZATION WHICH HELPS REFUGEES GO TO ISRAEL, U.S.

Joint Distribution Committee sponsored them to come to U.S.
Had several relatives in U.S.

THEY LIVE IN ST. LOUIS, THEN IN ILLINOIS. THERE THEY ENCOUNTER ANTI-SEMITISM

Jews not welcome at public pool.

A COUSIN INVITES THEM TO LIVE IN CLEVELAND

Life was very difficult at first, then husband bought business from shoemaker who became ill.

LEAH BELONGS TO TAYLOR RD. SYNAGOGUE

LEAH HAS NEVER SHARED HER EXPERIENCES, BUT WHEN SHE HEARD PEOPLE CALLING THE HOLOCAUST A MYTH, SHE KNEW SHE SHOULD TELL HER STORY

MET FELLOW SURVIVORS THROUGH KOL ISRAEL

USED TO HIDE HER TATTOOED NUMBER

Now that people are more aware, she is not so uncomfortable.
FEELS FREE AS A JEW IN AMERICA

Likes to play an active role in Jewish community
SHE RECALLS ENGLISH AIR RAIDS AT AMMUNITIONS FACTORY
PLANS TO BECOME ACTIVE IN VOLUNTEER WORK WHEN SHE RETIRES
CARRIED HOLOCAUST EXPERIENCE INSIDE. TELLING HER STORY IS A RELIEF

THINKS ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST MOST DURING HOLIDAYS

HER GREATEST LOSS WAS HER FAMILY

HAS NO MAJOR HEALTH PROBLEMS ASIDE FROM NERVOUSNESS, HEADACHES

HAD MANY DREAMS ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST AT FIRST, FEWER NOW

LEAH FINDS IT HARD TO TRUST PEOPLE

SHE WAS PESSIMISTIC DURING WAR, BUT SURVIVING MADE HER MORE OPTIMISTIC

FEELS THAT SURVIVORS ARE MORE REALISTIC ABOUT LIFE

They know that terrible things can happen.

LEAH THINKS SHE SURVIVED THROUGH LUCK, MOTHER'S INFLUENCE AND
SISTER'S PRESENCE

HER EXPERIENCES SEEM LIKE A DREAM FINDS IT HARD TO BELIEVE IT
HAPPENED TO HER

OLDEST SON WAS STRONG INFLUENCE ON HER TO BE INTERVIEWED. WANTS
FUTURE GENERATIONS TO KNOW THAT HOLOCAUST REALLY HAPPENED

SURVIVOR'S MESSAGE IS TO BE STRONG. NEVER GIVE UP

THESE INTERVIEWS ARE THE BEST WAY TO MEMORIALIZE THE HOLOCAUST