

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	BERTHA LAUTMAN		
Name of Interviewer	Leatrice Rabinsky	Date	1/23/85
Name of Abstractor	Judy Levendula	Date	12/7/87

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Bertha Lautman was born Bertha Berkovitch in Czechoslovakia. She is from a very religious family; father was a Hassid.

March 23, 1942, Bertha was taken by train to Auschwitz. Mother had taken her out of hiding to send her instead of father to Auschwitz. But three months later, parents, along with her youngest brother, were taken to Majdanek. Parents were killed almost immediately. Brother survived.

Bertha, as a teenager, was put to work digging ditches in Auschwitz. Then in August 1942, she was moved to Birkenau and worked as part of the Leichencommando, taking care of the dead bodies. October 31, 1944, she was taken from Birkenau to Bergen-Belsen, as the war neared its end.

On April 15, 1945 the American soldiers liberated her camp, and she was reunited with sister Fanny and brother, Hershey. She married another survivor and came to the U.S. in 1949.

Bertha has made three return trips to the concentration camps she was in, as well as Majdanek, where her parents were killed. She has gone back with her children and high school students from the Cleveland area.

ABSTRACT

VIDEO 1 OF 3

CURRENT LIFE

Bertha and husband have three grown children, youngest is a son in medical school at Ohio State University. Daughter, married with three children, living in Cleveland. Second son, married, two children, living in New Jersey.

Husband is in furniture business. Bertha directs arts and crafts at Montefiore Home, and has worked there for 15 years.

EARLY LIFE

Bertha was born in Czechoslovakia Bertha Berkovitch. Lived in Banska Stiavnica. Memories of warm feelings within family, Friday night meal, reading Hebrew stories with mother. Father was Hassid.

FAMILY LIFE

Had six siblings. No clear memories of two older brothers. Three sisters, Lilly, Magda and Fanny - also a survivor and here now, in Cleveland. Youngest brother, Hershey.

Shows photograph of parents and family, left by parents for any survivor to give to children.

Father worked in lumber yard. Sister Lilly became dressmaker; the boys went to Yeshiva.

BERTHA RECEIVES RELIGIOUS TRAINING AT HOME

Hebrew teacher lived with family.

SCHOOL

Bertha and Magda went to school in Swidnica. Only three Jewish families in town, but experienced no anti-Semitism. Would go home on weekends by wagon.

BERTHA LEARNS FIVE LANGUAGES

In five years in elementary school, learned Russian, Slovak, German. Polish learned from father's co-workers in lumberyard.

She learned Hungarian in 1944 when Hungarians came to Auschwitz.

BEGINNING OF ANTI-SEMITISM 1939

Non-Jews forbidden by Slovak government from visiting homes of Jews. Teachers hit them, gave them poor grades without testing them.

1942: BEGINNING OF BREAKUP OF FAMILY

Lilly was already married. Fanny and Magda were hidden in Presov. Mother hides Bertha with neighbors. To spare father, mother gets Bertha out of hiding to go with Nazis.

AUSCHWITZ

After two or three days on a cattle train, March 23, 1942, Bertha arrives at Auschwitz. SS greeted train with huge German shepherd dogs. Guards and dogs walk prisoners to camp where they see sign on gate: Arbeit Macht Frei. Made to undress, shaved, given clothing that was inadequate. She wonders how she withstood the cold. Bertha's job - digging ditches. Was supervised by SS and vicious dogs that would jump if worker tried to straighten up or stretch.

FOOD

For breakfast prisoners got black coffee. Lunch was soup made from horsemeat, and supper was coffee and very little bread.

BIRKENAU

August 1942, Bertha is moved from Auschwitz to Birkenau. Worse conditions. Shelves, not bunks. No floors, just earth. Barracks. Worked tending dead bodies. Had to take bodies off the street, throw on trucks for crematorium.

VIDEO 2 OF 3

SELECTIONS

Made when they would march in from work. Biggest selection made on Jewish holidays.

BERTHA GETS A NEW JOB

Next job at Birkenau was to unpack new prisoners. Found suitcases from brother's wife.

SHE RECALLS SEEING MENGELE

Recalls arrival of transport and selection made by Dr. Mengele.

BERTHA DISCUSSES THE SONDERCOMMANDO

The Sondercommando worked in the crematoria. 1944 was the worst. Recalls smells, sounds, sights of 24 hours a day of burning of people.

HEARS ABOUT OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS

She heard Lilly came, pregnant and sent directly to crematorium. Family friend Gershan Bash said Magda came, also, and too was sent directly to crematorium. Fanny - caught in Bratislava, living as non-Jew on false papers. November 1, 1944 Fanny came to Auschwitz. Parents taken three months after Bertha (June 1942) with brother Hershey to Majdanek. She heard parents worked in kitchen.

BERTHA LEAVES BIRKENAU OCT. 31, 1944

VIDEO 3 OF 3

BERGEN-BELSEN

Many girls taken out of Birkenau to Bergen-Belsen on Oct. 31, 1942. SS was trying to empty camp because war coming to end. Bertha was Working in hospital in Bergen-Belsen.

LIBERATION

They heard shooting. SS put out white flags and wore white armbands as a sign of surrender. On April 15, 1945, they were liberated by American soldiers.

BERTHA IS REUNITED WITH HER FAMILY

Reunited with sister after three years, then she and sister were reunited with brother.

BERTHA MARRIES IN KOSICE

IMMIGRATED TO U.S. AUGUST 1949

RETURN TRIPS TO AUSCHWITZ, MAJDANEK AND BIRKENAU

She made return trips in 1975 1979 and 1983.