

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	SYLVIA MALCHMACHER	
Name of Interviewer	Sidney Elsner	Date 1/14/85
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NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Sylvia Malchmacher was born in Vilna, Poland in 1926. Vilna was nearly one-third Jewish, and was the location for many synagogues, Hebrew schools and Universities. In addition, there were many Zionist organizations in the town.

Sylvia's family, the Distels, was happy and devoted. She had two sisters - one four years older and one four years younger. Her father was a printer and her mother kept house. The family was religious, but in a sense her father was fairly modern. He did not wear a beard, but was well-educated about Judaism. Their home was full of books and newspapers, and they had a radio.

Until the war began, in 1939, Sylvia was not aware of anti-Semitism. The eventual anti-Semitic actions and feelings in Vilna were, in her opinion, due to the war.

In 1939 Poland was divided between Russia and Germany, and Vilna was in the Russian zone. Many people panicked as food was rationed and people were forced to work for the government.

In October of 1939 Vilna became a Lithuanian zone and there was immediately a pogrom lasting several days. Although the Russians intervened to help the Jews, Vilna remained in the hands of the Lithuanians until June 1940.

Jews in Vilna were aware of the atrocities being committed by the Germans, but no one connected these atrocities with themselves. The German invasion, in July 1941, came as a total surprise.

Most of the gentiles in Poland actually welcomed the German invasion, feeling they'd been liberated by the Russians. They did very little to help the Jews; in fact, many turned Jews in to the Gestapo in exchange for money.

Within a few months of the invasion, a ghetto was created. Since Sylvia's house was located inside the boundary, the family was not forced to move, however ten other couples moved in with them. Conditions were bad; there was very little food and men were forced to go out to work.

After a year in the ghetto, Sylvia's entire family was allowed to leave because her sister was sent to work in a fur factory. She worked converting raw furs and confiscated furs into coats for German soldiers. The family lived in a basement room and her father did odd jobs.

The ghetto was liquidated in 1943, but those working outside - 2,000 people - remained in Vilna until 1944. On March 17, 1944 all children under 18 and old people were ordered to report to the hospital. Although Sylvia was 18, she was listed in the family's pass as being 16, so she reported with her younger sister. Suspecting she was older, the guards sent Sylvia home, but her sister never returned. Trucks took everyone from the hospital that afternoon.

The Jews remaining in Vilna were deported on May 16, 1944. They were loaded on trains and told they were being sent to a work camp. They were taken to a camp in the Kaiserwald, where they remained for three weeks, then, in August 1944 they were sent to Stutthof.

Sylvia remained in Stutthof for two weeks under horrible conditions. There was very little food, no work to occupy their time and a great deal of sickness.

After two weeks, there was a selection for work. All the women in the camp were forced to stand in line and were inspected. Sylvia's mother was too old and her sister had an infected sore on her leg. Sylvia, however, was among the 100 girls chosen for work.

The next day they were taken away. Sylvia saw her mother and sister as she left the camp. She never saw them again.

They were taken to Milldorf, a camp near Mannheim. Her first job was clearing the debris as tunnels were blasted into a mountain. Soon she was assigned new work, washing clothes for the German camp staff.

Sylvia remained in Milldorf until liberation on May 2, 1945. That morning they heard Russian bombs nearby. Most of the prisoners were evacuated, but the kitchen and cleaning staff, including Sylvia, was left behind. That afternoon, they were liberated by American troops.

She soon went to a Displaced Persons camp, but longed to return to Vilna, as the family had agreed that any survivors would meet there after the war. As she was leaving, however, she received news that her father, mother and sister had died.

Sylvia remained at the DP camp, where she attended a training school, and married Israel Malchmacher in 1946. They came to Cleveland in 1949, sponsored by the Jewish Family Service.

Sylvia and her husband, a retired meat plant worker, currently live in Cleveland. They have two grown daughters.

ABSTRACT

VIDEO 1 OF 3

EARLY LIFE

Born in Vilna, Poland in 1926. Had a sister four years older and a sister four years younger. Father was a printer, mother kept house. Very happy, devoted family. Went to Jewish school - spoke Yiddish at school, learned Polish, Hebrew. School got no money from the government, so family paid tuition.

JEWISH LIFE IN VILNA

Total population was around 250,000. Jewish population was 80,000. Progressive, educated city. Many synagogues, Hebrew schools and University. Sylvia feels town was very accepting of Jews. Many Zionist organization - nearly every child belonged to one.

SYLVIA'S CHILDHOOD

Had a busy, active life. Went skating, sledding, visited friends.

THE FAMILY'S RELATIONS WITH GENTILES

Most of their friends were Jewish. Had cordial relations with gentile neighbors. Jews were not concentrated in one part of the city.

MORE ON FAMILY LIFE AND CHILDHOOD

Father was modern in a religious sense - he didn't wear a beard. However he was well educated about Judaism and the family kept kosher, went to Temple every Sabbath. Sylvia had carefree life. House was filled with books, newspapers. Family had a radio.

SYLVIA BEGINS TO NOTICE ANTI-SEMITISM

First aware of it around age 10 or 11. She feels it was stirred up by impending war. No anti-Semitism by the government at that point.

POLAND IS DIVIDED BY RUSSIA AND GERMANY, 1939. VILNA IN RUSSIAN ZONE

People became panicked. Food was rationed. Father's boss was deported, father had to go to work for government. But life for younger people improved. Under Polish government, Sylvia could not have gone to University. Under Russians she could.

FAMILY NAME - DISTEL

CONTROL OF VILNA IS PASSED TO LITHUANIA, THERE IS IMMEDIATELY A
POGROM - OCTOBER 1939

Pogrom lasted several days, Many killed. Russians
intervened, but Vilna remained Lithuanian.

RUSSIANS TAKE VILNA BACK, JUNE 1940

POLISH JEWS IN RUSSIAN ZONE ARE AWARE OF ATROCITIES UNDER HITLER

Didn't really believe it, though. Some Jews ran away from
German to Russian zone. They were given housing and food.

NO ONE EXPECTED THE GERMAN INVASION

Sylvia's school prepared for graduation, but invasion
prevented it.

GERMAN INVASION - JULY 1, 1941

Heard planes, bombs began falling. Jewish hospital was
across from Sylvia's house - heard sirens all day and night.
Next day streets were full of German soldiers. Most gentiles
were happy - felt they had been liberated from the Russians.
Jews were afraid.

SOME JEWISH MEN ARE SENT TO WORK CAMPS. ONE GROUP IS MASSACRED
IN WOODS

VERY FEW GENTILES HELPED JEWS

Many received money for identifying Jews.

A GHETTO IS CREATED WITHIN A FEW MONTHS OF INVASION - SEPTEMBER
6, 1941

Sylvia's house was inside ghetto, they were able to stay
there.

THERE IS ANOTHER GHETTO IN ANOTHER SECTION OF VILNA. NOT ENOUGH
ROOM FOR ALL JEWS, SO SOME ARE SENT IMMEDIATELY TO CONCENTRATION
CAMPS

CONDITIONS IN GHETTO

Ten couples - some with children - move into Sylvia's house.
They couldn't bring anything with them. Very little food. Most
people had very little hope. Men were forced to go out to work.

AFTER A YEAR IN THE GHETTO, THE FAMILY IS TAKEN OUT BECAUSE
SISTER IS A FURRIER

She went to work in a factory converting confiscated furs
into coats for soldiers. Entire family went to live outside
ghetto.

MORE ON THE GHETTO

Extremely overcrowded. People had passes, were divided into
different categories according to status.

FIRST SELECTION

To reduce overcrowding, some people were given yellow
passes, told to report to gate. All people wanted to go -
thought they were being freed.

SISTER HAS YELLOW PASS

Only heads of families could bring others out with them, so
father took the passport. Because only children could leave on
parents' pass, sister, age 19, wore pigtails and child's clothes.

AFTER PEOPLE WITH YELLOW PASSES LEAVE, GERMANS LIQUIDATE GHETTO.
THOSE STILL INSIDE ARE TAKEN TO THE WOODS, SHOT. NEXT DAY THOSE
WITH YELLOW PASSES RETURN TO THE GHETTO

10,000 remained. Sylvia's family found 25 people hiding in
their house.

MEMORIES OF OLDER SISTER, RACHEL

She often went out without her yellow star to get extra
food. Many others did so and were reported by gentiles, but
Rachel was never reported.

A FAMILY SYLVIA KNEW IS HIDDEN BY GENTILES

SYLVIA AND RACHEL DISCUSS LEAVING BEFORE THE INVASION, BUT THEY
DON'T WANT TO LEAVE PARENTS

VIDEO 2 OF 3

MORE ON SISTER'S WORK AS A FURRIER AND FAMILY LEAVING GHETTO

Left in 1942, along with 2,000 others. Lived in a basement
room. Father did odd jobs. Gentiles in the factory gave them
food. They were watched by police.

YOUNGER SISTER IS DEPORTED

On March 17, 1944 Germans ordered all under 18 to report for an inspection at hospital. Sylvia was 18, but listed as 16 on family pass, so she went with sister. The commander suspected she was older, sent her and two others away. Trucks later took all the children away. Sylvia never saw her sister again.

GHETTO HAD BEEN LIQUIDATED IN 1943, BUT THOSE OUTSIDE STAY UNTIL 1944

THEY ARE EVACUATED MAY 16, 1944

Loaded on trains, told they were going to a work camp.

THEY ARE TAKEN TO THE KAISERWALD

Family was still together. Father in a different part of camp, but they saw him frequently. He went out to work every day. Stayed two or three weeks.

THE FAMILY IS SENT TO SEVERAL SMALL CAMPS. IN AUGUST 1944 THEY GO TO STUTTHOF

MORE ON FURRIERS' WORK

They worked on raw furs and collars, cuffs from confiscated coats. There was another factory for Jews in Vilna, but Sylvia doesn't know what they did.

ARRIVAL AT STUTTHOF

After three days on train, arrived at camp. Horrible conditions - much sickness.

FATHER IS SEPARATED FROM SYLVIA AND MOTHER. THEY NEVER SEE HIM AGAIN

CONDITIONS AT STUTTHOF

No work, nothing to do. Many roll calls. Older sister risked her life to get second helpings of food for mother. Stayed two weeks.

SYLVIA IS SELECTED FOR WORK

100 girls were to be selected. All women stood in line. Sylvia selected, but mother was too old, and sister had a sore on her leg, so they were not.

SELECTED GIRLS ARE TAKEN AWAY THE NEXT DAY

Sylvia saw mother and sister at gate as she went out. She never saw them again.

SYLVIA IS TAKEN TO MILLDORF, NEAR MANNHEIM

There were 50 other girls from Vilna there, and 200 Hungarian girls. Sylvia worked with other men and women digging tunnels into the mountains. After a short time she is taken to work washing the Germans' clothes. It was more difficult than tunneling. Scrubbed clothes by hand, hung them outside. In winter their hands froze.

SYLVIA REMAINS AT MILLDORF UNTIL LIBERATION - MAY 1945

Heard Russians bombing. Most prisoners were evacuated, but Sylvia and other washers and kitchen workers left behind. One morning they went out, saw Germans running away. Later that day - May 2, 1945 - they were liberated by American troops.

MANY DIE FROM EATING TOO MUCH AFTER LIBERATION

SYLVIA GOES TO A DISPLACED PERSONS CAMP

Didn't know what to do. Couldn't even feel emotions for many days. At camp, asked for survivors from Vilna, but didn't find any.

SYLVIA DECIDES TO GO TO VILNA

Before they were separated, family agreed to meet back in Vilna.

As she is leaving, she meets people from Vilna, who give her news of her family. Mother and sister died of typhus in Stutthof. Father was put on a refugee ship, which sank. He was drowned.

SYLVIA REMAINS IN DP CAMP

Went to ORT (organization, rehabilitation and training) school.

SHE MEETS AND MARRIES HER HUSBAND IN 1946

His name is Israel Malchmacher. From Radom, Poland.

THEY ARRIVE IN CLEVELAND IN JUNE 1949

Transport was arranged by Jewish Federation. Had no family in Cleveland, but were sponsored by Jewish Family Service.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER WAR, SYLVIA SHARES HER EXPERIENCES ONLY WITH OTHER SURVIVORS

SYLVIA AND HER HUSBAND DO NOT SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH THEIR CHILDREN WHEN THEY WERE YOUNG

Wanted to spare them the pain. But as children got older and asked questions, Sylvia became more open.

SYLVIA DREAMS OFTEN OF THE HOLOCAUST

HUSBAND GOES TO WORK AT MEAT PACKING PLANT AFTER ARRIVAL IN CLEVELAND. STAYS 30 YEARS

SYLVIA FEELS IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO EDUCATE PEOPLE ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

IS SHARING HER STORY AS A MEMORIAL TO HER FAMILY