

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	INGE WEISS		
Name of Interviewer	Rita Stonehill	Date	8/24/84
Name of Abstractor	Ruth Rubin	Date	11/4/86

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Inge Weiss was born in 1923 in Hannover, Germany, an industrial town in the northwestern part of the country. Her father was born in Poland, came to Germany in 1918, and became a men's clothing manufacturer. Her mother was born in Germany. She also had a sister four years younger than she. German law said that a woman who married a foreigner lost her German citizenship and took on that of her husband, and that children took their father's nationality. Hence she and her sister were Polish although they had never been in Poland.

Inge's family was active in the Jewish community, and they kept a religious, kosher home. She had a Jewish education, but she also regularly attended public school. She also attended business school for a short time. She loved sports and belonged to a German athletic club. Tutoring in English was also part of her program because the family had planned to emigrate to the U.S., but deportation and the war overtook them.

Inge remembers that, as the Nazi power emerged, signs were posted saying, "Jews and dogs not allowed." She was ostracized in school, and friendships with Germans cooled. She had to leave the athletic club. Her father's store was vandalized.

The Weiss family was deported to Poland in October 1938. They left with only the clothes they were wearing and travelled by train to the Polish border. Neither country wanted the Jews, but Poland finally had to accept them.

They stayed in crowded stables in Spoczynek, and Jews nearby provided clothing. Then the family moved in with relatives in Kalisz. Their father's sisters were there, but only their father could communicate with them; Inge, her mother, and her sister couldn't speak Polish or Yiddish.

When the war started, the family was deported to Krakow where they lived under very poor conditions until 1941. Her father couldn't work, and fear was constant, with selections taking place all the time.

Then they escaped to Warta, their father's birthplace, which he felt would be safer. Her mother and sister took the train and pretended to be Germans. Inge and her father walked; the Germans caught and jailed them, but smugglers freed them.

In Warta, many atrocities occurred. Ten leaders of the Jewish community were hanged in public and left on view a week. Thereafter there was no formal Jewish leadership and no news.

Finally all Jews were gathered in the square, and Inge's family was separated. Inge begged a German to let her and her sister stay with their mother. The German couldn't do it, but told her she was going to Lodz and gave her the name of a girl to look up. The girl was secretary to Rumkovsky, the ghetto leader who got her and her father jobs. They were there from 1942 to 1944.

In 1944 she and her father were deported to Auschwitz in cattle cars; she was separated from her father. Then, in September 1944, Inge was sent to Bergen-Belsen, a POW camp 75 km. from Hannover, run by the German army. The new inmates were well-treated, and Inge had a job distributing bread because she spoke German.

Conditions worsened when a new commander came who had formerly been commandant of Auschwitz. Inge became ill with typhoid fever. The British liberated and decontaminated the camp. Inge lived in the German officers' quarters until she recovered.

After she got well, Inge was disoriented and travelled back and forth between Hannover and Bergen-Belsen. The Red Cross could not find her immediate family, but found some relatives in Israel and the U.S.

In 1946, Inge returned to Hannover, roomed with a German family, and worked for the Jewish community. She met her husband at the Jewish Community Center and married him in 1947. Her husband drove a truck, and Inge got half her father's store and ran a notions business there. The survivors established a self-help group which served as an intermediary between them and the German government.

Inge and her family set sail for the U.S. in September 1949 after they obtained papers for their son, Michael, who was born in 1948. They came to Cleveland because N.Y. was crowded with refugees, and they had relatives in Cleveland. A member of the Ratner family helped them find an apartment and a job.

ABSTRACT

VIDEO 1 OF 2

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Inge Weiss, born in Hannover, Germany in 1923. Now lives in University Heights, Ohio with retired husband. Immigrated to U.S. in 1949. Has two sons: Michael, 36, attorney in Cleveland; younger son, age 33, living in Boston.

FAMILY LIFE IN HANNOVER

Lived in Hannover, an industrial town in N.W. Germany with active Jewish community. Father was born in Poland, came to Germany in 1918, the youngest of a large family. Mother born in Germany. Inge also had a sister, four years younger.

THE FAMILY WERE CITIZENS OF POLAND, ALTHOUGH THEY LIVED IN GERMANY

German law decreed when a German woman marries a foreigner she loses German citizenship and becomes husband's nationality. All ensuing children also become father's nationality. Thus, Inge was legally Polish without ever having been in Poland.

MORE ON FAMILY, RELIGIOUS LIFE

Father was a manufacturer of men's clothing. Family was religious, had kosher home, belonged to synagogue. Inge was a member of a Zionist youth group; went to Hebrew school in afternoons, after attending German public school. German was spoken at home. Father's family - two uncles - lived nearby, and an aunt lived in southern Germany. Later, her father opened a men's retail store.

INGE'S EDUCATION

Her favorite extracurricular activity was sports. She belonged to a German athletic club. Had to quit after Hitler came to power. Higher education was not available to her because she was considered Polish and Jewish. Attended a business school for a short time.

EVIDENCE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Signs in public places: "Jews and dogs not allowed." Ostracized in school; friendships with German schoolmates and neighbors cooled. Had to quit athletic club. Father's store vandalized many times. Nazis physically prevented any Germans from entering the store.

DEPORTATION OF INGE'S FAMILY TO POLAND - OCTOBER 1938

Left in early morning with only the clothes on their backs - father, mother, Inge and younger sister. Everyone was assembled in a large hall.

IF THEY DO NOT RETURN TO POLAND, THEY WILL LOSE CITIZENSHIP

The Polish government gave an ultimatum to all Polish citizens living outside Poland to return to Poland before October 30, 1938 or lose their Polish citizenship.

MORE ON DEPORTATION

Traveled by train. Arrived at the border between Germany and Poland. Women and children were taken by truck to a small town; men had to walk. Germans and Poles negotiated regarding the Polish Jews; neither wanted them. Finally the Poles had to accept the people. Poles put the Jews up in crowded stables in Spoczynek. Inge and her family lived in Spoczynek 1938-1939. Jews living in the surrounding community provided food and clothing.

POLES MOVE JEWS FROM BORDER TOWN SHORTLY BEFORE OUTBREAK OF WAR

German Jews were free to go anywhere in Poland. Inge's mother returned to Hannover for more possessions. Returned on the last train into Poland.

FAMILY GOES TO KALISZ JUST BEFORE OUTBREAK OF WAR

Father's sisters lived in Kalisz. Inge's family moved in with Polish relatives. Germans arrived in Kalisz in September 1939. Most of the Jews had to work in German factories in Kalisz. Inge's family was spared. Crowded living conditions, Polish relatives were poor. Only the father could communicate with sisters; Inge, her sister and mother could not speak Yiddish or Polish.

DEPORTATION TO KRAKOW

Sent in crowded cattle cars. Local Jewish community found family a room. Krakow did not have a ghetto, but Germans made one. Inge's family lived in Krakow until 1941. Conditions were poor; father did not work.

DEPORTATION TO CZESTOCHOWA

Some people, including Inge's family, sent to Czestochowa. Very primitive conditions. Lived in constant fear; selections took place all the time.

THE FAMILY RUNS AWAY TO WARTA, BIRTHPLACE OF INGE'S FATHER

Warta was father's birthplace. He felt they would be better off there with relatives. Mother and sister took the train, pretending to be Germans. Father and Inge walked to Warta, helped by professional smugglers. Warta was located in an area which Germans were planning to annex to the Third Reich.

INGE AND HER FATHER ARE CAPTURED, BUT ESCAPE AGAIN

Inge and her father were caught by German shepherds. They were taken back to Czystochowa and jailed. The smugglers then got them out and took them to a small town near Warta and hid them in a barn and then with a Jewish family for a week, until Inge's cut feet healed. Arrived in Warta in fall 1941.

LIFE IN THE GHETTO IN WARTA

Stayed with father's family in the ghetto. Inge's father became ill with a bleeding ulcer, but they managed to get a doctor to come to the ghetto and treat him.

ATROCITIES OCCUR IN WARTA

The leaders of the Jewish community, ten men, were hanged in the public square by the Germans as a warning. The Jewish population had to view the bodies for a week, even the families of the hung men.

MORE ON LIFE IN WARTA

There was no formal leadership among the people. Survival was of the utmost importance to everyone individually. Warta was a small ghetto. No meetings were permitted, and no news was allowed. Selections took place all the time, especially of the old and very young.

FINAL SELECTION TAKES PLACE IN WARTA

Everyone was gathered in the square. Inge's family was separated. Inge did not know where her father was taken. Inge, her sister and mother were taken to a church. No facilities or food and extremely crowded. Another selection took place in the church. Inge and her sister tried to protect the mother. Inge was separated from her sister and mother. Inge begged a German to let them stay together. He told her she would be sent to Lodz, and to look up a girl there who might help her.

INGE AND HER FATHER ARE REUNITED, GO TO LODZ

They again travel in cattle cars for two days. 65 people, sealed in without food and water.

INGE GOES TO WORK IN A MUNITIONS FACTORY

Inge looked up the girl whom the Nazi told her about. She was the secretary of Rumkovsky, leader of the ghetto. She got the father a job in the kitchen. Inge worked in a munition factory. They lived in one room. They received a little bit of bread once a week, which Inge saved from one time to another, and obtained scraps from the kitchen. They arrived in Lodz in 1942 and lived there until 1944.

GERMANS EMPTY LODZ GHETTO BEFORE ADVANCING RUSSIANS. INGE AND HER FATHER ARE SENT TO AUSCHWITZ, WHERE SHE REMAINS FOR TEN DAYS

Deported in cattle cars to Auschwitz. Traveled for two days. Inge was in Auschwitz only ten days. She was separated from her father. Barracks had hard three-tier bunks, five people to a bunk, and cold showers. One pot of soup and one slice of bread per bunk were given. Inge did not know about the gas chambers. The women had shaven heads and everyone wore wooden shoes, Dutch shoes. Every morning starting at 5 a.m. the inmates were counted for hours in the square.

INGE SEES HER FATHER FOR THE LAST TIME

Inge had a last glimpse of her father carrying bricks. She was severely beaten by a woman guard for talking to him.

INGE IS SENT TO BERGEN-BELSEN IN SEPTEMBER 1944

Bergen-Belsen was a prisoner-of-war camp run by the German Army, 75 km. from Hannover. The new inmates lived in tents, and were well treated. The commander of the camp was later shipped to the Eastern Front for being too soft. The Germans even made special dinners for the Jewish prisoners for the high holy days. Inge had a job distributing bread because she could speak German. The camp had all kinds of prisoners - Poles, political prisoners and non-Jews. Inge was beaten by a guard and later got typhoid.

NEW COMMANDER COMES TO BERGEN-BELSEN

Auschwitz was liquidated at the end of 1944, and the commandant, Col. Kramer, became commander of Bergen-Belsen.

THE END OF THE WAR IS NEAR

Prisoners were aware of the imminent end of the war. They heard many airplanes. Conditions worsened with the new commander. The doctor gave Inge a shot for the typhoid, which probably saved her life.

BRITISH LIBERATE BERGEN-BELSEN

Inge understood English. British distributed food, and many prisoners died of diarrhea. Mistakes were made, but the soldiers were very kind. They had to decontaminate the prisoners and the camp. Inge was put into the German officers' quarters after decontamination. She lived in Bergen-Belsen and recovered from her typhoid.

RED CROSS SEARCHES FOR INGE'S FAMILY, FINDS RELATIVES IN U.S. AND ISRAEL

They did not find her immediate family, but traced some family to Israel and U.S.

INGE RETURNS TO HANNOVER, BUT THEN GOES BACK TO BERGEN-BELSEN

Could not stay in Hannover, was disoriented, and returned to Bergen-Belsen.

INGE AGAIN RETURNS TO HANNOVER IN 1946

Inge found a room with a German family and worked for the Jewish community. HIAS and JDC helped with emigration formalities and application for an affidavit.

INGE MEETS HER HUSBAND

met him at work in the Jewish Community Center. Mostly Polish Jews lived in Hannover, and only a few of the original Jews from Hannover returned. Inge's husband was liberated from Dachau. Her husband found his brother at Bergen-Belsen.

INGE MARRIES IN 1947

They lived with a widow. Inge's husband had a permit to drive a truck and earned a living driving people and supplies. Inge got half of her father's store back and ran a store selling notions, etc.

THE SURVIVORS IN HANNOVER FORM A SELF-HELP COMMITTEE

Took care of the needs of the survivors, and were intermediaries between the survivors and the German government.

VIDEO 2 OF 2

INGE IS ANXIOUS TO LEAVE GERMANY, BUT THEY CANNOT LEAVE IMMEDIATELY

They had to remain longer, because they needed another affidavit, for Michael, her oldest son, who was born in 1948.

INGE AND HER FAMILY SAIL TO THE U.S. SEPTEMBER 1949

Ship's name was "General Hershey." Michael came down with the measles. Inge stayed with him in the ship's hospital. Ship was very crowded and conditions were rather rough but they were well taken care of.

INGE AND HER FAMILY ARRIVE IN U.S.

HIAS or JDA met the Weiss family at the port of debarkation, and put them up in a hotel for a week. HIAS urged them to leave N.Y., and join Inge's family in Cleveland. N.Y. was crowded with refugees, and HIAS was urging people to find homes elsewhere. Inge was anxious to come to Cleveland to her only family.

WEISS FAMILY'S EARLY YEARS IN CLEVELAND

Members of the Ratner family found the Weiss family an apartment and Mr. Weiss a job with Hotstream Co. Later they got him into the carpenter's union. He learned the business, and later formed his own business. Inge had her second son. At first the Jewish community helped them with their basic needs. They bought their first house in the Harvard-Lee area. The boys went to Hebrew school and later the family joined Gates of Hope Synagogue (Mayfield Hillcrest Synagogue).

MORE ON PREPARATION FOR EMIGRATION FROM GERMANY BEFORE 1939

Inge learned English with a tutor as a child because the family was planning to emigrate to U.S. before their deportation and the war overtook them.

INGE'S REFLECTIONS ON HER EXPERIENCES

She appreciates the meaning of freedom. As aging progresses, her health is deteriorating, perhaps as a result of her early years. She has shared her experiences with her sons only recently, and thinks that maybe that was a mistake. She does not think her sons were adversely affected as second generation of survivors. Inge's husband lost a wife and child in the Holocaust. Inge is proud to be a Jew, but fears that history might repeat itself.