

Adler, Esthy
RG-50.106*0014
Interview on January 13, 1993
Two Audiocassettes

Abstract

Esthy Adler does not know her real name or when and where she was born. Some of her memories of her past are factual, others are things that might have happened based on stories she was told or things she thinks happened. She believes her first language was German. Her papers say she was born in Kaliningrad, where she thinks her parents had a summer home. She thinks her parents tried to take her there to live with a caretaker, but she wouldn't let them leave her there. She remembers staying with her mother's sister in a compound where there were frequent bombings. During their stay, Esthy's mother died. Her father eventually remarried, but the family did not approve. At one point, the Germans found Esthy, her father, and her stepmother. That was the last time she saw her father. Esthy, her aunt and her two children, and her stepmother were relocated to another compound where they slept on cots in places similar to bunkers. One day, the group was led outside where they saw a man digging a ditch and holding a machine gun. They were lined up and the machine gun opened fire. However, Esthy woke up and made her way back to the barrack where she found her stepmother and another woman. Only one other child survived with Esthy. Eventually they were loaded onto a cattle car and taken to another area. She thinks it may have been Treblinka, which was a work camp at that time. Esthy knows this was in 1942. While there, she was able to escape into the forest with her stepmother via a hole and tunnel dug by another woman. Her stepmother was eventually killed by machine gun fire. Esthy then got sick from drinking poisoned water and was nursed back to health by a peasant. Eventually, Esthy was living with a woman named Margot. Margot made her get a job in a factory sewing pants. Another man thought this was wrong and paid for Esthy to go to a private school and stop working. Esthy was fourteen at the time. She moved in with the Katz family, whom she did not like. After leaving the Katz's at the age of eighteen, she went to graduate school and was accepted into a special program where she was trained as a paralegal. She met Jim Adler, her husband, at the University of Heidelberg in 1954.

Time Coded Notes **Tape One, Side A**

- 00:00 Esthy has been learning the record of her childhood at the urging of her daughter so that her children and grandchildren would know her past. She does not know her real name, her real birth date, or her place of birth. During the interview, she talks about her past as she puts things together in her mind. Some things are factual, some are things she might remember, and some are things she thinks might have happened based on stories she was told. Esthy concluded that her first language was German. Her papers say that she was born in Kaliningrad [Königsberg], which is near the Baltic Sea. She thinks her family had a summer home there. Esthy believes her parents took her up there to leave her with their caretaker for safekeeping. She carried on so much about it that her parents decided to bring her back with them.
- 00:50 Esthy stayed with her mother's sister in something that resembled a compound. She has memories of violence. One time, during dinner, she heard an awful crash, which was the sound of the first of many bombs to come.

- 01:20 She remembers knowing that a bomb shelter was being set up in the cellar. At one point, Esthy's mother died. She remembers the night she died. Her dad was crying and he took her over to her aunt's house, without seeing her mother.
- 01:40 Sometime later, her father remarried. Esthy knows that the family did not approve of the marriage. The compound was in Poland, so she had to learn Polish. She did not go to school because Jews were not allowed to attend them.
- 02:10 At one point, Esthy's stepmother put her on a windowsill while she went to hide in a bunker. She told her that if a policeman asked where her parents were, she should say that they were not there. German and Polish policemen did ask and left after a while. When Esthy's father came home, he was angry with her stepmother for leaving her alone in the house. Esthy had the feeling that her stepmother did not care whether or not she was taken away. At that time, children were not taken away without their parents. She realized that she was not very safe. The family went to a cellar very often, where they would hide from the Germans. They were very thirsty, but no one complained. Soon, they were ordered out of the cellar by German soldiers. There was a lot of noise and they heard crashes.
- 03:02 That was the last time Esthy saw her father. She ended up with her stepmother, her aunt, and her two daughters. Everyone else disappeared. They ended up at the end of the city in a compound. There was a gate and barbed wire. They stayed in places similar to barracks and slept on cots. They were told to stay in the barracks and the women were marched out to the fields to work. At night, when they came back, everyone got some food. One day, they were marched out to an area behind the barracks.
- 03:40 Esthy noticed an old man digging ditches. There was a machine gun there. Everyone was lined up and the machine guns opened fire on them. Everyone tumbled into the ditch. Esthy woke up, dazed, on top of some bodies. There were also some bodies on top of her. She was bleeding from her leg. Esthy went back to her old barrack and found her stepmother, alive, with another woman. Only one other child was still alive. The women were shielding them, but they were loaded into a cattle car which took them to another compound.
- 04:34 The compound was fenced in. There were two other children in the group. They might have been at Treblinka, which was a work camp at that time, not an extermination camp. This must have happened in 1942.
- 05:22 One day, a soldier took one of the girls away. Esthy did not know where he was taking her and she wanted to go with him too. He did not let her join them, but she followed him from a distance. She saw him take her into a hut. On the table there was a woman and he shot both the woman and the child. Esthy found out later that the woman had a contagious disease so he must have decided to protect the children from getting sick and therefore he killed the mother with the child.

[Interview continues on January 15]

Everyone was very affected by the death of the woman and her child. One night, Esthy was awakened, along with her stepmother and another woman. They were told to gather their few belongings and go down a hole, which a woman had dug for days, and run into the fields. This must have been in early fall. They traveled by night and slept during the day, taking food from farms. Esthy's next memory is of a forest. Her stepmother's brother was there. There was a mixed group of people with a few children.

07:20 There was a large group of people in one of the forests. The food they got was pea soup with potatoes and cabbage. Esthy's feeling, and fear, was that her stepmother's brother wanted to get rid of her. There was a dispute between him and another man who told him that they could not shoot each other and also that someone might have heard the shots from the area and would find some officials to find those in hiding. Esthy stayed away from him. She always watched out and used her sixth sense in order to survive. The group in the forest consisted of Jewish men and women, Polish-Ukrainian prisoners of war, and Russian deserters. The men were partisans.

08:17 Esthy and the group kept moving from forest to forest, joining different groups. They also lost a lot of people. Men would go out to find food, kill people, or some such project and some men did not make it back. This was the winter of 1942. One day, they heard Germans screaming that they were to run out to a clearing. Machine guns opened fire and shot at them. Esthy's stepmother was killed in front of her. She was shot also.

10:30 Several other people also survived. There was poisoned water, of which Esthy drank a little, not knowing it was poisoned. She was quite ill, but recovered. A peasant took her to his house and helped her get better. The peasants helped her because they had little choice. Either the Germans would have burned down their house if they found someone hiding or the partisans would burn down their home with him in it if they denounced the partisans. The peasant saved Esthy's life by letting her sleep on top of the back of the stove. During the day, she stayed in a little dark hole which he built for her so that no one would know about her or find her. She had a piece of bread every day and then she would quietly stay in the hole, daydreaming and in and out of sleep. [End of Tape One, Side A]

Tape One, Side B

00:00 This side of the tape is empty.

Tape Two, Side A

00:00 Esthy was nursing him the last few weeks of his life. He could not bear seeing his mother so unhappy, so he did not let her in his room. His mother asked her to stay in his room and read to him. He was like a brother to Esthy and she was losing him. It was terribly painful.

- 00:15 After René's death, they moved to a better place. Esthy was going to school and loving it. Eric died of a heart attack; it was a devastating experience since he became her father. He was a great man and Esthy related to him very closely, unlike to Margo. Margo wanted her to find a job. She had some friends, Mr. and Mrs. Yarovsky. Mrs. Yarovsky had a place where they were making pants and raincoats. Esthy got a job there. She was fourteen years old.
- 00:50 Walter was Eric's nephew. He thought it was terrible that a young child was sewing pants instead of going to school. This was a problem because elementary school only went to the age of thirteen. Going to Lycée was difficult and it cost money. Walter decided to pay for Esthy's schooling at a private school.
- 01:08 She became friendly with students from very wealthy homes. Her instructor was very taken by Esthy's writing. He used to read them to the class. He was very encouraging. Then it was decided that she should have been more connected to Jewish students and was taken out of that private school. Esthy learned to read and write Hebrew. The students were very religious and very smart. She did not think of herself as a Jew. Esthy did not become Jewish in her mind until she was in a religious Jewish school. She became aware of Jewish holidays when she was supposed to take a test and the Grand Rabbi of France wrote a notice that her exam was postponed because it was a Jewish holiday. Esthy was learning a lot and was getting very good tutoring. From there she went to a regular Lycée. Margo decided to get married. She did not want Esthy to be part of her life. Since Eric had been her guardian, he named a man named Mr. Katz as co-guardian. It was decided that Esthy should move in with the Katzes.
- 02:37 This was when Esthy was still at the Jewish school. The wife of the manufacturer she worked for was her very good friend and was very good to her. Esthy did not like Mr. Katz and did not like living there. The Katzes had two sons. Mr. Katz was very mean to his older son, as well as to his younger son's wife. Esthy had a lot of work to do in the morning before she went to school. She was forbidden to see Dina [Gina?]. They did meet once in a while. One time, she informed Esthy of an existing law that at the age of eighteen, if one had three witnesses to testify to one's maturity and good character, one could become fully independent, without waiting until the age of 21. A lawyer filed the petition for her and at the age of eighteen she left the Katzes. Esthy moved in with Dina's [Gina's?] daughter and lived there for one year. Dina [Gina?] and her daughter left to live in Germany and she used to visit them during vacations. Esthy took a special test and was accepted into a very special program in graduate school. She was trained to be something like a paralegal. She met Jim Adler at the University of Heidelberg.
- 04:48 After the interview, Jim made the following comments. They met in August 1954. She was nineteen years old. They got married in Paris and got on a boat to go to New York. When they got off the boat, they started a new life with new people around them. He felt then, thirty seven years ago, as he does now, that Esthy was the most remarkable person that he had ever met. She is a whole person, despite her past. She loves life and loves herself. People envy Esthy for being a normal person. At the time of their grandchild's birth, someone said to her that she was not a loser, but a winner. She made this tape for their children and grandchildren and with it, she did them a great

service. They will appreciate it as well as he does, knowing just how difficult it was for her to make the decision to talk about her past.