

**Helen Luksenburg**

**Tape 1, Side A**

**May 26, 1998**

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### **Abstract**

Helen Luksenburg begins her interview about her liberation and the time afterwards. It starts out with her on the death march out of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp in northern Germany around May 2, 1945 with three girls from her hometown. Suddenly they realize that they have been liberated by the Russians as civilians are walking with them. The girls speak Polish and dress as peasants so are presumed Polaks and are taken care of. Helen and another girl had typhus and the four took over an apartment until they recover. Then they took a train to Poland and then decide to return to their hometown in Germany. First Helen stayed two months in her friend's uncle's apartment where she had to cook and clean. Later the Jewish committee gave her and her Cousin Hadassah a room in a hotel. Everyone was looking for survivors. She first met Willie, her husband when she worked in a factory. Later she saw him in the Men's concentration camp. Hadassah shared her clothes with Helen and Helen also got clothes from UNWRA and other needs from bartering with the Germans. Helen's boyfriend shows up with a watch and asks her to marry him. In 1946 her fiancé's uncle leaves for America and they sell his Ford to pay for their wedding. Many other couples are getting married, too. Willie and Helen get visas for the US and arrive in Washington, DC on September 2, 1949. Helen obtains her first job here as a seamstress due to her taking an ORT course in sewing.

### **Summary**

00:00 Helen Luksenburg was called Hinda Chilewicz at birth. This interview is a follow-up to the interview she made for the Visual History Foundation. It will focus on liberation and the time afterwards. There were many girls marching from one camp to another. Helen was the youngest of the four from her hometown who she marched with. The young Hungarians were off fighting so the old guard was with them. The girls stopped at a farm to rest and told the guards that they will catch up. Suddenly they realized that they were walking with German civilians and realized that they were liberated. When a young German came over, Helen recalled her mother telling her that at the end of World War I a soldier put his arm around her. The young German was handsome in his uniform and blue eyes but he did not have a belt. At first he flirted with them but after they told him they were Jewish girls, he thought that they were not human and had horns on their head. The girls thought he was probably brain-washed. They were walking north of Ravensbruck in northern Germany by the Baltic lakes. There was lots of fishing in that area. She thought it was Mecklenburg. The three other girls were: Pola Sukra (?), Judith Signer (?) and Ethel Rosefeld (?). One girl went to Brazil and Helen never saw her again.

She keeps in touch with the girl who moved to Nevada and the girl who moved to New York.

- 05:00 When Helen realized that she was liberated, she was no longer afraid. In Yiddish, Helen told the young German that he was a pig and he walked away. Around May 2, 1945 she was liberated. They walked to a small town and rested on a bench. They spoke Polish and three men blessed them and kissed them as though they were Polaks. They had all held good jobs in the concentration camps. They went to a farm and the wife gave them beds, supper of mashed potatoes, a pitcher of pig lard, and a pitcher of milk. Although they were starved, they threw up from the combination of milk and meat. They were rushed to the hospital and found to have typhus. Polish people thought them Poles and German people thought them German. Helen had light hair and the other girls had short hair. They still had on their striped uniforms but must have looked halfway decent. They were not skin and bones like the Mussel men. Helen's father had told her that she was the one to survive. She was never a big eater and her father told her she was sweet and pretty and will be the one to survive. In the guard house at the stadium in 1943 where they were separated, her father thought the guards would get tired and send them home. Her parents were detained and told her to go home to survive.
- 10:00 Helen took a lacy summer cover and a green velour winter cover and told the militia to give them to her parents. Her parents escaped and went home for a year. No one watched Helen as she walked away. The old guard did not come to take her to the hospital. They were liberated by the Russians a few days later. Two of the girls were healthy and two had typhus. They took over an apartment. The Germans were afraid of them. A neighbor came with real tea. Helen went into the apartment to get a robe and shoes and tried to be nice to those residing there. The Russians told them to leave their apartment and go home to Poland. The Russians were demolishing everything in Germany and taking it home to Russia. The Russians told them to take home cattle but they did not know what to do with cattle. They were given the villa of Fruchita (?) where they recuperated. Helen had a high fever and hallucinations. She did not see the actual liberalization as she was in the hospital. She did not see how the Russians behaved. They wrote, "Quarantine" on their door so the Russians would be afraid to enter.
- 15:00 They did not want the hungry Russian soldiers to enter the apartment. One afternoon two soldiers came and talked. One was a captain and the other was short and looked Jewish so they asked him if he was Israeli or Russian. He did not respond but he returned in the middle of the night and told them he was Jewish and did not want to admit it in front of the others. He did not know how they could leave so arranged for a Jewish general who was going to Skatey (?), Poland to take the four of them after they meet at the Hungarian girl's apartment. He did not show up but they obtained a heavy suitcase from next door. In the middle of the night, the Russian Jew returned appearing drunk and wanted to rape her so she sang him a lullaby. He fell asleep and in the morning woke up, having

forgotten the incident, and took them to a train going to Poland. There were people hanging from the doorways and roofs but they managed to get on the crowded train. One girl who had escaped from the camp was at the station and told her to go to her cousin. Etta's uncle had hidden during the War and she could go to him. The two others had no place to stay. They did not recognize their old street as it had changed.

20:00 The cousin was put to work and Helen stayed to cook and clean, like Cinderella. After two months, the cousin got engaged and decided they should all go to Germany. Helen returned home to see if anyone had survived. People had witnessed Helen's parents going toward the gas chambers but she hoped that her brother who was a year younger than herself, had survived. Someone who had worked in the kitchen reported that two weeks before liberation, he was sent to another camp where he died. A neighbor was surprised that Helen was still alive and was unhappy to see her. It was a very painful experience. Helen found the Jewish committee where everyone registered to see who was still alive. After two months, the cousin's friend survived who had the big apartment. There was a cousin who was married and worked as a secretary. Everyone age 14 and older worked. Cousin Herman, among other survivors, returned so Helen had to cook and shop for more people.

25:00 Helen's mother had lived through World War I. She lived just 20 kilometers from the border and got very nervous when World War II broke out on September 1, 1939. The Polish Army retreated when the Germans arrived. The grandfather owned a building and put them on a train going to Jalicazar (?). The train was going through woods and they could see fires on both sides and they got off. It was a short trip. They had no food and her brother fainted. Her sister was with them and she was four years younger. Her mother asked people in the passageway whether they had a crust of bread for her brother. They walked until they got to the home of acquaintances. They saw an old man and an 11-year-old child. They were asked to leave for the market place which was the gathering place. Their uncle sent them by horse and buggy to Jarawak (?) where they saw their cousins, many were younger, and their aunt. There was a lot of screaming as the cousins would not eat the bananas. The War had been on for two or three days and they were starved so stayed in line for bread. Helen was 13 at the time and did not get upset. Those who were four and six were upset. They remained for two months. **Tape 1, Side B.**

30:00 They hid their jewelry, silver, and fabrics in the basement in 1935 and filled it with dirt. Her father was in textiles. They were left with nothing. Her younger sister was born in 1930 and she was too young to work so went with her parents to the liquidation. Helen did not witness any persecution. After two months in Poland, they returned to Germany where life was normal. Every day she walked on the street and met people and found out that her future husband was alive. She met David Handler who she knew in the camp and said he saw her future husband in Flossenbug in April 1945 so thought he survived.

They were being shipped and he ran out of the line to get water which saved his life. When he got back, the transport already left Poland. The entire transport was placed in a barn and they were burned alive. It was "bashert" (meant to be) that he lived. Her mother had 11 brothers and sisters so the cousins were friends. Of 250 people, six survived including two sisters (Henyer (?) and herself). They found another survivor in Germany, Harry Brogus (?) who is 85 and lives in Brooklyn.

35:00 He had been in Russia during the War. It was difficult to find out who survived. Many weddings were held after the War. She knew about Hitler before the War from the newspapers. It was in "The Moment," the Jewish newspaper. Helen was born near the German border. Jews who were born in Poland were shipped back to Poland in 1938 after the Anschluss with Austria. She recalls history from the late 30s. She was 10 and 11 and the family spoke politics at home. Her mother couldn't believe the Germans could do such a thing. She did not think that they would touch a Jewish girl as being Jewish was a shameful race. It was called "Rassenschandler (?)", race breaker as officially no German would touch a Jewish girl. Everything was systematic. First there was Martial Law – you could not walk on certain streets. Then you had to wear an armband with a blue Magen David star. Then there was rationing and then you had to give up your fur coat and appliances. Then the Germans said that all men must register.

40:00 They gathered them and appointed a head of the Judenrat. Her father became the head and he gave the orders that came from the Germans. Every day they went to City Hall. Someone gave her a ride and she saw her father and he was bald, looked shrunken and did not recognize her. When the Germans marched in, her father was having a beer. They opened the door and shot the other men on the spot and her father got scared. Her mother and the children took over. She opened the credenza and found so much bread that they were saving but it became mildewed. Everyday her father got in line to get the bread. Their cousin looked Aryan and visited Helen at the factory. Hadassah sat across from her. They were not introduced but it was fate. There were 600 women in her camp and 1,000 men on the other side in their camp. Helen saw him in the Men's camp. One day her camp ran out of water so she used the Men's washroom and a friend introduced them and from then on they conversed at the fence.

45:00 One time they opened the gate and they could mingle while the Germans and the Gestapo looked on. Her future husband insisted that they would survive and get married. After they left Poland, the cousin's fiancé took a group of people. Helen was born in 1926 and they wanted her to register for the Polish Army. She had no money and no visa and got on the train and was arrested at the border of Slovakia. She was placed in a school in Bratislava and Menachin left for Prague, returned and took a train to Prague. Everyone had vodka to bribe the Russian guards. On the streetcar, someone recognized her and called, "Hilda." She said that Veleg (?) is alive.

- 50:00 She was a Czech girl, her overseer. She was told to look at the JOINT. Helen told Manachem that she did not want to go to Prague so he returned a few weeks later. They were seven people sleeping on the floor in one room. They had no clothes and their shoes did not fit. Hadassah still had a knit dress from home as the camp did not take away her clothes. Helen's camp was a branch of Auschwitz so her clothes were taken away. Hadassah shared her clothes with Helen. People were continually traveling after the War. They would look at lists of survivors. She talked to three girls about a shoemaker and got cigarettes at UNWRA. She also received clothes, nurse's shoes and bedding. The Germans wanted coffee so they bartered. The Germans loved white bread so they would exchange their white bread for the German's rye bread. Someone who had been in Ravensbruck knew her cousins and gave her their address. The cousin came and said to throw down the key. He got the note and came to see her. He wore a brown suit and his hair was starting to grow in.
- 55:00 He looked good. He gave Helen a man's watch and said that they will get married. He worked as the uncle's chauffeur. The uncle did not want him to get married. In '46 the uncle went to the US and left them the Ford. They sold it and made a wedding for 50 people. Helen cooked for her own wedding. There were lots of marriages. Everyone wanted to have their own life. They talked about their past experiences. Even now, survivors tell about them. There is a film of a DP camp which is now being made. Helen would not go to a DP camp as there were too many people. She was lucky that she had cousins in Poland and Germany. The Jewish community gave them a room in a hotel with her Cousin Hadassah so she did not have to go to a DP camp. Hadassah got married. There were lots of marriages but not all good ones. Many old men married young girls. Perhaps they got divorced. They made money and impressed the girls with watches and leather boots. Some were more educated but she wanted to be compatible and talk to her husband. She found a Zionist organization and got involved in the movement to go to Palestine. She got papers to go to the US but did not want to leave Willie behind so tore them up. Helen attended an ORT school.
- 60:00 Her second cousin, older than her, was involved in political discussions. Helen's mother had sent her for a sewing course during the War as she thought it would be helpful. Helen wasn't thinking of America at the time. She needed to take the ORT course to improve her sewing to get work. At her first job in America, Helen did alterations so the sewing was helpful. Her cousin talked of going to Palestine but the War of Independence was going on. Willie was 29 and afraid that he would be drafted. She wanted to wait. There was the Black Market in Germany which helped them to survive. Willie went to Munich and bought stockings on credit from Mr. Weizmann. Helen made her first trip to Israel in 1962 and visited Mr. Weizmann and paid him. One must pay for merchandise. She did not want to be blacklisted and not permitted to leave Germany. Someone gave Willie a yard full of bombed planes in a Villa. Helen would not live there and left. They

waited for their papers. They stood in line in Munich to register for America. Two months later they were sent to Hamburg and got x-rayed. They were not clear due to repeated bronchitis. They were acceptable as it was just calcifications. They arrived in Washington, DC on Labor Day, September 2, 1949.

65:00