

STESSIN, Paulette
RG-50.106*0150
Two Audiotapes
In French

Abstract

Paulette Stessin was born into a large religious family in 1922 in Metz, France. Paulette's Polish parents struggled with the French language and the difficulties of bringing their clothing merchandise to market.

In 1938, when people began talking about anti-Semitic actions in Germany, Paulette's family and three other families moved to Angoulême, a town with relatively few Jews. There, Paulette's family interacted easily with non-Jewish neighbors, and her sister married one.

In November 1942, Paulette's family moved to the woods outside the town of Brives. Their neighbors knew they were Jewish, but Paulette's family felt safe. Paulette found work in Brives, and visited her family weekly in the woods. When the Germans occupied Brives in 1944, Paulette and her family lived in fear. She had heard that "foreign Jews" were in camps, and that three men had been shot.

On April 4, 1944, Paulette was detained, and eventually sent to Drancy. There, she saw relatives before they were deported in early convoys.

Paulette was deported to Auschwitz, where she carried heavy stones to build roads. She heard violinists playing when she went to and from work. She learned that her father had been shot. Paulette had a Dutch "camp sister", and they still remain in contact. When the camp sister said she was being sent to Bergen-Belsen on January 1, 1945, Paulette joined her. Paulette remembers few details about Bergen-Belsen, but said it was even worse than Auschwitz.

When the camp was liberated, British troops paraded the German Chief of Camp in front of the freed prisoners. When Paulette returned home, her two brothers, sister and her in-laws, and Paulette's friends were waiting for her at the train station. They all cried, but Paulette could not cry because her experiences had hardened her. She wore a black dress for a month to symbolize her mourning.

Tape 1, Side A

- 0:00** Paulette Stessin was born into a very large family. In addition to her mother and father, she had two sisters and three brothers. Her father's mother, two sisters and three brothers, and four of her mother's brothers lived in Metz. Paulette's parents were merchants who made and sold clothing in local markets. Her family was from Poland, but she does not know when they arrived in Metz, France. However, her oldest brother was born in Poland in 1914. Paulette's family spoke Yiddish at home, but later they also spoke French. They also managed German in the markets. Paulette's family did not have an easy life. Merchandise had to be taken to markets by train, carts, etc. Her family's house in Metz was two stories high, but the first floor was purely for business. They were a religious family and kept kosher. Paulette bought the meat for the family. Metz had a large Jewish community, and there were two or three synagogues. Paulette's grandmother wore a wig.
- 0:54** From the age of ten, Paulette sang in the synagogues, as did her father, who was a tenor. They did this for seven or eight years, until the war began. The first signs of what was coming began in 1938, when people started talking about events in Germany. Her father had to join the French military. Paulette was 16 or 17 at the time, and worked as a hairdresser. All children worked and had a trade. During the war, she learned to shave men. Her father and some other men went to Angoulême to rent a house. Paulette's family and three other families decided to move because the future in Metz did not look promising. Her grandmother decided to stay behind because she believed that the Germans would not touch old people. Later, she was sent to a camp and died. The family travelled to Angoulême by car, and sent their furniture to their new home. In Angoulême, there were very few Jews. Paulette's family made some friends with non-Jews, and her sister even married one. In November 1942, they decided to move to the "free zone". They had a special helper to cross the demarcation line, and went to Brives. Paulette's family settled in a rural area with only five houses.
- 1:44** Their new neighbors knew they were Jews. Paulette worked during the week in Brives and slept at a friend's house in town. She went home every Saturday evening. She walked, and her father waited for her at the opening of the woods. Two of her brothers survived the Holocaust. She met her husband in Périgueux. Brives was occupied by the Germans in 1944, so Paulette and her family lived in fear, but could survive. She had some knowledge of what was going on, and she knew things were not good. She could see trucks of wounded people going to Paris. She knew there were camps full of "foreign Jews". Paulette and her family were well hidden until 1944.
- 2:26** In Brives, she was told that three men were shot. She chose not to tell her family. Early morning on April 4, Paulette was detained at her home.
- 2:41** The detainees were separated into two groups, male and female. They were put into trucks with many other people, and were taken to the high school in Brives. They went to Drancy by train. There, Paulette saw her in-laws and other relatives, but they left in an early convoy. Paulette's convoy was closed train cars with very little food. No one knew about their future. After more than a day and a half, her convoy arrived at Auschwitz.

Tape 1, Side B

0:00 Paulette was assigned to a block. She knew her father had been shot. Everyone on her block wore rags. Her hair was cut short, but was not shaved. They were in quarantine. Paulette and the other women were given small amounts of food. They had to come out for the *appel* (roll call). Then they were assigned to work. Paulette mentions that one of the rumors was that some substance was added to the soup so women would not menstruate. However, Paulette never stopped having her period, and she always had to find rags. She understood German, so she was aware of things happening at the camp. At work, her supervisor was a Polish man who was nice and brought her bread. Returning to camp in the evenings, the women were counted again. Paulette had a Dutch “camp sister”, and they still keep in touch. On January 1, 1945, the camp sister, who was in another block, told Paulette she was leaving in a convoy that evening. They decided to go together. For a day and a half, they went on a train to Bergen-Belsen. This camp was worse than Auschwitz. Paulette had no work and slept on the floor. Mud was everywhere. She does not remember any other details. At Auschwitz, they performed hard labor, carrying big stones to build roads. Inmates played the violin as Paulette left and returned from work. There was no work on Sundays. Paulette’s block was close to the crematorium. She never wanted to go to the hospital because no one ever came out. Simone Weil was on the convoy before hers. When Paulette returned home after the war, she sought her in-laws, and found out that none of them came back. Paulette was young then and had many hopes. She was liberated sometime in May by British troops. The German Chief of Camp was paraded in front of them, to show the former prisoners that he was now a prisoner.

Tape 2, Side A

0:00 Paulette talks about liberation of her camp. Prisoners were allowed to circulate freely between the men’s and women’s camps. They had good food. Paulette mentions that she lost weight, but considered herself lucky because she did not get typhus. Upon her return to France, Paulette was given a card at the Lutetia in Paris. She asked to be sent to Angoulême, to be with her sister who had married a non-Jew and her in-laws. When she arrived at the train station, many people were waiting for her. Paulette saw her two brothers, her sister, her in-laws, and some friends. They all cried except for her, because she was now hardened by her experiences. Paulette’s sister-in-law had her stay in her home for a while. Someone gave Paulette a black dress, and she wore it for a month because she was in mourning.