

RG-50.120 #163
ANNA de VONOCUR

TAPE I

- 1.01.26 Anna was born in Lodz, Poland, on September 25, 1926. Mother was Rivka Bechan; her father was Chenock Wolf Benckel. Her brothers were Hirsch and Leibush. Anna has 2 sons and 4 granddaughters.
- 02.09 At age 11 or 12, Anna studied in a public school. She had Polish girl friends, too. Anna thought that she was Polish, as she was born in Poland, but one fine day a friend informed her that Poland was not her 'motherland'. The friend had heard in her house that Jews are not Polish citizens. That comment sent Anna to seek information from her mother and grandmother, then in history books. She came to the realization that her friend Volka was speaking the truth.
- 06.23 Anna's father bought old machines [sewing machines, etc.] repaired them and sold them. They prospered. Father had some Polish friends too.
- 07.11 Family was traditional [observed Shabbat, holidays and kashrut] but not religious.
- 8.02 Her family were Zionists.
- 9.06 Only Anna and one of her brothers, and an aunt, survived, out of a very large family.
- 9.21 Nazis invaded Poland on Sept.1, 1939. They entered Lodz in great force, and immediately identified all the Jews, whose documents stated explicitly: Mosaic descent. Anti-Jewish edicts.
- 13.27 Poles, especially the 'folk-deutsch' [who were born from German descent] were only happy to cooperate with the Nazis against the Jews. They began speaking German, and sported the swastika on their clothes.
- 15.13 Ghetto fence is erected in a few days.
- 17.54 The Gestapo 'house of torture' was located in the ghetto.[Kripo: Kriminal Polizei]
- 18.05 The German in charge of the house was Hans Shivor, sentenced and executed by a Russian court in 1946. The Kripo remained for all the 4 ½ years Anna was in the ghetto.
- 18.30 Rumkovsky.
- 19.30 Anna's family, who had moved to a house shortly before the ghetto was declared, could stay in their house, by the fence of the ghetto. More families were located in that house.

20.29 The ghetto as a labor camp. Its functioning. Father managed the sewing workshop; Anna's older brother, still a child - only 1 ½ years older than her - worked in the large machine repairs workshop; Anna worked in a rug factory. [The rugs were and looked like a collage.] When the workers found that those carpets went to German soldiers' positions, the workers began sabotaging their work, as a tiny protest.

DS135.P63V56 1976

23.09 An answer to the question 'why you went into the ghetto willingly'.

28.01 People were incredulous of the few reports of gas chambers and concentration camps, where the sick and the handicapped had been taken.

29.39 Mobilization of young professionals by the Germans. They were murdered.

30.00 The printing of ghetto stamps and money with the image of Rumkovsky.

31.00 Use of the ghetto money to purchase food rations.

34.17 Hunger was severe. All women stopped menstruating until after the war.

34.30 The beginning of a home 'industry' of candy to complement the family's income. The dangers. The sugar was obtained from outside the ghetto. Sometimes, they used 20 or more kilograms of sugar.

37.10 The older brother. His mastery to produce machinery pieces. His dignity.

39.36 Deportation of children under 10, and the old people [including her little brother Leibush who was already 10 and Anna's paternal grandmother].

41.29 Public hanging in answer to protests.

42.38 Anna was chosen in the next round up. When she was ordered to board the truck to be deported, she screamed 'mother, don't let them take me away'. The Nazi in charge looked at her, and then asked, 'And where is your mother'? The mother took a step forward. The Nazi then said: 'go to your mother'. This was the one and only case like this in the ghetto!
Some of the deported ended up in Majdanek, others in Chelmno. This particular round-up took 8 days on continuous agony. No one worked then. Anna says these were the saddest days of life in the ghetto.

47.24 Rationale given by Rumkovsky for the above deportation.

- 48.23 Rumors of Warsaw ghetto revolt arrived to Lodz, but they were not confirmed.
- 50.05 Arrival in the ghetto of Jews from small cities, including tow of Ana's cousins from Bzhevini: berek and Felix Winter. Berek could not survive without news from the outside world. He managed to obtain a radio and listen to it clandestinely. However, he was caught and shot dead.
- 53.45 Ana's work in the carpet factory is about to end. Mother trains her to make buttonholes so that Ana can transfer to the sewing workshop.
- 54.50 Girls' activities after work.
- 56.00 Her friend Nadja Stachewska Shafer. They sang together. They promised each other that, were they to survive, they will sing all the songs they loved at the shores of lake Kinnereth
They fulfilled their wish in 1968. [At that time, the onlookers thought they were singing for money!]
- 59.20 Fear of Jewish police. Father rejected the invitation to become a Jewish policeman.
- 2.00.00 Relationships within the family in the ghetto.
- 02.16 Liquidation of the ghetto.
- 05.43 The evacuation of the ghetto.
- 08.58 Arrival in Auschwitz. Encounter with a shark reality.
- 11.27 Father and brother were taken to the men's camp. Father was also separated from brother. The latter survived. Ana and her mother remained together.
- 13.17 Many people wanted to commit suicide, but they were not permitted to approach the electrified fence.
- 15.23 The kapos.
- 17.34 Absence of insects and other bus in Auschwitz. Ana interprets it as the attempt of the Nazis - who lived themselves in the camp - to eradicate any possible outbreak of epidemics. [Mengele and his family, for instance, lived in the camp.]
- 18.06 Mengele's experiments.
- 21.06 Reflections on why the allies [who flew over the camps] didn't bomb the camps or the rail tracks.
- 22.00 Difference between Jewish and other prisoners.

- 26.00 Mother passes 'selection' to a different camp, thanks to Ana's skill at making up her mother's pale face by using a peel of beet.
- 26.50 Transport to a different camp.
- 28.34 Daily schedule at Auschwitz. The 'appell'.
- 29.35 Some people escaped by lying among the cadavers piled up by the gas chambers. Because the crematoria didn't have room, some of the bodies were taken out of the camp to be rid of.
- 35.40 Ana's reaction to the commonly used phrase against the Jewish victims 'like sheep to the slaughter'.
- 41.06 The sonderkommando in Auschwitz were Jews chosen to do the 'dirty work'.
- 45.07 Arrival in Shtutthof, a camp worse than Auschwitz. The camp was teeming with lice, bed bugs and more.
- 47.15 The kapo there. Her name was Basya.
- 48.44 High rate of death.
- 50.00 Singing for an extra ration of bread.
- 51.30 Ana sings 'Marushka' on tape.
- 55.20 One day Ana witnessed the kapo punishing a friend with her stick. She decides to ask to be transferred temporarily to a different barracks where, she heard, the kapo, Maria, was humane.
- 56.42 In the meantime, Basya was removed from the camp.
- 57.00 Ana's mother's health was failing. They were in Maria's barracks for 2-3 weeks. The prisoners did not work, in their majority. They awaited extermination.
- 3.00.00 A pal reader tells Ana her future and that of her mother, in exchange for a piece of bread. Ana was to survive the war; her mother was not [as it indeed, happened]. The palm-reader said she herself won't survive either and indeed, the bombardment of the camp by the allies began at that moment, and the palm-reader was killed. Ana escaped.
- 02.00 Life in Shtutthof.
- 02.53 Ana tried to keep herself clean by using the snow to wash herself. She contracted TB and was sick for two years.

- 03.50 Ana's mother died in Shtutthof.
- 06.00 All the kapos were removed from the camps so that they would not contract the epidemics, that were rampant in the camp.
- 13.00 Almost at the end of the war, the Nazis were administering legal injections to the camp inmates, as the crematoria couldn't work any harder. A friend of Ana's lived in the barracks chosen for the infections treatment. People were succumbing to them. Ana's friend, already injected, was awaiting her end, sitting at the entrance of the barracks. A Jewish woman doctor, Kagan, asked her what was going on there. Ana's friend explained. Dr. Kagan took her to the clinic [where she was working under German orders] and excised the patch of flesh where decay already began. The friend survived, and lives now in Uruguay. She is looking for Dr. Kagan [now living in Israel] to express her gratitude.
- 14.17 Camp is evacuated to a place in Germany. Only those who can walk could go. Ana misses the transport because of a stomach illness, and catches the last one before the camp is dynamited by the Germans.
- 18.00 Arrival in the Baltic Sea, to board cargo ships.
- 19.00 Sitting in the bowels of the ship. Whoever did not find a place to sit were thrown overboard.
- 21.00 Beginning of a friendship with a Polish Christian girl. She had been 'unofficially' adopted by a Jewish couple, and decided to follow her 'parents' life: entered the ghetto Lodz, went to Auschwitz. Her friend's name was Yanka.
- 25.06 They discovered that the ship was carrying ammunition, and that the Jews were taken as collaterals. Also, the Nazis had painted huge red crosses on the ships, hoping to avoid the allied bombardment.
- 27.02 Ships ahead of Ana's were bombed one after another. The only one left was Ana's. Eventually, this one was, too. The ship did not explode nor sink. At the next bombardment, the ship caught fire. Yanka urged her to go to deck and die in the water rather. Ana did not have the strength to move because of her illness. She finally choked from the smoke, and fainted. The ammunition did not explode because the water put out the fire, Yanka dragged her to the deck. When Ana came to, Yanka told her that the Nazis were no more: they either escaped or died. Many of the Jewish survivors had lost limbs. Blood flowed like water on the deck. Ana feels that survivors lived in hell during the war.
- 36.56 The ship kept on floating. The survivors were warmed by the May sun and breezes.
- 38.00 A German ship showed up to save all those who could ambulate. Ana could not walk.

- 39.17 A plank was put between the German ship and the damaged one. Yanka urged Ana to walk.
- 40.54 The Germans belonged to the Wermacht. Amy and Yanks were saved. Her hair was charred from the fire. All 2 weeks of travel they hadn't received any food or water. Ana weighed 28 kg.
- 43.10 First meal after all that time was rice pudding.
- 44.30 Arrival in the German port city of Kiel, festooned with the white flags of surrender.
- 45.52 Very few from Shtutthof survived the odyssey.
- 46.42 In Kiel they were taken to a German hospital. It was confirmed that Germany had lost the war. Nazis were not to be seen. Yanks and Ana were diagnosed with TB. Many died of overeating, after years of starvation.
- 49.53 Ana and Yanka agreed that the day of their liberation was their real birth date. Crying was unstoppable, after years of restraint.
- 51.47 Search for survivors after the war. Ana's older brother survived five concentration camps.
- 53.09 About Yanka.
- 55.06 Hoarding food received from HIAS, Joint, etc., incase of hunger in the future.
- 58.00 Ana and Yanka left the hospital carrying their food in a big trunk. They were headed for Munich, but the trunk didn't fit through the door or the window of a passenger train. They had to travel in a cargo train.
- 4.00.00 They wanted to get to Munich because they had heard that there were all the lists of survivors deposited there. A museum was converted into a missing person center. They couldn't have anybody. Doctors there declared them ill, and were transported to another hospital, where they were hospitalized for a year.
- 02.41 The nuns and other personnel who took care of them professed not to know about the Nazis atrocities.
- 03.00 The Center for Holocaust Remembrance in Montevideo, Uruguay.

TAPE II

- 07.47 Ana's reaction of 'why me?' at the time of liberation.
- 10.03 Upon her arrival in Uruguay, Ana told of her experience to her family only once,

intending

to erase the past and to live in the present. Her resolution stood her until after the birth of her children, when memories assaulted her continuously: it happened 25 years after her liberation. Her daughter convinced her to commit her memories to writing.

12.12 Publishing of her first book: 'A Book Without a Title'.

13.03 January 1946, in the hospital in Munich. Invitation of her only remaining relatives in Uruguay to move there, instead of Palestine, where Ana intended to go. The letter also contained the news that her older brother had survived, and was in Italy.

16.16 Encounter with Ana's brother upon her arrival in Montevideo.

17.42 Ana's friend went back to Poland. She died in a car crash in the 1980s.

19.17 The trunk stayed with Yanka.

22.36 Ana's work with other survivors in Uruguay, those who refused to share their memories.