

USHMM –interview transcript: Alice Ruda
National Council of Jewish Women Sarasota-Manatee Section
Holocaust Oral History Project with Alice Ruda, Survivor
May 4, 1986
Venice, Florida

- Q. This is Muriel Nathanson, interviewing Mrs. Alice Ruda on May 5, 1986, in her home, on behalf of the oral history of the Holocaust program of National Council of Jewish Women, Sarasota-Manatee Section. Mrs. Ruda, we want to thank you very much for being a part of this program, and we know that your contribution will be a very helpful one. There are several questions that I am going to ask you and, one of the things that would be very helpful is that if during the time that you are telling us about your experiences, you could keep in mind that it is helpful to know when these things happened, how old you were, so that we get some sort of progression. Mrs. Ruda, tell me about your family background. Where did you come from?
- A. I come from Czechoslovakia, and my family and I lived in a small town in Southern Slovakia. I had a brother. There was two of us. Two children in the family. My father had a business. He had a lumber business. Lumber mills. And, he moved to this small town in 1923, when he first got married and he established a business there and, of course, then later on, he raised his family there.
- Q. When were you born and what was it like growing up in a small town?
- A. I was born in 1927 and had a beautiful childhood. Of course, the fact that my parents were so wealthy was very helpful. And, I really, as far as I can remember, I had everything that I could possibly want when I was growing up.
- Q. Were there other members of the family—aunts and uncles—around?
- A. Uh, not in that small town. My grandparents lived there—my mother's parents. I had one uncle, on my mother's side, who was working for my father in the lumber business. Later on, he went to the United States in 1938. My other uncle went in '39 to Israel. Uh...on my father's side, my grandmother lived in a city not too far from where we lived, so we saw each other quite often.
- Q. Living in a small town, what opportunities were there for a Jewish experience?
- A. Oh, there was a big Jewish community where I lived. There was, I would say, approximately 250 Jewish families living there, and we had a temple. There was a Hebrew school. In fact, for the first five years, I went to the Jewish school and a lot of the Catholic families sent their children to the Jewish school because the education was better than the public schools.

- Q. Interesting.
- A. Yah, and, like I said, we had a very, very active, very nice Jewish community there.
- Q. And you and your family were involved in the community?
- A. Oh yes, yes. All the time. Yah. My mother was the President of the Sisterhood and my father was the President of the Men's Club...you know like here. The same thing.
- Q. So that it really was a very comfortable kind of life.
- A. Yes, yes, very comfortable.
- Q. You mentioned that the first five years of your education were in the Hebrew school. Then where did you go?
- A. Then I stated high school and I don't know whether you are familiar with the European school system. You aren't? Well, in Czechoslovakia, instead of going to high school you are going to gymnasium, and I started going to gymnasium in 1938, September. And then, of course, a few months later, that part of Slovakia, where we lived, was given to Hungary, and the town where I went to gymnasium was cut off. That remained Slovakia. So, that meant for me to choose another school, new language, of course, and I went to Hungarian high school then.
- Q. That must have been very difficult.
- A. Well, you know, children learn very quickly. I mean I was young and...
- Q. How did the other children react to you—being Jewish?
- A. Uh, I didn't have too many problems in that point. Uh—I was one of the group and, uh, of course every once in a while they let me know that I was different from the rest of them, but basically I didn't have too many problems.
- Q. What were some of the things that you did besides go to school?
- A. Well, I took different languages. I studied English and I started to study French, and I studied German, and uh, I took piano lessons and in the wintertime, of course, there was ice-skating. In the summertime there was swimming and camps.
- Q. So the beginnings of problems really did not affect you too much.
- A. No, no.

- Q. What did you find was the first evidence that there was trouble?
- A. Well, in...let me see, now in 1938, when this change took place, my father happened to have been in the Czechoslovakian army. When we became Hungary, he could not be a soldier anymore. But they put him into the labor force. All the Jews could not wear the Hungarian uniforms. They were in the labor camps. Uh—in 1942, my family from Slovakia was deported to Majdanek. My grandmother and my father's two sisters with their husbands, and the children and nobody ever heard of what Majdanek is. We got one letter from them and they were telling us they were in a camp and they were going to be working and everything is fine. We never heard from them. We never saw them again. Then, in 19...the beginning of 1944, uh—we heard that the German army moved into Budapest and, of course, almost immediately after that, our travels were restricted. We couldn't travel.
- Q. In other words, from 1938 until 1942, there wasn't much that happened. And your life went on pretty much?
- A. Pretty much normally. I mean normal. When I applied for college, I couldn't get into a college because there was this thing called *numerus clausus* ("closed number" in Latin, refers to anti-Jewish restrictions), where a Jew was not allowed to go to college, but I did manage to find a college that accepted me.
- Q. How did you do that?
- A. Well, I wrote all kinds of applications and I got into a convent. I was living there with the nuns and it was an excellent school. I loved it. And I was very happy there. They were very, very good to me. I was the only Jew there. In fact, when I left, because of the problems with the Germans, I was afraid to continue. And I left the school. They asked me if maybe my mother and my brother would want to come in, and they would try to find a place for us to hide—the nuns. They were very, very good to me.
- Q. But your mother and brother chose not to do this?
- A. No. No.
- Q. And, then from 1942 until 1944, did things become more difficult?
- A. Yes. Every day there was something, something new. You know, one day we had to wear the yellow star. The next day, there was a—over the radio we heard the Jews had to give up their cameras. One day, they came and picked up everybody's radios. You know, in those days there were no televisions, only radios. Uh, of course, my father had a brand new car. He bought a brand new car every year. That was the first thing they took from us.

Q. What about his business?

A. The business was taken from us, and, at that point my father was never really home. He was always in the labor camp and my mother was trying to conduct the business but she wasn't knowledgeable enough and, then finally, they took the business away from us.

Q. During the time your father was in the labor camp, did you have—what kind of communication did you have?

A. Uh, only by mail.

Q. But you were able to keep in touch?

A. Oh, yes. Yes. He could write to us and we could write to him. They would forward our letters to him.

Q. Censored?

A. Uh, I believe so. I'm not quite sure but I think they were.

Q. And then what happened in 1944?

A. Then, in 1944, well one day, a friend of ours came over and he said that all the Jews have to go. There was a—I don't know whether you can call it a factory or a—at the end of the town, a tremendous big building and all the Jews were concentrated in that building. And, we stayed there for about two weeks.

Q. Could you bring anything with you?

A. Only a backpack. There was no food. The only food we had was the food that was lowered through the wall to us by our friends at night. We had friends on the outside that were Catholic and when they found out where we are, they would bring us the food there every night. And, we were there about three days. They picked up my mother and she wouldn't come home at night, back to the place. And, of course, we were terribly worried about her. We didn't know where she was. The next day they brought her back. She was all black and blue. They beat her up. It was something awful. They wanted to know what she did with the money and with our jewelry and with— They were asking all kinds of questions from her, and uh—then a few days later, they took us to the nearest big city where there was, what they called, the big ghetto.

Q. Where was this?

A. That was, I would say, about 20 miles from where we lived. In a larger city.

Incidentally, that city was where I went to the convent. The same place. And then, a week later, they took us to Auschwitz. From there.

Q. What was the trip to Auschwitz like?

A. It was awful. It was awful. They put us in these cattle cars and there was just enough room for everybody to sit on the floor. Children, old people, women, men—no food, no air, no water. I believe there were four people—I don't remember whether three or four people—that died on the train. Elderly people. And, of course, their bodies stayed with us for a week until we arrived at Auschwitz. And the journey took one week. And, we arrived. The doors opened, and there were the people, the Germans with their whips, rushing with them, and, of course, we were weak from the trip and we had to march, five in a row. It seemed like forever, and, of course, my grandparents were with us, and my brother and my mother and I. There were five of us. Until we reached—I remember there was a building and there was a gate and at that gate the first thing I noticed were the shiny boots. Dr. Mengele. And he determined what was going to happen to each and every one of us.

Q. We heard about this. But to have experienced it must have been difficult.

A. Anyway, my mother and I and my brother, we—it was decided that we are going to live. My grandparents never made it. And, of course, as we proceeded, we were separated from my brother, and we were pushed into a building and, the next thing I knew, I looked for my mother and I couldn't find her.

Q. How old were you then?

A. I was seventeen—about sixteen and a half—seventeen, and she was standing right next to me all the time. I didn't recognize her because they shaved our heads.

Q. Do you want to stop a while? You said, you mentioned that your mother had changed because they had shaved her head. Did these same things happen to you?

A. I had beautiful braids, thick—two braids, and God, I wanted to die when they took that hair off.

Q. For a teenage girl...

A. Oh. I had beautiful braids. Never grew back quite that long after that.

Q. How many were in your barracks?

- A. Oh, my God, there were wall-to-wall people when we finally made it. I remember, it was on a Friday when we got to Auschwitz. And, by the time we made it to the *barackene*, to the barracks, to the camp, it must have been midnight because they put us through delousing and showers, and then we had to wait for each other, and then the march, and it was very, very late and they told us to go into this one barrack, and we stepped all over everybody because we didn't know that people are sleeping on the floors there. And, uh, and the next day was 4 o'clock in the morning, they woke us up for a head [count]. Outside, it was freezing, and all day, we were just standing around, just sitting around outside. No food, no water. No showers, no baths, no toilets, and, after a few days, my mother recognized a childhood friend of hers, and she was like the manager of that particular barrack, and my mother went over to her, and she told her who she was, and this woman then gave us all kind of information—what kind of place we are in, what the name is, what do they do to people, what happened to her family, and she also said that, as soon as we can, if they are looking for a group of women for work, to volunteer and get out.
- Q. Work outside the camp?
- A. Yes, yes. But this didn't happen until about four or five months later, that we were able to get out.
- Q. This would be early in 1945?
- A. Right.
- Q. How did you manage until then?
- A. No, this was—this was like closer to the end of '44.
- Q. How did you manage until then?
- A. We lost a lot of weight. I was really surprised that they picked us for labor because we were really emaciated, but I guess we—we could still walk. That's about it.
- Q. What kept you going?
- A. Well, this friend of my mother gave us a little bit of food, whatever she could spare, so the two of us had a little bit more food than anybody else. Plus the fact that we were young and healthy and, I guess, just the willpower to live.
- Q. What did you know of your brother during this time?
- A. Nothing. Uh. We saw him once from far away. He was marching. They were coming back from some kind of a work commando and we saw him from far

away. Uh. We couldn't talk to him. That was the only time we saw him.

Q. Then, he did not survive, to the best of your knowledge?

A. No, he did not.

Q. What happened with the work detail? How were you selected and what did that mean?

A. Well, they came. They needed some 1000 women. So we were standing again, five in a row, and we had to parade in front of Dr. Mengele, stark naked, of course, and I guess he felt that we would be strong enough to go to work, so we were amongst the 1000 women. Um. They took us into Germany, with cattle cars again, of course, and the trip was also about a week. About. We arrived to a place called Allendorf, which was not too far from Frankfurt. And, they took us into the camp. It was a nice beautiful camp—beautiful. Nice cut grass, and green. And nice clean barracks and clean bathrooms and we were able to shower. The food was a little bit better, and we worked in an ammunition factory and we had the night shift. The whole factory was under ground and we left our camp, I guess around five o'clock in the evening and it took us about an hour to get to the factory.

Q. Walking?

A. Yes, we walked. Every day. And, we worked all night, and then in the morning we had to shower before we left the factory and march back. And, uh, we had an old commander, who was very, very good to us. I think the fact that we all—all of us survived, could be attributed to him, because he was receiving letters from the higher command to evacuate the camp. That there is nothing for us to do in the factory any more, and he kept stalling, and he kept us there until he thought the Allies were close enough for us to be liberated.

Q. So he really saved...

A. Yes, yes. He did. In fact, after our liberation, they arrested him and we made sure that they suspended the charges against him.

Q. Let me stop you. What was the liberation like?

A. OK. When finally the Commander couldn't stall anymore, he called us all together in the yard and he said, "Look, I have received orders that I have to take you away from here." He says "Whatever you have, take with you." He gave us each extra food rations and we started marching at night, and during the day we rested.

Q. And hid?

- A. That's what we did. The second day we hid in the forest and, when the rest of the group was—marched on, we walked deeper into the forest, and we signaled to each other. There was nine of us. And that's how we found each other. And, we stayed in the forest for about 3 or 4 days. We just couldn't take it any more. It was raining. We were all wet. We were cold. This was the end of March. And, finally, two of the girls wanted to go to see what's going on to the main road. And, they left, and about an hour later, then came back with all kinds of American food, and then we finally came out through the forest and went into the next town and we saw the American army there.
- Q. And this was in March of 1945?
- A. Yah. Yah.
- Q. Just shortly before the end of the war?
- A. Yah, right.
- Q. What were your feelings then?
- A. Oh, my God, it's very hard to describe. We couldn't believe that we are free. We just couldn't believe it. That it—that it was all over.
- Q. Your mother was with you?
- A. Yes, yes, of course. The first thing that the Americans did for us. They went into several German homes, and they requisitioned a room for everybody. And, of course, sleeping in a clean bed, and sitting on a toilet, that was—. Then I started working for the American army.
- Q. Doing what?
- A. Interpreting. And I was interviewed once by a Jewish chaplain from the Army, and my picture appeared in the—at that time it was the *Brooklyn Eagle*, in New York—. And my uncle recognized me. In New York.
- Q. He wanted you to come to America?
- A. He wrote to the chaplain a letter. In fact, I still have that letter. And that's how my uncle knew that my mother and I are alive. And, then of course, the end of May, we wanted to go home because we wanted to see who is left from the family, and we decided we'll go home.
- Q. What did you have to go through to get permission to go back to your home town?

- A. Nothing really. The only thing was that it was complicated because all the railroads were bombed and it took us like over a month to get home, and with all the things that were going on there—the Russian Army was there, and women were raped on the trains. And it was just terrible. Many times I said to my mother “This is what we have to come home to?” It was awful. But we finally got home unharmed and my father was home. Because my father escaped from the labor camp, and there was this Gentile family—very, very good friends of ours—that kept my father in hiding all these months and, of course, right after our home town was liberated my father went home and he started the business again but he did not know that we were alive. And, we, of course did not know that he was alive. So, the end of June, we got home. June 28.
- Q. 1945
- A. June 28, 1945. We got home.
- Q. That must have been quite a reunion.
- A. Oh, my God. We were crying. All of us—for hours. And we resumed life. My bedroom was the last room in the house. And my window, I had a big bay window in my bedroom. It faced the main gate. We had like a very high fence around the house because we had a lumber yard and we had big gates up front, for the trucks and the delivery people. And I stayed up night after night because I kept hearing knocking on the gate and I thought my brother was coming.
- Q. What made you and your family decide to leave?
- A. Well, after the war, of course, we started rebuilding. We tried to pick up the pieces and put them together the best we could and my father started the business again and a few years later the Communists said, “Oh, no, this doesn’t belong to you.” And they gave us a choice—either we stay and my father can be a manager in his own business or, if we choose to leave, they gave us the option to leave. And Israel was the only place that we could leave at that time because we did have the registration consulate in Prague but we had very high quota numbers. We couldn’t make it to the United States so we went to Israel. Left everything behind.
- Q. The second time you were uprooted.
- A. Yes. We went to Israel and life was very hard there. Very hard. This was right after the war and a lot of people came from Europe to Israel and they just didn’t have the facilities where to put all those people.
- Q. Was this before Israel became independent?

- A. Uh, no, this was about a month after.
- Q. So, you didn't have difficulty entering Israel?
- A. No, no we didn't. My husband was drafted in the army right away. He was in the Israeli army and we stayed with the third brother of my mother, who lived in Israel for many, many years. We stayed in his place. And then we moved to Beersheva. We lived there and, for some reason or other, we could never make a go of it in Israel.
- Q. You mentioned your husband. When did you meet him?
- A. I met him, well, he lived, his family lived in the same town where I was brought up. And, coincidentally, his family had a lumber business, too. So after the war, what has happened, they both came back, my father and my husband, and neither of them had enough money to start the lumber business on his own, so, whatever they had they put together and they went in as partners and then, of course, when my mother and I came home, we started dating and I married him.
- Q. And you all went to Israel?
- A. Yes. Yes.
- Q. How did you manage to leave Israel and come to the United States?
- A. That wasn't easy. They wouldn't let us out because my husband was an officer in the army.
- Q. Hmm.
- A. They—we had difficulty. They told us that my son and I can go but they wouldn't let my husband go. Finally, I don't know how, somehow it was arranged that they let us go. And we came to this country in '51.
- Q. You, and your husband, your son and your parents?
- A. Yes. Yes. We lived in Brooklyn.
- Q. Where was your uncle? In Brooklyn?
- A. Yes, and then we moved to Queens and we bought a house and I had another child. And, you know, we worked. My husband worked. I was home with the children and life was more or less routine after that.
- Q. What brought you to Florida?

- A. Well, I had some friends that moved down here to Venice and I was just tired of New York. I wanted a complete change.
- Q. Did you bring your parents down when you moved?
- A. No. My parents were living in Miami already. They were retired. And after I moved down here, they moved to Port Charlotte.
- Q. So that there is some family nearby?
- A. Yes.
- Q. This has been a very difficult thing for you, and yet, you have done this taping with us. You have appeared at the Federation meeting. Why?
- A. Well, I guess I just feel like everybody else, that the world shouldn't forget. Because once my generation is gone, and the young generation is not going to be told about it, then nobody will really know what happened. Nobody will remember.
- Q. There are many who feel as you do. We feel as you do. There are Centers all over the country now and we hope that the efforts of all of us will keep this memory alive, so it will never happen again. I want to thank you very much, Mrs. Ruda, you have been very helpful. I hope that from now on, it is just smooth sailing.
- A. I hope so. And thank you very much. It was my pleasure, really.
- Q. Thank you.