

HOLOCAUST INTERVIEW WITH STEFA KUPFER

Sid Bolkosky interviewing

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0:00:53

Born in Poland in a very Jewish town. Grandfather had long beard, Shabath was observed, father went to shul. Lost a sister when she was 2 years old. Had grandparents on her mother's side. Had aunts, cousins. Family of 60-70 people in that town. Father's brother's and sisters didn't live in the town. Probably 10 or 12 survived.

Father ran a store. She went to public school in the morning, Hebrew school in the afternoon. They Kosher. Lots of Jews wore beards, wore side locks, kept their heads covered. Friday father would go to shul, then they would have a meal and sing. Saturdays, father would go to early meeting, come home and have lunch. Then the family would go for a long walk. This was before her sister was born.

05:58

Father had a lot of non-Jewish customers. Didn't experience any anti-Semitism personally. But just before the holidays college students would come home and try to shoo customers away from the Jewish stores. People would throw stones at her grandfather. He was a businessman, but studied in the evening. They had Purim at the grandfather's house. They lived very close. Sister was born in 1938.

8:55

She heard the war had started on a Saturday afternoon. Saw and heard tanks in the streets, Germans were throwing candy to the people in the street. Soon after hard labor, persecution started.

10:24

Right before the Germans came, her father left because he was afraid for his life. Rumor that women and children, the Germans were civilized about, but they would take the men to hard labor. Right away, the mother had to take care of the store, and Stefa became a mother to her little sister. Their Polish maid left, and besides it was illegal to have a Polish maid. got a Jewish lady to stay with them. Lots of young people trying to escape came to her grandparents' house. Jewish children didn't go to school.

12:49

When father was packing his suitcase, she asked when he was coming back. "Never". Caught himself, and said, probably in two or three weeks. Father was tortured to death by Ukrainians?. For years and years, she wouldn't believe it.

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15:23

Her parents were in love for ten years before they were allowed to get married. Special relationship. Her father was an extremely gentle person. Nursed her when she was sick.

16:30

Germans would come to the store a few times a week. Took what they needed, never paid anything. Forced her mother once to open the store on shabat.

17:28

She didn't have a childhood or even a youth. At the age of ten, she became a mother to her sister. Kids grow up quickly when there is a war.

18:06

Not long after the Germans came, an order went out for Jews to register. Her mother didn't. They didn't know what it was for. Two days later, there was an order for all the registered people to come to the market square with their belongings. They were marched to the river. They crossed into Russia, where they were treated as displaced persons, but not as Jews. Stafa's family felt lucky not to have registered, didn't know that their persecution was just starting. Jews worked on road, quarries, had to give up furs, Jews were not allowed to have furs. A woman forgot she had a fur pompom on her slipper, her maid informed and the woman was punished severely. Still they were in their house, they had something to eat. Her family was lucky, because her father had ordered flour, sugar and salt just before he left. There was rationing.

22:52

Didn't have to stand in line because they had flour. All the neighbors did. Meat was not available, generally. Before the ghetto was erected, they left to save their lives. People in the ghetto were above 18 years old. Stafa was sent to her aunt to see what was happening in the town there. Aunt told her to stay with them, but Stafa went home and told that her aunt wanted them there. Mother hired a Polish lady to take her and her sister to the aunt. The woman got scared and disappeared. When they got off the train, they were questioned by police. Stafa denied that she was Jewish, gave a name she had taken from her non-Jewish neighbor. They kept questioning her, and pointed to her briefcase, and told her that they had seen a suitcase like hers filled with gold. The police opened the suitcase, and in it contained an uncut challah--some tomatoes, soap. This was a dead give-away. But for some reason they didn't pay attention, and let her go eventually. So Stafa and her sister Nina walked toward aunt's apartment. When they got there the house was closed, nobody there. They went to sit in the outhouse. When the landlady came she let them into the aunt's apartment. Aunt

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didn't show up for a couple of days. Mother didn't know what had happened to them. They stayed there for a while, and finally aunt showed up. Didn't know what to do with them. The landlady used to bring them some food.

31:28

One day her cousin came in with a Polish man. When her mother saw that the house was going to be part of the ghetto, she went into hiding. She asked the Polish man to go and see what happened to the children. Ran into Stafa's cousin, who took him to the house. Man went back and got her, and in the night he brought her to the aunt's house, and they were reunited. Aunt could not keep apartment any longer. Jews were not allowed in the open. She kept them for the two weeks that the rent covered. Landlady, Mrs. Olefska, had to rent the apartment out, but she took them to a room in the attic. Stayed there for a while. But the relative who had rented the apartment urged Olefska to rent out the attic room. So finally she rented out the room. She then took them into the basement. They were living in the attic for 2 or 3 months.

37:55

with a family below them, they had to whisper, walk on tip toe, couldn't open the window. They had a pail with cover, landlady's brother would come every evening and pick it up. Landlady made them potato soup every day. Whenever Stafa peels a potato she remembers the potato soup and Mrs. Olefska. She was a Christian, Stafa's mother a very orthodox Jew. Olefska respected it. she took one pot and one spoon, scrubbed it washed it. That was theirs. Didn't put in a fat. Did nice things for them, bought them apples. Brother would go to Germans soldiers and buy very old bread. Olefska suggested that the other rub the bread with apples to soften it. Very special lade.

40:45

The entrance to the basement from the hall, steps going down, shared by Olefska and the neighbor. Olefska's basement had separate door. Little platform erected to sleep on. Also entrance from the garden. Brother would bring bread, soup and empty their pail after dark. Never left basement, except once when her neck was swollen. Olefska called down, and on a Sunday Oleska would take her out to sit in the sun, and the neck got better. When they finally came out of hiding, it was difficult to walk. They could only whisper, voice was gone.

44:05

They left the basement because the sister developed the whooping cough, she was 3-4 years old. Somebody heard it. And they had to leave. Not far from Olefska's there was a field and a small house, which they rented. The woman did not know they were Jewish. It was a two-room house, which they shared with the woman. She was a maid who worked all day. Got suspicious because

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the children never went out to play with the neighbor's children. Went to the neighbors. Little sister walked in to the house and saw religious pictures on the walls. Asked who the portraits were, but the neighbor children just answered: God, and didn't get suspicious. Stafa almost gave herself away too, when she asked when Christmas was that year. There was never a time when they felt completely safe. Woman wanted them to move out, said her neighbors were suspicious that they were Jewish. Mother wrote to non-Jewish friend, who posed as her brother. Brought food, vodka, flour etc. Persuaded the woman to let them stay in the house. All very jolly. They had money for the rent because at the beginning of the war the mother had bought dollars. Later they sold jewelry and clothes.

52:30

Still, after a while the woman had enough. They had to leave. Went to Polish man who had posed as her brother. Went on a Sunday morning. Drove in when the church let out and the Poles saw three Jewish faces. Everybody knew immediately because their rescuer was known to do everything and anything that was against the Germans. He rented them a place, where they stayed for a month. After a month they had to leave, somebody knew about them and they wanted to kill them. Were sent back where they came from. Saw Mrs. Olefska. In the evening they went back to the Olefska basement. They stayed there until the Russians came. When the front was coming closer, some Germans occupied the front part of the basement. They could hear their radio through the wall.

Just before the Russians came in, they were given away. The front was so close that the door to the basement was left unlocked so they could escape. There was a knock on the door, and an SS man was there.

BREAK

1:00:35

They immediately got out and hid in the bushes. They could see flashlights in the basement, and hear them say that the room was probably outfitted as a bomb shelter. And they left. They went into the field where the corn was very high. A few hours later, the Russians came. Even with the Russians coming, the Germans were hunting Jews.

Mrs. Olefska told them that she was going to join the Russians. So they hid in the attic again. Soon the Russians retreated and the Germans were back. Then they went back in the basement. Then the street was vacated. Olefska's brother told them to stay a day or two. Were left with bread and water. After a few days, brother knocked on the window. Pulled them out through the window. Told them to go to the public bomb shelter and that they wouldn't be recognized in the turmoil. But they were recognized. The brother had said that if they were in trouble, they could go

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to the house of a crazy professor. That's where they went. He invited them in. Part of the house was occupied by Germans from Vienna. They were nice because they didn't know they were Jewish.

Mother had gotten an infection in a scratch sustained when she was pulled through the window. Had blood poisoning, was treated by doctor there. Next day they were called to the police station. They were sure that this was the end. They only wanted to know why the doctor was helping a civilian lady, but they let them go. Then they had to leave the safe place because the Russians were coming. Went with Poles to a village where they were liberated by the Russians. Mother became very friendly with a Polish lady, who wanted to open a business with her mother. Later told that they were Jewish, and she was very surprised and disappointed.

1:13:31

Stafa's aunt worked in a rubber factory. One day they were to be shipped to a camp. Cousin came to pick up something, and mother pleaded with cousin to stay. Cousin knew that she wasn't going to live through the war. They were sent to a death camp. They didn't know about the death camp and gas chambers. Always felt it would have been easier to survive if not so isolated. They saw Polish papers every morning, but they didn't say anything about Jews. Read the matrimonial announcements. Kept their sanity. They read everything--even the recipes. Olefska subscribed to monthly magazine about saints. Stafa's favorite saint was St. Anthony of Padua.

1:18:13

Once mother left and didn't come back. They stood in the window and looked at the bright stars. They cried and prayed--to St. Anthony too.

1:19:10

Mrs. Olefska and her brother would have been shot or hung on the spot if they had been found to hide Jews. She knew that. Olefska was not that young when she got married, she was a wealthy lady, who was used by her husband who had converted from Judaism. She bought him clothes, a house, etc, and then he left her. She could be expected not to like Jews, but she told Stefa's why she hid them.

1:20:48

When Olefska was a little girl, she was crossing a frozen lake, but she fell in. A man passing by on a sled saw her, and both he--a Jewish man--and the driver jumped in and pulled her out. She was convinced that she had been saved by a Jewish man so she could save Jewish lives later. She got no payment, she sold things, and wouldn't accept payment. Olefska would go to mass every morning and pray for them. After they were liberated the

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mother went to see Olefska. Olefska told her mother to leave and never to write because she was afraid of her neighbors for saving Jewish lives.

She is still in touch with man who posed as mother's brother. He was a friend of both the father and the mother. When he used to come to the store he would go into the back room, and they knew that he stole from them. He hated the Germans, and maybe he had a bad conscience, maybe he was hoping for reward after the war. Her family was very wealthy. She doesn't know what his motives were.

Professor was crazy, ran around naked. Wanted to show mother the holy light, which was a fire in town.

1:26:45

When the Russians came, they went out and joined them. Talked to an officer who turned out to be a Jew too. Went back to Krasno??.

1:28:17

Went back to Sarnok?. The reception they got was "So many of you are still alive." There were still too many Jews! But nobody was alive anymore. Before the ghetto was established, many went into an ice cellar to hide, about 40 people. Two old women living nearby pointed them out, and the Germans came to get them. she was told that her pious uncle sang all the way to the cemetery, where they were all shot.

1:31:02

She feels a sense of waste, loss, bewilderment. Who knows what geniuses went down.

1:32:00

She feels a loss of childhood, loss of her father. It's such a void, terrible loss, emptiness.

1:33:06

When she met her husband, they talked about it. He was in Russia. Her own stories sound unbelievable to herself even though it is absolutely true. Didn't tell her children the whole story. May have picked up information when she talks to her fiend about it. With her mother she didn't talk much. Sister once asked the mother about the father. She told her that he was a good person and respected in the community.

1:36:53

Got worried when she was young and her husband came home late that she was going to be alone with the kids. Many triggers, like cigarette smoke that drifted into the basement from a young couple, music. Once she left the basement to go to some friend to sell a piece of jewelry. It was winter and very cold. When

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Stafa came into the kitchen, woman was baking cookies in a hot kitchen. For her it was the epitome of well-being. There is always something that triggers the memories.

1:40:45

They were never able to show Mrs. Olefska how much she meant to them. This interview is for her. It should never be forgotten that not everybody was a beast. What happened to the Jews should never be forgotten.