

Koenigsberg, Rose
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Three Audio Tapes

Abstract

Rose Koenigsberg was born in 1914 and raised in Velichovky, Czechoslovakia. She was a teacher in the town of Ralova (?) until March 1939 when the Hungarians occupied the entire town. Shortly afterwards, Rose and some of the other Jewish teachers at her school were arrested. Rose was able to return home as a result of a request made by the town's mayor. She returned to her family in Velichovky and stayed with them until April 1944. They lived a fairly comfortable life under the circumstances because her father was able to maintain his fields until 1944. Of Rose's five brothers and three sisters, one was sent into forced labor, and two were sent to Theresienstadt from their school.

In mid-1944, Rose's family began to feel the pressures of being Jewish so they went into hiding. They hid and lived off of the generosity of several local friends. However, they were finally discovered and arrested by Hungarian guards and sent to Berehove, Ukraine and then on to Auschwitz. Rose and her three sisters were able to stay together throughout their stay at the camp. Two of her sisters were assigned to hand out food, but Rose had no official job. The girls saw their brothers on various occasions, and the oldest brother was able to see them briefly while he was on a transport from Theresienstadt.

Rose describes many aspects of her life in Auschwitz, ranging from the terrible food to the poor clothing. She and her sisters were eventually moved to the sub-camp Zittau, where she worked in an airplane factory. Rose held various positions at this factory until the camp was liberated by the Russians. After liberation, she went back to Czechoslovakia and returned to her home in Velichovky for a short while. She eventually joined the rest of her surviving family in Liberec. While there, Rose was married and began to see a doctor for her illnesses. She and her husband finally moved to New York in 1948 to join her sister and other family members already living in the United States.

Oral History

Tape 1, Side A

- 001** Rose was born in 1914 Velichovky, Czechoslovakia. Before the war, she was a teacher in the town of Lollar (?). In 1938, the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia. Under Nazi protection, the Hungarians occupied her town.
- 015** When the Hungarians occupied Czechoslovakia, the principal at Rose's school decided to move and left Rose in charge of the school. She became principal and took over teaching first grade. Rose tracked down the superintendent of the local schools. He promised to send a new principal.
- 032** The new principal arrived. Rose remained at that school until the Hungarians occupied the rest of the surrounding area in March 1939. Rose was out one day with some of her teacher friends when they were arrested by Hungarian guards and taken to a gathering place five kilometers away. The mayor of the town heard of her arrest and requested that Rose be released. The guards released her, and she returned home.

- 049** Rose spoke Hungarian, so the landlord of her apartment would often bring non-Jews by her home to speak with her.
- 056** She received a letter from the military saying that she had lost her position as a teacher. Only one of the teachers that were previously taken away ever returned to Lollar. Non-Jews were assigned to the local teaching positions.
- 070** Rose asked the military why she was discharged from her teaching position, but they could not give her a good answer.
- 072** She went back to Velichovky to stay with her family. She lived there until the Nazis came in April 1944.
- 077** From 1939 to 1944, Rose and her family lived a fairly comfortable life. Her father was able to keep his business on his field and mill. Though many non-Jews did not want to work for her father, Rose made them clothes, so they would stay.
- 093** Her father owned his fields until 1944.
- 097** The Hungarians occupied Velichovky and her father had a reputation for disliking Hungarians so they wanted to arrest him because of his sentiments, but a local priest defended him.
- 113** Even though Rose's family did not suffer greatly during the Hungarian occupation, their freedoms were certainly limited.
- 116** Rose had five brothers and three sisters. One brother was sent into forced labor in 1941. Another brother and one of her sisters were originally studying at a school in a town near Prague.
- 128** Certain people from these schools were sent to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. Her brother and sister were among those sent from their school.
- 130** Rose's three other sisters, one brother, and parents remained at their home in Velichovky. One sister worked for the executive director of a synagogue in the city.
- 135** On the last day of Passover in 1944, the family began to hear stories of Nazis coming for Jews. Her family was at their synagogue one day, and the executive director warned the brother that the family should disappear.
- 155** The last communication Rose received from her brother and sister in Theresienstadt was in 1943.
- 164** Prior to 1944, Rose's family did not believe anything would happen to them. By 1944, it was too late for them to do anything significant to save themselves.

- 172** Rose's father had several non-Jewish friends who lived on the outskirts of their town. The family was able to hide with several of these friends by going back and forth between them. Rose was thirty years old in 1944.
- 183** They slept with cows and horses quite frequently. When they heard dogs barking, they always feared that soldiers were coming for them. One of the families they stayed with always attended church on Sundays. The church's priest, who knew this family was hiding Jews, warned that people would be killed if they were found with Jews.
- 202** When Rose's family discovered this threat, they left and hid in the woods. Rose's sister was able to sneak back home and retrieve some clothing, documents, pictures, and food.
- 227** The family moved all around the area and had difficulty finding places to stay. One person had to ask them to leave when his neighbor became suspicious.
- 239** Rose's family was not able to take much with them, and what they could bring would most likely not help much. They had what they needed and often lived off of the generosity of others.
- 252** Rose describes how her family was discovered in hiding and others were arrested. A group of Hungarian gendarme officers took them to the local city hall, tied them up, and told them to stay in place.
- 272** The priest who had earlier defended Rose's father was also brought to the city hall. He was beaten and questioned. They wanted to know where Rose's family had hidden their money and who had helped them hide for so long.
- 285** While the family was in hiding, the executive director had sent their former mayor after them. The mayor had a son in Budapest who was a soldier on leave and would take the family's children. The executive director even had gentile documents prepared for them.
- 302** Rose and her siblings did not want to be separated from their parents, so they did not take the documents.
- 318** All of the policemen in Rose's town were Hungarian. By the time Rose and her family were arrested, most of the other Jews had been removed to Mukacheve. Only Rose's family and another Jewish woman with her two children remained in hiding.
- 335** When Rose and her family were arrested, the woman and her two children gave themselves up to the police. They were eventually taken to Auschwitz and never returned.
- 344** From Mukacheve, all of Velichovsky's Jews went to Auschwitz.
- 348** Rose's family was taken to Berehove before going to Auschwitz. One of the policemen escorting them offered to take care of them to some extent. He

allowed them to go to their summer house in Berehove to bake bread and take what they wanted.

Tape 1, Side B

- 005** Rose's mother asked this policeman if she would ever see her home again. The soldier did not know where they were going but replied that it was unlikely they would return. Though he allowed them to take what they wanted from their summer home, the family knew that they most likely would not need any of it where they were going.
- 014** Rose's family was one of the few that could speak Hungarian, so they knew all of the Hungarian policemen. The one that helped them was a high-ranking official.
- 019** Her family was taken on a special, small train to Berehove. When they arrived, everyone was sad to see them because they were some of the last Jews transported from the area.
- 036** All of her family—her three sisters, one brother, and parents—lined up when they arrived in Berehove. The soldiers searched them and took everything away from them.
- 044** The policeman who had helped them went back to Velichovsky and told people there that they would never see Rose's family again. He told everyone that he had witnessed them being shot.
- 053** Rose's family was told that they would be taken to work.
- 055** Rose describes what she brought with her. One item was a coat in which she hid other items.
- 061** Rose and her family were packed into cattle trains. Every few hours a soldier would come in and accuse them of still hiding some goods. Her sister had a large bill of currency and was afraid she would be caught with it.
- 077** They arrived in Auschwitz after traveling in the cattle cars for what had felt like an eternity. However, Rose estimates that they were really only on the train for a couple of days. They were told to leave everything in the cars.
- 090** Everyone separated and lined up according to gender. They discovered that Rose's grandmother, aunt, and her mother's cousin had been placed on the same transport as they from Berehove.
- 102** Mengele arrived as the new arrivals were separated. He told them to either go left or right. Those who went right were young, and those sent left went to the crematoria. Rose's family was told by some Polish Jews that either way everyone would eventually be sent to the crematoria.

- 117** Rose and her sisters were taken to a new location, told to undress, and placed five to a room. Their heads were shaved. Mengele came in, picked up the hair of Rose's sixteen year old sister and said that it was ideal hair. They were given soap to bathe with that she said was made from Jewish bodies. They were allowed to keep their own shoes but were given dresses with no underwear.
- 137** They were taken to a block where they had to stay. There were three rows of bunks, and ten women sharing one blanket per bed. It was very cold at night, and it was difficult to recognize each other.
- 147** Rose and her three sisters were able to stay together because no one knew they were sisters. Her seventeen year-old brother remained with her father until he was taken to be with the other youth of the camp.
- 153** Rose's block leader was from Czechoslovakia and one day heard the four sisters speaking Czech.
- 169** Two of Rose's sisters were assigned by the block leader to stand at the camp's back gate and hand out food. They had to divide one loaf of bread into pieces for about twenty people to share. They recognized that something strange was in their soup.
- 185** They found out that some sort of medicine was being put in their soup from some of the other prisoners who were doctors.
- 200** They noticed one day that some of the men in their camp were from their town and were working at the crematoria. Her sisters made little packages of food and threw them over the fence for them.
- 215** One of Rose's sisters asked one of the crematoria men what she should do to survive in the camp. He replied that the Devil would not even take them where the Germans were taking them. He also informed her that those who volunteered at selections were often taken to be burned.
- 223** Every morning at five o'clock, regardless of weather, the prisoners were taken out for four to five hours. If someone was missing, the guards checked the bunks and sent that person, if found, immediately to the crematorium.
- 234** One day, Mengele came for a selection with a beautiful SS woman. They looked at everyone's knees.
- 248** A mother and a daughter stood near Rose during that selection. The mother had bulging thighs and was removed. The daughter cried that she wanted to remain with her mother.
- 271** One day, a truck went by with her mother's cousin standing up on it naked. Rose's sister yelled out in Hungarian to him. A soldier held a gun up to her head and told her to disappear.

- 290** The four sisters one day noticed one of their younger brothers working in Buna. However, he was shot three weeks before the camp was liberated. Later, their eldest sister in Theresienstadt was yelling out family names, and a young boy who had known her brother there informed her of his death.
- 331** A Polish commander told the girls that a group from Theresienstadt was coming to Auschwitz and that their brother was in this group. A German group found her brother in a washroom trying to contact his sisters. He was shot.

Tape 2, Side A

- 001** Rose describes meeting her brother in Auschwitz. He informed her that he was some sort of leader at Theresienstadt, so their sister there was taken care of by others. After he was shot, they heard no more about him until after the war.
- 017** The block leader told the sister to move from Block 3 to Block 18.
- 021** Rose had no regular job duty at Auschwitz. She and her sisters traded positions frequently.
- 041** She describes a typical day at the camp. Everyone had to wake up at five o'clock. Some soup was brought in for their food. Then they all had to line up and stand in the rain for five or more hours in only thin dresses. Some girls cut off pieces from their dresses to wear on their heads. They were punished for destroying their dresses.
- 056** Sometimes they received bread with their soup. If they were lucky, they would maybe get some marmalade for lunch.
- 060** They had to force themselves to go to the bathroom. The buckets filled up quickly, and the prisoners were not allowed to clean them often.
- 068** Rose never got sick, but her youngest sister once did. It was too dangerous to go to the camp's health station. A doctor among the prisoners tried to help.
- 079** She became ill once she left the camp.
- 081** Rose was only taken to the "showers" once. The blanket she and her bedmates shared was also only cleaned once. They had to walk four to five kilometers to a place where their blankets were cleaned.
- 097** Rose was in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps from the end of May 1944 to November 1944.
- 105** One day, some women were taken to Lager A to take a shower. To confuse them, the Germans then placed them in cattle cars and then led them outside. They thought they were being taken to the crematoria but they were not.

- 118** Rose and some others were taken to a new location, which they later found out to be Zittau, a sub-camp of Auschwitz.
- 129** She did not know how they had the strength to move at that point.
- 132** In their new building, there were captive Russians. Each had their own bunk bed and blanket. The four sisters remained together in one corner and felt very special and happy.
- 143** Next door to their new location was a building of English captives. They had found a spot in the ceiling to get through to Rose's building. The English asked them questions and brought them chocolate.
- 151** A very nice German SS man came in and brought them good food in the morning. They ate soup with noodles. He noticed that the women could not carry heavy loads so he helped them.
- 169** One sister worked in the kitchen for the Germans.
- 176** Rose and the others stayed there for about two weeks and then went to work in factories. Rose went to an airplane factory and had to select screws and other pieces for planes. When she delivered some boxes to a German soldier one day, he had her transferred to work for him with ten other women.
- 194** Because of her new job, Rose's clothing improved. She received a coat, a pair of shoes, underwear, and a new dress. Everything was new for her, but it was still quite old and shabby.
- 210** In her new job, Rose scraped off places on planes for mechanics to put on wings.
- 217** In Rose's new area, there was a German soldier who was originally from the Sudetenland and spoke Czech. He was embarrassed of his background. He orders Rose to translate his orders for him, and she became the manager of much of the factory's work.
- 231** Once, two women working in the factory gave Rose some food to share with her sisters.
- 251** A female soldier asked who was hiding the food. The German soldier in charge of the plant told her that she had no right to interfere with his workers.
- 278** Rose worked at the factory for a long time. Her youngest sister was not as good a worker, so she could not work with Rose. Her other two sisters were chosen to go near the Austrian border to a factory of two hundred workers. They all worried about the youngest sister.
- 295** In the end, they did not have to worry about her because they were soon liberated.

- 300** Rose can not believe that she survived. She thinks that she did because she had hope and did not want to die.
- 311** Rose and many other prisoners often heard planes flying above them. They hoped that the planes would kill them.
- 320** When the planes did come, the guards had everyone go inside the barracks.

Tape 2, Side B

- 002** Around August of 1944, a Polish soldier told Rose and her sisters that they should not go outside because they were strong. The Germans in charge of the camp wanted to empty it of Czech citizens and sent many to the crematorium that night.
- 008** Before the Czechs were placed in that camp, there had been a group of Gypsies that were eliminated.
- 016** Rose describes some of her experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- 021** She discusses how the women in her camp were punished. Once, a female soldier grabbed a female prisoner and pulled what little hair she had out of her head.
- 032** The mother of two daughters from Rose's town was immediately killed during the initial selections. Her two daughters were killed soon afterwards because they appeared too weak.
- 043** One of Rose's sisters tried to help a group of Hungarians who had recently arrived.
- 060** One day while in the barracks, a female doctor among the prisoners performed an abortion on another inmate. The woman who had the abortion survived and now lives in the United States.
- 070** The doctor who had performed the abortion had no medical supplies. Rose does not know how she performed the abortion.
- 082** This doctor also somehow found medicine to give to Rose's youngest sister once.
- 087** Rose has tried hard to forget her experiences, but she often has rough dreams and her husband must comfort her. When people wanted to start talking about their memories, she had no desire to do so. Not a day goes by now when she does not think of her experiences.
- 101** Rose and the others did not think the war would really end until a few days before liberation. In the bunks, they saw some SS men leaving. On the night of liberation, she and a few others were lying in a cemetery near Zittau. They heard in the streets that the Germans were leaving.

- 116** The SS men took two people from her group and dressed them in their clothing. They left with them the day before liberation.
- 132** In Zittau, a Polish man told them that he would one day give them tools to cut the fence and escape. However, the day never came.
- 144** Rose and the others did not know they were liberated until the morning after it was announced. All the Germans had disappeared, and they saw the Russians approaching. The Russians arrested many Germans and SS officers.
- 164** At liberation, Rose was very skinny. She came home and found out that she had lung problems, and she had to receive treatment. When she went to the United States, she also found out that she had problems with her teeth. Many of her teeth had to be pulled out.
- 175** The Russians in Zittau did not provide any help but said that the prisoners could take whatever they wanted from what remained of the camp. The Russians occupied the nice houses in which the SS officers once lived. Rose helped some of the Russians by cooking for them.
- 195** Rose and the others stayed a few days near Zittau until they found a truck going towards Czechoslovakia. They were far from their home but near the border.
- 214** On their way home, they met some nice Yugoslav soldiers.
- 218** Rose does not remember in what order they went through the cities of Czechoslovakia. She does remember that they went to Prague, Brno, and finally Budapest.
- 225** They had no money and were only able to travel with those willing to take them for free.
- 229** Rose finally arrived home. Everyone feared that she and her sisters were dead and that her brother who died before liberation might be alive.
- 238** Rose and her family found their old home clean when they returned. Two teachers, former friends of Rose, had lived there during the war but disappeared before they returned.
- 248** They found the teachers' prayer books in their attic.
- 255** The family stayed there until the brother who was a forced laborer came back. Her brother and sister who had been in Theresienstadt did not come home but they did survive. The brother was in Budapest helping others go to Israel through the Aliyah movement.
- 263** Someone told the brother from Theresienstadt that his family was safe. He did not want to see his old home.

- 271** Some people brought back items they had stolen from the family's home.
- 276** Rose's sisters went to Bucharest to look for family members. Rose and her younger brother stayed home. The man who had originally reported her family's hiding place to the police came to their house to apologize. Rose knew that she could report him but chose not to do so. She regrets not doing so today. She told the man, "Only God will punish you."
- 304** Rose's mother, father, grandmother, and one brother did not survive the war.
- 308** Everyone had different stories to tell when they returned home.
- 313** Rose was with her younger sister when she met the priest who had defended her family. He was now the superintendent of the local schools, and she was happy to see him.
- 326** The priest offered Rose a teaching job anywhere she wanted. He also told her that if she decided to leave then he would leave as well.
- 334** Rose stayed home for a few weeks then went to the Czech part of Liberec with the rest of her family. There she started to see a doctor. She had regular check-ups from 1945 to 1948 because she was initially quite ill.

Tape 3 Side A

- 000** Rose, her sisters, and her younger brother stayed together in Liberec.
- 004** The youngest sister got married but stayed nearby in Liberec. When Rose got married, her brother from Theresienstadt came to visit the family. Her sister who had survived Theresienstadt got married in Bratislava to someone she had met in the camp.
- 013** Rose's sister and brother then went to the United States.
- 015** The Russians occupied Czechoslovakia. Rose had a visa to leave and she had family in the United States who were willing to sponsor her coming here.
- 022** Rose had an aunt, and her husband had two nephews in the United States.
- 027** Rose stayed in Liberec until 1948. She then went to New York and stayed with her sister who was already living in the United States.
- 033** The war changed Rose's life in many significant ways. For example, when her son went to college, he asked her to come with him. Because Rose had lost family during the Holocaust, she developed a close relationship with her children.

- 052** Rose very seldom talks about her war experiences. Prior to this interview, she had only spoken with her family and close friends. She only shared partial stories with her children.
- 058** When Rose's oldest son was five years old, he asked why he did not have any grandparents. Rose told him they had been murdered in the war and he could not stop crying. Rose learned to restrain her stories.
- 070** Rose discusses being Jewish during the war. She says that her feelings about religion remained the same after the war, and she follows the major traditions today.
- 074** Rose's parents were not very religious Jews. They had allowed her to receive an education, but they did observe Jewish holidays.
- 084** Her sisters and brothers stayed kosher but did not practice Judaism fanatically either. They all kept the major holidays and traditions.
- 091** Rose applied for war reparations but only received a small amount like most others.
- 110** She considers her overall war experiences.
- 113** In Zittau, Rose was once given a soup with frozen turnips in it. Since then, she has been unable to eat turnips.
- 119** Rose recalls a time when one of her sisters brought her some clothing but covered it all up because she was afraid that it would be stolen. Rose also remembers that the SS woman who watched over them in the camp was very strict.
- 157** She shares the story of a male doctor, a female Romanian singer, and the singer's husband. The doctor knew of the singer's whereabouts during the war. When he was sent to a men's camp near the husband's camp, he was able to tell the man where his wife was. The husband was able to find his wife, only a few kilometers away, after the war.
- 178** As liberation neared, the women were happy that some of their hair was finally growing in.
- 185** One day, an SS soldier began to help the women because he had worked for a Jewish firm prior to the war. He gave each woman a potato.
- 197** The same soldier informed one of Rose's sisters that they had been ordered to kill all of the Jews when liberation appeared close. Instead, he wished to set them all free.
- 211** Many of the Jews in Auschwitz, including Rose, tried to maintain the Sabbath.

- 214** Rose's hobby was sewing. A leader of the barracks wanted Rose to sew her a fancy outfit, but Rose refused to do it on the Sabbath.
- 232** The time between 1939 and 1944 was a depressing period for Rose. She recalls soldiers taking people without citizen papers. There was a Polish family that had lived in Rose's town for several years before the war. They were taken from their home and sent into forced labor back in Poland long before Rose's family was taken. Guards and policemen walked around Rose's home every night. She was scared to leave her parents.
- 298** At the beginning of the war, there was a law that required men between the ages of eighteen and fifty to do forced labor. One of Rose's brothers had to leave home because of this law. Her youngest brother was too young, and her father was too old to be affected.
- 315** From 1939 to 1944, Rose and her family knew about the rations, but they were not badly affected. They were able to get clothes and to help their workers. Rose even made some heavy coats for the men. She also made several needlepoints for pleasure.

Tape 3 Side B

- 000** Rose describes staying with a family of Seventh Day Adventists while they were in hiding. Her family had left some photos and documents with this family that they kept until after the war. These items were some of the only photos and documents that Rose and her family were able to get after the war.
- 012** In certain ways, Rose and her family were treated differently from the rest of the town's Jews. They had friends in the woods nearby that they were able to trust to hide them.
- 025** They lived in a close-knit Jewish community that was generally very supportive. People looked for them when they went into hiding.
- 047** Not many Jews remained in Velichovky after the war. The town's Jewish cemetery is now destroyed.
- 050** Rose, her brothers, and her sisters have no desire to return to their home now. Rose has not kept in touch with anyone there.
- 090** Rose's final words are that she hopes that no one will ever have to go through what she went through.