

HELENA FINKLESTEIN  
RG-50.228.0004 (Rec. Ft Wayne 1990)

Helena was born in 1925 in Stanislaw, then in southern Poland and now in Ukraine. Her father was a physician and her mother a nurse; she had a sister Emily. She lived in a small town with many relative. She stated she had a wonderful life, with beautiful house and plenty of money. The Russians took over the town in 1939 but her immediate family had no problems until Nazis took over in in June 1941. They took away the intelligentsia and shot many of them but her father was returned to the family. The Germans made them give up their valuables and jewelry. They buried some to save them as did many others.

They were made to go into the ghetto where they had only one room for the family. Helena recalls that in October at Shana Raba the Nazis marched most of the Jews out of town from the Plaza (though not her family because of her father being a doctor). They made them undress and dig a big trench and then they were shot, while the Nazi soldiers sat at tables eating and drinking. She remembers that there was a Captain Hans Krieger who rode a white horse. When it got to be 5 pm he told this Jews that had not been killed to go home.

Helena remembers that every day people were taken and killed. She went to the laboratory with her parents and helped with tests; her sister stayed home. There was a lot of hunger and sickness and much black-market organization. The ghetto lasted until. February 1943. Helena's boyfriend had papers with Christian names and wanted her to go with him. Her father had a plan to smuggle them all the Hungary, but by the time Helena got to the train station she found out that her family had all been taken and killed. She was then taken in by a childless Christian couple who knew her parents. They were wonderful to her, but there came a time when she had to be hidden in a small shed in a make shift grave, covered up and she couldn't even stand up. She stayed like that until she was liberated in August 1944 by the Russians. She couldn't even walk at first.

She found out that that 30 Jews had been successfully hidden by Stasha Keshkovsky in an underground bunker. She went with this group and eventually married one of the survivors. She, her husband and brother in law went to Nuremberg and lived as Christians. They traveled from town to town in Poland where she took the name Mrs. Charnovsky, since there was still persecution of Jews. They then went to Berlin and Munich at the end of 1946. A cousin who had immigrated to the US and who worked for a general in the American Embassy in Berlin tried to get them visas. They then went to Paris for five months. Her husband was working for ORT and Helena had a baby there. Finally, they were even visas for Columbia in South America.

Helena said they had a wonderful life in Columbia for 35 years. They had another child and gradually moved up in society, aided by HIAS and the Joint. Her children went to graduate school in the US and settled there; Helena jointed them in the US after her husband died since she had no other relatives in Columbia, (her brother in law had gone to US). She now gives talks to schools about her experiences.