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Summary

This is an interview with Blanka Gross (born Bluma Liebermann) conducted in 1992 at the home of her granddaughter. Blanka's daughter Ruthie, who was with her mother during the Holocaust as a young child, also spoke occasionally.

Blanka Gross (née Bluma Liebermann) was born on November 30, 1911, in a small town in eastern Poland called Oleszyce. She had one older brother and one much younger sister in addition to her mother and father. Her father was in the lumber business, and the family lived comfortably. Jews lived in the center of town and gentiles on the outskirts and in the countryside. Blanka said that she had a happy childhood and that there was little antisemitism until the 1930s. She claimed that the Ukrainians in the town became especially antisemitic. Blanka spoke Yiddish at home but went to a secular school where she spoke Polish.

In 1936 Blanka married someone she had known from her hometown but who had moved to Vienna and later to Italy for further schooling because of Polish quotas on Jews. In 1936 she followed her husband to Italy where she lived until Mussolini instituted anti-Jewish legislation in 1938. She said that Italians were not antisemitic but that the adjustment to living in Italy was still difficult. Because Blanka did not have a permit to stay in Italy she was forced to leave and return to her hometown with her daughter Ruthie who was born in 1937. Blanka's husband remained in Italy for awhile and later went to England and then to the United States.

When the war broke out in 1939 Blanka's town was at first taken over by the Russians. Although she was not able to leave, and her parent's property was confiscated, she said that the Russians generally treated the Jews well. Blanka requested a passport from her husband and received a Guatemalan passport in 1940. This would help save her life. When the Nazis invaded in June 1941, she and Ruthie were able to live outside the ghetto, but many people, including, as she later learned, her parents were deported and killed. At some point the Nazis sent her to Lemberg (later Lvov and now Lviv). Blanka and her daughter Ruthie were able to survive there under very precarious conditions until June 1942 when they were deported to Bergen-Belsen. She was there for twenty-two months believing that she would die there. The Germans suspected that her passport was false but nevertheless treated her and others who held passports better than most prisoners. Nevertheless, there was never enough food, there were daily *Appels*, and there were frequent killings of prisoners.

On Passover 1944 as the allies came closer Blanka, her daughter, and others were taken on foot and by cattle car toward Theresienstadt. Blanka said that she preferred to die rather than go there. Fortunately, she and Ruthie were liberated by the American army. Blanka and Ruthie were able to emigrate to the United States in November 1945 after a brief stay in Portugal and Cuba. Ruthie saw her father for the first time in eight years. Ruthie also shared her memories of Lemberg and Bergen-Belsen, most of which, she said, emerged as her children began to grow up. Ruthie remained very upset that there were still Holocaust deniers.

Asked how she was able to survive Blanka attributed her survival to faith, courage, luck, and the occasional help from others. In 1992 Blanka was a great grandmother, Ruthie a grandmother, and they lived happy lives in the United States. But the memories of the Holocaust were still very much with them.