Heuman, Margot
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Abstract

Margot Heuman was born on February 17, 1928 in Hellenthal, Germany. After a pleasant childhood in Lippstadt, Germany, she and her family were deported to Theresienstadt. She actually enjoyed life in the ghetto, but was forced to leave when her family was sent to Auschwitz, and placed in the Birkenau camp. She took an opportunity to be transferred out of the camp, but had to leave her family behind. After a brief stay in a transition camp, her group arrived in Hamburg, where they did various jobs until the warehouse in which they lived was bombed. Then they moved on to Neugraben. After that, they were sent to a camp at Tiefstack, which was also bombed. They were then moved to Bergen Belsen. For days they had barely any food or water, and many died. The camp was liberated on April 15, 1945 by British troops. Margot went to Sweden with a group of other young survivors to recuperate, and was taken in by a teacher, Marta Dandenell. After over a year with her, Margot immigrated to the U.S. and joined relatives in New York City. She found work in an advertising agency and then as a systems analyst. She was married, and had two children. She maintains contact with Dandenell, as well as with her friend, Dita, who was with her during most of her internment. At the time of this testimony, Margot was still living in New York.

Testimony

000 My name is Margot Heuman. I was born February 17, 1928 in a small village in Germany called Hellenthal. The village had approximately five hundred inhabitants and perhaps twenty-five to forty Jewish families. I grew up and for the first three years of my life I lived there. I lived in a house; my father had a store and we lived above the store on the second floor. My grandfather lived across the street from us. He was a cattle dealer and he had a big house with a big barn, and I remember more from later vacations than from my early childhood... but I had a lot of fun there. He had horses and cows, and I loved being there. My younger sister was born three years later. Her name was Lore. After about... when I was about 4 ½ years old, we moved from Hellenthal to a bigger town.

013 We moved from Hellenthal in about 1932 and since this was before the Hitler era, I don't think it had anything to do with that. My father sold our house, he sold his store, and we moved to a small town—approximately 100,000 people or maybe more —called Lippstadt. This was also in Germany. We lived in a beautiful big house with a big garden, and I remember learning how to swim in a river which flowed beyond our garden called the Lippe. I went to school in Lippstadt. I went to public school and I also went to Hebrew school three times a week, and on Sundays I went to Sunday school. We did not have an orthodox home, but my mother kept kosher. We did celebrate and keep all the Jewish holidays, but that... my sister was also in school, and somehow I had a very good time in Lippstadt because I was

living in a nice house, had a very, very, very good home, with lots of love and care... much emphasis on education. I had a bicycle, I had friends... and somehow, everything was nice.

030 As I mentioned before, we did spend our vacations in Hellenthal, in my grandfather's house. My grandmother had died shortly after WWI, and two of my uncles were killed fighting for Germany in WWI. The reason I had such a really good time at my grandfather's and also at my mother's parents, who lived in Euskirchen, was that all my cousins, we were always together. Those were some of the best memories that I have. It was great being there, being together... lovely surroundings. I also skied. Hellenthal is in the mountains in a part of Germany called the Eifel, and I learned to ski there. I think I had a fairly... not only fairly... I think I had a very good life.

040 For reasons unknown to me we had to move again from Lippstadt, and lived briefly with my grandparents in Euskirchen. And then we moved to Bielefeld. This was about 1937. In Bielefeld, my father was employed for an organization called "Help for German Jews." At that time I went to middle school, but in 1938, we were all kicked out of school. I even remember the day we three Jewish children in the school— my sister, myself and a boy, I don't remember his name— but I remember the three of us were standing outside crying because all of the sudden we were kicked out of class, and we didn't know why, and really what was happening. Even though I was ten years old, I don't think I was really aware of the whole situation. We walked home, and later on, shortly afterwards, my parents arranged for us to go to a Jewish school, because the same thing was happening to all the other Jewish children and we still needed some kind of education. So we did go to a Jewish school, and had Jewish teachers, who were also kicked out of German schools. This I think was probably before Kristallnacht. Sometime... sometime in the summer or early autumn of 1938.

059 We had to wear a Jewish Star and were not really allowed to do anything. We couldn't go swimming, we couldn't go to the movies, we couldn't go hiking, we couldn't do anything. Except, my parents didn't know about this, but I used to cover up my star and do these things anyhow, and it was like an adventure. I did not really feel any direct anti-Semitism, or direct ... I wasn't persecuted at that time, except that I had to wear the star. But nobody really did anything to me or said anything, and as I said, I got around it and did a lot of things anyhow. Then in 1941, the deportations started, and lots of my friends were deported to Poland, to the Warsaw Ghetto. And I remember going with my friend to the place where they were supposed to be deported from, and feeling lost and unhappy because I was left behind and nobody really knew whether they were going or what was going to happen, we didn't know. It's just that there were fewer and fewer Jewish families, and since my father worked for this Jewish organization we were one of the last ones to leave and I felt lost and lonely and ... I don't know. Anyhow, I did not mention that in 1938, Kristallnacht and all that. I don't remember much about it, and I know that my father did not go into any concentration camps. Somehow, it didn't leave too much of an impression on me, because I don't recall it.

079 On June 29, 1942, we were deported to Theresienstadt. Now Theresienstadt was supposedly the ideal place to go. It was a ghetto. The reason we went to Theresienstadt was because my father was a veteran of WWI and had earned a medal, the Iron Cross, similar to the Medal of Honor, fighting

for Germany. So that gave us special privileges. When we arrived in Theresienstadt, my grandmother met us at the station. We travelled in... compared to what happened later on we travelled very comfortably. We were allowed to take suitcases and backpacks and as much as we could carry. As I said, my grandmother met us. Both my, these are my maternal grandparents, were deported to Theresienstadt about six months before us, and my grandfather had died of starvation, so he was no longer alive when we got there.

092 The first few weeks in Theresienstadt were pretty bad. My mother, sister and I lived on a floor somewhere. It was hot as hell, and there were fleas. My father lived in barracks. The food was pretty good, and there was also enough in the beginning, but after a few weeks somehow, we were always hungry. And my parents were able to find a place for us in a youth home. Both my sister and I lived in a room with about twenty to twenty-five girls my age—thirteen to fifteen years old—and I somehow got used to it, to being there... and I liked it... I found... we had Zionist organizations there, and I joined an organization and having been all alone in Bielefeld towards the end and not having any Jewish kids, and not being able to do anything, somehow, I loved Theresienstadt. We were hungry, but otherwise we were not... it was a ghetto, it was Jewish, self-ruled, and except for being hungry, I don't think I really missed anything. As I said, I probably liked it better than being in Germany.

111 While in Theresienstadt, we did have schooling because there were a lot of Jewish teachers there. I saw my first opera, La Bohéme, because there were a lot of Jewish musicians there. I worked outside the ghetto in something called a Landwirtschaft, which means working in a farming community or something like that. I remember working in the spinach fields and eating the spinach and trying to bring back whatever we could by stuffing it in our bras—we had nothing else to put in them—so we made these bras and stuffed them with spinach and other vegetables to bring back to our parents. By the way, I did see my parents two or three times a week. I was able to visit them. I also saw my sister almost every other day. As a matter of fact, I did resent her at times because being younger, she expected me to take care of her and being... not knowing any better, I didn't do it.

122 You did get soup, bread, and milk, which we beat up because if you beat the milk, it became foamy and it filled your stomach more. And once a week we had these little cakes called Glistern, with a chocolate sauce, which was like a treat Friday nights. As I mentioned before, we were all big Zionists. We all planned to go to Israel eventually. Besides going to my first opera, I remember the theater. We studied a lot, there was a lot of camaraderie... and I... this might sound funny, but compared to what happened to me afterwards, Theresienstadt was heaven.

133 My father worked for the post office, and he was caught stealing some food out of a package... being hungry, stealing food to me is not a sin or anything like that. Anyhow, he was caught and he was deported. He was supposed to be deported to Auschwitz. That was in May, 1944, and my mother said, if he goes, we all go. So there we went, all of us, to Auschwitz.

138 There's something I'd like to mention that I haven't mentioned before. In Theresienstadt, I met a very very good friend, my friend Dita. We were the same age. She came from Vienna, and somehow,

we are still friends now. And I felt terrible, very lost, having to leave her in Theresienstadt when we went to Auschwitz. Being transported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz in a cattle wagon... I don't know how many people there were in the wagon, but I remember hardly having enough room to stand, and being on the road for two or three days... we had a bucket as a toilet. It was pretty horrible. We arrived in Auschwitz, not really knowing what Auschwitz was. We had no idea. We arrived at the railroad station. We all had to disembark. We were standing there. This was one of the worst things that I witnessed. There was a mother with a little kid, and the baby was crying. I'd say the baby was three, four, maybe five months old. One of the SS men just took the baby and stepped on its head. And they were separated in Auschwitz— the gas chamber people and the people who went to camp. And we were all... we went together to a family camp called Birkenau. We did not live together—this includes my grandmother, by the way. We lived... my sister and I again lived in a barracks where children were. My mother lived in another barracks, my father lived in another, and I believe my grandmother lived with my mother. We were tattooed. I have the number A1712. And... in Birkenau... we were very, very, very hungry. I worked in a children's home three days a week. I don't know... it was just... it was hard [hell].

168 After being in Birkenau for close to a month a transport arrived from Theresienstadt and my fried Dita came. And somehow I felt better about being there. We worked together. Three months later, we were chosen to leave Birkenau. We didn't really know where we were going. But somehow, someone had told Dita to go because it would be a way out of Auschwitz. My mother had the option to go with me or to stay with my sister, who was too young to go, and since she felt my sister needed her more than I did, she stayed. At the time, my grandmother had already died, and I think she just died of starvation and old age and a broken heart. I remember leaving Auschwitz. I remember saying goodbye to my mother. I remember her... hugging her... she used to be a very heavy kind of woman, and I remember all she was was skin and bones. And not knowing any better, I ate her soup for the day, which she insisted that I take. And which meant that day she would have absolutely nothing to eat until the following day. And I somehow learned that it's incredible what a mother will do for her children. It's just unbelievable. Because it really... hunger is very, very painful. I marched out of this camp with a group of young people, ages sixteen to forty. I remember my father standing in front of his barracks and I went over and he said goodbye to me, and he blessed me with a Jewish blessing. And it's the first time I had seen my father cry... and ... being young, I really didn't know what was happening, and I didn't realize that I would never see my parents again.

193 First we went to a transition camp for three days. And we had to sleep fifteen on one cot, not a cot, a bed, but it would ordinarily sleep maybe two or three, but we had fifteen. And we had to eat from one pot, six to a pot. And... I don't know. We stayed there for three days and we had to go for a medical examination. They took all our clothes away from us; we were deloused. I had an internal examination, and somehow the German doctor realized that the more she tried to examine me, the more I moved away, and she left me alone... but a lot of us had our hair cut short. If we had lice, the hair was cut off. We ran around without any clothing at all for a couple of hours. It was summer, so it wasn't cold or anything, but because they had taken everything from us.... We did have showers, we had water showers. And I remember standing outside in this yard, naked, with about 500 other people,

naked. Then we were taken in one by one and given clothes. And I was one of the first ones in and I was given this white and blue striped prisoner uniform and I think.... I don't know what else... socks and shoes... but no underwear... so when I went to the other side, I lifted up my dress to show the others that we didn't have any underwear. Everybody got this uniform and then we were again put into a cattle wagon. And we went on to Germany. We ended up in Hamburg, where we were in a labor camp. In Hamburg, we lived in this big place called Freihafen, a warehouse overlooking the harbor. The place was huge. We slept in bunk beds, approximately 500 people. We had these sinks in the front so we could wash up. We got up at five in the morning, went in a boat on the Elbe... we went to work there. I don't really remember what we did. We did dig ditches at one point because they expected an invasion from the British, and these were supposed to be traps for tanks. In the summer, it was pretty good, but in October, when it got colder, it was pretty bad. We didn't have enough clothing, we were hungry...it was just...but we were alive... I guess that's all I could say. All this time I was together with Dita. We stuck together, we shared everything. All these years, after Auschwitz, I never ate anything without sharing it with her, no matter how hungry I was. And she did the same, and I think if it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't be alive and I don't think that she would be alive if it hadn't been for our relationship either. Also, because of my ... caring for another human being, somehow we never lost our dignity and we remained people.

242 We had a lot of bombings. We had to go down to the basement, which after a while we refused to do. And we had very mixed feelings, because we were happy that they were bombing and thought that the war was going to be over, its going to be the end, we'd meet our friends and families again... but then we were also scared because some of them were very close calls.

One day, when we returned from work, the Freihafen where we had been living was bombed and was no more. That was the end of that period. And we were sent to a place called Neugraben, which is a little suburb of Hamburg, and was in the mountains. And we lived in the barracks there. But I, liking the other girls, loved it there... I liked it relatively more than anywhere else. We went mushroom hunting. We made mushroom soups. We didn't really know mushrooms, but we were never poisoned. We somehow found the ones we could eat. Again, being young made a big difference. We went to work in the morning, and I remember days that it snowed and there was ice and older people were stumbling and complaining. And we had a great time; we were just sliding down the hill. So I think everything is relative. Again, we didn't have enough to eat... but I did meet a German... well he gave me... a German soldier gave me his lunch almost every day because I reminded him of his daughter. And there was a German family that lived in a boat and they left me a bowl of porridge almost everyday. They left it right near the entrance to the boat. I don't know who they were, I don't know their names, but they did do that every day. Again, Dita and I shared everything. We used to play games, mental telepathy, what we would do when we got out of here... what we would do when we met our families again... and sometimes we would just sit there and try to think... to transmit my thoughts to her or her thoughts to me, and somehow the time went by. And the physical abuse, I was physically abused a few times, kicked when I wasn't fast enough. One of the SS men gave me a kick down the stairs... somebody hit me... and at that time part of our work was, because of all the bombings and because a lot of Hamburg was destroyed, we went to town and were cleaning bricks so they could be used again to rebuild whatever the Germans wanted to rebuild. And sometimes we found a bombed out cellar full of

food and wine and all kinds of stuff, which we just hid there and ate and ate and ate. I think that things like that are what kept us going and kept us alive.

286 In February of 1945 we had to move again and we went to a place called Tiefstack. And it was a terrible camp. Again, lots of hunger, no heat... very bad accommodations. But one day when we came back from work, as a matter of fact it was the beginning of March, the whole thing was again bombed and had been burnt down. And... the bad part is a lot of our comrades had been harmed, some were killed. There were mixed feelings each time--- we were glad that these things were happening, but we were also concerned about what was happening to our comrades and to us. I don't know. At this point I was really thinking a lot about my parents because I was getting older and I was seeing what was happening to us. I was wondering what was happening to them. I don't know... it's... I don't know.... Then around the middle of March, all of the sudden we heard "transport, transport..." and we got a half a loaf of bread and twenty grams of margarine. And we were in a wagon. Again these freight wagons, for five days, sixty people. We finally came on... we came without hands as far as I'm concerned... Bergen-Belsen.

315 We had to hike into camp, this is Bergen-Belsen. For approximately six hours. And I think the worst time of my whole concentration camp experience began. We were four on a small little cot. And the beds were bunk beds, triple bunk beds. There were lice all over. Nothing to eat. For twelve days we had absolutely nothing, no bread, no water. Nothing at all. The only thing we got was soup made out of... garbage. And we were finally liberated on April 15, 1945 by the British. Before liberation, I remember every morning waking up, looking at my cot, seeing the people who were alive, seeing the people who were dead, taking the people who were dead, one of us by the arms, one of us by the feet, and just dumping them outside. Shortly before we were liberated the dead were just piled up, as high as trees on both sides of the road, and I don't know, it was pretty bad.

336 I was very [very] ill when we were liberated. I remember lying there just before the liberation. We already heard all the bombing and the shooting. The only thing that was... I had this tremendous will to live and I said, "Gee... I just have to get through this. I have to live." I can remember this now. I forgot my name. I was lying there, trying to remember my name, and saying it to myself. Then I thought, well, I probably won't see my parents again anyhow, and what's the difference... and I was very bad... but I did go into... I was taken to the... by the British and Swedish Red Cross to a hospital that was set up. French nuns who had volunteered were taking care of us. I remember being unconscious at the time. I was about 5'5" tall and weighed 76 pounds. I remember waking up and having a cross above my bed and little bells were ringing. And I remember saying, "No no no, I'm Jewish, I can't have this"'... and then I was unconscious again... and around the middle of July, the Swedish Red Cross took youngsters under a team to Sweden to recuperate. I did sign up for this. I mean I volunteered. I wanted to go and get out of Germany and get well and go on with my life. Dita and I had been separated, just towards the end because there was so much confusion and so much going on that we just couldn't keep track of each other. But she did find me again in the hospital. But then we lost each other again because I went to Sweden and she went to England.

365 On the boat to Sweden, a teacher from Stockholm by the name of Marta Dandenell was there as a volunteer. We had to go into quarantine in I believe its spelled Holsdydiunn (?). While there, I met my friend Hilde, with whom I had also been in Theresienstadt. We were not particularly close friends, but we were together in the same youth home in Theresienstadt and we met again in Sweden. I recovered quickly, being young. I received communication from Mrs. Dandenell and she asked me to come live with her in Stockholm and she wanted me to be part of her family. She was a single woman, a teacher, very well off... a humanitarian, a Nazi fighter all during the war. Just a wonderful woman. I did go to Stockholm and lived with her for about a year and a half or so. And somehow I recovered my joy for living, went to school, lived with her... and just, I don't know, just went back... got back to being a human being.

395 One of the things I remember most about being with Marta was that she let me be me. She never expected anything of me. She never asked me to go to church. She never asked me to do anything unless I wanted to do it. She was just a wonderful, wonderful person. She gave me private lessons and sent me to the best of private schools. She sent me to a summer school on an island. And somehow I think this woman did more for me than anyone has ever done, without any thought of gain on her part... completely without any thought of personal gain, there was nothing in it for her. She just gave herself to me. And at the time I was living with her, she also had a Finnish girl living with her, and later on she adopted this girl, Eva. I am still in contact with these people. I have gone to visit her many times now in a senior citizens' home in Stockholm. She's 86 years old, and somehow, I owe her an awful lot. We did go to the Swedish Red Cross and inquired about my family to see if they could help us find them or what had happened to them, but somehow, I never found out. I don't know. I don't know where they died, how they died... I just know that they're gone. My friend Dita was in England and somehow I was in contact with her. We wrote to each other and found each other again, but only through correspondence for the time being. My mother's brothers as well as my father's brother and sister had gone... left Germany in 1938. Why my parents never left, I don't know. And they were in the United States and lived in Newark, New Jersey. They insisted that I come to the United States, something I really didn't want to do, because I was really dying to go to Israel. But somehow, they sent me a ticket. I was the only one left of the whole family. Out of approximately 45 people who were in the concentration camps, I am the only survivor. So they insisted that I come. So I came to New York, and I hated it. I despised New York and all I wanted to do was go back to Sweden. But what happens, with time, you get used to it. I did stay in New York. I went to school, I got a job. I worked in an advertising agency... I became a systems analyst later on. I was married; I felt very strongly that it was up to me to have children. To replace at least part of my family that was lost. I now have two great kids, I have four grandchildren. Life goes on. All I can say is that as far as I am concerned this will never, ever happen again.

459 I was never helped by any group or organization. In Sweden I was helped by Marta Dandenell, and then I came to the U.S. and stayed with relatives briefly. And basically, I helped myself. I would also like to mention something else that I forgot or did not mention before about while I was still in Germany, in Bielefeld. My father had a secretary called Anna Lisa and I don't remember her family name. I know that she fell in love with a doctor, Freudenteller, who was a Jewish man married to a

German woman who had two children. But they fell in love, and when she went to Theresienstadt, he volunteered, and went along with her as a physician. Then, while in Theresienstadt, Doctor Freudenteller had to go with a transport of children, to leave Theresienstadt. There were about 500 children, and since he was a physician, he was leading this trip. And Anna Lisa volunteered to go along, and he, Anna Lisa, and the 500 children ended up in the Auschwitz gas chambers. This is something else that I think about occasionally. I think that's about it. If you need any other information you can call me. [redacted]