

-TITLE- KESSELMAN, RITA  
-I\_DATE- 04-02-91  
-SOURCE- BOSTON  
-RESTRICTIONS-  
-SOUND\_QUALITY- EXCELLENT  
-IMAGE\_QUALITY- EXCELLENT  
-DURATION-  
-LANGUAGES- ENGLISH  
-KEY\_SEGMENT-  
-GEOGRAPHIC\_NAME-  
-PERSONAL\_NAME-  
-CORPORATE\_NAME-  
-KEY\_WORDS-  
-NOTES-  
-CONTENTS-

Rita's stories were captivating. Her descriptions were detailed and thus images of her experiences were clear. Her stories were touching yet, she told them without hesitation.

1:00:12 My name is Rita Kesselman. I was born in Brodna, Poland. I was in a ghetto when the war broke out...

Interviewer: How would you describe your family's social class?

Rita: Middle class. My father bought and sold wood to factories and individuals. Wood to heat houses.

I: Was your family religious?

R: Yes, we observed the Jewish law. Everything in our house was kosher. I went to a Jewish school. We went to the temple every Saturday.

I: What about culture? Did your family participate in the theater or the literary world?

R: Life was tough. There was a local theater but my parents only went a few times.

I: What is the educational background of your family?

1:03:08

R: My mother was born in a small town and life was tough for her growing up as well.

I: What was your family relationship to non-Jews?

R: We lived with non-Jews. We got along beautifully with them until the war broke out. The Germans would give them our belongings when they took us away.

I: Did you experience any anti-semitic experience before the war?

R: Yes, on Sundays, the Gentile children would pick on the Jewish children on our way home from school. My mother would try to meet us after school to walk us home. Young Jewish boys were afraid to hit non-Jews. Once my brother hit a Gentile boy and his father came over and wanted to hit my brother. My father said that he would take care of it. The boy's father wanted to kill my 9 year old brother. We were also afraid of the police men. There were no Jewish police men only Poles.

When I was nine years old, in a Jewish night club, a non-Jewish sailor entered. He chose a beautiful girl and wanted to dance with her. Her fiance fought the man. The sailor died. After the funeral some Gentiles decided they wanted to kill Jews so they stood by the bridge in the middle of the city and killed 15-20 Jews. They wanted to burn down a Jewish neighborhood but a non-jew who also lived there talked them out of it.

We were hiding from them in our basement and my baby sister began to cry. Someone wanted to kill her so that she wouldn't give us away.

1:09:05

I: Once the war was imminent what options did your family have?

R: No options. Our family was all together and we did not have the money to go anywhere. And, "whoever believed something like this was going to happen?"

I: How old were you when the war broke out?

R: In '39 I was 12 years old. The Russians came in. 2/3 of Poland was taken over by the German's and 1/3 was taken over by the Russians. I lived on the Russian side of Poland. Life wasn't so bad for two years. I went to school. My father went to work. We were all together. I didn't really understand what was going on. We had to stand in lines for food and clothes but, we had them. The Poles were afraid of the Russians so they didn't pick on the Jews. On June 22, 1941, without a warning, planes flew over during the night and bombed bridges. We didn't think it was war. But bombs began to fall. Everyone ran in different directions for two days. I came to a village and found a couple of friends. Some peasants told us to go in the barn. After Germans on motorcycles left, it took us three days to get back home. Everything was fled and bombed. People were lying in the streets dead. I didn't know where my parents were. I didn't know if I had parents. We took boats or swam across the river. I went to my Jewish school and found my grandmother, aunt and parents. Everything was bombed. No one had anything except what was on their backs. We lived in the school until they formed the ghetto.

1:15:00

I: Were you in the ghetto?

R Yes.

I: Can you describe it's formation? administrators, inhabitants, its size, lifestyle-work, housing, food?

R: In every classroom there was wall to wall people. The food rations were very little. Sicknesses started. There were about 40,000 Jews. They put up signs that instructed any Jew with gold, radios, money, any belongings to turn them in. There were also signs that Jews must wear Jewish star. Signs also read that Jews must walk in the street single file, not on the sidewalk.

There were two ghettos. Every Jew had to get in a ghetto. The Jewish consols told you what ghetto to get into. It was November during the first snow of the year. Epidemics broke out.

There were many times I went to work for my mother. I would sneak away and ask my father's friend for bread and sneak children's old shoes into get fixed by an other friend of my fathers

We use to smuggle in salami or bread from work. The Germans could beat you or kill you but you would take the risk because you were cold and dying from hunger. I was too young to work but for a few months I worked for my mom until I contracted an epidemic. They took me to the hospital. There was no medicine.

They told my family that my 16 year old brother was beaten to death at work by a German. When they brought the body he was so hurt that he could barely breathe after six weeks in a hospital. He was a beautiful boy, dark, tall. I'll tell you later how ..

I: Did you still observe the Jewish law?

R: Yes, in the place were we lived on holidays and Friday nights we would get together and light candles.

1:22:45

I: Any political activity?

R: There were meetings. I don't remember these things very vividly. My mother didn't like to talk about it. I was a sensitive child. I cried. I really don't know. I don't remember alot.

I: Any resistance?

R: No, not that I know. People went to work and didn't come back. They went away and tried to run away. We thought they were dead. Also they took people to Auschwitz from the ghetto.

They would display bloody people in chains as examples of run aways.

I: How did you reach the camp?

1:24:45

R: If you were lucky you could work in a factory. My father wasn't a shoemaker but, he could do anything. He worked in the shoe factory making boots for the German army.

They cleaned out half the ghetto and took them to Auschwitz. We found this out when we were given old chairs and things of the people who were gone. Those without jobs were transported. I know now that they went to Auschwitz.

We were told to go to the gates in order to be transferred from one ghetto to the other. My cousin stuttered trying to say his name. The guard told him to open his mouth wide and then shot him in the mouth in front of his family.

I was staying at my aunt's house for a week or so. While I was there the SS men took away all the people from the factory. In three days they took 10,000 people to Auschwitz. I was on one of the first transports.

I: Do you remember the date?

R: It was December 1942. It took hours to walk to the train station. Little babies were being left behind in the streets. Some were shot on the spot. In the trains there was standing room only. In the corner was one pale and bread thrown on the floor. The little windows had bars. All were yelling, "wasser", "wasser, we are thirsty." The pale filled up right away. We had a dead person on the train because a German shot him through the little window. The trip took three days and three nights. People say it should take 6-7 hours total. They mixed us up so we wouldn't know what was happening.

1:33:36

We got there and saw mostly men working at the camp. Men in little hats and striped shirts. I didn't see any women working. They told us we were to go. The young were separated from the old and little children who were sent to the trucks. We thought we were going to war. We marched to a gate. At the corner of the gate women were in striped shirts. A band was playing. It was getting dark as we came in. We stayed for a day and a night. In the morning everyone undressed, naked, and they shaved our heads. I was number 30775. They put it on our arm with a needle. I've taken it off since. They gave us striped clothes, no socks. It was winter time. We got wooden shoes. The floors were dirt. About 1000 people in each barrack. 5-6 people on each bunk. The bunks were bare. No pillows no blankets, no straw. It was winter time. They gave us a little piece of bread. They also gave us a little red bowl. If you lost this bowl you lost your life.

You need the bowl for the little soup they give you. Without the soup you don't eat and if you don't eat you don't survive. There was no toilets. If you wanted to go to the toilet you had to walk 25 blocks.

In Birkenau there were different camps. A women camp, a men camp, a gypsy camp and a family camp which was an experimentation. They were devided by electric wires.

The toilets were so far away and in the night it was dark. You were afraid of falling in a hole. We went pee in our bowls. The next day we ate from those bowls and God forbid if your bowl tipped and leaked onto the person below you at night.

Of the 10,000 people 3,000 of the women went to Auschwitz and only 12 survived.

1:40:17

In the morning about 3:00 AM they would chase us out of our bunks with cold water hoses in order to count us. There was not water for us to drink only the water they used to make coffee and the water they used to spray us. It was freezing outside but they took us out to make sure no one ran away. They would spray us and have selectlon. Everyday they would gather enough people to fill one block and they would take them away in trucks. (block 25). I came close to dying. One day I was worn out. I couldn't go anymore. I worked cleaning the city. I couldn't walk or carry anything. A school friend talked me into walking back to my bunk so that she wouldn't have to carry me. They would have shot us both if she carried me because she would be moving so slowly. The next day I didn't go to work. I couldn't even eat the little piece of bread. They picked me up and brought me to the 25th barrack. An SS man said, "Out" and kicked me with his boot. I couldn't walk for the longest time. I still have pain in my lower back today. He wouldn't let me die that time. Another time I wasn't ready to die yet. They sprayed us, undressed us and looked at us. I was sent to the line headed to die. When no one was looking I jumped over to the other line and that's how I saved my life. If I hadn't Jumped into the other line I would not be alive today.

1:45:40

I: Could you describe the guard system of the camp?

R: We had nothing to do with them. They would come and go, They assigned supervisors among us to tell us where to go and to give us our rations,

Most Sundays we were tortured, We would have to take off our uniforms and put them on backwards and transport sand in them while being chased by dogs. The dogs would kill. They would tear apart the people, Torture Sunday.

I: Any attempt at resistance? Any attempt at escapes?

R: Yes, There were 4 crematoriums, When we arrived the sky was black. The chimneys were always going, People who worked in ammunition smuggled weapons to the crematoriums and they planned an uprising They burned one crematorium and they ran, The SS Shot all the people.

1:50:28

One girl, Molly, tried to run away. She spoke many languages. She was a runner, a messenger. She was a beautiful girl. A German fell in love with her and tried to smuggle her out. They caught her and hanged her. We all had to watch. She had a razor blade and cut her wrists and spit on a German and they hanged her. No one else would run away. They would make us stay outside until they found the one running away. They would say, "You will rot in hell until we find her." They wouldn't let us go back to the barracks.

I: Was there any work outside the camp?

R: Yes, commando 103 cleaning up the city, a shoe factory, an ammunition factory and a sorting factory where all the belongings of the Jews were organized and shipped to Germany. In camp I worked mending clothes. I was 13 or 14 and the youngest. Later I worked braiding ropes for parachutes.

I: Any relationships with people outside the camp?

R: No, not where I worked.

I: Any cultural activity?

R: No.

I: Any political activity?

R: None that I know.

I: Religious?

R: Yes, we never knew what day of the week it was but, somehow we always knew when it was Roshashana. We barely ate anyway but, we would just save our bread for the next day.

I never dreamt that I would live through this. Whenever we heard a plane over our heads we would beg God that they would drop a bomb on us and that it would all be over. We knew we would be going to the crematorium one way or another.

1:55:30

I: Any special methods of communicating?

R: Among ourselves? No. We were just existing. No one had a name. we were all just numbers. We were close together. We would hug each other for warmth.

We never baithed. We would brush the lice off like this...

1:56:50

I: To what do you attribute your survival?

R: Sheer luck. When the Germans knew they had lost the war they destroyed the crematoriums and evacuated the camps. They sprayed us, gave us new striped clothes, took us to the trains and dropped us off in fields to live in tents. It was raining and the wind blew so hard it blew away the tents. They walked us to the camp of Bergen-Belsen and put us in bunks waiting to die. One time my friends ran away. I couldn't keep up. A German caught me and hit me with a hose. I thought I was dead lying on the street. Friends took me to a bunk and I lay there until we were freed. The English came in and gave us soup and bread. We couldn't eat. We couldn't even control our bladders to get to a toilet at that point. I was very sick. I was taken to a hospital for a month.

2:00:00

When I got out of the hospital they put us up in the old SS housing. People came to look for relatives. A friend from school found me and introduced me to his friends and I met my husband this way.

1:62:25

2:01:32

I: Then where did you go?

R: My boyfriend got a job in Marbel and I went there with him. I wanted to go to Israel but I didn't know where I was going. I got married and we were trying to go to Israel. My cousin in the Polish army wrote to me and told me that I had already gone through enough and that there were no houses and no food in Israel. He told us to go to America.

2:05:45

I: Who was left in your family after the war?

R: No one. One cousin left for America before the war in 1930. One cousin went to Israel in 1928 and an other cousin was in the Polish army.

I: Did you ever go back to your home town?

R: No. Nothing was left. The Poles would shoot those who came back for fear they would want their homes back. We were afraid to go back.

I: What were your feelings about these experiences?

R: I wasn't alone. We were homeless. We clung together. I don't know. I was numb. I didn't believe I was liberated. When I got out the world didn't know what happened. When I tried to tell them they didn't want to know. People didn't want to hear. The people in America told me I had it good because so many people were here to help me get started and find a job, home. When they arrived they had to go through much more difficult times. I couldn't believe my ears. Some people told me I should have gone to Israel. They told me that Israel needs me. I told them that they should go to Israel. Coming here no one had a trade or a profession. My husband couldn't even speak english when he started working. It was a tough time. The children had no relatives. We hung together with other survivors. We were lucky to have them.

I: How did the war influence your values?

R: I know how lucky I am. I came to a country with opportunity. We are lucky. My husband did well. My children are all professionals. They have homes they made themselves. If you are willing to work and make something of your life, this is the best country in the world.

2:11:07

I: How religious were you after the war as opposed to before the war?

R: I loved the Yiddish way of life. I was very strict in my traditional values. After the war I joined a temple. My husband did not want to have anything to do with it. He said there is no God after what happened to us. I will always belong to a temple. My roots are there. I met people there.

I: Did you join any survival organizations?

R: Yes, the New American Association. We only met once in a while. My children called my friends aunts and uncles because that's all the family they knew.

I: Did you apply for reparations?

R: Yes, my husband didn't want to but, we needed the money

I: What languages were primarily spoken at home?

R: Yiddish and English. I can speak 7 languages.

I: What did you communicate to your children about the Holocaust?

R: Whenever they had questions I would try to answer them. Whatever they could comprehend. My oldest son said he never asked me questions because he didn't want to put me through it again. My grandchildren are asking questions now and I'm telling them.

2:15:08

I: Do you think an other Holocaust is possible?

R: I hope not. Everything is possible, this happened. We have to educate our people. I have been called to schools to talk and I didn't use to be able to do it. If we don't talk now then we've survived in vain. When we die, our story will die with us. My husband worked in a crematorium. Very few people are left. For many years I didn't sleep at night. He screamed during the night. I want him to tell his story. It is very important that it comes from him.

I: What ways did the Holocaust effect your life?

R: Everyway. I understand life better. I have deep feelings for people. I love life. I don't have to go places to do things. I wake up in the mornings and I am the happiest person alive. I saw in my short life, more then most could see in 10 lives. I'm well adjusted. I have a beautiful family now.

I: Anything to add?

R: I'm glad you're doing this. The whole thing is being denied and we need to tell about it. Some people are working to spread the stories. I know a teacher who is trying to get the money to go to Israel to learn about the Holocaust to teach the children. She is not Jewish herself. She's so devoted.

I: How do you feel about answering these questions?

R: Before I started talking I was very nervous. It is very trying. I use to break down but it gets easier with time. Sometimes I think I'm talking about an other person because I can't believe I lived through some of the things I did.

2:20:30

.END.→