

RG-50.266 #06
HELA JAFFE

Hela was born in Warsaw in 1923. She was one of 9 children. Her father was an art and furniture merchant. The mother didn't need to work.

The war broke out on Sept. 1, 1939. The family was on vacation 30 km from Warsaw. The family returned home to Warsaw to a destroyed house. The business was put under the name of a Polish acquaintance who gave them a full account of the transactions, and the money.

In 1941, the Warsaw ghetto was established and the family entered it too. They were in the 'small ghetto'. Hela managed to leave the ghetto and get the proceeds of the father's shop. In 1942, everyone had to have a working certificate [which the father obtained for them]. Hela worked at Tebbens. Hela and her 2 sisters worked in the clothing factory. Hela worked on a machine, the other 2 sisters by hand. One day, the sisters were taken out and sent to Treblinka. Since Hela was left alone, she decided to join her parents and brothers in another part of the ghetto. There, after going through a dangerous and forbidden road, she realized that the father and 2 brothers had also been sent to Treblinka. Only one brother was left with the mother. Hela stayed there until the uprising. They had prepared a bunker on the roof of the house. When the ghetto began burning, the group went out and congregated, with similar groups, in the square. From there, they were put on trains, in cattle cars. Arrival in Poniatov. There was a branch of Tebbens there, where Hela began to work. The brother and mother worked outdoors. Germans came to look for workers for forced labor camps, and took Hela's mother. Hela ran to her, and she was also taken to Biala Podlaska, in a work camp. The boys worked in an airport there, fixing it. Mother cooked for the Germans, and the sisters cleaned offices. It was the end of 1943.

Auschwitz, prisoners in uniforms, crematoria. The camp looked empty because a month before, the inmates there had been liquidated. It was 1944. Maidanek was bombed heavily. The Nazis took cover, the Jews were not allowed. Immediately after, they saw that the Germans began to burn the documents. The inmates were given bread, and began to walk, for many days. Maidanek, in the meantime, had been liberated by the Russians, but the camp was empty. Arrival in Auschwitz and from there to Bergen-Belsen. It was November 1944.

[Here the story becomes a personal dialogue between Hela and the interviewer, with whom she worked in Bergen-Belsen.]

There were over 40 orphans in Bergen-Belsen, and the 2 women began to take care of them. It was winter and the children cried from cold. Ada was the name of the other woman. When more and more children began arriving from other camps, Ada saw to their needs too.

May 15, 1945, the English liberated them. After the liberation, the children's homes continued to function but with food, medical services and education. Many of the children were repatriated to their homes. Many were sent through England to Palestine. Among the British who liberated Bergen-Belsen was the future president of Israel, Herzog. In 1947, Hela emigrated to Palestine, and suffered through the war of Liberation. Ada brought the children to kibbutz Dorot, Kiryat Anavim and Beit-Shemesh. Hela joined the children.

In 1946, a survivor from Auschwitz was approached by people who saw her number tattooed on her arm. They asked her 'why did you survive and my relatives died'? After several of these questions, she had the number removed.

Photos are shared at the end of the conversation.