

-TITLE-PAULA POPOWSKI
-I_DATE-27 JULY 1983
-SOURCE-CHILDREN OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS ATLANTA
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-EXCELLENT (One segment is distorted)
-IMAGE_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-DURATION-1 HOURS 48 MINUTES
-LANGUAGES-ENGLISH
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-

1:01:16 Paula was born 29 January 1923 in the city of (ph) Kalesheem, Poland (middle Poland). Her family owned and operated a flour mill originally built by her grandfather. Her father and her two uncles ran the business. She lived on the mill property with her father Moshe, her mother Sarah, her brother Gersher, and her sister, Hannah. Her grandmother and a great aunt also lived on the property. They were an upper-middle class, Orthodox Jewish family. She attended both a Polish public school and a religious girl's school. Her contact with non-jews was very limited before the war.

1:03:52 Paula encountered some anti-Semitism before the war. Her public school was segregated between Jews and Gentiles, and religious slurs were common.

1:05:06 Her first awareness of the danger came in 1938 after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Many in her city felt that war was imminent.

1:06:11 Paula and other Jews were immediately affected after the Nazi invasion. The Germans reached her town on 12 September 1939, and the Nuremberg laws immediately went into effect. Ninety percent of her town was burned and over 1,000 Jews were initially killed. Thereafter, Jews were forced to wear armbands, they were impressed for forced labor, and they were attacked in the streets by Poles and Germans. The situation was made worse by the severe food shortages and by the many homeless people in Kalesheem, a town which had been eighty percent Jewish.

1:08:29 Paula remembers Gentiles as being of very little help if any. No organized efforts were made to aid the Jews.

1:09:59 Jews were soon regulated as to where and when they could travel within the city. The Judenrat was established by the Germans.

1:12:12 Daily life in the evolving Ghetto centered on survival from meal to meal. All schools and businesses were closed, and the Jews focused their attention on finding food. One source was the black market. Her father lost the mill, but the family retained its house, where they sheltered many of the city's homeless as well as new refugees.

1:16:45 During September 1942, Paula was separated from her family. The Germans were starting to send Jews to Treblinka. Paula had the option of going to a local labor camp on her own (her sister was already there). In the face of her father's indecision, Paula's mother sent her to the camp, along with some money and some food. She was desperate to get to the camp, for she saw it as an alternative to deportation to a concentration camp, about which she and some of the other Jews had already heard terrible stories. Before Paula left for the camp, her father told her that it was the last that they would ever see of each other. At the camp, she learned that everyone else in the town was sent to Treblinka.

1:20:20 After one week in the camp, Paula learned that her family had remained hidden in Kalesheem. They were, however, found, and all of them were executed at the local cemetery. She learned that her sister is in another local labor camp, and she traveled to this camp, where she was reunited with Hannah.

1:22:27 Paula returns to a discussion of the Ghetto. There was a little resistance against the Germans in the beginning, but this quickly evaporated in the face of disease, starvation, and repression. Underground schools and social work did, however, persist until the end. Communications were possible, even with Warsaw. Jews, however, were refused many foods stuffs and even basic medical supplies. The Ghetto leadership, the Judenrat, was imposed by the Germans. Some of its members were "rotten apples."

1:26:46 Paula's family learned of the extermination camps from an escapee. Thereafter, they knew to where the Warsaw Jews were being transported. The Jews of Kalesheem began to feel like "hunted animals." Paula was emotionless, without any idea of what to do.

1:33:12 Few babies were born in the Ghetto, but, her uncle, a bachelor, delivered a refugee baby. Some few marriages and religious ceremonies also continued, for "life was a little bit going on." But all of these events had to be kept secret. Thus, they usually were performed by the adults, while the children kept a look-out for the Germans. During this period, Gentile help was rare and unorganized.

1:33:57 Paula returns to her account of the labor camp. She and her sister worked at digging ditches. Conditions and food were poor, but there was no attempt to escape, for the camp was seen as a haven. Indeed, many refugees tried, illegally, to pose as laborers.

This was punished when it was found out by the Germans. The legitimate workers were soon registered, with all others (the unregistered, disposed of). On one occasion, an unregistered boy of four was found. In front of the whole camp (and his hiding parents), he was killed. The other unregistered workers were found and killed.

1:37:48 Hannah was smuggled out of the camp by a friendly Pole. He came back for Paula, who at first refused to leave. Finally, she acquiesced, and, in November 1942, she was reunited with her sister in Warsaw. At this point, Paula was thinking neither of religion nor of her family. Too much had happened. The labor camp had been called (ph) Bizhorick.

1:42:39 In Warsaw, Paula and Hannah bought false papers which identified them as Gentiles. She assumed the name (ph) Appollonia Borkovska. They lived in hiding in the rooms of (ph) Mr. Borzhnack, a railroad worker. They became acquainted with the underground network of hidden Jews and they would visit other Jews after dark. Some Jews were identified to the Germans by Poles, and, when this happened, the Jews were usually interrogated and then shot.

1:47:22 Paula and Hannah had to move after a neighbor became suspicious. At the new hiding place, two extortionists quickly appeared and demanded money, threatening otherwise to turn the girls in to the Germans. The girls gave them some money. Soon after, Paula and her sister again moved. By now it was April 1943. They remained in Warsaw throughout the Ghetto uprising, which they both heard and saw from their hiding place in the Polish part of Warsaw. They decided to leave Warsaw and to go to Czestochowa, the town of the "Black Madonna," a common shrine for pilgrims. They arranged the move through the Polish woman they were hiding with, but "everything was for money."

1:52:30 In Czestochowa, they were installed with two nuns. One of the nuns almost immediately recognized that they were Jews. She confronted them, but did not betray them. Instead, she put them in contact with (ph) Mr. Rylski, the owner of a glass factory, and a secret protector of a Jewish boy who posed as a goat herder in the town. Rylski offered them jobs in his factory, and they stayed with the nuns.

1:57:43 Rylski explained his sympathy for the Jews as a result of his having two whom, he hoped, would be protected if they found themselves under similar circumstances. He was very kind to Paula and Hannah. Unfortunately, the nun soon stole most of their money, but they were in no position to accuse her. Without the money, the girls could not survive, and so they considered going to Germany to a labor camp for Poles. Rylski dissuaded them from this venture, and told them that "no situation is without a solution."

This tape started with poor sound.

1:02:28 In September 1943, a neighbor found out that they were Jews, and the nun insisted that they leave. Paula and her sister turned to Rylski. He told them of a priest who might aid them, but Rylski insisted that they tell the priest the truth from the very start. The girls left for the priest's place separately. The priest, who ran two old age homes, was sympathetic, and he installed them in one of the homes. The Mother Superior, however, was afraid, and after one night she sent them to the other home.

Here the sound returns to normal.

1:05:39 At the other home, the Mother Superior was sympathetic to their plight. She refused even to take money in payment, and so they stayed with her, while continuing their work at Rylski's glass factory. They lived under these circumstances until they were liberated by the Russians. After they were liberated, the Mother Superior gave the girls enough money to buy themselves a train ticket home to Kalesheem.

1:08:24 At this point, Paula shows her forged papers, which she has retained since the war. They include her general I.D., her employment documents, and her health insurance, as well as a picture of her sister, herself, and a friend working in the glass factory.

1:11:40 Paula returns to a discussion of the end of the war. The first sign that the end was nearing came as hints of the Russian advance were reported in the Polish National News. She later learned that the Russians had halted outside of Warsaw, and, by so doing, had allowed the Germans to crush the Polish uprising there. It became known by late 1944 that the Russians had liberated territory east of the Vistula, but Paula could not get across, for to do so was very dangerous. So, she remained in Chenslihova.

1:14:26 In January 1945, the Russians began a new offensive. On 12 January, the Russians reached Chenslihova, where they fought with the remaining Germans. Paula and Hannah hid in the glass factory with the other workers. At nightfall, they returned home, where the Mother Superior greeted their appearance with happy disbelief, and with the whispered words: "You are almost free." By 17 January, the Russians had secured the city. Paula and Hannah continued, nonetheless to hid the fact that they were Jews. Much looting was taking place in the town, and the girls went to look through the headquarters of the German staff. There is was evident that the Germans had left in great haste; there were half-cooked meals and toothpaste on brushes. The girls found a gold ring which they gave as a gift to the Mother Superior.

1:17:35 The Russians kept the Poles and Jews from taking revenge upon the many German prisoners. There had been an ammunition plant in Czestochowa where many Jews worked as slaves. Upon their liberation, they wanted to take revenge, but the Russians did not allow this.

1:19:09 Paula knew another hiding Jew who had remained in Warsaw. He wrote on New Year's Day, telling her of their imminent liberation. She was made aware of another letter in February, which she had to track down at the post office. This letter was from the same man, who had by then returned to Kalesheem. She then learned the Kalesheem had been liberated in June 1944.

1:22:06 Paula and Hannah received another letter, which informed them that their uncle was alive and in Kalesheem. He had survived by fleeing to Russia. The girls decided to return to Kalesheem, and in this endeavor they were aided by the Mother Superior and by Mr. Rylski. The train system was in pandemonium, and it took them three days to make a three hour trip to Warsaw.

1:24:50 Warsaw was filled with the stench of the dead and the whole city was demolished. The girls crossed the Vistula, and received shelter from a Pole whom they knew. They continued by train to Kalesheem, but they were forced off of the train so as to make room for the Russian wounded. It was now mid-February and freezing cold. The girls bribed their way on to another train which was returning Russian women who had been enslaved back to their homeland. Finally, they returned to Kalesheem, where they stayed initially with another Jewish family which had also survived.

1:28:25 Polish squatters, unwilling to relinquish the property which they had seized after the Jewish deportation, attacked and killed some of the returning Jews, but these attacks were unorganized. None the less, Paula and Hannah again fled Kalesheem. The girls received word again that one uncle was alive, and that an aunt was now in Palestine.

1:29:30 The girls went to b&d, where many of the Jewish survivors were gathering. Here, they received a letter from distant relatives in Charleston, south Carolina. These American relatives (of whom the girls were completely ignorant) promised to help the girls to be reunited with their aunt in Palestine. In the meantime, the girls were frustrated in their attempts to regain their parents property in Kalesheem, for the new Polish government nationalized it. This, as well as the increasing Polish violence against the Jews, motivated the girls to flee to a displaced persons camp in Germany.

1:33:24 The girls fled to Berlin. At this point Paula was separated from her sister, who continued on to Munich. Paula remained at the Berlin camp, called (ph Schlocktenezane, from January until April 1946. Although happy to simply be alive.

1:36:30 Paula was finally reunited with both her sister and her uncle in April 1946 when she went to Landsberg Germany, outside of Munich. Here they all stayed for four years, under U.S. jurisdiction. During that period, Paula was married and had a child. Her American relatives registered her, her sister, and her uncle in New York so as to facilitate their immigration to America, but the process was slow. With the passing of the Truman Displaced Persons laws, however, things suddenly began moving very fast. In late 1949, she and her husband immigrated to America, and went straight to Charleston, where they still live and work.

1:40:09 Paula discusses her feelings about the war. It has divided her life into two parts: before and after the war. Now that she is no longer raising a family, she thinks about it more often. Yet, it is not as terrible for her as it is for her husband, who survived a concentration camp. Nonetheless, she often reflects upon the fact that her entire extended family was killed.

1:41:57 Paula says that she is no longer concerned with vengeance. But, she is telling her story so that the children will remember and know that others came before them, before the war.

1:42:48 Paula discusses war reparations. She feels that nothing can repay the Jews, not even for one day of what happen. But, at the same time, she reflects, it is better that there be reparations than that the Germans keep the money. After the war, Paula kept in touch with Mr. Rylski, who she credits with saving her life. In 1963 she wrote to the World Jewish Congress, and identified Rylski as a "righteous Gentile," at the same time asking that some money be awarded to him. He, and after his death, his wife, did receive a money certificate. If this can be done with reparations, says Paula, then they should continue.

1:47:29 Paula is questioned as to her opinion about the possibility of another Holocaust. She does not want to believe that such a thing is possible in this day and age. But, in the 1930's, she says, everyone believed that the Germans were the most advanced people in the world, and yet they sank to such depths of barbarism.

1:48:20 Paula believes that the Holocaust profoundly influenced the rebirth of Israel. Without it, there would have been no Israel.

1:48:51 End Tape.
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