

Oral History: Henriette Liebman, August 1996

Henriette Liebman, born May 7, 1917 in Łódź, Poland, the younger of two sisters, describes: her parents, Victor and Perla (née Birensweig*), both teachers; living in “very modest” circumstances; not being “consciously” Jewish; having a socialist outlook; speaking Polish in the home; living in a traditional Jewish home, though not particularly Orthodox or observant; attending a private, Jewish, school, and then a state university; feeling Polish anti-Semitism “very deeply”; after the German invasion of Poland, feeling enraged by German and Polish brutality; being in line for bread and witnessing Poles point out Jews to the Germans; creation of the Łódź Ghetto in the poorest part of Łódź; being forced into the ghetto with her parents (her sister, married, moving in with in-laws); the ghetto being like a big prison, with horrible conditions and starvation; her father dying of starvation, followed by her mother about a year later; predations of the criminal police, Kripo; not knowing what was happening outside the ghetto but suspecting things, such as when someone would be taken away and never return; roundup and deportation of children; some people surviving the war by creating hiding places; the irony of manufacturing ammunition for the German war effort in the ghetto; the “nightmare” of being transported by train to Auschwitz in about August 1944; some people committing suicide en route and others not surviving the journey; undergoing selection; being forced to disrobe; being very much aware of killings in Auschwitz; transports continuing arrive every day; being savagely beaten for picking up a rotten potato; after three or four months, being taken by train without food and with little water to Bergen-Belsen; surviving only because she and her sister supported one another; being sent to Salzwedel, Germany, a work camp, until liberation by the Americans; feeling “indescribable joy” when they were liberated and the Germans taken prisoner; being treated compassionately by the camp commandant and writing him a poem of thanks, which was shown in his defense after his arrest; [in answer to a question] attributing her transfer to Belsen from Auschwitz to Auschwitz being overwhelmed by new transports and the exterminations still occurring there at a high rate, not being selected for extermination because she and her sister were young and might still be useful; obtaining a visa to emigrate to Australia in 1950; loving Australia; marrying and having a son; not losing her faith in God.

*Transliteration as heard