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Oral History: Esther Werblud, July 4 and August 22, 2001

Part I, July 4, 2001.

Esther Werblud, born May 18, 1923 in Bialystok, Poland to Shayna née Friedfeld* and Moshe Srivatz*, describes: an extended family; her family in the textile business; an older sister, who emigrated to Australia before the war, and brother, Samuel; her family struggling through the Depression; her family being marginally observant Jews; Bialystok being a largely Jewish city before the war; pervasive Polish anti-Semitism; division of Poland in 1939, with Bialystok in the Soviet zone; German attack and occupation of Bialystok in June 1941; Polish Jews escaping to Bialystok in 1939; German destruction of the synagogue and murder of over 2,000 Jews [timestamp 00:55:30]; her family among those who fled Bialystok to stay with relatives; her brother's arrest in July 1941; mass execution of Jews, including intellectuals and professionals; creation of the walled ghetto; working odd jobs for the Germans, both before and after creation of the ghetto; first German Aktion, in February 1943, rounding up about 10,000 Jews; her family members escaping by either being at work or hiding; [timestamp 01:34:00] existence of some resistance in the ghetto, including by her fiancé; a second roundup approximately six months after the first; accompanying her fiancé, who had a valued skill, and thus neither of them being taken in the roundup; subsequently being seized and transported by cattle car to Majdanek.

Part II, August 22, 2001. [begins at 01:51:30 in the first file]

Werblud describes: the train (to Majdanek) stopping in Lublin for a selection; men, including her fiancé, being left in Lublin; never seeing him again; the women continuing on foot to Majdanek; conditions on the train; some people escaping from the train; being told that children would be sent to Czechoslovakia [Theresienstadt] and be "well taken care of"; while stopped in Lublin, some mothers leaving babies behind in hope they might survive; arrival process in Majdanek [timestamp 02:10:39]; after about two weeks, being fortunate to be selected with a group of women to leave Majdanek and thus avoid the mass liquidation that occurred on November 3, 1943; being transported by train to Blizyn [site of AB-Aktion liquidation of Polish intellectuals] to work producing leather boots, where she remained until May 1944; developing sores all over her body but being able to smuggle in ointment to treat it; deadly outbreaks of typhus in the camp, mostly affecting men; being sent to Plaszow [timestamp 02:56:21]; [Note: Transitions abruptly to her experiences in Auschwitz]; the sight and smell of the crematoria and her presence during destruction by explosion of one of the crematoria; her job in Auschwitz mostly cleaning; [Returns to questions about Plaszow] continuing to work on leather goods; being transported to work in Wieliczka, an area of mines and tunnels near Krakow where the Nazis wanted to build planes; [second file, timestamp 00:16:00]; tells story of a lagerführer in Butin* who refused to surrender his Jews; after a few months in Wieliczka, experience of being transported to Auschwitz; being sent to Mühlhausen, near Hamburg; attributing survival mainly to luck; [asked about religion in the camps] observance by Jews of some major holidays, and some inmates having prayer paraphernalia,

such as shawls; being transported to Bergen-Belsen in 1945; being sick with typhus and hungry when liberated on April 15, 1945 by the British; moving to Bambek*; meeting her husband and marrying in 1946; arriving on the first ship to Australia, March 16, 1946; having a son and daughter. She reads poems and recollections she wrote while recovering in Belsen and after her arrival in Australia; shows photos of her family, including parents, siblings, children and grandchildren.

*As heard/transliterated