

## Translation/Summary of Oral History Interview with Helen Auster

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**Personal information...** Helen Auster (HA) was born on November 27, 1918 in Lwów (now L'viv, Ukraine). Father's name was Leon. Mother's name was Bronisława (Bronia), neé Kanafas. HA had two brothers, Baruch, who was a year older and Józek, who was 3 years younger. She had two sisters, Julia Teresa, who was 2 years younger and Janka who was the youngest. Janka was the smartest of them all. HA's father was a jeweler/watch repairer who had a shop in the center of town and a prominent clientele.

**Earliest memories of childhood...** HA recalls that she had a happy family. Her father would send them on summer holiday each year for two full months. HA attended Saint Anne's elementary school in Lwów. [Timestamp: 00:04:05]. She also took evening courses in fabric cutting and sewing, took classes in Hebrew and Ukrainian. She studied German in school.

**Relations between HA's parents and Poles...** HA's father had many Polish clients. However, where they lived when she was a child, most of the residents were Jews. HA's social circle mostly consisted of Jewish girls. At home, the parents spoke Yiddish. While HA understands Yiddish very well, she doesn't speak it. At home, she spoke to her parents in Polish.

Before the war, Lwów's population was about 330,000 people, of which about 1/3 were Jews, 1/3 were Poles and 1/3 were Ukrainians.

At this point in the narrative, HA is unable to provide substantive answers to the interviewer's questions. Instead, HA rambles on about her role in the household after her mother died and how she actually replaced the Polish domestic that they had. Phillip Maisel (I), the interviewer makes a valiant effort to get HA to focus on the changes in their life at the start of the war (which in Lwów meant Russian occupation). By then HA is married and they lived in their previous family apartment, while her father moved to an apartment closer to his shop in town. HA's husband worked for his father as a plumber. Her husband's brother was a lawyer and a violinist in the Lwów Opera. The arrival of the Russians did not bring about any significant changes in HA's life. [Timestamp: 00:28:24]. Her life continued quite comfortably without any interruptions.

**Start of German Occupation...** At first the ghetto was open. It wasn't walled in. HA and her husband managed to live without major inconvenience, especially since her husband was hired as a civil servant by the German occupation administration. HA's father was allowed to keep his shop for about a half year. Since they had money, they did not lack anything. As the enclosure and sealing of the ghetto approached, the food situation in the Jewish quarter deteriorated. Jewish residents became required to wear armbands with the Jewish star and Ukrainians started to appear at the entry points to the quarter. HA was working as a seamstress for the best seamstress in Lwów, Mrs. Hercegova, who worked only for German women. That meant that each day, HA would leave the ghetto with a column of Jewish workers. By the end, she worked for a shop in the ghetto and no longer left the ghetto.

[An interesting footnote about the fate of Mrs. Hercegova and her family...] One day, she was instructed by the Germans to pack her belonging, ready her two children and husband whom

the Germans were going to send to the U.S. Instead she left all her belongings behind, while the entire family was sent to the ovens in a concentration camp. HA's younger brother Józek was taken to the concentration camp Janowski, during the first week of German occupation. Their father almost succeeded in bribing the Germans to release him to a hospital in town. But by the time that HA came to see him there, all the patients were marched out to the nearby Zamarsonowsky [sp?] Forest where they were executed.

HA's older brother died in Warsaw in July 1943. He was betrayed by a Volksdeutscher.

**Life in Hiding...** Jerzy Khruty, a Ukrainian who was married to a Polish woman, lived in Warsaw. He was Leon Auster's (Helen's father's) client. He took HA with him to Warsaw under false papers. HA initially lived with Jerzy Khruty's family. HA's father also arranged for illegal Aryan papers for HA's two other sisters. They also ultimately went into hiding in Warsaw. Later, Jerzy moved HA to live with a Mrs. Kwiecińska—a Latvian widow. HA lived with her for 2-3 months. Subsequently she moved to live in the same building, but with Mrs. Kwiecińska's neighbor, Zosia Małecka. HA was able to sew there and earn some money. She also developed a clientele through Zosia's underground contacts. Meanwhile, HA's husband, for whom HA's father obtained illegal Aryan papers as well, remained in Lwów because he felt obliged to take care of his infirm mother. He never actually met up again with HA. He disappeared during his journey from Lwów to Warsaw. Her father, Leon probably died around the same time in Beżec concentration camp.

HA's younger sister Janka was arrested because she was also betrayed by a Volksdeutscher in Warsaw, who was keeping her in hiding at that time. Given that her younger sister did not look Jewish, HA was very surprised that she was arrested. Janka also held an essential position on the Polish telephone exchange because she spoke Polish, German and Russian. That same woman gave up another Jewish family that lived in hiding in her place. This was an extremely well to do family, named Kapłan. Their wealth came from huge warehouses with train and tram rails. Ultimately, that same woman betrayed some 25 people, mostly from Lwów.

When HA lived in Germany, she worked as a seamstress for a German woman. HA's second husband to be, worked some 5 km away from her. He was a Pole she met in Warsaw. His last name was Janek Ziliński. Sometime in May or June 1944, he told HA that the Germans had essentially lost the war. He concluded this thanks to underground radio programs to which he listened in his forester's lodge.

For an extensive period of time, HA continues what seems like totally disjointed and unfocused conversation about the time she had spent living and working in Germany. During that time she emphasizes that she maintained contact with Janek Ziliński who was a forester on an estate owned by a German. Fortunately, Phillip Maisel the interviewer stopped HA and asked HA:

**You were in Warsaw and suddenly you find yourself in Pomerania. What happened?**

[Timestamp: 01:13:23]

HA avers that this all started on July 10, 1943, on Assumption Day, when some 25 young residents of Lwów, were betrayed to the Germans and were killed. [Translator's Note: The date here is spurious, since Assumption Day is celebrated in Poland on August 15] They all lived on illegal Aryan documents. Among the dead were HA's brother and older sister. For that long

holiday weekend, HA was invited by some Polish (Catholic) girlfriends to spend in Biały Kamień—a village near Warsaw. Their sleeping accommodations would be a barn. (Suddenly, HA makes a correction by recalling that this event actually took place in August. That at least realigns the chronology of events in her narrative.)

It was during this outing that HA was unexpectedly arrested in a surprise German raid. HA was taken with everyone else who was swept up, to a prison in Ostrów Mazowiecki. There they spent 48 hrs. From there she was taken to Warsaw to the labor office of the prison on Skaryszewska Street 8. When her underground friends found out that she was being slated for deportation to Germany, they offered to use their connections to get her out. HA however, declined the offer, not wanting to expose them to the risk of losing their life for protecting a Jewess. [Timestamp: 1:21:53] HA did not want to have that on her conscience. HA used this incident as evidence of the goodness that she found among the Poles. Another case in point along the same lines was Marian Bocian, with whom, HA left all of her jewelry before leaving for Germany. He returned all of it to HA after the war. Yes, HA admits that she also had run-ins with the “szmalcownik” [Defined by Wikipedia as: ...“a slang expression that originated during the Holocaust in Poland and refers to people who blackmailed Jews who were in hiding, or Poles who aided Jews during the German occupation.”]; but she (HA) mostly met decent people during the war years.

HA was first deported to Stuttgart, Germany, where her transport was disinfected. After a day, the transport was taken to Szczecin (Stettin). There, they were again taken to a labor office, but this time, they were subjected to a selection process conducted by German employers seeking workers as forced labor in their enterprises. HA was chosen by a Hans Blume. It was he who took HA to the forester’s lodge mentioned above. This lodge was some 20 km. from Szczecin, in the then German village of Binow.

Here, HA admits that at that time she led a very carefree life and paid little attention to what fate held for her from day to day. She didn’t pay much attention to the small personal inconveniences and hardships that she experienced. For her, the big picture was that in the course of the war she lost most of her family and didn’t know the fate of her husband.

In another digression, HA feels obliged to mention the kindness shown to her by Hans Blume’s wife, the German woman who was HA’s supervisor in the forester lodge, for whom she did the tailoring on the side and otherwise served as her domestic. A few weeks into her stint in the forester’s lodge, this woman brought to HA a rucksack filled with dried fruit, dried bread and dried rolls, simply hinting that these supplies might come in handy in the near future.

Soon, HA’s life indeed, became complicated, after Janek Ziliński (the man who will ultimately become HA’s second husband) was dispatched to a concentration camp for assaulting a German who insulted him. He would have remained there, if Janek’s and HA’s employer, Hans Blume, was not called up as a reservist, to serve in the Wehrmacht. Prior to his induction he issued an ultimatum to the authorities that he would rather be shot than serve, unless his manager, Janek Ziliński was released from prison to take over the management of his business affairs during his call up. The ultimatum was accepted and Janek was released.

Within a few days the German residents in this area of Pomerania started getting ready for an evacuation. Mrs. Blume was ready to travel in a car owned by another well to do industrialist, who resided at the lodge at the time. They had plans to head for the American occupation zone. The German SS-man who was left in charge at the property after Hans Blume was called up for military service, had orders to await the arrival of the Russian forces. He wanted HA to remain with him. Fortunately for HA, she spoke up at that critical moment and asked “her” SS-minder to allow her to check with Janek, what he wanted HA to do.

HA raced the 5 km to Janek’s place of work only to see that all the residents of Binow were getting ready to evacuate. They had instructions to head for the British occupation zone. Janek forbade HA to remain in the forester’s lodge. He instructed her to wait that evening in front of the lodge and he would pick her up as they started the evacuation journey. And that’s exactly what happened. According to HA, it must have been April when these events took place. HA’s journey took about 4 weeks. In her narrative, she records her amazement at German efficiency and organization of this evacuation. The evacuation of entire villages took place flawlessly. Their journey ended in the town of Celle, some 40 km. northeast of Hanover.

### **HA’s life after the War**

Janek and Helen spend time in Celle in a detention camp for Poles and Jews near Bergen-Belsen, where Helen’s daughter, Joanna Zofia, was born on January 27, 1946. Helen tried to get an abortion during the 3<sup>rd</sup> month of her pregnancy, since she still did not know the fate of her first husband. As it turned out, Helen was as unable to have an abortion, because all German doctors were forbidden from aborting children of non-German women.

A month-and-a-half after their daughter’s birth, Helen and Janek leave Germany for Poland. They arrived in Warsaw on April 1, 1946. From there, they move to Łódź in October 1946.

Helen marries Janek in Łódź, Poland. By then their daughter was already 4½ years old.

They lived in Łódź from October, 1946 until December 26, 1960, when they started their journey to Australia, thanks to an invitation that Helen received from her younger sister Janka. Her sister arrived in Australia 3 years earlier. [Timestamp: 02:04:09]

From this point, until the end of the narrative, Helen shares her memories of her life in Australia with the interviewer, Phillip Maisel. It’s evident that they had met in Australia prior to this interview and had numerous friends and acquaintances in common. The only details that seemed relevant from this segment were that Janek and Helen lived in Canberra and that Janek died at the age of 56.