

This is an interview with Dorothy Biercatz on Monday, May 9, 1988, Columbus, Ohio. Interviewer, Louisa Hext

Thank you. I came from a family of seven children, now I have nobody. Now I have my family, thank God. But otherwise, sisters, and two brothers, parents, everybody got lost.

So could you start by telling me about your life before... what your life was like.

My life wasn't too bad. I was working in a factory. I was living in Krakow. And then when the war started in 1939, I was working for the Germans in ~~kranksarbeit~~ ^{forced labor}. You was in a lot of trouble if you make a wrong move, you know. So I was working from '39 to 1942. Then, I was working in all the places, heavy work, heavy work. The work was really not for a woman, just for men. I was doing the woman too. In 1942, I don't remember exactly the month, they make the ghetto. We wasn't allowed too much to go out. We was going for a while but too long under escort. We wasn't allowed to ... straight, city streets ... we had to walk not on the sidewalks, but in the middle of the street. So I was walking in this from the ghetto. Later on, we were not allowed to go out at all. So we had a factory in the city in the ghetto. We was going every day out to work at the factory--tailor shops. I was working there ^{from} in 1942 to 1944--it was very hard. Was terrible, during the day we

was working and during the night we had work in the city to do. ^{And then, after this in '44 they took us to} And then, after this in '44 they took us to concentration camps. There, I was working for a while too in a factory, not tailor shops. And then during the day, during the night we had do work to carry boards for barracks to build, to carry bricks. One time they took us to big trucks, like horses, you know, the trucks wouldn't go by themselves so 50 women, 25 in one side, and 25 in the other side. We was pulling those ^{ropes} horses around. We was bitten to death almost. Some not survive. So this was during the night and during the day in the tailor shops. They wake us up in the middle of the night, one time they come in, they pull our earrings, don't took off the earrings quick, they would tear the ears. It was unbelievable. So I was in concentration camp to '44.

What concentration camp?

Krakowplace. And then after that they took me to ^{Auschwitz} Auschwitz. In Auschwitz, I was there, I think I was there about eight months. And I was in a ^{labor camp} labor camp. But I carried bricks from one... this was a punishment, you know. And then, they transferred us to Germany to a concentration camp was ~~Lebbow~~ ^{Lebbow} and I was in ~~Lebbow~~ ^{Lebbow} until the liberation, 1945. Liberated by the Russians. That was that. I was three years in the concentration camps.

Can I ask you some questions?

Yes. Go ahead.

You told me a little bit about your life before, could you tell me about your family life? Your mother, father, your brothers and sisters.

Yes, I had a happy life. We were working. Everybody was happy.

You were close to your parents?

Yes, we had a grocery--mother, father were in the grocery. You know, in Europe they were not groceries like here in the United States.

What was it like?

It was O.K. It wasn't too good later. Polacks. I'm born Polish, I'm Polack. So there were all kind of pogroms. We had like a president--Joseph Persuski was his name. He was very good to the Jews. Matter of fact, he was a noble person. The Polacks used to say after he died, they were going to cut the Jews in quarters. You know, in Polish it's like ... You know after he died, they did this. There were pogroms, no kind things. It was terrible. So this was in Poland.

How old were you when the Germans invaded the town?

I was 22.

So you can remember clearly the experience?

When they came in, it was just terrible. Everybody was just laying around the cellars because there was so much bomb and everything. Everybody was in their cellars, then after it stopped we all got out and everybody was very,

10/21

They were in a camp at Auschwitz - helped...

very, very upset. They came in. They had to you know because they had no choice. Other cities were totally upset against the Germans. They were no good either. So they were there.

So what happened to you immediately after the occupation? Who were you with?

I was with other friends. We were together in the camp. We didn't have money. We didn't have nothing. We had a Gentile woman, she was from Warsaw. She was a doctor. She was very worried about me all the time. She was for me. She wasn't Jewish. She did so much for me. There was a hospital. So she went and took me there to help her out. So I was with her for a while because the other women had to go out into dig, you know, places where the Germans hide in case the Russians come. So some don't come in alive and some come in dead, triple injuries. She saved my life. I don't know how long this was going on because I can't remember.

So she had you with her... So she protected you.

She protected me. Otherwise I don't know where I would be.

And you were separated from your family from the beginning?

I don't have my family. They all are gone. Not before the war, in the war.

Before you were taken or just...

Yes, before I was taken. I was with one sister and one brother in Krakowplace and there was a segregation. They separated them and took them to Auschwitz. *March 1944*

Can you remember how you felt at that time?

I just took apart myself. In the same night they went I had a dream my sister was yelling, "please help me, I'm burning." I can never forget this. ^{dream} "I'm on fire, help me." She was pulling her clothes off. This was my dream ^{in my head} after they left. I don't know how I survived, I just can't tell you. It was just a miracle.

Did you have a strong faith?

I had, but I didn't want to survive. I have nobody. When the liberation was there was ^{PLK/M HCA} ~~pledge~~ man in the same concentration camp where we. They were not so punished like we, they could go out. We couldn't, we was close. So they came to our camp where we were separated from men we was not together. They often took us out. We're out, we free, we free. So everybody started yelling, crying, nobody was happy. Everybody knew they were left.

So at your liberation you didn't know what to do?

No, the Russian come to us a give us some money because we got nothing. They said come on, go. Go to the Germans, get the rest, we don't have nothing on ourselves. So we went out, we got, we were looking for food. Some people started to eat so fast they got so sick, because we were starving there. We didn't have no food.

You told me a little bit about the doctor who helped you survive. What about other friends in the camp.

There were a lot, yes. But she was just for me. After the war, she wants me so bad to go with her to Poland. She says, I'm going to open you a store, a cosmetic store, this and that. But I was thinking myself was I going to stay with the Gentiles, I'm not Gentile. She's maybe going to convert me or what. So I said no, I'm sorry I have to go, I have family in America. I'm going to go to America.

Was she working for the Germans?

She was working but was like a prisoner too. Because her husband was an officer in the Polish Army. They really were looking for him. But he escaped to Russia. She don't got so bad but she was personal too. Are you going to remember everything?

I said to you I was going to tape it. Did you forget? So, what about other people. Friends.

Yes, we were very good friends, we all had the same trouble, all was starving. I don't know I was something else, you know. We got one little bread like this for a whole week. But what I did, I saved all the time every bread, all the time. But sometime there was just chanting for a piece of bread so I cut him a piece of bread from my....

So you shared...

I shared. Whatever they got, they finished in one time. Yes, there was very bad starvation. I hope nobody has to starve because this is the worst thing.

So you had one piece of bread, they gave you each week? And you had to keep....

To save, nobody could save.

So you would save?

I saved.

How did you manage to do that?

I did. I don't know. I'm asking myself.

And you would also give to other people?

Yes.

Why did you do that?

I was feeling sorry for them.

And for yourself?

I don't care for myself.

*interesting
first - try
!*

Was there anybody in particular, other than the doctor that you had....

~~There be other folks, but nobody can have each other.~~

Nothing. One time I was working, big chains, for the tanks you know, by a machine. And I don't know, I wasn't doing too fast or what, and a German behind my back give me a push and I cut off my finger. So it start to heal and it came out like this. But now I have arthritis, all of my fingers got it.

So you can't tell the difference?

Yes. This was so bad. ^{KroKau.} There was nobody to ^{help} ~~help~~. I just wrapped around it, I find paper. Not even clean paper, wrapped around and squeezed, it should stop. That's it. That's what my life and somebody else' lives were like.

Tell me, you said it was a miracle that you survived. Was there anything that you did?

I can't remember. When they took away my sister and brother we was all stand in a line five people in a line. A long while, when they took my sister and brother I know where they're going. So I start and I tried to run after them. They had big dogs, I don't remember the dogs names, I told the dogs down, down, don't jump on me but the dog don't touch me. So this was a miracle.

They set the dogs on you?

Yes. Normally, they ~~treat the people decent~~. Yes, there were other things like this.

Can you think of other situations where things like that happened?

Oh there happened lots of things. One time somebody steal somebody's junk, I don't know. In the concentration camp, and so I was going on in the back door and I was working out the ghetto and I was carrying something my brother and sister was still there--some clothes to wash--while I was working Sunday we don't have Germans day it was just a Jewish. So everybody put something washday.

And they find by me this stuff. Not the Germans, Jews.
And he find this by me, you know. So he beat me--he
thought I stealed it--he beat me so badly you haven't any
idea. A Jew. I was just hoping I see him someplace after
the war.

He was in charge of you...

Yes, he was in charge, unfortunately. But later on
they find out in a day or two who was lost.

*During your experience do you think that you...can you
remember any feelings, emotions...*

Oh, I had lots of emotions. I had lots of
emotions...thinking about my family. I wasn't caring
anything about me. I just was wishing I could go because I
have nothing in this world anymore.

But you must have been strong...

I don't know from what I was strong. Not from pleasure
I don't know. Lot of trouble, just thinking about that.
So I was strong. If I could survive, I was strong.

What do you mean by survive?

I'm alive.

*Part II**Interview with Dorothy Biercatz**May 16, 1988*

Describe a normal day when you were living in Poland before anything happened.

I worked and it was normal, it was everything quiet. We had holidays like supposed to be. Do you have holidays in England? Here I go every Saturday to Synagogue, but some people don't.

Are you an Orthodox Jew?

Yes.

Did that have any effect on you during when you were in the camps. Were you able to...

Nothing. We wasn't able to do anything. We don't know from one day to another what's coming. We didn't even know when the holidays were.

Did you think yourself...did you have any personal faith?

Yes. I had faith, but I don't believe anything. Cause I thought I'm not going...for the war.

It seems you say that a lot. That you did...that you were really strong.

I was strong, yes.

And now....you say that...you say I was strong, I survived and then you say...but I didn't think.

I didn't want to live, it's true, because I know I have nobody in this world. But I just can't do this.

Was it feelings of guilt or just loneliness...

Loneliness. I wasn't guilty because I did nothing to nobody. Just loneliness. Almost.

Almost, but you found people afterwards.

I find some, I make new friends. But in the war I had nobody. Matter of fact after the war, I returned to the place where I lived. Nobody.

What was it like?

In Krakow. No Jews. There were just Gentile people. They took everything. Whatever was in the house, they took over.

Were you the first to be taken from your family, or was everybody taken together.

No. No. Everybody was separate. I wasn't first. Matter of fact, I was the last one. When I was taken, I had nobody.

How did that go, can you explain that a little bit?

When I was taken to Auschwitz, I had nobody for my family. Nobody there. Kill every one of them. Before I left for Auschwitz. When I went to Krakowplazie concentration camp, this time I had everybody. But we don't live together but everybody escaped all my sisters

and brothers they escaped one day. They all looked for a better place. It wasn't helping anything.

So they escaped from the first place. You stayed... that would take...

I stayed. They took me to Krakowplace then they took me to Auschwitz. The last place was

And your parents...

My parents...was early taken away.

Were they in Krakowplace with you?

My mother was. My father was in another city. He went to live with my sister and my mother they killed everyone.

You know what interests me a little...^{but}when you were...I'm not sure what camp it was, but you had your friend, or the Gentile woman...

Yes, this was in Auschwitz.

Auschwitz...In the camps, did you have any other friends, did you make friends.

~~*Yes, but who had time for friends. Not time to talk.*~~
We weren't allowed to speak to one another.

You weren't allowed to speak.

No. And this friend of mine after she was working, she was staying all the time in the krankenhaus.

So you made ... So in the camps you couldn't make friends but there were people who you bonded with more than others to help each other. So what help did you give in any way?

Yes, yes, but we didn't have too much ^{hope} ~~hope~~ to give to anybody.

That's interesting. Food.

No, we don't have good. Everybody was standing in the line when it came dinner time and had a little bit water. ^{With} sand in it. I can still feel the sand ^{scrap} knocking in my teeth.

But you said that you were very kind because you were clever. Was that a tactic of yours to save as much as you could to space it--with your bread.

I was hungry but I space it. Maybe tomorrow they are going to give nothing. Who knows what's tomorrow.

Clever.

So that's the whole thing.

You can't remember any particular person other than the Gentile woman that ...

No. There were ^{water} some French people--defectors. But they couldn't get in touch with us. Someone had a chance to throw a piece of bread to somebody. But we was afraid to. The Nazi's would see us.

Would you say that you survived very much alone then. In the camps...

Oh, in the camps, there was 500 women and then there was 200 left. They took out, little by little. Took them...

But as an individual you didn't associate much with any other people?

Because, I couldn't. In the barracks, we had...so in the barracks, we associated, but who had the cause to associate. Everybody was disgusted. Everybody was upset. Nobody had the cause.

Many people talk about having somebody at least to be with.

Yes. We was ^{to speak to the other...} together. What's going to happen tomorrow.

Did you do anything to pass the time.

What time to pass. Nobody got time. We was working day and night. ^{They were... they put everything in the line and ...} no we don't have time. We live most like animals. We come to Auschwitz, they shaved our heads off. We couldn't recognize each other, you know. We was looking like a wild animal. Everybody was wild almost.

What did that mean?

Wild. Nobody knew what was going on. They shaved the women. Shaved heads.

They wanted to make you be reduced to nothing.

I just don't know. I cannot understand myself.

Incomprehensible maybe.

Sure. Some camps they sterilized the women.

What kept you going then? What kept you living day to day?

Day to day we expect to go to the crematorium. That was our expecting time.

So you were just thankful each day you didn't go?

Yes. Because it happened to people. They picked up every day, every day. ^{Or people} They came ~~by~~ every day and picked people out. There was in Auschwitz when I came there was over 70,000, there was maybe close to 30,000 people. From our group they took two straight. They was four crematorium burning besides this there was a wood and there piled up wood and people on top...gasoline, alive.

Do you have a determination to not be one of those people?

I don't know, was my luck. I don't know.

You say it's luck.

I don't know if it's luck. I don't know what to call...it's a miracle. I'm from seven children. I don't know what this means.

It's interesting to me, every time I speak to someone, every time they use the words, luck and miracle, every single time. Can you understand why that is? Do you have any idea?

Because they took everybody what kind of an exception was I? What was I better than my sisters and brothers. Was I good, no. ^{They were better than me} So I don't know. I was left just to cry over them, you know.

But at the same time, are you happy to be here? What was your biggest fear then?

After my...nothing, I don't care for nothing.

Just numb...

Numb. Numb. I couldn't even cry.

And you have still to me very vivid memories of the experience as a whole.

Yes.

Would you prefer to forget.

Never, never. You can't forget such a thing. No.

Do you think that other people should know?

Yes. Everybody should know, and be prepared in case, God forbid, I hope not. I don't want my children to ... there are Nazis all over in the whole world.

But there are some people that say ...

I hope this doesn't happen.

What does the word holocaust mean to you?

I don't really know. What do you make up this word holocaust. I don't know.

So how would you describe or define that experience. Can you give a word to it?

I can't, just can't.

And survival?

We survived.

Everybody has different ways to say it. So to you it means...

Live, life.

What incident had the largest effect on your life then?

The largest effect was for the health of my family.

This is the largest. I don't care about anything else, just this.

You were very close before.

We was very close.

Can you talk a little bit about that?

It's hard.

That in itself says...

I was with my youngest sister in camp. Lots of times she don't eat. She give it to me. She was worried for me. She wasn't worried for herself. I don't want to take from her. She was worried about me. So she's gone now. For over 40 years. I'm still here.

And you're strong because you keep yourself busy. You make yourself busy every day.

Yes, if I can.

If I would have asked you how do you think about your life during this experience looking back at it today what would you say to that?

I would never dream I would say I had a dream.

Still.

Yes.

Do you have anything that you would like to say other than what you've said that's important to you?

was my classmate. What do you think... did anybody live through, whether they lived through, how could we look for them. You start missing all those things. And you think of the last you saw them. Or the last time... you remember the last words you said to them. Stuff like that.

When did you come to the United States? 1949. And why did you come? We had to escape Europe. We couldn't stay in Europe, any of the survivors. First of all the home we had... there was no home left. So all the people that survived, probably... you're not Jewish, right? I am. you really? I didn't know you were. Anyways, so what happened was nobody could really stay in Europe. Because first of all of the memories and you wouldn't want to be there anymore and second of all, you didn't have a home anymore where to go back. So you wanted to go to Israel or to America or someplace. Anyplace but Europe. We had family... my grandfather had a brother here, and that's how the whole family came here. But mainly I wanted to go to Israel and somehow the trip to Israel didn't work out so I ended up here. I joined my mother here. Right after the war I was separated from my mother; my mother wanted us to go to Israel. But of course, Israel was at that time owned by the British and the British didn't want us to go there. We had to fight our way. So what happened was there was a whole chain of underground immigration or illegal immigration at that time and my brothers and I joined a

Asks me if I'm
Jewish right in
Are the middle of
a context

group because my mother wanted me to get away... save the children and send them away from Poland, because we were still in Poland after the war. We joined a children's group to go to Israel. However, the preparation of illegal immigration was a long process. They trained you, they taught you, they brain-washed you about Israel, made you real strong Zionists. And then if you were lucky you got on a waiting list on a ship. And because of my age and my brothers' age we finally made it to the top of the list in 1947. We came to Germany, the West Germany the Americans owned in 1945, the fall of 1945. In 1947 went on the ship Exodus of 1947, it left July.

This summer I had the privilege of being in Israel with a group that had a reunion and it's called The American Volunteers Who Sailed the Ships, the illegal ships. And they had a 40 year reunion and I met a lot of the people that were actually the captains and chief executives of the illegal immigration. And they had a lot of lectures and seminars on why it happened and where it happened and who was behind it and how it was organized. And now I know the whole history about the ship Exodus. Where it was built and who bought it and how they shipped it from Baltimore, Maryland to the Mediterranean and it was a really interesting experience for me to meet all those men. Of course, it's 40 years later. Some of those men were real young in 1945-46-47. There were like in their twenties.

Some of them actually volunteered as an adventure. The war was over. They had nothing else to do. And if they had any little experience with being on a boat they were asked to help. So a lot of them did it for adventure, a lot of them did it because they wanted to volunteer their services, because they wanted to help the survivors out of Europe. From all this organization... they formed an organization, a dues paying organization and they got a lot of material together. From everybody wrote their experiences and they put together a book and it's called the Jew's Secret Fleet. And it tells the story of how the illegal immigration was born and who were the men responsible for it, the people responsible for it, and it... it was mainly American sailors that did it but it... actually what they have [Aferhocanow] (?) which was the Israeli underground government at that time or military government. They found, there's a list in the back of the book, I have a book that was just published. In the back of the book they have a list of 200 American volunteers who sailed the ship. And I was one of them and I met all of the sailors on the ship Exodus.

Wonderful. I'm interested to know what your life is like now and your view of life. Whether you see it as being effected by the holocaust experience. And whether you believe that you have different values because of what happened. O.K. Well right now my situation in life is I

lost my husband about 9 years ago. We had a real good life until then. We were in business and we did very well. We were successful in business. We have three sons. My husband passed away just before they started professional school, but they all were in college by then. But they had not chosen their profession then. And since he's passed away, I was able to manage to get them through school and to make sure that nothing is interrupted with their schooling. And they're all professionals now, they're all doctors. And they're all married and I have two grandsons by two sons. Two grandsons. And they're all settled and I'm all finished. To keep myself busy now. I worked till now and this last September I quit working to change a little bit

Do you want to continue about what you were talking about?

O.K. So, I'm real proud that I was able to kind of inspire my children to go on with life and finish their school and become professionals. And they all got married within a year, every year one of them got married, so all three got married within three years. So now that they're all gone and it's like an empty nest type of a person I am now, you know by myself. So I quit my job and am doing something to maybe change my lifestyle to be able to travel a little more and not be tied up. Because before I had a job where I really couldn't travel too much. So I'm going to school. I started travel and tourism school. And I'm looking... I'm really enjoying and looking forward to starting that type of a career where I can maybe move to another town or wherever I go I can take it with me or freelance with it. Whatever becomes of it I don't know. But I have, I think, because of surviving what I went through, may survivals I've done, I feel life is precious and take one day at a time. And enjoy whatever you can. I also have a sickness right now. I have lymphoma (?), which is a controlled disease with medication. So I have to cope with that too. I doing a great job with it. I think as a survivor, you feel whatever you have left... it's like, that's just like actual years you have left. Whatever you do with it, that's your job and it's nobody else's. Nobody

else can do anything for you. It's whatever you do with it. Whatever time you have to do. Whatever you want to do. It's your time and you do whatever you want to do with it. And nobody owes you anything. You do it on your own. Whatever you make out of it you get. Whatever you put into it, that's what you get out of it, is what I mean to say. It's not going to come to you, you have to go get it. I think that's a lesson I think survivors learned. And you'll notice, at least, we live harder. I mean we enjoy things more. By that I mean maybe some of it looks like its frivolous. I notice there's alot of survivors, when they make a bar mitzvah party or wedding, they will not be stingy, they will make it a really happy occasion. They want to be happy. If you live long enough to be happy, why not enjoy it.

You seem like a really strong individual that's experienced alot... It's called head-strong. No, I think that's strong. Do you believe you have different values?

I do believe... what I'm saying is actually... I tried to say that... is that the values of what is important, the set of values are different, proportioned differently, by survival. I mean the most important thing is your life and your health. And that while you're living you may as well enjoy it and it's here for you to enjoy it and nobody is going to enjoy it unless you do it yourself. And that's the sense of values that I think everybody, including me,

has.

Is there anything that you'd like to add? Anything that you'd like to say about anything?

I really can't think of anything. It's just that... it's kinda new for me, talking about it, because I really never dwelled on it that much. It's just recently where a lot of people have started talking and then you talk about it too. And I got pulled into it. And I did speak for schools a couple of times, or the center I told you about. So probably it's very good that alot of people know about it. I think my own children don't know that much. If I start talking about it they get bored. I think they would get bored about it. *Why do you think that?* Cause it's like, well O.K. So everybody has problems, you know? So what else is new. So I think it's becoming a little bit more popular to talk about it, but maybe it's good because maybe we'll learn from mistakes. I don't think I could be caught in a situation like this again. That I wouldn't do anything. So maybe it is good that our children would know about it.

O.K. I think that's it then.

If you want this you can have that.