

Sevi, Silvia
RG-50.426*0006
Three video cassettes
In Ladino
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Abstract

Silva Sevi was born in Thessaloníki, Greece. Her family lived quite well, in a large home. They got along well with the Greek people in the neighborhood. When the Germans entered Thessaloníki, the family heard the sounds of the attack, and they were afraid. The Jews were assembled in the city square, and forced to stay there for a long time in the heat, while they were beaten. The Greek citizens wanted to help the Jews but were prevented from doing so by the Germans. The Germans started taking young Jewish men, including Silvia's brother, for forced labor. He eventually died at Birkenau.

Initially, the Jews were allowed to stay in their homes, but they were faced with many restrictions. Soon they were moved from the center of town to the Baron Hirsch quarter, which became a Jewish ghetto. The Jews were told by their rabbi that life in Poland would be better, so many did not try to escape. The transports to the camps began, and Silvia's family was taken on the third transport. After a torturous journey of seven days they arrived at Birkenau. There Silvia and her sister were taken to a quarantine barrack for several weeks, and then to a block where they were forced to do hard labor, and were beaten. Silvia's sister died at Birkenau. Silvia was transferred to Auschwitz, where she remained until January 1945. She was sent to Ravensbruck, and then to another location, where she was liberated by Russian soldiers. Silvia then made her way to Greece, where she met her husband, who was also a survivor of Auschwitz. They have children and grandchildren who have successful lives.

Tape 1

- 1.01** Silvia Sevi (born Silvia Molho) and her family lived in Thessaloníki, Greece before World War II. They were a family of five, and they lived quite well. Silvia's father worked as a 'Coredor de Funciones'(?). Silvia attended the Alliance Francaise school, and then a Greek school named Demoia(?) for a while, but she never completed her schooling. She had an older brother, Lieto, and a younger sister, Ida. Her brother finished school at the Alliance. They lived at Temindadeo(?) 52 in Thessaloníki. Their house had three bedrooms, two baths and a living room. The family spoke a type of Spanish, but not Ladino. Silvia's mother had some formal education, and she also spoke French. They were not very active in the life of the Jewish community; they only attended some social functions such as balls and speakers. Her brother participated in Maccabi activities. He, like most of the Jews there, was a Zionist. They got along well with the Greeks - they lived in a mixed neighborhood and interacted.
- 1.07** When the Germans entered the city, Silvia's family was at home. At first they heard the Stukas (dive bombers), then the rumbling and the noises of the army. They were very afraid. That night they locked themselves in, not leaving the house. Then there was a curfew. After a few days, the Germans ordered all the Jews to assemble in the city

square. There was a hotel there and the Germans stood at a higher level with their search lights and cameras. They kept the Jews there for a very long time, from early morning until late, in the heat. They beat them, forced some to do exercises and made them suffer. The Greek population was not allowed to come close to the area. They told the Greeks that whoever helps the Jews would suffer the same fate, so the Greeks were afraid. But Silvia knows that they were in sympathy with the Jews because after the war they learned of the many ways many Greeks helped the Jews, with hiding, and false papers. Later the Germans started taking the young Jewish men for forced labor. It was very hard work, under unsanitary conditions, creating all kinds of hardships for them. Silvia's brother was taken to a nearby small town to work on road repairs. She was able to visit her brother and bring him food and some medicine that he needed. Then he escaped from there and she lost contact with him. After the war she learned that a year later he was taken to the concentration camp in Birkenau. Just one month before the liberation there, there was an uprising at the camp and the Germans selected many young men including Silvia's brother and shot them.

Silvia's family lived in their apartment for a long time before they were taken to the concentration camp. At first, the Germans were just making registers of the Jewish community; who and where they lived, what they did, etc. During that time they had many restrictions on their lives, like no public transportation, no public or prominent jobs, no school. Starting in the spring of 1941 through 1942, the Germans removed all the Jews from the center of the town. They could not go to restaurants, movies, parks, etc. Then in July 1943 they took the Jews to Rejivarda(?) in the Baron Hirsch quarter, a section inhabited mostly by Jews.

- 1.17** At first the Germans cleared the whole section. They removed the residents from Baron Hirsch, then they brought them to cramped quarters, with four or more families in each unit. The Jews were not allowed to bring many possessions, and they had to live on whatever money, food or goods they brought. Silvia would sneak out to buy food, which was available on the black market. The compound was encircled by electrified wire and many guards. Then the Germans started to form transport groups. The Jews were asked to turn in their money and jewelry. The Jews were given receipts, and were told that when they arrived in Poland they would receive zlotys. By this time the Germans had organized a Jewish administration to execute the German orders. There was also the Jewish police force, made up of some good people and some not so good people. Silvia learned after the war, in a book called 'In Memoriam,' that several Jews even collaborated with the Germans, scouring the countryside for any Jews who might be hiding, taking their money and turning them in. Sometimes the Jewish police would beat the Jews to make them comply. There was an insane asylum where the Germans would take people and beat them until they told them where they hid their money. The Jews of Baron Hirsch received information from their rabbi (Rabbi Koretz) who was in hiding. Rabbi Koretz told them that the life in Poland would be better and that all families would be united.
- 1.28** Silvia was taken on the 'third transport'. There were a lot of people being taken that day. There was a third, fourth and fifth transport. There was much crying, people trying to stay with their families. Silvia's family had already boarded, so one of the guards let her squeeze into the same box car with her parents. It was very dark inside; there was a very small window, not enough for even two heads to look outside. The

train started and it kept going. Sometimes, the train would stop and they would let them out to 'do their needs', and then continue. This lasted for about seven days. There were no seats - everyone sat on the floor. There was no water. There were children, many older people and by that time many sick people. They were packed in, many people in each wagon. They slept standing or leaning against each other. That is how they arrived at Birkenau.

- 1.32** The Germans were ready with their loud speakers, whips and bats, yelling and screaming 'schnell, schnell' and beating up anyone who did not react fast enough to suit them. A special group of Jewish prisoners came to remove the dead from the train. There were many dead people. Then the Germans started barking orders, telling them all the things that they were not allowed to do. Among the prisoners, there was a lady from Thessaloníki, Madame Kunios, who spoke German well. She was their 'mother', visiting everyone, giving news and words of hope.

Tape 2

- 2.01** When they arrived at the station at Birkenau, they walked a distance, and then they were separated, the old from the young. They put the older ones in the trucks because, as they said, the older ones couldn't walk as well. This display of concern gave them some courage. They never saw the older ones again. When they approached the crematoria at midnight, they saw all the wired fences, and they realized that they would not be free. The Germans took them to what they recognized was a concentration camp. They were awakened at 4:00 am - this would become the norm. They had to fall in lines - rain, snow, cold, whatever, to be counted. They would count them, then they would wait for about two hours before they would lead them to work. There was no breakfast, only a bit of dirty water - they called it 'tea' - made from grass. When the Jews first arrived at the camp they were taken to the baths. That's when the Germans tattooed the numbers on their arms. They spread out a blanket and ordered the Jews to deposit any gold or jewelry that they might have had. They took off all of their rings and earrings under the watchful eyes of the German guards, who were women. They were screaming, rushing the prisoners to undress, and beating them with their sticks. They were left there naked, all of them, while they shaved their heads. They were forced to go under the extra hot showers, which later changed to cold. The prisoners were screaming and the Germans were beating them and laughing, saying that the prisoners were dancing.

After the showers they were taken to benches to be registered, with the new number being tattooed on their arms. The Germans gave them some awful clothes to wear - the pants that were worn by the Russian prisoners before the Germans killed them. Then they were assigned to barracks, where they remained quarantined for a few weeks. Silvia's barrack was near the crematorium. When the new transports would arrive she would see flames coming out from the crematorium. They would see flames and ask what was going on there, but nobody would tell them. 'It is some factory' they would say. But after a while they found out. In Silvia's barrack there was a small window and sometimes they would look outside when the German guard was not present. She saw when a new transport arrived, the small children were separated from their mothers, the children were taken outside and thrown into the flames, yes, alive, together, with the bundles brought by the prisoners. Perhaps the crematory ovens could not handle the large number of new arrivals. There was constant wailing. They would hear the noise

of trucks, the crying and wailing of people, and finally silence. At that time the train did not go all the way to Auschwitz and people were shuttled there by trucks. Later they added a rail line going to the crematoria.

- 2.09** Silvia and the other women were in these quarantine barracks for about twenty days, until they formed work groups. Silvia was with her sister Ida; they slept in the same 'bunk' with five other women. The bunks were three tiers. Silvia and her sister were on the second tier. People on the first tier were screaming all the time because of the rats that would bite them. There were many different women: from Greece, from Poland, a mean Belgian girl named Edithka. There were many non Jewish prisoners who were criminals, serving their time at this camp. There was a German criminal who was mean to the Jewish girls. She was put in charge of Silvia's block.
- 2.14** Silvia describes life in the camp after the quarantine. In the same block, they formed two working teams: Number 7 and Number 4. Number 7 was okay but Number 4, which was led by non-Jewish kapos, was terrible, with regular beatings, guard dogs and hard work. Every night at the end of the workday, there were always several dead prisoners. Their work consisted of building steps and banks for the river. The water was polluted, and most of the people got sick with typhoid. There was no safe water to drink, only the little bit of 'tea' they were given. Silvia was often placed in group Number 4 where she was occasionally able to get a drink of good water. (If they caught you drinking they would beat you up.) At the end of the day they would sic the dogs on them; they would beat them with sticks, on the head, shoulders and backs for no reason, telling them that they should work faster and harder. Some mornings Silvia would try to sneak into group Number 7. Once she got caught and she was beaten furiously. The kapo broke her tooth and left her in a pool of blood. Then the very same person took pity on Silvia and told her that she didn't want her to continue with this group because this was the route to the crematorium; instead, she transferred her to another unit, shoocommand(?). This unit had to empty the contents of the trains, and then push the wagons with their strength, shouting 'ho-root! ho root!'. One worse thing was that on the way to the work station they had to pass through a section where there were German prisoners who would beat them with their tools as they passed by. There were benches full of tools, such as hammers, saws, spades, etc. which they used for their work. Their hands and arms would get all cut up from using these tools. At the end of the day they had to show how much work they did. If the kapo in charge was not satisfied, she would make them do push-ups until they would collapse from pain, so bad that they couldn't even climb into the bunk. At first, their work was done indoors, then later outside, with snow and rain in the winter, and the hot sun in the summer.
- 2.24** After a while, then they were transferred to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz they had barracks where inmates were organized by the trade on which they worked. There were all types of prisoners, criminals, political; many not very nice. Silvia was there until January 1945.
- 2.25** Silvia went through nine selections. The prisoners knew that there was a selection scheduled when they saw the cars and the German officers milling about. On these occasions after work the Germans would not let the prisoners go back to their barracks. Instead, they would be taken to the baths, required to get totally undressed, and pass one

by one in front of the German officers who would examine each woman and tell her to go there or there.

- 2.28** Silvia tells of an episode about surviving the harshness of camp life. When they would go to work they would pass the officers' mess. There was a large garbage container where the kitchen staff, Russian prisoners, would throw the potato peels, fruit peels and other garbage. Two of the Jewish women from the group would, at great risk, jump into the containers and fill their blouses and pants, with potato peels, and sometimes a whole potato, and bring it to the group. If they were caught they would be beaten. Once, just at the time when the chief of all district camps was making an inspection, Silvia was in the garbage dumpster with another girl. The other girl ran away but was caught and given 25 'bombons', hits with the club. While this girl was screaming, Silvia sat inside the dumpster terrified and crying and saying the Shema. A Russian kitchen worker jumped inside with her and told her to be quiet and hide until the district commander left. Afterwards the Russian worker returned, on a pretext of dumping more garbage, and brought Silvia three whole potatoes and a small loaf of bread. He also gave her a push to get her out of the dumpster. Later she and others ate the three potatoes and peels. This is how the inmates sustained themselves, although at great risk to their lives. There was also some black marketing going on in the compound. Some of them had hidden gold which they used to trade for food. The food would be brought in by the 'forced labor' workers - not prisoners - who were free to go outside the concentration camp. The gold was also used to obtain special favors, such as being transferred to another unit which was less terrible or had lesser number of selections for the crematorium.

Tape 3

- 3.02** They did many, many things in order to live another day. They stole a lot, took many risks and many of them were beaten to death by the guards.
- 3.04** In Birkenau there were two 'lagers', or camps, Lager 1 and Lager B. In Lager 1 there were the nurses, the other hospital workers, and the sick women. Silvia's sister was taken to the hospital because she had typhus. One day when they were returning from work they passed the trucks loaded with naked women who were being taken to the crematoria. Silvia did not see her sister but she knew she was there because she recognized many others who were in the same group with her. The last time Silvia saw her sister was one week before she was transferred to Auschwitz. Under a false pretext she visited her in the hospital. She looked very bad. She no longer had the desire to live. She said to Silvia: 'I am finished, but you try to live.'
- 3.08** Silvia continued working at Auschwitz until January 2, 1945. The Jewish prisoners learned from the Russian prisoners that the Russian Army was very close. They started praying and celebrating and singing. A German guard came in and said to them: 'What are you celebrating about? Don't you know that if our end will be at twelve o'clock, yours will be five minutes earlier? You will enter through the crematorium and exit through the chimney'. The next day they were taken on a forced march through the snow until they reached the train tracks with open wagons. They were loaded into the cars and the trains took off. They rode for three days without food or water, until they reached another concentration camp, Ravensbruck. That is where they took all of the

Russian prisoners. They kept them there in the open, under atrocious conditions, for one week, then took them to another concentration camp called Manlehopf(?). They had all types of labor activities there. They were taken to a clothing repair shop. They were there for about three months, until May. In May they were taken to a place where all the German civilians seemed to be carrying their large bundles and rushing westwards. They learned that the Germans didn't want to fall into the Russian hands and were running towards the American front. A Polish guard told them to escape and hide, saying that very likely they would be freed the following day, so they hid.

The next day at dawn they saw the first contingents of the Russian army entering. They came out of hiding. They were free! The Russians formed them into a group and started a kitchen to feed them. There was a Russian officer who was Jewish – his name was Pesakovic. He told them to be careful of the Russian troops because they had been fighting for a long time, might be drunk, and might not respect women. And some Russian soldiers did behave badly. One came and said he wanted a woman. They protested that they were sick and weak, but he insisted and took one of them, a young girl named Palomba - she was a virgin. She is still alive, lives here (in Greece?) in an old age center. Then three Russian soldiers raped another girl, Dora, who is no longer living. Then another Russian soldier came with a similar idea. In talking with him, the prisoners became aware that he spoke Yiddish. They told him that they were Jewish. He then stayed with them all night, and whenever a Russian soldier came to the door he would tell them that the house was in quarantine because of a contagious disease, typhoid. The next day he went with them to the Russian command, where they asked for protection. At first the Russians put them in a place where no one was allowed to bother them. They were allowed to rummage through homes of Germans who had left the town. Then they were placed in a camp where there were former prisoners from many nationalities. Groups were being formed for repatriations. Silvia went with a Greek group and they started their trip back to Greece.

It took them over three months to reach their destination because most of the train tracks had been destroyed. Their first Yom Kippur was in Sofia. The local Jewish community had learned that a trainload of Jews from concentrations camp was going to pass through. They were invited to the pre-fast meal and the following day for synagogue and for the break-fast celebration. They were so happy, they cried like they had not cried for many years. The Sofia Jews were so good to them: they brought doctors to examine them, and they gave them clothing and money. They kept them for two days, then they provided cars to take them to the Bulgarian-Greek border. At the border they were received by the Joint (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), who asked them what they wanted to do. There were among them some non-Jewish Greeks who had been political prisoners, and they didn't want to go back. Silvia went back to her home town, where they all looked for their families and other survivors. She could not find anyone. She was alone. A newly formed Jewish council had obtained from the government a building that formerly housed a Jewish Old Age Home and the Joint brought bunks, provided blankets, organized a kitchen and helped them look for their relatives. There Silvia met the man who became her husband. They started with nothing. Silvia had some family friends in America who offered to take her, but she declined. Her husband repossessed some of the real property that his family owned but he couldn't live there because it reminded him of the past. After a year and a half their

older daughter was born. They now have three grandchildren, one in America, one in England and the third is here (Buenos Aires?)

- 3.26** Silvia talks about her children and grandchildren and describes their successes, of which she is very proud.
- 3.27** Silvia wants to talk about her husband's liberation. Her husband was also in the same area, in the Buna factory complex, working in a metal shop. She tells about the hardships he suffered - first, in the metal shop, then in the mines. He was very sick, he was separated and reunited with his brother. He escaped and went into hiding for a long time until the Allies came and finally they were free.
- 3.35** The interviewer asks several questions about some of the points brought out before, which Silvia clarifies. Thus ends the interview.