

DONOR: HELEN FREED
INTERVIEWER: MAXINE KAUFMAN

Tape Footage: Background

1-209 Helen was born in 1916 in the small village of Smardonova in the Slovakian part of Czechoslovakia. She was the second daughter of Adolph and Cecilia Berger. She had two brothers and two sisters.

Helen attended a Roman Catholic school until grade three. For grades four and five she moved to Sarnowa (Tchernova) and boarded at her father's sister's so she could attend a Jewish school. For junior high she went to public school.

210-401 Helen's father owned a grocery store and had fields with corn, cows and horses. When his children were in school in Sarnowa he sold the farm and bought a house in town. He could not afford to keep the farm also.

They lived between Austria and Hungary near the capital city of Bratislaw.

Helen's two sisters attended bookkeeping school. Helen attended a Roman Catholic Teachers' College. She was one of 40 girls, and the only Jew in her class. In 1935 she was the youngest graduate.

402-704 At Teachers' College Helen maintained her religion. She did not find it too hard being the only Jew. She was respected and there was no anti-semitism.

Slovakia was a democracy and everyone was free to do as they wanted. It was a beautiful country. Children were happy. The Jews went to synagogue and kept their holidays.

Helen was brought up orthodox.

She taught for two years close to the Hungarian border. Everyone there spoke Hungarian which she could not speak. She enjoyed teaching.

Married Life

Helen's husband was a relative of her mother's who used to come for the holidays. Helen married him in October, 1937 when she was 20. She left teaching. He had a house, a farm and land, and had some people working for him. His father had been a landowner.

706-1139 In 1937 things were still quiet. They honeymooned in Vienna.

Prelude to War

Things started to change in 1938-39. Soldiers were called on maneuvers. Helen's husband was in the reserves. He was called up during the uprising when the

Sudeten Deutschland was taken over. There were many German speaking Jews living there. The Czech army thought they could oppose the Germans, but no help came from Britain or France, so the soldiers were sent back and the Germans took over.

In 1939 the slogans started and the Jews were forced to wear the yellow star on their right arms. There were many things Jews could not do. They could no longer own businesses, or attend shows. They were allowed in the market only during certain hours. Windows of Jewish businesses were broken, and Jewish students were not allowed to finish their schooling.

Helen's younger brother William had one more year until graduation and was not permitted to return to school.

On March 14, 1939 Slovakia separated from Czechoslovakia and Moravia, and Hlinka began doing whatever the Germans wanted. The radio was full of anti-semitism. Not a half hour would go by without something being said against the Jews. The Germans hadn't come to the country yet, but the Slovaks were doing whatever the Germans wanted. In return their soldiers were not taken in the army.

1140-1502 It was very dangerous. Things were a little easier for Helen because they were in a small village. There were three Jewish families in the area.

WWII

In March 1942 all young unmarried men and women had to register. They were told to pack 25 kilos and report to the train station. First Helen's younger sister was called and then her sister Jennie who was 24. She had a special card giving her permission to remain but that did not matter. No one believed they would be going forever. They were sent to Auschwitz. The family thought they would work and then come home.

Helen's two single brothers were staying with her because they thought they'd be safe in the village. But on March 27, 1942 they received papers giving them 24 hour notice to report to the train station in Torpocheni which was the closest city. That was the last time Helen saw them.

Helen's husband went with them to the train station. Their names were called and they were pushed onto the train. Helen still thought they would work and then come back.

In 1941 all Jews had to register. The identification said Israeli on it rather than Jewish.

1502-1623 There were transports every second Friday.

Helen's parents were taken in April three weeks after her brothers. They were both over 60. Helen could not travel without a special permit, and even a permit did not guarantee safety. So she sent a woman to Sarnowa to bring her parents to her. They were not ready to come. Two days later they were taken.

1624-1889 Helen and her husband were the only Jews in their village. Jewish families in nearby villages were taken.

Helen's husband had a special permit saying that a big landowner needed him. This landowner had signed the permit for him even though he was not his employee.

Hiding

By the winter of 1943 Helen and her husband knew they could not keep their home. Six months later a villager was named trustee of their property and took it over. They had to move out and had nowhere to go. Helen was four months pregnant. Neighbors took them in, hiding Helen in a room with a bed, dresser and big oven, and her husband was in a tiny unheated room next to her. The man was a cobbler, and the place was very noisy because of the horses. Helen did not go out, but her husband went out for milk each day. The woman baked bread for Helen, giving her a loaf a week.

The villagers knew where Helen was. The Germans were no longer anxious to come and take away one family.

1890-2065 On June 7, 1943 Helen's son was born. The hospital director knew her and said she could come to give birth, even though this was not allowed. Her son was premature and the doctors said he would not live. The premature birth was a result of Helen's stress. They stayed in hospital 10 days, then the doctor told them to go to the Children's Hospital in Sarnowa. The doctor was Jewish, and was taken two months later. But the Children's Hospital would not accept George because he was Jewish. Helen argued that he wasn't Jewish because he had not had Brit Milah, but he still was not accepted. They travelled back to their village in a Red Cross Bus.

2067-2362 By three months the baby weighed 3 kilos and was ready for Brit Milah.. He stayed with Helen in a crib in the room. He was very skinny.

His Brit was a miracle. A Jewish couple who had sent their own children to Hungary heard of the birth of a Jewish boy and arranged for a Rabbi Stern from Switzerland to come and perform the Brit. It was held in the synagogue. After that the baby began gaining weight.

At three weeks George had a hernia operation. Helen took him home two hours after surgery.

It was a miracle for a Jewish baby to be born in 1943.

Helen stayed at the village until 1944. George was scared o f the horses and noise.

Outside they had to wear the yellow star, but the villagers knew her.

2364-2554 At the end of 1943 Helen received postcards from her sisters in Auschwitz. Helen sent money to the Swiss Red Cross for it to send parcels to them, but does not think they ever received them.

She sent a photograph of her son announcing his birth to her sisters. They received it, and one sister carried it in her dress. Knowing that someone was still alive in Slovakia kept them alive.

2557-2792 Helen tried to be very good and polite to the villagers. She thinks because of this and because of the child they did not betray her. They must have felt sorry for her for the way she had to live.

By the spring of 1944 they could not stay in their hiding place. George was crawling and they needed space. They heard of a empty house in a village 15 minutes away. The owner had been taken away. They asked the man in charge of it if they could stay there. He said go ahead, he just did not want to know about it. They stayed there five months. There was a big garden, and a well down the hill. They were all alone except for one woman who came to help Helen bake bread.

At this time there was an uprising in Slovakia, and people were being told to be good to the Jews. This woman had two small children. One night Helen and her family stayed at this woman's house because they were being bombed. The uprising lasted two weeks then failed. The Germans came in and a lot of people were killed. This woman had been scared too.

Giving Up Child

2793-3047 On a Friday at the beginning of September 1944, a young girl from the village came to tell Helen that the Germans were coming that night to take all the remaining Jews. The neighbor who had helped them out before agreed to keep George and give him to an aunt of his who lived in a cottage in the forest. She would bring him up like her own, and Helen would give her what she could. In case they did not survive he would stay with this woman or go to an orphanage. Helen agreed. She had no choice.

At midnight she packed a few things, took her son across the back lane and said goodbye to him. The man told her not to worry. Helen and her husband then walked through the forest for two hours to the home of an old Jewish couple they knew. Helen was so tired. They arrived at one in the morning, and the couple said they could not stay there because the Germans were on their way. The four of them then walked through the forest to a Jewish family that had a bunker. There were about ten people staying there. During the day one of them would go out and buy food from the farmers. They had to be very quiet, and would sit in the bunker, or go out and look for wood. It was fall and it was rainy and getting colder.

3048-3359 While in the bunker Helen heard of a Jewish baby with a fever and measles and that the people looking after him were worried. She knew it was her son.

They stayed in the bunker until November. Once it snowed they could not stay because of the footprints. During the day they walked around a little and raked leaves to sit on.

They were all Jews in the bunker. There were two girls ages 10 and 12, who were later killed. Most of them were middle aged people. The villagers could

see their smoke once a day.

Helen let the man who took George know that she wanted to see him. They met at night. She wore dark clothes and a kerchief and walked through the forest and up down hills for two hours. George was almost bald. They had cut his curls so he would not look Jewish. Helen wanted to touch him, but he did not want her. She was a stranger to him. The family was good to him. There were five children in the family. Helen had to leave because it was getting light. The man was very nice and told her not to worry.

3360-3724 They moved to a different bunker. They had to crawl through a hole in the ground and then lie or sit down in it.

There were partisans in the forest.

One day in December the woman who was keeping George brought him to Helen. She said the Germans were coming and would kill anyone hiding Jews. They could see the Germans were coming closer to the forest, and it was not safe. In the bunker the baby cried. It was dark, wet and cold.

Helen, her husband, and the older couple walked through the forest to a wood cottage they heard about. Helen carried George on her shoulders through the forest and kept checking that he was breathing. It was so cold.

They stayed at the cottage, but there was no milk and George was crying.

Once a week their friend came. Helen's husband had done a lot of good for these people. They were poor and against the Germans, and willing to take big risks.

On January 1, 1945 Helen saw a horse and wagon approaching. Her husband went out. They were scared. There was a young man in the wagon who knew Helen's husband. He told them they were not in a safe place. Helen's husband remembered this man had a widowed sister and suggested maybe she would take their baby. The man thought about it for about 20 minutes and then agreed. He would have her say it was her brother's child.

George had not been happy. He was crying, hungry and wet all the time. Helen gave him up at the spur of the moment. The man put him in the bottom of his wagon and told her not to worry.

3725-4193 It was very cold and there was a lot of snow. She wanted to save her son.

Helen and her husband and the old couple stayed at the cottage a couple more weeks. Then their friend who had helped them all along told them they could stay in the basement of his new house. They walked in the middle of the night for more than two hours until they came to the house. The friend had already made two bunk beds for them.

The basement was covered except for an opening for food. The windows were covered up. Once a day their friend gave them warm food. He and his family were living upstairs. Helen and the others had to be very quiet. They lay around most of the time. Her nerves were very bad, and she had recurring bad dreams about trying

to get her son and reaching out for him with stiff hands. She had these dreams so often that she thought she was crazy.

The older couple got lice from lying around all the time. Their nerves were very bad. They were all given a little water each day and tried to keep clean.

Once in the middle of the night the man took them out to a field intending to leave them there. He was getting nervous. They begged him not to and he took them back. The days were very long.

Liberation

They stayed in this basement until they were liberated on May 15, 1945 by the Russians. At first they were scared to go out. Finally they came out and bathed. Helen wanted to see her boy right away. They were very sweaty and Helen's hair was long and unkempt.

Helen's husband wanted to go into the city right away to look for a place to live and work. It was dangerous for them to stay with their friend much longer.

Their friend let the woman who was keeping George know that Helen was coming for him. George was almost two years old. She lived in a very small house. When Helen looked at him her heart was pumping. She called him by the Polish name he had been given. When she went to lift him up he let out a very scared cry and stretched out his arms to the other woman and called her mama. Helen didn't know what to do, but she wanted to take him home. The woman who had cared for him offered to come with her so George could get used to his real mother.

4195-4469 Helen later found out that a month after George was taken in by this woman the wife of the man who had taken over their property came, uncovered the baby to see that he was Jewish and reported him to the Gestapo. The Gestapo were scared at this point and thought maybe this was a partisan trick so they never went to get George. The woman caring for him loved him.

It took George two weeks to get used to Helen. They stayed upstairs at their friend's house for a couple days. George was just starting to walk. Helen's husband got a job as a trustee on a property that had been owned by a Jewish couple. The family moved there.

Helen was scared wherever she went. She was scared of people. Many of them were not happy to see that Jews survived. They had taken whatever they could from the Jews and were worried they would have to give it all back.

4470-4567 The man who took over Helen's property tried to have her husband killed because he was afraid he would want his land back. This man was the first to join the Communist Party.

They could not get anything back. The Russians did almost the same as the Germans. They were anti-semitic.

Helen stayed on the farm for two weeks. She was scared. There were

Russian soldiers everywhere and her husband was away a lot. The soldiers would go into homes looking for jewelry. They hadn't seen women in a long time, and could do whatever they wanted. It was not safe.

4568-4793 In the late summer of 1945 they found a place to rent in the city. They had sold whatever they had, and received some money from UNRA. There was a Jewish kitchen that sold meals very cheaply.

In July Helen heard that her two sisters who had been in Auschwitz for three and a half years had survived. This was a miracle. Both had had typhus, and the younger sister had been hurt by a British bomb. Being together had saved them.

Her sisters went to Prague to register. Helen had already done so, and they learned she was living in Sarnowa. One sister could not walk at all. Helen will never forget seeing them again. One sister, who was a grown woman, wore a blouse that fit three-year-old George. When the sisters saw George they said he had saved their lives. He was their hope. The youngest sister moved in with Helen. The oldest looked for a job. Her husband had died in a concentration camp.

4795-4972 The sisters knew that their brother William had died around the time George was born. He died a natural death in Auschwitz. The sisters had worked as secretaries of death. They both spoke and wrote German and that was what saved them. They had begun working barefoot in the fields before they were moved inside. One of them saw their brother William's name on a list of those who died. After the war both sisters contributed to a book entitled 'Secretaries of Death'.

The oldest sister could not move for two weeks her feet were so sore and infected.

Helen's husband kept hoping for a law that would allow them to return to their property. Helen did not want to. In 1946 she applied for a teaching job and was told her certificate was lost. When she applied for a new one she found out she had to be a member of the Communist Party, and she didn't want to join.

4973-5213 In 1946-47 they didn't know what to do. Everyone was trying to leave. In 1947 there was a pogrom. Helen's husband was hit over the head and taken to the police station. She wasn't touched because she was holding George. Her husband was kept all day. At night the pogrom was determined a failure.

They had no future there. The country was getting worse and worse.

Helen's younger sister married a concentration camp survivor and made plans to go to Australia.

Canada

Helen's husband had a non-Jewish friend from school days who had come to Canada in 1937. Her husband asked for his help in emigrating, and he agreed to help them. He had three sons.

The trip was supposed to be paid for in American dollars. Helen and her husband

sold everything, but still did not have enough money. Finally the Jewish Congress arranged for them to pay in Czech money which would be changed for dollars in Italy, from where the boat left.

Helen's older sister wanted to leave too.

It took almost a year to get the tickets. The Czech government did not want people to emigrate. They had to pay taxes and were not allowed to take anything with them.

Helen's sister took them to the Austrian-Swiss border. Then they took a long, hot train ride to Italy. This sister stayed in Slovakia a couple more months. She remarried. At the border George wouldn't let her go. He had left everything behind.

5213-5416 The old couple who survived with Helen stayed in Torpochenie. Helen sent them parcels from Canada. They had nowhere else to go. When she left Helen wore her winter coat and a suit. She didn't look back.

She was very sick on the boat to New York. They had a two day wait there and stayed at a cousin's. Then they took the train to Transcona. The farmer who brought them over lived in Springfield, but he was waiting for the train in Winnipeg. They arrived August, 31 on a hot, humid day. They were very thirsty, had little English and about \$20. On the train they wouldn't buy any food except a chocolate for George. When they arrived in Transcona they went to a grocery store and conversed in German and were given banana splits. George didn't know any English or Yiddish. Then they were taken to their friend's house. They stayed there one week, and the people were very nice to them.

5416-5523 Helen was in her thirties and her husband was 42. She wanted a kosher home and a Jewish school for her child. They rented a two room apartment on Aberdeen and Helen's husband got a factory job. He lost it two weeks later after cutting his arm. Then he worked at Silverwoods for three months. Helen registered her son at Peretz School. He didn't want to go. The principal was very nice and talked to him in Russian.

Life was not easy here.

Helen got a job sewing in a factory and came home crying because she couldn't do the work and wasn't earning enough money. Eventually she was given minimum wage and taken off the sewing machine.

5524-end Helen has two grandchildren. Her husband died five years ago.

She gives a lot of money to charity. She is orthodox because that is what she saw at her parents home. It is important to her. Her sisters live in Australia and she is very close to them. She has one cousin living in Slovakia.

Her son and grandchildren mean everything to her.