HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

EVA BURNS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Josey G. Fisher
Date: February 10, 1980

This page left intentionally blank.

EB - Eva Burns[1] [interviewee]
JF - Josey Fisher [interviewer]
Date: February 10, 1980

Tape one, side one:

JF: Eva, can you tell me where you were born and when, and a little bit about your family?

EB: I was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia in December, 1924 and lived there quite a few years until we were taken to camp. My father was a pediatrician, and my mother had been a concert pianist before she was married, and taught my brother and myself to play the piano quiet well—in fact we still play for family and friends. We lived a very nice life; my mother's family is large, with three brothers and sisters and it was a comfortable life. My father had his practice and we lived in an apartment of which one entrance was the office and the other entrance was our apartment. I had a brother six years older than I and there was just the two of us. His name was Gerhard; I called him Gary. He was six years older than I am.

JF: What do you remember about your growing up years in Prague?

EB: The years were very nice. I had a very nice childhood up until the time we went to camp, and of course things changed very drastically.

JF: What was the atmosphere in Prague before Hitler's time in terms of any evidence of anti-Semitism or things in the Jewish community?

EB: Well some people were assimilated, others weren't, and the anti-Semitism could be felt sometimes, but mostly in terms of somebody would say, "He's a Jew but he's a nice guy," remarks like that. But I didn't feel too much of it.

JF: Did you experience anything yourself?

EB: Maybe I did but I don't remember; it couldn't have been to any great degree or I would have remembered.

JF: Would you describe your family as assimilated or...?

EB: My family, yes, my immediate family wasn't but my mother's brothers and sisters intermarried. Three intermarried; three didn't. One of them got divorced and married again. My aunt married a Viennese man and my uncle married a Dutch girl.

JF: Did your family belong to a synagogue?

EB: No, we belonged...as far as...we went once a year on Holy Days.

JF: Did you have any kind of a Jewish education?

EB: Yes, I went to school in our public schools. We had, in the public schools, rabbis, priests, and ministers coming in for the particular religions.

JF: It was a required subject?

---

[1]née Gerstl

EB: I think it was.

JF: Were your friends of both faiths?

EB: Yes, I have friends of both faiths.

JF: What do you remember starting about 1933 when Hitler first came to power? Do you recall any changes within Czechoslovakia? Did you experience any kind of changes?

EB: No, I was too young. I was only nine years old then. My parents might have felt something or seen something coming then, but nobody wanted to believe it: what's happening in Germany is going to spread, or Hitler is going to spread and occupy so many countries.

JF: What about when Austria was taken?

EB: When Austria was taken still people prayed, but I don't think it was a sign that we would come next. Some people didn't want to believe it, but Poland was taken and then one country after another but still they did not want to believe it. They were saying, "It won't happen here."

JF: What about after the Munich pact was signed, can you remember?

EB: Well then, people were starting to be afraid, because it was getting closer and closer.

JF: Do you remember your parents talking?

EB: No, my parents may have discussed something but they didn't talk in front of children. At that time it wasn't done. They tried to keep the worries away from children.

JF: When do you first remember them being concerned?

EB: They threw the Jewish students out of the university. Also a time I remember, my uncle was invited to our house for dinner because they were leaving for America, he and his family and when...I don't remember too much because....My uncle told me about it: there were students yelling, "Jews get out," and I don't know what they meant. They meant out of the university and they also meant get out of the country.

JF: When was this?

EB: This was in December, 1938, and they marched into Czechoslovakia in March, 1939. My uncle remembers my father standing white as a sheet, near the window. We lived on a main thoroughfare, with cobblestone, and the students yelled and my uncle was saying to my father, "Can you hear what they are saying?" And he said, "Yes I can; what can we do?"

JF: This is your father's brother.

EB: Yes.

JF: So, this was December of 1938.

EB: Yes.

JF: Were you feeling the change of atmosphere in the schools also?

EB: No, that came later. I went to German schools and most of my friends started to turn away from me. Not just me but all of the Jewish kids. It was an all-girls school. All the girls were afraid to talk to us.

JF: And that started later?

EB: Yes; I don't remember when.

JF: So, the first memory you have then is of the university students.

EB: Shouting.

JF: When did the changes start affecting your family?

EB: Shortly after March 10th the Nuremberg Laws started being carried out and we weren't allowed in public places. And we weren't allowed to go to parks, shopping only at certain hours. Also, my father lost his practice as a pediatrician.

JF: How did that happen?

EB: There were only so many doctors that were allowed to treat patients—and not only Jewish patients—and I don't know how they handled it. Some could keep their practice only to Jewish patients and others couldn't. And my father was among them.

JF: Before that time was your father's practice interdenominational?

EB: Yes it was. He treated people of all kinds—Czechs, Germans, Jews.

JF: How did he find out that he had to close his practice?

EB: I don't remember. It skips my memory. But I know that they took the shingle off the door and he was very disturbed about that. He said, "How come that I can't practice after 25 years?" And they said, "Because you are a Jew," and he was very shaken up about it. He then took a course in child psychology—it had just come into service—to keep busy, thinking that one day he could use it for his own purpose.

JF: Did that help him regain optimism?

EB: Yes. It helped him to keep busy and not just sit around the house and worry.

JF: What, if any, conversation then went on between your parents? Was there more discussion?

EB: I really can't say; I don't remember. There was fear, I am sure. My father would say, "I just saw someone from the street and they are going next week on the transports." There were a lot of people getting notices.

JF: What was he doing there, your father?

EB: I said he was taking a course in psychology.

JF: That's why he was there?

EB: Yes, but he would see people on the street and they would say, "I want to say good-bye to you because next week I am leaving."

JF: You said that his brother came to the United States.

EB: Yes.

JF: Did your parents ever talk about leaving?

EB: No, there were some things said, but my grandmother had a lot of influence and for some reason she kept saying that the family should not be torn apart.

JF: This was your father's mother?

EB: My mother's mother. My father's mother passed away. And I don't know, that was the influence. My uncle had the tendencies to put some blame on my grandmother over that. I feel that if they had really wanted to—there would have been an opportunity to go—they would have left.

JF: Did you feel that you should have left at the time?

EB: No, at the time I was still quite young. I was 15, and we left things up to our parents. We didn't decide or discuss things like that with our parents at that age. I know that children today do.

JF: What kind of experiences were you having once the laws were passed? You had spoken before about your friends beginning to...

EB: Yes, my friends didn't speak to us, and they were afraid to be seen with us. I had one experience with a professor. We called them professors in the high schools—not colleges, but high school. She was one of my favorites, and she was the professor of German and history, two subjects she taught us. We always liked her very much because she was very dramatic, especially in history; she was like putting on a play when she was talking about history. We were wearing the Jewish stars already. And I said, "Professor," and she greeted me and made it a point to say hello to me. She said, "Let's go in here. You better not talk to me." And I said, "I have the star." And she said, "I don't care." And I covered up my star and went into her house and talked to her. I imagine she was not a Nazi at heart. She was German, Czechoslovakian-German, and this was one of the good experiences I had with anybody. There were quite a few bad experiences. We used to socialize a lot together like birthday parties, etc., and overnight everything changed.

JF: What were they saying to you?

EB: They didn't say much. They were afraid I suppose. They would have been punished. And I dropped out of the school, and I went into the Czech schools.

JF: You dropped out or you were asked to leave?

EB: No, I think we changed. It was so uncomfortable. I went to an all-girls high school.

JF: It was a public school then.

EB: Yes.

JF: And what was your experience there?

EB: There it was much better. The only thing that we found was that we were discriminated against, not because we were Jews, but because we came from German schools; but otherwise I became friends with some of the girls.

JF: Christians or Jews?

EB: Both, but then we had to drop out, and I took some sewing lessons to keep busy. My girlfriend's aunt had a sewing salon and I took some courses there. And I remember a Czech policeman greeting me as though I was his best friend; it was the first day that

we wore stars, as though to say, "I don't care if you are wearing a star." I never saw that policeman before. He just greeted people like "The heck with it," in a kind of a protest.

JF: Were there many exceptions like that?

EB: Not many.

JF: Your parents were also experiencing that kind of social thing?

EB: Yes.

JF: And your brother, where was he at this time?

EB: My brother was living with some friends of his. He left a year earlier than we did. In the middle of the night they banged on the door and young Jewish boys were called. I guess they had the names, and you had to be registered with the police.

JF: You said before that the orders for the transports came from the Jewish Committee. [In a previous conversation, J.F.]

EB: Yes.

JF: While your father was taking the course, what was the feeling towards the people that were making those selections? Those lists?

EB: I don't know; I wasn't aware of anything.

JF: Were any of the men in your family in the national army at any point before this? Had they served in the army in Czechoslovakia?

EB: Yes, my father served; as a matter of fact my parents got married during the war in 1917 in Czechoslovakia, and my brother was born one year after, in 1918.

JF: He served as a physician?

EB: My father, I think so, yes.

JF: Was he decorated, do you know?

EB: No. When he served he was in Czechoslovakia.

JF: It was before?

EB: Yes.

JF: Do you remember any reaction to the invasion of Poland?

EB: No, as I said, I was young. There was not much communications. There was the paper.

JF: Did you hear anything during this time about the Lublin Reservation? Did anyone talk about that?

EB: No.

JF: Had you heard anything about the establishment of Theresienstadt?

EB: Yes. We heard because my brother was one of the young men that was called to a transport to Theresienstadt—building up the ghetto of Theresienstadt. This was in December, 1941. I think there were about a thousand young men going—to build, to get it ready for other people to come.

JF: Was this the first transport of young people?

EB: Yes, there may have been another one before that. Somebody said two transports but I only remember this one.

JF: And he was ordered to go.

EB: Yes.

JF: What was your family's feeling at that time about what this experience was like?

EB: Well, they didn't know. They felt very sad and anxious about it. They didn't know what could be expected.

JF: What were your brother's reactions to the orders to go?

EB: Well, he was quite unhappy about it I am sure. He didn't say much. They all expected to go because my husband, who is now my husband, (at the time he was just a friend) went in October, 1941. But they went, not to Theresienstadt but to Poland, to Lodz, to the city of Lodz.

JF: To the ghetto?

EB: Yes, there was a ghetto there.

JF: What was your understanding of what was going on? Did you hear anything?

EB: No, we didn't hear too much about what was going on.

JF: What did you think was happening? What was your family's understanding about the deportation?

EB: Sometimes we thought that they were mistreated but we didn't hear anything about the gassing. That came later anyway.

JF: What did you understand about the nature of Theresienstadt before you went? What kind of place?

EB: It was a garrison. It was a military garrison and military barracks were there and the only thing we knew is that it was a fortress, a military fortress.

JF: Were you told that it was to be a different kind of ghetto, a different kind of location than the other ghettos?

EB: No, we were not told anything. We were just told to go.

JF: Did you hear from your brother once he was there?

EB: Yes, not directly but indirectly. Somebody came to see us and told us about things there. My brother had a girlfriend who went there to give him some baked goods; she was not Jewish. My mother baked and we sent something and apparently they let her give them. But the second time, we heard that a young man had jumped into the shaft.... They were working in the coal mine, in Kladno, as workers, and of course they didn't get enough to eat. And if there would be any kind of connection with outsiders and things would be found, they would be severely punished. So, somehow the food got to the authorities and when that happened the transport was put together to go back to Theresienstadt and then shipped elsewhere. This was a so-called punishment transport because of the goods received which was contraband. So, we never saw my brother again. The only thing that we did hear was from my grandmother who was in Theresienstadt, that she saw my

brother, "He doesn't look too badly, and he didn't have a winter coat and since winter is coming up I gave him one of your uncle's coats, because he had two."

JF: The part that you described before about the conditions in the coal mine, how did you find out about that?

EB: Some Czech workers who were down in the coal mines.

JF: He wasn't allowed to communicate directly with you.

EB: No.

JF: You said that your grandmother was there.

EB: Yes, my grandmother and some uncles and aunts went before us. We did not go till 1942.

JF: Did you ever hear from them before?

EB: They only were allowed to write, and also my uncle and my aunt went from my father's side and they wrote of course, but they were only allowed to write 30 words, that they were doing well, and were healthy, and things are pretty good here, and the family is well and they are working.

JF: So, you really had no more accurate information before.

EB: No.

Tape one, side two:

JF: When did you get your orders to go to Theresienstadt?

EB: We got our orders sometime in November and we left on the 17th of November, 1942. It was about a year after my brother went, not quite a year.

JF: Do you remember what it was like when you got your orders to go?

EB: Well, we were in some barracks and we had to stay overnight there and there was some things that we were allowed to take.

JF: Do you remember what you were allowed to take?

EB: No, I don't remember. We stayed overnight, and our transport for some reason was of many doctors. Apparently those were the doctors that were not allowed to treat Jewish people. I don't know what happened to the ones that were allowed to treat. They actually went too, I am sure. They wouldn't keep them there to treat Jewish people because there were no Jewish people left. I don't know whether they were the ones that were not allowed to treat Jews or if there were some that were allowed. There was so many people that it was hard to tell.

JF: At this time, who was included in the group from your family that went?

EB: My mother and my father and I, because my brother had already left.

JF: What were the barracks like; how were you treated?

EB: We lived men and women separately in families. I lived with my mother and other women; and my father lived with men, other men and boys. And my father was needed again as a doctor there, so he had a position: a pediatrician together with others. And he was in the infirmary for infectious diseases where children and young adults were taken care of. I happened to contract scarlet fever there and I was one from our bunk heads that got it. I was hospitalized. I stayed there six weeks in quarantine.

JF: How long were you in the barracks altogether?

EB: In Theresienstadt you mean?

JF: No, in the barracks that you were talking about, before you were deported.

EB: No, this is after.

JF: I'm sorry I misunderstood you. You were detained before you went on the transport overnight?

EB: That was just overnight.

JF: How did you go?

EB: By train.

JF: What kind of train?

EB: I think it was a regular train. I don't think it was a cattle train, not there.

JF: What happened once you got to Theresienstadt?

EB: Well, we were put into barracks, and they had all names of German cities—Hamburg, Dresden, etc. Barracks were called *Kaserne*. We stayed in the Dresden *Kaserne*. My mother and I were together and the other people, and we started to work. Working

different shifts, different jobs. I worked...I think...when my mother worked, carrying lumber one week, cleaning out old folks homes with Lysol, mopping out with a wet mop, and being in the bakery. The bakery wasn't too bad with the smell of bread and it was clean, and the wood wasn't too bad either when the weather was nice. It wasn't good cleaning the old folks homes with the Lysol.

JF: Were you allowed to keep any of your possessions at all?

EB: Yes, we were. Not valuables, but pictures or other little things that we had.

JF: Were you put into uniforms there?

EB: Just regular clothes.

JF: They distributed clothes there?

EB: I think that we had our own clothes.

JF: What about the food?

EB: The food was not good, but we were fortunate when we worked to receive some parcels from Prague, from relatives who stayed there, so it supplemented our food. When we saw someone come and we would see we had enough food and the soup was not very good, we would give the soup to some poor people, especially from Germany. We would ask if they wanted soup.

JF: What else can you tell me about your life there?

EB: This was supposed to be a camp for show. We had a coffee house, we had opera, we had books; it was only to show the world what a wonderful camp it is. But it was only a show place. Many people died there, perished...

JF: Can you tell me more about the cultural activities that you participated in?

EB: I participated in singing opera, which was done in a basement of a building. We had an old organ and we did the *Bartered Bride*, *Marriage of Figaro*; we did the *Magic Flute*, and we did some Hebrew songs towards the end. And we also performed one great work, *Verdi's Requiem*.

JF: And who organized this?

EB: The whole thing was organized by a conductor named Schechter. He was a musician and he was a conductor at one time.

JF: When did you have time to participate in this?

EB: This was in the evening, and we had a special permit for people who were in it because you were not allowed to walk after a certain time in the street. We had a special permit, I think, to go out and walk to the building. [not clear] Not everybody could participate, only people that worked during the day. If somebody had shifts, night shifts, they couldn't have done that. It was a bright spot. It was the one thing that kept us going in our lives, because you forgot all about your worries and about everything else, and it was culture. And, the amazing thing is that Jews, even under those conditions, they painted and did things cultural. They didn't always let the Germans get them down. Not everybody participated, but many did.

JF: There was freedom to participate in these activities?

EB: Yes, there was, at the time, if you could do it. Some couldn't because they were too tired, too worried or depressed, but it kept you going. It kept your spirit up. It was something to look forward to.

JF: Was the *Requiem* done for any special occasion? Or was it just a project you undertook?

EB: If you read the book *The Theresin Requiem* by Joseph Bor, it explains it. It was called crazy and foolish in a Jewish ghetto to put on a Catholic performance, but we did it in Latin and it was for ourselves. But in the end, when I was not there anymore, it was performed for the Germans. Not too many people were left. Some had left and I was one of them. It was September '44 and I left in May '44. It was performed for the hierarchy, the German officers; and the people themselves translated it. There were words in there when translated, like "damn you" and "hell"; when you yell it out you kind of knew what it meant. The Germans did not understand it. They just thought it was a beautiful work. It was an out-cry of, "Don't worry. The end will come for you." That's what was written in the book. It is translated. I have given a book review on that book, so I know it.

JF: What about the other activities that were going on?

EB: We went to the coffee house a couple of times and there were concerts. There were musical instruments smuggled in somehow and hidden, because when you went on a transport you couldn't take these kinds of things, only necessities.

JF: Were you aware of educational activities going on for the children?

EB: Yes. There was some kind of learning going on for the children. There was no school but some kind of learning. Maybe it was a school. I don't know. You see, I don't remember; it has...it's been so many years that you forget.

JF: What do you remember of the guards? Were they Czech guards or German Nazi guards?

EB: I think they were German guards.

JF: What kind of experience did you have with them?

EB: I didn't have any, neither good or bad with them. I didn't have any contact with them. I just followed orders. They gave you a little ticket because you were allowed to go out at night to chorus and it was all right. I had nothing to do with them.

JF: Were any Jews involved in the care-taking?

EB: Yes, there was. The office of the *Judenältesten*, mostly Jews, people who were in charge.

JF: How were they?

EB: Well, they were liked by some and not liked by others. They had a difficult job; somebody had to do it. It was very difficult for them. But I don't remember. If there were some bad things going on, I don't remember. Maybe there were but I was not aware of it.

JF: Do you have any memories of Baeck?

EB: No, as a matter of fact I did not learn about him until I came to this country.

JF: Were any of the people that you knew taken to the little fortress?

EB: Yes, not only did I know some, but some were my family—my uncle and my cousin. They had concealed some cigarettes or something. They were taken to the little fortress and they both died there.

JF: They were just kept there?

EB: Yes.

JF: Did you ever hear from them after they were taken there?

EB: No, but I don't know if my cousin ever heard from them.

JF: What were you hearing while you were in Theresienstadt about what was going on elsewhere?

EB: Only that things could be worse and that we don't have it so bad. I don't think we heard about gas, at least I didn't.

JF: Were any of the people receiving postcards from other family members that had gone to Auschwitz?

EB: No, I don't think so, not that I remember.

JF: You spoke before about the Red Cross visits. [In a previous conversation. J.F.]

EB: Yes.

JF: What are your memories of that?

EB: I never saw them but I knew that there were things being painted. Things were really going on before they came. [unclear]

JF: Were you aware of any resistance groups being formed in the ghetto?

EB: No, I wasn't. But I'm sure there must have been some.

JF: What experience helped you most to maintain your faith and to maintain your sense of purpose?

EB: I think it was the music and performing, and youth and the thought that it can't last forever, that things will get better somehow.

JF: What about your parents?

EB: They never spoke too much. We just did the best we could and told jokes, which is unbelievable. But if you watch MASH you can understand that it is important to keep your sense of humor.

JF: Do you remember any of the humor?

EB: No, but I know there was some laughing and jokes. Some poems were written; I translated some of them from Czech and German. Jokes were sarcastic ones like, you know, that the coffee is like dishwater and things like that.

JF: Were these poems published?

EB: There is a Czech and Polish version and I translated them into English, in prose, not in rhymes.

JF: Did you have any contact with any family member? You talked about the parcels; did you have any news or did you have any letters from family members outside of Theresienstadt?

EB: I don't remember but I think we may have. I know that we could write 30 words, but we didn't have that many people to write to.

JF: When did things change for you at Theresienstadt? When did you...?

EB: Well, I was called to go to Auschwitz, and this was in May, 1944. And since my parents were, my father was still a doctor and I was 19, I was not protected any more by him. Had I been a minor, I would have still been protected. It wasn't much later that they went; they went in October, 1944. I found that out after the war.

JF: Your grandmother was still in...

EB: My grandmother stayed there until the end.

JF: She survived?

EB: Yes, she survived and she was sick though; she was bed-ridden after the war.

JF: Once you received your notice that you were to be deported, what happened?

EB: They gave us a notice. They gave us a certain date. I forget how much time they gave. My father wanted to go with me and I talked him out of it because I knew that we were apart here and we would be apart there too. And he still had my mother here and I am young and I am healthy. And I said, "I don't want you to volunteer to go with me because it doesn't make sense. If you have to go, go, but don't volunteer for anything." He listened to me reluctantly, and he stayed on. I had some problems with my stomach so he brought me some medication. So then, we were shipped in cattle cars...

JF: Were many young people on that transport?

EB: Yes.

JF: Was there any relationship between that transport and one of the Red Cross visits that was to occur?

EB: No. There was just too many people and they had to get them out. More kept coming. You had to have a solution to the overcrowding. My parents' transport I think was the last.

JF: Can you describe what it was like on the cattle car?

EB: Yes it was very bad. We were choking because there was not much air. Just a little window opening, and we were talking quietly. We went through Prague, which was our home town, and we wanted to jump out and we were very despondent about the whole thing. I don't know how long of a ride it was, but when we got out it was night and there were barbed wire fences with lights all over the place. We were very afraid.

JF: Was the response of the Nazi officers different once you reached Auschwitz than they had been in Theresienstadt?

EB: Yes, they were very stern and they made us get out quickly, and they marched us into some barracks which were much worse than in Theresienstadt.

JF: Were you aware of the selection happening when you first got out of the car?

EB: Not when we first got out of the car, but we met some people that said to us, "Now that you are here, it is our turn to be gassed." We did not know what they were talking about. When the last transport came, they disappeared and I imagine that they were gassed.

JF: This was the first time?

EB: Yes. But still I didn't want to believe it.

JF: Were you kept in a part of the camp?

EB: For six weeks in the barracks. [not clear] We did nothing, and we didn't even work. So we thought too much; it was very depressing. If you worked, the time passed and it wasn't so depressing.