

KRON-TV interview Spring 1992

Interview with YANINA CYWINSKA

Holocaust Oral History Project

Date:                      Place: San Francisco, CA

Interviewer:

Transcriber: Barbara K. Palmer

Q.            YOU'RE LEAVING MONDAY ON THIS TRIP, RIGHT?

A.            Uh-huh.

Q.            SO YOU'RE GOING TO BE GOING TO ISRAEL AND  
DACHAU. WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE OF GOING ON THIS TRIP AND  
WHAT IS THE MESSAGE THAT YOU HOPE WILL COME OUT FROM  
THIS VISIT?

A.            The purpose of this trip is to honor and  
expose the Japanese soldiers that liberated me in  
Dachau. And I really don't have any hope to what we  
will accomplish, except that I do so enjoy being near  
these men that came, and if they were an hour later I  
would have been dead.

              And so the purpose, really, is, as far as  
the association is concerned, to honor these men for  
the deed that they did. And that deed is that they  
came -- they were up in a dangerous area in front,  
volunteers, and they were in a battlefield the first  
round. And obviously I remember them liberating me,  
but lots of people don't know about it at all, that

it was the Japanese Americans, American-born Japanese, that liberated us in Dachau.

Q. YOU'RE SAYING A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ABOUT IT, SO ACTUALLY YOU'RE ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE WHO CAN ATTEST TO THEIR PRESENCE THERE, RIGHT?

A. Well, I have been making speeches for several years -- this is how this came about -- in high schools and Lions Clubs about Auschwitz and World War II, and I've always mentioned that I was liberated by Japanese. And many times I was questioned on it, and it came a time when I said to my husband, "I wonder if I'm getting this mixed up, because nobody knows about it. Maybe I'm all mixed up. Maybe it wasn't Japanese Americans."

And then one day it was in the paper about this story in this area and someone sent the story to Israel, and that is how I came to meet my liberators. And therefore I felt very normal. Suddenly this was dignified, my memory was dignified, because for a while there I began to wonder if I was right.

Q. OKAY.

A. So it was really wonderful to know that they were there.

Q. OKAY. WOULD YOU MIND JUST LOOKING THIS WAY INSTEAD OF -- WHAT I MEAN IS --

A. You mean all the time?

Q. YEAH.

A. Okay.

Q. AND THEN WE'LL HAVE YOU INTERACTING LATER  
ON.

A. All right.

Q. THERE IS A CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO, BUT  
WE'LL HAVE THAT HAPPEN LATER.

A. All right.

Q. OKAY?

A. Yes.

Q. SO YOU TALKED ABOUT THE FACT THAT YOU WERE  
SAVED BY AN HOUR, WITHIN AN HOUR. CAN YOU EXPLAIN?  
MAYBE JUST TAKE US BACK TO HOW YOUR INVOLVEMENT -- WHAT  
HAPPENED TO YOU IN THE HOLOCAUST.

A. Well, the problem with the Holocaust was  
my father was a doctor, and he was ordered to do  
operations on Jewish people in ghetto, Warsaw ghetto.  
And when he went in there, when he went in there, the  
atrocities shocked him. There were people being  
operated on without anesthesia and all kinds -- they  
were torturing people, there were people crawling from  
starvation, and Nazis, so my father went to the  
Catholic church and asked them to stop these atrocities  
by getting news media in or all the churches together

to stop this torture of the Jews.

And the Catholic church refused him, so he then got all of us in the Cywinska family involved in underground work. That particular year Christmas was not ours because my father said, "We're going together to help the Jews, to bring them medicine, food, water," because there wasn't any, it was all cut off and they were dying, and help them as a doctor. And so we went underground helping them.

And eventually we got caught and arrested for it, and therefore I was taken to the gas chamber in Auschwitz and I was condemned there as the Jew-lover vermin of the earth. And we were put in the gas chamber, the whole family.

Q. HOW MANY IN YOUR FAMILY?

A. I didn't count, but I know I had a lot of cousins. I was only ten, so I don't remember the number of relatives, but it was my aunt and uncle and their seven children and my other uncle and his four children and my brother and I and my father and some other cousins that were doing work underground with other Polish people, good people.

Q. YOUR MOTHER, TOO?

A. Oh, yes, everybody. Oh, yes. We would carry grenades for uprising and food and ammunition so

they could fight back. Anyway, when they put us in the gas chamber, I did not consume enough gas to die. I was still breathing, and a Jewish woman gave me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. And I was kept in Auschwitz doing all kinds of atrocity work like putting people in the gas chambers and not able to tell them what's going to happen to them.

When the Russians started coming to liberate Auschwitz, which was located in Poland, the Nazis pushed us into the death march, marching from Auschwitz all the way to Dachau, another camp where they were trying to exterminate and shoot and kill people as fast as possible so there would be no witnesses left.

I was standing on a railroad cattle car ramp, sitting and standing, and I was cuddling a Jewish boy that was very young, seven or eight, and he was crying that he was afraid to go in the gas chamber. And I was telling him to put his head into my chest, and that I survived one of the gas chambers, that he will not die if he just squishes his face into my chest, I will hug him tight and he will not die, when a Nazi pulled me over, blindfolded me and lined me up against the wall to shoot.

And when -- usually when they start

shooting you hear the cocking of the guns and gravel sound. We were very sensitive to gravel sound. There was no sound. There was a lot of running going on, a lot of running and chaos, but -- so I finally told the woman next to me, "Something is wrong."

And we heard this awful noise, squeaky noise. Then I said, "Don't move, because they're trying to drive us crazy, so we run and they'll shoot us so they don't feel guilty for shooting us. They will use that as an excuse."

And next thing I knew I was -- somebody was pulling on my blind and pulling on my ears, and this person couldn't reach me to take it off. And so he jumped up high and pulled off my blind and I looked at him and he was a Japanese fellow. And I said to him, "Okay, you've taken over now, Nazis are gone, so you go ahead and shoot us. Just get it over with. Go ahead and shoot." And I was yelling at him to shoot me.

And he stood back and he said, "I'm an American," and we bust out, "Oh, yeah, sure." By then we didn't believe anyone. So finally he did a strange gesture. He went down on his knees. Or when I said, "Go ahead and shoot," I said, "Little Ceasar," because he looked like a Ceasar little fellow, and he went down

on his knees and did some kind of a gesture like this, as if he was praying to God of his own, and he said, "You must believe me in the God's name that I'm your liberator. I am an American soldier born in America, and we are here to liberate you. We are the first one here."

And slowly we began to believe him. And the lady next to me accepted Hershey bar with almonds in it from one of these Japanese liberators and she died on the spot, because our stomachs were so dehydrated that anything sharp like a almond would just pop it. So many people died that way.

And someone was shouting at the Japanese soldier not to feed any of the prisoners, that it's forbidden to feed the prisoners, and get the prisoners ready for disinfection and medical care and get them undressed and so forth and so on.

And that was the day I was liberated. And the tanks came rolling over the fence, and it was Japanese soldiers that liberated us.

Q. AND YOU WERE JUST AN HOUR AWAY FROM BEING EXECUTED?

A. Well, if they came in a little -- well, yes. If this all happened an hour later I would have been shot, but obviously the Germans ran, because the

soldiers were coming, the liberators were coming. So they obviously took off rather than shoot us. But if it took another hour or so we would have been gone. I would have been dead. So --

Q. AT THAT TIME I TAKE IT YOU DIDN'T REALIZE WHAT THE JAPANESE AMERICAN SOLDIERS WERE GOING THROUGH AT HOME.

A. Not at all.

Q. WHEN DID YOU REALIZE AND WHAT WERE YOUR THOUGHTS WHEN YOU REALIZED?

A. I heard -- I have a special fondness for Japanese faces now because of this particular liberation, and I've often said to people, Japanese food or Japanese -- you know, this, and I would -- oh, these Japs; oh, these Japs. In America, you know, the Japs, the Japs. The attitude. So I stopped talking about Japanese people for a while. And -- what was your question again?

Q. WELL, WHEN DID YOU REALIZE THE IRONY THAT HERE THEY WERE HELPING TO LIBERATE DACHAU AND AT HOME THEIR OWN FAMILIES WERE BEING INTERNED IN CAMPS?

A. When we had the first sushi and bagel breakfast here in San Francisco I finally also felt liberated, first time. I actually indulged in feeling liberated. I've never felt liberated. I'm in my own

prison, still, emotionally. It's a pain that never sleeps, being in Auschwitz. So I really didn't come to realize the impact and the beauty of my liberation until I saw these men in front of me at sushi and bagel breakfast.

And then I heard their stories from their end, such as they described us victims eating a dead horse, and there were many of us eating dead bodies and dead horses, dead humans, anything we could find to eat, we were so starved. And it was interesting to hear their side of it.

So I came -- I've heard here and there about -- I passed by in one of the country areas here where I saw some -- I asked my husband, "What are those empty barracks?" And he said that used to be concentration camps for Japanese, where they put them in. And that would go past me, what is it, you know. And I would hear stories, but I never realized the full impact of it until the sushi and bagel breakfast. I didn't know that their families were in camps while they were liberating me.

Q. AND WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THAT?

A. I think it was ironic. It was unbelievably ironic how one person's family is in the camps in USA of America, stripped of their dignity and

decorum, and another one -- and they are liberating me, whose dignity was totally destroyed, who felt -- a person that felt insignificant.

And then I spoke to a Japanese young woman in Los Angeles, and she still feels like there -- it's a kind of a feeling for the Jews and Japanese in these camp things, it's like being caught in a dirty underwear in the middle of Union Square or something. You always feel something is wrong with you.

My purpose of talking for the Japanese people about this is that there are so many young Japanese people grew up like I did in Auschwitz feeling insignificant and dirty and like there's something wrong with us. And that feeling must go, because there is nothing wrong with us. It's just prejudice that did it.

And I was attacked with skinheads with my husband after one of the speeches, and I decided that that would be a very important thing for me to do, is to keep talking until I die about what happened, for the Jewish people, too, for the people that I had to put in gas chambers where I couldn't save them. I still feel the guilt of it. And I could not save them. And so I talk about it because of skinheads and rise of these people who say that this never happened.

And so the purpose really is that no young people such as Japanese or any black person or anyone should not ever grow up feeling like they're a vermin or something. And that's big reason, because the young people, young Japanese people, should know their history of this and not feel secondary citizen.

Q. AND, ALSO, YOU WERE A WITNESS TO A VERY LITTLE KNOWN BUT REMARKABLE IRONY IN HISTORY.

A. Yes, yes. That was really amazing to me, the irony of the whole thing. It was unbelievable and beautiful.

Q. ALL RIGHT. THANK YOU.

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A. We went to castles in Vienna from the woodwork and recognized me, and the little boy --

Q. RIGHT.

A. -- or Hans, a German soldier that helped me escape. He helped me escape from Auschwitz, and I spoke very good German but then I went in a dress shop. I was waiting for my passport and I went in a dress shop to look at a dress.

Q. A BRIEF PERIOD OF TIME?

A. No, I was in Auschwitz village out of the camp and I was to be picked up by some family to be taken to Heidelberg and escape, but it didn't work.

So I'm hoping Hans will show up on the scene one of these days.

Q. IT'S GOING TO BE A REMARKABLE JOURNEY.

A. He's looking for his girlfriend.

Q. RIGHT.

A. I'm looking for --

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Q. AND THIS VERSION CAN BE SHORTER, TOO. YOU DON'T HAVE TO GIVE US --

A. Right. So I was in Dachau concentration camp waiting to be executed on the steps. I was sitting and standing on a railroad cattle car waiting to be executed, and I was cuddling a little boy, Jewish boy, who was asking me why does he have to die and that he was very scared from going into gas chamber, he heard all about it.

And I told him to put his head into my chest and that I've gone through one gas chamber and I did not die, that if he puts it into my clothes, that he will be spared to consume the gas and he will not die.

And as I was talking to him a Nazi walked over and grabbed me and other people and took us over against a stone wall full of blood and dead bodies around it because they were shooting people. Just a

stone wall, and the stone wall was full of blood and bodies all over, so we knew that we are going to be executed.

They put a blindfold on us women and lined us up against the wall to shoot us, the Nazis. And we stood there for a while and there was no sound of the -- there was a lot of running going on but no sound of the cocking of the gun and eins, zwei, drei, shoot, you know. "Schiess" is the word. And so I said to the women next to me, "There is something very funny going on. They're taking too long. They usually are so systematically bang, bang, bang."

And then we heard squeaking noises which were unbearable. We had to put our hands on our ears. And I told the woman, "Don't move. Don't anybody run, because if you do, they're going to shoot us and use that as an excuse."

And as I was talking to her there was this person in front of me trying to pull off my blindfold, and he was pulling up and he couldn't. I heard him going up and down trying to get it. He was doing this way and up.

Finally he got my blindfold off and I looked at the face and it was a very short Japanese man, very, very -- hardly could see his eyes. And I

said -- we all said, "Okay, so the Nazis are gone and you took over, so go ahead and shoot. Let's get this over with, let's get this over with. Shoot, shoot."

And the guy standing staring at me said, "We are American soldiers." And in my mind American soldier is blond and white skin, you know. And I said -- our response was, "No, no, go ahead and shoot."

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Q. SO YOU HAD THE BLINDFOLD ON, SOMEBODY WAS JUMPING UP AND DOWN --

A. Are you ready?

Q. YES.

A. Okay. So he was jumping up and down, the soldier, and pulled my blindfold off and I looked him in the face and it looked -- slanted eyes, dark skin, and he said, "We are your liberators. We liberated you. We are your friend." He was trying to convince us. They were using a lot of fast talk, and we said, "Well, go ahead and shoot us. Since you took over, just go ahead and shoot."

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Q. IT'S US. WE'RE TRYING TO GET IT RIGHT. OKAY. SO --

A. So the Japanese fellow that pulled my blindfold off, we did not believe him that he was an

American, because we expected someone blue-eyed, light skin. And they were trying to convince us that they were our liberators, that they're our friends. And we insisted that they shoot us and get it over with.

And he, the Japanese soldier, Japanese American in American uniform, went down on his knees and did some kind of a strange gesture like this, and I felt like he was talking to his God. And he said, "Please believe us, in God's name, that we are American soldiers and your liberators."

And we slowly started to accept the fact, and then the Japanese fellow gave the lady next to me a Hershey bar and he started to give me one but I didn't take it. And she ate it, and I just looked over and she collapsed, because our stomachs were dehydrated and almond, sharp almond, can split the stomach.

And the orders -- all the Japanese soldiers started yelling orders not to feed -- don't feed the prisoners, don't feed the prisoners. And get them ready for showers and cleanup and medical attention.

And when they said "showers," whoops, you know, okay, here we go again, gas chambers, right? So we were lingering between believing and not believing, but we eventually accepted that we were free. I saw

the American flag, saw the tanks rolling over the fences, and --

Q. SO THE SOLDIERS, INCLUDING THE JAPANESE AMERICANS, HAD TAKEN JUST A LITTLE LONGER TO GET TO DACHAU?

A. I don't know. How would they take long?

Q. WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED TO YOU?

A. Oh, yes, if they were an hour later I would have been dead, because the Nazis kept shooting people. Obviously they heard the tanks coming and they heard the shootings and they heard the American soldiers approaching, so they took off and left us standing there.

So when the Japanese came in, if they would have come in an hour later, I may not be here today talking to you, because there was just like, okay, one batch, shoot, back up, next batch, shoot, just trying to get rid of witnesses so that we would never tell the world what we went through.

Q. AND YOU WENT THROUGH THIS AND YOU AREN'T JEWISH, YOU WERE HELPING THE JEWISH, AND THIS IS HOW --

A. We are Roman Catholics, and my father was a doctor so he was ordered by the Nazis to work on the Jews, experimental operations and no use of numbing anything, you just do it raw. And, yes.

Q. WHAT ARE YOUR FEELINGS THAT YOU LOST YOUR FAMILY BECAUSE YOU HELPED THE JEWISH?

A. I cannot afford any -- I have forgiven a lot of people that I don't even know, because if I don't forgive I'm going to be a mess. I don't like the -- I've turned my scars into stars, so to speak, and I don't let any hate enter my mind. But if I were to -- you mean my feelings toward Jewish people or Nazis?

Q. THAT BY HELPING SOMEONE ELSE YOUR FAMILY WAS DESTROYED.

A. I believe that we have a responsibility to come to a rescue of another human being whatever the price, and I would like Jewish people to accept me more, but I don't know. They don't like Catholics.

Q. WELL, I DON'T KNOW --

A. And don't say that.

Q. -- BUT GIVEN WHAT YOU WENT THROUGH TO HELP THEM I WOULD THINK --

A. Well, I have a lot of Jewish friends now through this thing, but I also had a Jewish man call me a Catholic bitch and all.

Q. OBVIOUSLY HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT YOU WENT THROUGH.

A. Yes, he did. So don't put that. It's too

much prejudice.

Q. BUT BASICALLY YOU BELIEVE IN --

A. I have no feelings whatsoever one way or another about losing my family. I believe that -- sometimes I feel like, what's going to happen to me when I'm old and can't take care of myself and can't earn a living? Then I wish the Nazis would give me back my family and my home.

But I think about it once in a while, and it hurts more as I get older because I've never experienced uncles, aunts, fathers, mothers. And if you were to sit here and say, "Okay, Yanina, I have to leave now because my family is waiting, this is Easter, you know," I would feel terrible pain after you leave because you said the word "family" and I didn't have any.

Q. I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN ANSWER THIS QUESTION, BUT WOULD YOU DO IT AGAIN?

A. Yes. We would do -- I understand my father. Yes, we would do it again, because the ones that talk, don't do, but the ones that do, don't talk. We just automatically help, automatically. If somebody fell on the street, I would automatically run up to them and help them. It's something you do instantaneously and you don't plan.

And I probably would, yes. It's just a thing in my soul to help another soul. Yes, I would help.

Q. OKAY. THANK YOU.

A. Without thinking about consequences.