

-TITLE-ZDENKA LEVY
-I_DATE-MARCH 25, 1990
-SOURCE-SAN FRANCISCO ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-IMAGE_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-DURATION-2 HOURS 15 MINUTES
-LANGUAGES-
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-

1:00:00 Zdenka was born in September of 1925 in Zagreb, Yugoslavia where she lived with her parents. Their family name was Baum. Her mother was from Budapest, Hungary. Both parents were Jewish. She had one older brother. In Zagreb, Jewish children went to a Jewish elementary school for four years and then to a regular junior high school. There was a large Jewish population in Zagreb.

1:02:00 Zdenka personally never encountered anti-Semitism. Her father was an industrialist; he owned a factory in Zagreb which produced metal furniture including hospital beds.

1:02:25 Zdenka's parents were not orthodox, but the one temple in Zagreb was orthodox. This temple was later destroyed by the Nazis. Zdenka remembers singing in the choir as a child. The Baums did not keep a kosher home. Zdenka remembers the Jews as being somewhat integrated, however they socialized mainly within the Jewish community.

1:03:55 They lived very comfortably until the Germans invaded on April 6, 1941. Zdenka remembers shelling of the town followed by the entrance of troops. She remembers the first few weeks of German occupation when German soldiers would come to the Baum's home to eat. There were even soldiers housed in their home.

1:04:40 After a month or two, decrees began to appear in the newspapers. First, all the Jews were to report to a gathering place to receive the star of David. A week later, a second decree was issued expelling Jewish children from school. Soon all Jews from certain parts of the city had to move to a sort of ghetto established in the northern part of the city. "All the Jews could not live beyond a certain street.

1:06:15 It did not occur to Zdenka's parents to flee, although Jews from Germany had been coming to Yugoslavia. "We did not know of any atrocities...Kristalnacht...the tragedy did not impress us at all, we did not know of it." However, Zdenka remembers that some families did leave for Palestine at this time.

1:08:00 Both of Zdenka's parents were Zionists, but her mother moreso. Her mother was a prominent member of the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO). Her father was too involved in Yugoslavia for the family to leave. They had a large family, all of whom, including her mother's relations from Hungary lived in Yugoslavia.

1:09s40 They were moved by the Germans to a small apartment. "It was dreadful to think that we were so naive." They suspected that they would be taken to labor camps and slept with their knapsacks so that they would be ready to go when the Germans came for them.

1:10:15 Another decree was issued that all Jewish boys were to gather at a certain place to be taken to a labor camp. Her brother did not go, but many of their friends did. They were never heard from again. Some boys refused to gather and thereby escaped, but "the majority did go, like lambs, like sheep. Zjenka heard later that they were transported to the town of Jacobo(ph) and were shot.

1:12:00 A knock came at the door of the Baum's apartment and two German officers appeared, asking Zjenka's parents to go with them. Her brother had a wooden leg, she reflected later that his handicap may have saved his life. Her father was a member of B'nai B'rith; members of B'nai B'rith and their families were the first group to be gathered and deported. She remembers spending one night sleeping on straw in a gathering place. The next day, her aunt and brother came. Her aunt was waving a sheet of paper. It was a petition from the workers in her father's factory who said they needed him to help make hospital beds. On this account, the family was released, but they still did not flee. The group of B'nai B'rith people was deported and never returned. Her father continued to run the furniture factory, although she is unsure whether or not he still maintained ownership.

1:15:00 German soldiers took her father away during the night to Yasenovits (ph), the worst concentration camp in Yugoslavla. From there, very few people came back alive. Many weeks later her father was released, 80 pounds lighter, much weaker and with three frozen fingers. He had seen many friends die. The prisoners there were not gassed, a few were shot but many died from exposure. The camp was run by Yugoslavian people.

1:17:30 Only after her father's return from the horrible camp did they wake up and decide to flee. They found connections to smuggle them to take them to Italy. These "connections" were not members of the underground, but rather opportunists who smuggled refugees for a price. The only valuables they had been able to take were her mother's jewelry and only this jewelry was able to save them; with it they bought food and false documents. Her brother managed to come along with them, but the rest of the family remained in Yugoslavia. They were later taken to camps in Germany where they all died.

Only two aunts remained, one who joined the resistance and the other who had earlier rescued them from the waiting area. This second aunt had somehow managed to avoid being listed as an active Jewess, probably because of her earlier marriage to a gentile. Eleven members of Zdenka's family died, and she never had news of any of them during the war.

1:22:50 Zdenka and her parents and brother were fortunate because they had false papers by the time they reached the Italian border. Her parents sent Zdenka and her brother across first. Her passport photo looked nothing like her, but she assumed that the border guards must also have been bribed. Her parents had purchased false identification from Yugoslav smugglers. The two of them entered Trieste and went to the Jewish Community Center. Refugees from all over were sleeping there on mattresses and straw. Since their parents had given them some money, her brother wanted to get a room someplace else. They spent three or four days in this room before Italian authorities found them and took them to jail. She was in the women's prison but was somehow able to communicate with her brother. They stayed in jail for twelve days before members of the Jewish community came and had them released and reunited them with their parents at the Jewish Community Center.

1:26:30 The other women in the prison were mostly from families of Yugoslav partisans. There was one other Jewish woman and some criminals. Zdenka was not allowed out of the cell for twelve days. She attributes her family's decision to go to Italy to their knowledge that "the Italian government took in refugees from other countries." The Yugoslavian refugees in New York sent a letter of recognition to the Italian government five or six years ago to thank them for their actions during the war.

1:28:30 The family was again rounded up and sent to Feramonte (ph), the only concentration camp in Italy for eighteen months. The camp had an Italian director and Italian police, but apart from the daily roll call, Zdenka remembers that the inmates ran the camp largely by themselves. They set up schools and had bar mitzvas and weddings. The camp looked like an American Army fort but it had barbed wire around it. There were barracks for the inmates and some houses for the director and the police. There were guard posts around the perimeter and a gate; sick prisoners were allowed to be taken to a nearby hospital, but barring these instances the gate was kept closed.

1:30:15 They did not have much food, but they used her mother's jewelry to buy turkeys from the inhabitants of the surrounding area. They had apartments in the barracks with two bedrooms and a kitchenette equipped with an electric stove. There was a basin outside for washing laundry, but there was no hot water. There were several thousand people at the camp, and not only Jewish people. There were many Yugoslavs, Russians, Poles and Czechs. The boys formed soccer teams and Zdenka remembers playing

volleyball.

1:32:30 Allied forces, mostly British, came in 1943 and liberated the camp. The prisoners were relocated. This was the only concentration camp in Italy that Zdenka was aware of; most prisoners there were placed in "liberal confinement" which was almost like house arrest in little villages established for the purpose.

1:34:30 When she was initially captured by the Italian authorities Zdenka remembers that they stopped overnight in Rome and then were taken by train to the camp by two Italian government agents. She thinks they could have escaped, but the agents were polite and it did not occur to her at the time. At the camp she received daily lessons in Italian and geography from an Italian professor she met there.

1:36:00 The Baum's spoke Serbo-croatian at home, but Zdenka's first language was German because of her nanny. Later she learned to speak Italian. In Zagreb, nobody spoke Yiddish.

1:38:00 In the camp many of the prisoners formed their futures. Zdenka met her first husband there. Her brother also met his wife. Zdenka's first husband was a Russian doctor to whom she was married shortly after the liberation by a refugee rabbi (1944). They borrowed clothes for the wedding and villagers brought flowers for her bouquet.

1:40:30 Soon they heard that the United States would permit 1,000 refugees to come there. They put themselves on the list and sat with their fingers crossed. Her husband worked as a physician for the British forces and Zdenka acted as a nurse inoculating children.

1:42:45 Zdenka's mother had the foresight to pack all of their real identification papers. "My mother, in our family, was definitely the driving force...strong, resourceful, dedicated, reliable...a fantastic person."

1:43:15 982 refugees eventually embarked for the U.S. Zdenka does not know why the number was 982. Those on the list were sent to a gathering place. They had to sign a paper saying that they would return to Europe after the war. Zdenka did not know where they would return to since their homes and livelihoods had been taken. They were sent to Naples where they boarded a boat. It was a medical ship called the Henry Gibbons returning injured soldiers to the U.S. and it was one of several in a convoy. Her husband was designated as the doctor for the refugees aboard the ship and they were given a cabin while all the other refugees had to sleep in bunks. Zdenka remembers that it was not a pleasant trip. The Germans tried to bombard the boat and Zdenka remembers having to black out the lights, but they escaped the bombs and nothing happened. They spent fourteen days at sea before arriving in New York on August 4, 1944.

1:46:15 Life magazine reporters were there at the docks when they arrived and followed them wherever they were going. They were taken by train to Fort Ontario in upstate New York.

1:48:15 On the boat, Zdenka remembers, wounded American soldiers would wave to the refugees from their part of the ship and throw sweets to the children. At Fort Ontario they were not allowed outside and there was wire around the camp. The director of the camp was named Joe Smart. Zdenka's husband worked in the hospital and she worked as a gym teacher. All those who worked were paid a salary of eighteen dollars a month. "We ran the camp." There were marriages and parties here too. Zdenka's mother worked as a cook and her father was on the board of directors of the camp which made policy decisions. Two books have been written about the refugees there: Haven by Ruth Gruber, an American social worker who accompanied them on the boat from Naples to New York, and Token Refuge by Shirley Lawrenstein. A film called Safe Haven was also made ... war. Interviewed because he spoke fluent English. Her brother served as camp interpreter and assistant to the camp director.

1:53:15 Mrs. Roosevelt came to visit the camp and was instrumental in getting the children to be able to go to area schools. The refugees received daily English lessons in the evenings and this is when Zdenka perfected her English.

1:54:15 Zdenka's father's health had been failing since his stay at the first camp in Yugoslavia. There were one or two deaths at Fort Ontario and the health of many of the refugees was poor but the seriously ill were taken to the hospital in Syracuse. Zdenka remembers being treated quite well but not knowing what the future had in store for her. In 1945, the war ended and they had no place to go. The American Jewish community petitioned the Congress which enacted legislation allowing them to stay in the United States. They were taken into Canada to re-enter the U.S. as legal immigrants.

1:57:30 They were asked where they wanted to go. Many had families in the U.S. A list of the refugees names was printed in several newspapers and many Americans began to write to them and to send much appreciated clothing and other goods. An American doctor with the same last name as Zdenka's husband wrote to inquire if they were related. Zdenka wrote him that they were not but he said he did not care and was instrumental in getting her husband a job in Newark as a resident in a hospital. Her parents went to New York City. Zdenka had a baby girl in Newark. Zdenka and her husband then moved to Maryland. Her husband would have to have gone to school for six more years in the U.S. to have

resumed his specialty of surgery, but was allowed to practice medicine as a psychiatrist in a mental institution. Later they moved to D.C. Zjenka's Husband opened a private practice and she worked as his assistant. His brothers and sisters lived in Israel, and he wanted to move there to join them. They began to visit Israel every couple of years. Then he became ill and they went to live in Israel in 1966.

2:02:00 They returned to the U.S. for their daughter's wedding and to sell their house, but Zjenka's husband died there. Zjenka brought him back to Israel to be buried and then moved back to the U.S.

2:03:00 Both of Zjenka's children are U.S. citizens. They have both heard the story of their parents' and grandparents' war experiences many times. Zjenka and her family were always very open with them. Zjenka's son has made a study of the Holocaust. Despite their background, Zjenka's children do not feel different from other people.

2:06:00 Zjenka remarried a man who was a patient of her first husband on the boat from Italy to the U.S. Her second husband remembered her as a nurse in a clinic on the boat and when he heard she had become a widow he looked her up. Zjenka's mother, father and brother have all died.

2:10:00 Zjenka says "I think that we should not take our freedoms for granted" She warns us to always be wary that history could repeat itself. "I am quite frightened of what might happen." She has always felt close to Judaism, she has been to Israel twelve times and worked in a kibbutz. She plans to visit Israel again this year. As a child she remembers placing money in a little blue box every shabbat and being very aware of Palestine. She believes in a supreme being, although in some desperate moments, she believed that there was no God watching over her.

2:14:45 Her advice to the future generations is to preserve their Jewishness. They should be proud to be Jews. She remembers parading in Yugoslavia as a child when she had to wear the stars of David. She has a picture of her family wearing the stars. They were always proud.