

## Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

**Name of interviewee:** Brandstetter, Marie

**Date of interview:** 2/7/2001

**Summary:** Marie was born Mania Zelwer on 1-20-1933 in Kalisz, Poland. Her father's name was Haim Luzer Zelwer, mother Eta Messer. Younger brother Sam and half sister Helene Litwak Gordon.

Her family owned bus companies and was well off. She lived a happy life with close family members and many aunts and uncles in an Orthodox home.

Marie remembers hearing about Hitler's invasion of Poland over the radio in September of 1938. Her father was drafted, and she remembers telling him not to go, but that he was too proud to desert, and he thought that if he didn't join the Polish army he'd eventually be drafted into the German army. He died in Treblinka in August of 1942.

After the invasion, her mother, brother, aunt, and Marie fled Poland for Russia, in an attempt to escape Nazi occupation. They traveled across the Soviet Union, oftentimes near freezing and starvation. They struggled to find refuge in small towns. Her mother worked in a labor camp in Siberia, and in 1944, before the war ended, the three were reunited with one of Marie's aunts and uncles. The family lived together for a while, but when Marie's mother got ill, her aunt sent Marie and her brother to a kibbutz, with the idea that the two would eventually emigrate to Palestine.

Marie's mother searched for her children, and prevented their emigration when she showed up at the displaced persons camp from which they were preparing to leave. The three lived in a DP camp with relatives, and Marie went to school, studying languages and nursing. When Marie's mother announced she was getting married, Marie refused to remain with the family, out of anger at what she perceived as her mother's attempt to replace her father with another man. Marie signed up for passage to Palestine on the Exodus, and she participated in the onboard resistance when British soldiers boarded the ship and ordered the refugees to disembark so they could return to Europe. Marie returned to her family, and stayed with them until visas came through for Marie and her brother to travel to the U.S.

An uncle sponsored Marie and her brother, who died shortly after they arrived in San Francisco in June of 1950. The two lived in Homewood Terrace. Marie didn't enjoy Homewood Terrace, and found a nursing job as soon as she turned 17, less than a year after her arrival. She met her husband, whose family owned a shoe store, in the early 1950s, and the two were married in 1953. Marie's mother, stepfather and half-sister immigrated to San Francisco before the

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wedding, and the family remained in the Bay Area.

All her family died in Treblinka, except the few who emigrated to Russia in 1940. Marie is a regular speaker in local schools, and in 1995 published her memoir, "Mania's Angel: My Life Story."