

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Field, Julia

Date of interview: 3/3 & 3/31/1990

Summary: (Deceased 2/1997.)

Julia was born in Csaroda, Hungary. She explained that Hungary was an early ally of Germany in WWII, due to territorial losses imposed by the Treaty of Versailles after WWI. Her father left in 1938 to visit relatives in the U.S., leaving behind Julia, her mother and two younger siblings. In August 1939, her father had secured arrangements for the family to join him in the U.S., but war broke out in early September, and they were unable to leave. She could, however, still communicate with her father until "Pearl Harbor."

Julia observed that it was bad in Hungary for Jews. Their rights were slowly being denied and replaced with restrictions enforced by the Hungarians, who carried out Hitler's race laws vigorously. But, according to Julia, it was not until Germany started to lose the war that conditions severely worsened. In March 1944, Germany occupied Hungary, and troops entered her town, leading to increased restrictions. She described Passover as when her life changed forever, beginning with her little brother's rushing into her home, announcing: "the Germans are here." She was in her teens at the time. On Passover, her mother was forced to house and feed four German soldiers. Julia and her sister were sent to a neighbor's for safety. About a week later, reunited with her mother, Julia and her family, together with all other Jews, had to assemble in town to receive relocation orders. Sometime later, they were marched for about two days to another town, stopping ultimately at a former brick factory. There they stayed for several weeks in an uncovered building with thousands of other Jews from surrounding communities. They were forced to surrender all of their money and possessions. On May 20, 1944, they were loaded onto cattle cars, and told they were going south to work. Conditions in the cattle car were very bad. She knew from the terrain they were not headed south; their fate was unknown.

Julia ultimately arrived at a place she later discovered was Auschwitz, where she survived for the next eight months. She described the unloading of the cattle cars, separation from her mother and siblings, being kicked by a German SS officer - later discovering this was Dr. Mengele, entering the bathhouse, disrobing, showering and being shaved, standing naked in front of German soldiers, and being issued prisoner's clothing. In the barracks, she learned of her whereabouts, but dismissed talk of exterminations. She discussed the sleeping arrangements in the barracks; there were too few bunks for everybody to sleep at the same time, among other difficulties.

After two weeks, Julia was tattooed and assigned to work in the "Canada" section, sorting the possessions of arriving prisoners. She said the Germans

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referred to this as the "Circus," which she described as a tented area. Julia quickly discovered the function of the camp, having witnessed people lined up to enter one of the four crematoria, which she passed on the way to her work everyday. She had seen her mother and sister in one of these lines. Further details of the gassing and chimneys, in Birkenau, she learned from another prisoner. She described her thoughts at the time, how, after realizing what happened to her family, she became numb to her surroundings, like a robot or dead, withdrawn. She ceased communicating and was "going mad." Whatever pulled her through, she attributed to her knowledge that her father was alive in the U.S., and her brother too might be alive. She attempted to explain the normality or casualness of routine life there: the daily roll calls; barracks conditions; beatings; starvation and dehydration; the transports; the selections; and, work meant survival. Other recalled events she witnessed or experienced included an encounter with Dr. Mengele making selections involving her cousins in the bathhouse, execution of escapees, suicide by electrical fence, a crematorium on fire (sabotage), Germans celebrating Christmas, and her unexpected return, alive, from a stay in the hospital with her friend.

As the transports slowed and fewer prisoners with possessions arrived, there was nothing to sort. Workers were shipped to Germany, and the remaining healthy ones were concentrated in other areas of the camp. Julia was relocated and reassigned to making what she possibly described as bomb fuses, but was uncertain. Towards the very end, before liberation, the transports had stopped, and the Germans were fleeing, taking many prisoners with them to Germany. The fence was no longer electrified, enabling access to other parts of the camp, but Germans still remained, so she stayed put for a while.

The Russians liberated Julia, at about age 18, on December 5, 1944. But, they didn't stay long, lending to fear of returning Germans. She described the death of a good friend in the barracks, at liberation; mentioning that many died in the barracks around this time, only guessing as to an explanation.

Days later, she, her friend Sarah and possibly others exited the camp on foot, and walked into the neighboring town of Auschwitz. For the next several days, they traveled, ultimately by horse carriage, to Krakow in search of other surviving Jews, staying overnight at several farmhouses along the way. Thereafter, Julia went to Tarnobrzeg(?) and then by train to Slovakia, unable to return home because Hungary was then still at war. She witnessed along the way the death and destruction of war that ended only days earlier, and described later entanglements with Russian soldiers, who threatened to send her to labor and east for reasons unknown, or to be shot. She stopped at the summit of the Carpathian Mountains, observing this was the same route she passed on her way to Auschwitz.

Julia eventually returned to her hometown. But, nothing there was the same...it was empty, and realizing that her brother was dead and her losses were so

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great, she at first “didn’t want to live.” She relocated to Budapest, where she reconnected with her father via telegram. She stated that “nobody was the same,” as his life too had changed. Although she wanted to go to Palestine, her duty was to her father in the U.S. She met and married her husband in Budapest, and spent the duration in a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Germany, avoiding Hungary - then under Russian occupation, until emigrating to the U.S. in 1948. She was unable to communicate her feelings of rejoining her father after the 10 years of separation.