

-TITLE-MIRIAM MICHAELIS
-I_DATE-4/2/89
-SOURCE-SAN FRANCISCO HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-IMAGE_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-DURATION-
-LANGUAGES-
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-
Tape 1

0:00:17 Born in Dusseldorf, Germany, 1928, Miriam was the youngest of three sisters, daughter of a mechanical engineer. She grew up in a Jewish community, and led a normal, happy life.

0:00:50 Though Miriam had been forced to go to a Jewish school for a year before Kristallnacht, she didn't think anything was wrong until November 9, 1938. She remembers Nazis broke into her apartment and broke everything. She was shocked. She and her sister hid upstairs. The Nazis arrested her father and she did not see him again until she came to the U.S.

0:03:06 While her mother and older sister stayed behind to sell the family's possession, Miriam went with her younger sister on a children's transport to Holland to a children's home, (it was like a nunnery). The nunnery had about 100 Jewish German children, there was some school. They found out their father had gone to Cuba after her mother had gotten him out of the concentration camp.

0:06:17 In May, Miriam and her middle sister went by train to France, where they met their mother and oldest sister. They boarded the St. Louis, a ship bound for Cuba, but the ship couldn't land when it got to the island. The Germans were in cahoots with the Cubans to generate propaganda that Jews weren't wanted anywhere. The U.S. wouldn't let them in, the country only gave a small amount of money to each passenger. In Cuba, their father rowed out next to the ship in a small boat but could not board to see them.

0:08:35 Miriam, her mother and two sisters were let off in Holland and interned. They stayed in a refugee camp for a few months in 1939, because they had no place else to go. When Germany invaded Holland, the whole camp was deported. Miriam's mother delayed the family's deportation by saying her husband was an American citizen, but they were eventually sent to Bergen-Belsen.

0:10:18 In Bergen Belsen, Miriam worked in a silk worm factory and cut apart uniforms. She felt like a number. She was together with her family until April, when the Germans tried to move the camp because it was surrounded by Allied forces. They were liberated in Hilleslaben (ph) while the train was on the way to Auschwitz.

0:11:37 Miriam describes her daily routine at Bergen-Belsen. Everyday, the same thing: in the morning, you were counted, the Germans took you to the factory to work, and then you came back at night. She did this for about sixteen months. She didn't think or hope in the camp, she was very young.

0:12:33 Miriam's mother died of starvation in the camp, when she was about fifty years old. Miriam left for work in the morning and when she came home at night, the Germans had taken her mother away.

0:14:44 Miriam describes how her extended family dispersed: before the war, some went to Shanghai, some to South America, where ever would take them. She says that things went so fast. She was a child and could hardly keep up.

0:16:10 Miriam says the people in the camps knew the war was coming to an end when planes flew over Bergen-Belsen. They heard gossip, and sometimes shooting, but were too busy with work to think about it too much. She was never beaten and never saw anyone else beaten; most people followed the rules and avoided trouble.

0:17:37 On the train from Bergen-belsen to Aushwitz, Miriam saw German soldiers taking off their uniforms and running away in their underwear. She knew then that the English and Americans were very close and that the time in concentration camp was over. The British boarded the train, told them Roosevelt had died the day before. The British cleaned them up, gave them food, put them into a hospital near Haldensbeben.

0:20:14 Miriam's family went back to Holland, where the Jewish Committee placed the children with different families until they found out through the Red Cross that their father was alive in the U.S. They then went through Sweden, and finally got passage to New York. Miriam says it was odd to go back to a normal life: three meals a day, bed at a certain time, ect.

0:22:15 Miriam had to go to work and found a job making hats. She made a lot of friends and says this country was good to her. She is not uncomfortable talking about her war experience, she says, she is one of the lucky ones who are here. She says she learned to be a survivor. That is what everybody should learn from the war: that terrible things can happen.

0:23:41 Miriam's family was very religious; her mother even refused to eat the meat in the camp even though she was starving. She says she still believes in God and is grateful and has to give thanks for the good things every day. At first, she was haunted by memories of the camps, but not she has too many good things in her life, like her family, to dwell on it. She says she learned to appreciate little things, like nature.

0:24:40 Miriam says the worst part of her experience was coming back to normal life: taking a shower, having real cloths. Even to see flowers was a big adjustment. She and her sister were affected differently, she is very grateful and intimates her sisters may be a bit bitter. She insists that she only thinks about the good parts: that she is here, that she has a wonderful family. Now she wants to help others. She taught her children to appreciate every day, and that family is very important.

0:29:43 Miriam says she doesn't know why she doesn't feel the same pain and bitterness many other survivors do. She says it is part, it happened but not it is over. Sure, remember, but take day by day and enjoy.

0:31:14 Miriam says the American army gave her papers after the liberation: a piece of identification paper that she had to get stamped before taking a shower once a week all sorts of passports that say she is Jewish She wants to donate these to the museum to show that the holocaust really happened, because some people still don't believe. They may also be useful to scholars. She's usually not attached to things but hung onto these papers because she knew they would be important. The books have pictures of the camps.

0:33:30 Miriam says there is no need for her to go back to Dusseldorf. They threw her out and she asks why would she want to go back.

0:34:06 When asked if there is something she wants to say, she tells about how wonderful the American soldiers were when they liberated the train, and how all the German soldiers ran away. When she runs into friends from the camps, they don't talk about the camp but about what happened afterward, about putting the families back together.

0:36:47 A slice of bread, soups and water were the only foods Miriam lived on in the camp. She didn't notice days, or holidays. She says she has to remember she is a Jew, a lot of people forgot and that's a problem. She says it was easy to come back to practicing the religion, celebrating holidays.

0:39:41 Miriam says she feels no particular bond with her sister because of the camps. Everybody went his or her own way for work. then went straight to bed. She was not aware of any resistance. She says the situation in the camp made her stronger, and that you have to hope.

0:42:47 Miriam says she will tell her grandchildren to always remember that they are Jews.

0:44:13 In the camp, one year, two years, didn't matter, everyday was the same and you didn't think of the day before or the day after. The work was not very hard but it was dirty and boring and Miriam was being watched constantly. She says you become like a machine. All ages were mixed in together.

0:45:39 Miriam stressed that the Holocaust really happened. There are a lot of survivors but many can't talk about it.

0:47:02 Miriam remembers when she arrived at Bergen-Belsen: the train stopped, there was not one sign. They had to drop off all their belongings and start marching. She didn't know if Bergen-Belsen was an extermination camp or not. Everybody was speechless when they saw all the soldiers with dogs and riffles. Miriam did not get a number on her arm because her mother said her father was an American citizen and the Germans thought her family could be exchanged for German prisoners, but somehow, it didn't go through.

0:49:36 Miriam says other people can't even visualize life in the concentration camp. You had set times to go to the bathroom, you were programmed to do everything at set times. You ate off your lap with a tin cup. There were no chairs. There was no laundry, there was no soap. You lived like a number.

0:52:09 Sometimes, when the Germans looked away, Miriam threw some of her work in the boiler to burn. This she describes as "making some fun". She rebelled, in a small way, sometimes just for a little difference. She never looked the Germans in the eye.

0:54:42 Miriam says she became very independent. She was too young to think about future beyond the concentration camp. Her family gave her hope, especially her father, because he was in Cuba. They were waiting for the American planes to come in.

0:56:37 In Holland, after the liberation, Miriam lived with a very nice catholic family. They dressed her, fed her, treated her wonderfully. She wrote to them until they passed away.

0:57:38 Miriam says she hopes she can help someone in the same way under different circumstances. She recently quit working to devote her time to volunteer work.
.END.