

## Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

**Name of interviewee:** Cywinska, Yanina

**Date of interview:** 10/17/1991, 2/1, 2/8 & 3/8/1993

**Summary:** Yanina Cywinska was born on October 28, 1929. She lived with her parents, Wladyslaw and Ludwika, and her brother Theodor who was one year older. Her family was from the Ukraine, and Yanina remembers traveling a lot as a child; they lived mostly in and around Warsaw, Poland. She was put into ballet school for a while, which she loved. Yanina's family was Catholic. Her father had Jewish friends and always taught his children that they were not to look down on Jews or ever make an anti-Semitic comment. He was a doctor and was asked by the Nazis, once they had invaded Poland, to perform some medical experiments on Jewish twins. He refused, and was put in jail for a short period. When the Warsaw Ghetto was constructed in 1939 and it soon became evident that the Jewish residents of the ghetto were suffering, Yanina's father realized he had a moral obligation to help them. He went to his church and asked his priest for support and resources, but the priest refused. Wladyslaw was determined to make a difference, however, and he began to work with the underground. The entire family got involved. This meant that Yanina and her brother made several trips a day through tunnels and sewer lines into and out of the ghetto. They carried ammunition, jewelry and furs for the black market, medicine, and poison.

Yanina remembers her father telling his children that if they were caught, they would be shot; however, at the time she did not comprehend what that meant. Throughout Warsaw she witnessed executions and other violence, but she was young and she did what her father told her. There were many other people working in the underground. They had various tunnels that they used to get in and out of the ghetto, and one day (in 1939, Yanina says) there were Gestapo waiting for them at the opening of the tunnel. They were arrested and sent to a detention center. There, Yanina was picked to dig ditches and was taken out in the middle of the night with other people. The Nazis took them out into the forest, where they dug ditches and then were lined up and shot. Yanina survived because she was behind another woman, and she fell into the pit and pretended to be dead. After climbing out later, she hid in a haystack, where a farmer found her. At this point, Yanina still did not understand about the "Jewish problem" and was confused when the farmer yelled, "Are you a Jew? Are you a Jew?" This was the first time she had an inkling that being a Jew meant that you were different from other people. The farmer took her back to the detention center and she was reunited with her parents.

Yanina's parents arranged for an aunt, Stasha, to pay the Gestapo and get Yanina and her brother out of the detention center. Stasha took them to her home, where Yanina describes being beaten and abused by her aunt for being a "Jew-lover." Yanina's brother ran away, but Yanina was kept to work as a

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servant for her aunt. Eventually, she ended up homeless, and wandered around the streets of Warsaw for a while. She describes sleeping in alleys and going through garbage cans for food. She was about ten years old.

A while later, she made her way back to the detention center to look for her parents. A couple that she did not know, who were looking for their daughter at the center, took her home and she recuperated for a few weeks. Then they took her back to the detention center, where she was reunited with her parents. Soon thereafter the prisoners were put into cattle cars and taken to Auschwitz. Many died during the journey.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, they were told to strip and put into the gas chambers. Yanina describes this experience; the next thing she remembers is being given mouth to mouth by another woman prisoner, who told her to be quiet.

Miraculously, she had survived the gas chambers. She was given a uniform, her head was shaved and she was tattooed with a number. Yanina describes her time at Auschwitz. She worked in various places, including a factory that produced products made from human bodies (such as soap and lampshades), a soup kitchen, in the labs where doctors were conducting horrific medical experiments, and in the crematorium. It should be noted that it is generally thought that only men worked in the Sonderkommando doing the jobs that Yanina said she did, such as putting the new arrivals into the gas chambers.

Yanina says she spent her time at Auschwitz in a dream world. She pretended she was in ballet school and was constantly dancing and singing to herself. She was extremely traumatized by her experiences and describes the effects that they had on her. As the Germans began to lose the war and the Allied forces approached, she was forced on a death march to Dachau. It should be noted that I could not find any other description of a march from Auschwitz to Dachau. When she arrived at Dachau, Yanina describes being blindfolded and lined up against a wall to be executed. However, instead of being shot, her blindfold was pulled off by a Japanese-American soldier a few moments later - the Americans had liberated the camp.

After the war, Yanina stayed in a displaced persons camp for a while, where she was raped and impregnated by a soldier. She describes the difficulties she has had overcoming her experiences and the loss of her family. She had two abusive marriages after the war and was not able to achieve happiness until she met her third husband. She has no relationship with her daughter, who was born soon after Yanina was raped. She describes her fear, her hate, her anger, her nonexistent self-esteem, her intuitive nature, the way she gave up on God, and her long recovery from her traumatic experiences.