

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Cesana, Nellie

Date of interview: 2/28/1991, 12/3/1993 & 2/18/1994

Summary: Nelly Cesana was born Nelly Zeigler on September 29, 1935, in Warsaw, Poland. She lived with her parents, Josef and Paula, and her brother, Marian (nicknamed Mietek), who was nine years older than she. Nelly's entire extended family lived in Warsaw - this included four aunts and an uncle on her mother's side, one aunt on her father's side, grandparents, and various cousins. Her father's father was religious and would pray often (especially in the ghetto), but her parents were not very religious.

Since she was so young, some of Nelly's first memories are the sounds of war. In 1939 the Germans bombed Warsaw, and she remembers shrapnel flying into the apartment where the family lived. By 1941, the ghetto had been constructed and Nelly and her family were living behind the wall. Her brother, when he was about fifteen, sold his bar mitzvah suit and bought himself a fake Polish ID. He was able to get out of the ghetto and lived on "the other side." Nelly and her parents had some contact with him, and he would occasionally come into the ghetto with food for the family.

Nelly and her mother survived the blockades and roundups by hiding. She talks about moving almost every day and hiding whenever she heard Germans coming. Several times, she and her mother were almost caught; Nelly describes several incidents, including the time when her father was taken away, in which it was simply luck that they were not caught. She also describes losing her childhood to the hunger and fear of the ghetto, and how much she longed for other children to play with and enough to eat. Nelly's mother was the one who kept her safe, and made sure they always were able to steal some food. By the end of 1942, the ghetto was getting emptier and emptier. There was very little food. Nelly's mother was able to get a letter to her brother, who was still outside working in the Polish underground. Marian came to them and told them he would devise a way to get them out of the ghetto, so they would not starve or get sent to a camp. He also gave Nelly's mother fake papers and a bible to study. She learned an entire (Christian) life history that he gave her.

Nelly escaped the ghetto one night by climbing over the wall. Her brother had arranged for men inside the ghetto to help her climb up the ladder, and he was waiting on the other side. Her mother followed several days later (Nelly describes a close call with a bribed Polish policeman taking her mother into the station but then letting her go). Marian decided that his mother and sister would be safer "in the lion's mouth", so he sent them to Germany with other Polish volunteer workers. Nelly's new name was Stanisława Zugayska. Her brother could not go with them because the physical examination before getting on the

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train would have revealed he was circumcised.

When they arrived in Germany, Nelly's mother was able to get a job on a farm because of her excellent German. They moved to a beautiful town, near Kitzin (sp?), where they lived as Mr. and Mrs. Mirau's servants. Nelly was allowed a lot of freedom, and after ghetto life she loved the new world she was able to explore. She describes her fascination with nature, which has lasted her whole life. She spent her time swimming in the river and exploring the countryside. She was lonely, but she felt safe. Neither she nor her mother ever mentioned to anyone in Germany, even after their liberation, that they were Jewish. She provides a very interesting description of her two and a half years on the farm, and says it was during this time that she was able to get some of her childhood back.

They received letters from Nelly's brother throughout this time. He wrote that there were no Jews left in Warsaw. One day, instead of a letter from Marian, they got a letter from a man named Arthur who told them that Marian had been killed in action (at the age of seventeen). Arthur told them he had arranged for Marian's burial and had promised him that he would take care of his mother and sister. They had some correspondence with Arthur but never met him (he was caught and killed later on). Nelly's mother was devastated by the death of her son and never really recovered - although she did eventually come to terms with it.

As the war came to an end, the air raids became more frequent. In April of 1945 the Russians arrived. Nelly describes the commotion and turmoil of their liberation. After some time, Nelly and her mother went back to Poland to look for survivors. Warsaw was completely demolished, and they could not find any family. Finally they were told of an office where survivors were going to meet each other and search for relatives. After the war, Nelly says, friends became like family. They found two of Nelly's cousins who had survived.

Anti-Semitism was still rampant in Poland after the war, and Nelly had a very hard time adjusting, especially since she had had no education up to this point. Eventually a Jewish community formed near Breslau and Reichenbach, and Nelly started to go to school. Her mother met a man named Leo Tenenbaum and the two married. Leo had lost his wife and children in Auschwitz. He became a devoted and wonderful father to Nelly. In 1950, the family moved to Israel. This was where Nelly says she finally felt at home, although it was difficult for her because she did not know the language. Her parents never regretted moving to Israel, even though times were tough. Nelly eventually enrolled in an education and nursing program for immigrants. She worked at a hospital until 1961, when she married Amadeo Cesana, an Italian Jewish man. He moved to the United States and joined the army, and this way was able to get his family (by this time the couple had one son, Josef) to America. In 1967 her parents came to live with them. Nelly had another son, Adrian. After 25 years, she and Amadeo divorced. Nelly now lives in Northern California.

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Nelly has talked about her experiences with her sons. She describes how she continues to see goodness and beauty in the world, and values life.