

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Barta, Anna

Date of interview: 5/17/2004 & 7/28/2004

Summary: Anna Barta was born Anna Székely on April 3, 1920. She lived with her parents, István and Rozsa Székely (her mother's maiden name was Fülöp). They lived in Debrecen, Hungary, which was a city of about 100,000 at the time. There was a fairly large Jewish population there, but in general it was very Protestant. Anna was an only child. Her father was an executive at an insurance company, and the family was not religious. When she was young, she would often visit her mother's parents, who had a farm in a village close by.

Anna went to a Jewish elementary school from ages 6 to 10, but after that she went to the Protestant gymnasium (high school) because it was the best one nearby and she wanted to be a doctor. Anna says she was quite idealistic, as many young people are, and she wanted to find a cure for tuberculosis because both of her father's parents died of it when he was very young. At high school, she was one of only seven Jewish girls, but there was not much anti-Semitism. Jewish students there received a separate Jewish religious education. She spoke Hungarian at home (no Yiddish) and learned French, German and Latin in school. She had both Jewish and non-Jewish friends; her father was very proud of Hungary and it was always clear to Anna that they were Hungarians first, Jews second. He was a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army during the first World War. The family celebrated holidays, but did not keep kosher. Anna was aware of anti-Semitism and describes how non-Jewish parents would tell their children, "if you don't behave, the Jew will come and get you!"

After high school, Anna started Medical school at the University. She was the only Jew there, and it was very difficult for her to get in. There was a sign on a gate in the campus that said, "Jews and Dogs Forbidden." For the first couple of days, none of the other students knew she was Jewish, but then one of Anna's classmates (who she had known for years) told them. It was 1938. Anna describes the annual "Jew-beating" on campus at the beginning of every school year. Many students beat up Jews, destroy property, etc. Anna had several friends who would warn her when these things were particularly bad, so she could stay in her room. One day, after the Jew-beating, she went to class. When she walked in, the rest of the class got up and walked out. This happened in each of her classes for a week, until she called the director of the school to complain. He told her to go back to class and that this behavior on the part of the professors and students was not acceptable. She went, and the professor told her to leave. Anna went to the deacon of the medical school; she was very upset. He called the professor and made sure that Anna was able to go back to class; the professor was even punished.

After she graduated, Anna began an internship at a hospital in a town in

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Hungary. She married in 1942, to a young military man whom she didn't love. She says she knew bad times were coming and he wanted to get married, so she married him to make him happy. Two months later, he was taken away to work in a labor camp, and she never saw him again. In 1944, Anna was put into a ghetto with her father-in-law and mother-in-law. She had no contact with her parents at this time - they were in a ghetto back in Debrecen. Anna and her in-laws were moved into the temple of the town. She says they had no idea of what was going to happen to them, and there was really no thought of escaping the ghetto. She had the opportunity to get out when a Polish doctor, who liked her a lot, was able to come and get her in an ambulance. However, since her father-in-law was the head of the ghetto, she knew he would get in trouble if she went missing, so she did not go.

They were in the ghetto for three to four weeks. Then they were taken to a station where they waited for a week; it was then that the rumors began to fly. Next came ten days in a cattle car to Auschwitz-Birkenau. When they arrived in Birkenau there was a selection by Dr. Mengele. Anna was sent to the right. This group of women was marched to Auschwitz the next day, where they were bathed, shaved, and given uniforms. Back in Birkenau, Camp C, they slept in an empty room on the floor because no bunks had been built yet. Anna describes extreme hunger, and especially thirst. Her female kapo was especially brutal. Several weeks later she met up with someone she knew, and she heard that her parents had been brought to Auschwitz in the most recent transport. They had not survived the journey, ten days of standing with no food or water.

Representatives from different factories came to the camp to select workers. Anna was chosen and put on a train to Langen Bilau, near Breslau. There she mainly worked cleaning, but she also was assigned to help sick women (she told the woman leader that she was almost a doctor). After about two weeks in this camp, she became ill with pneumonia and was in the hospital for five weeks. Langen Bilau was near Gross-Rosen, which had a small crematorium, and people who could not work were taken there. Anna was scheduled to go to the crematorium the next day when an SS supervisor came to inspect the hospital and began to talk to her. She told him she was almost a doctor, and claiming she was "the first honest Jew" he'd ever met, he offered her the position of being a doctor at a brand new camp called Mittelsteine. He sent her there, which saved her life, but she was still ill and had a hard time. However, at the new camp this supervisor arranged for her to be sent medicine and constructed a hospital building for her. The camp contained about three hundred Hungarian and Polish Jewish women. Anna describes this officer as a humane man who saved her life. She soon gained respect as a doctor, although she had not completed her education, because she performed surgeries on prisoners who needed it. She was able to help many people.

In April of 1945, the SS took over the camp and made half of the women - Anna included - move closer to the Russian front and dig trenches. They could tell the end of the war was coming, because there was not much to do. On May 7, the

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SS said they had to go meet the Americans; none of the Germans wanted to be met with Russian soldiers, so they moved towards the Americans. It was at this point that the SS men started being nice to the Jewish prisoners. They wanted to save themselves, because they knew the war was over and that they had lost.

Anna went to meet the Russians with flowers when they arrived, but they were so frightening that she ran away. Some British, French and New Zealand soldiers hid Anna and two of her friends as the Russians raped all the women they could find. They found a truck and headed west, and although Russians met them many times, they eventually made it to Dresden and then to an American camp. Anna says the destroyed city of Dresden was the worst thing she had ever seen, and when she saw German refugees - even soldiers - she pitied them so much she gave them some water. She wanted to go to a British camp (one British soldier was particularly decent and she was very impressed), but she could only get into the American one. Still, she wanted to go to England - not back to Hungary, and not to Israel.

From the camp, she met some other Hungarians who were planning to return to Hungary, and she decided to go with them. She wanted to go back and look for the Polish doctor with whom she had had a romance. Anna and several others managed to get back into Budapest, and she found the man, who was about to marry someone else. Instead of staying with him, as she'd thought she might, she went back to her hometown and took her last exam. She got two jobs, one at the Budapest Research Institute and another at the Cancer Institute. She got in contact with some of her more distant relatives and began dating one of her second cousins, George Barta, who was quite wealthy. Although she had two other suitors, she decided to marry her cousin in the fall of 1945.

By 1948, the Communists had taken over Hungary. The Bartas had two young sons, Ivan Andreas and László (Leslie) and wanted to leave; they managed to get to Austria, where they stayed for about two years. Anna would have preferred to then go to Brazil or Australia, but they left for the United States in January of 1951. Once in New York, they took a train to San Francisco. Anna got a job as a private nurse for Louis Bloch, a well-known businessman. Later she got an internship at Mount Zion hospital, and after one year passed the state boards. She joined the army and became a civilian doctor with the rank of captain. Her husband, who had not really worked back in Europe, worked very hard and they became quite successful.

Anna is now widowed and has two granddaughters. She is independent and says that Auschwitz taught her that she could only depend on herself, although she did receive help along the way. She visited various camps with her younger son and his family, which had a great impact upon Leslie; he became interested in her story for the first time. Anna has written down her story and gave a copy to each of her granddaughters. She says before the war, she was very idealistic - to this day, she feels no hate, only satisfaction that she survived.

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