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OLGA ISSENBERG

INTERVIEW WITH: OLGA ISSENBERG

INTERVIEWER:

PLACE:

TRANSCRIBER: Katherine E. Lauster

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 MS. ISSENBERG: I'm Olga Issenberg. My maiden
3 name was HIAM/A/WITZ and I was born in HER/MAN/OF/TSA
4 which is a suburb of Praha in Czechoslovakia.

5 We had moved in 1935. We moved to the KAR/PA/DEN
6 because danger started already with antisemitism in
7 Czechoslovak- -- in Slovakia.

8 THE INTERVIEWER: What were some of the signs of
9 antisemitism.

10 MS. ISSENBERG: At that particular time I was
11 just in school, elementary school, and the signs were
12 already -- elementary school -- that favoritism was
13 shown to the Christians and not to the Jews, and the
14 Jews were always scolded and always -- plus my
15 parents, who had a lumber factory, the employees were
16 already -- they were not too happy to be employed by a
17 Jew. So there were problems.

18 And then he -- my father had a couple of threats
19 during the night. They held knives over his head.
20 And they said, "You'll have to leave," leave the whole
21 thing and just leave home. So this was -- they left
22 Slovakia and they had built a house in the KAR/PA/DEN
23 where my mother's family comes from.

24 And there was -- that particular time in the
25 KAR/PA/DEN there was no danger yet. So you tried to
26 escape from one place, coming in from the other

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 place. Then the environment was about the same thing
3 as Slovakia, just we had to learn another --
4 additional language which was already Russian and --
5 because when I was brought up in Slovakia it was Czech
6 and Slovak. So the problem with studying the language
7 and speaking to employees or, you know, maids, and
8 everything else. But the environment otherwise was
9 all right.

10 Everything was going on nicely up until 1944
11 where, 194- -- actually we were occupied by the
12 Hungarian regime in 1942-43 and that was the time,
13 already, that my father could not be an employer, so
14 he had to be disguised. We had Christian help and --
15 that they were the employer and my father was the
16 employee. But we were still under a special quota
17 that we were shipping lumber, wood, for the
18 government. So this way my father could hold off, not
19 to go into camp, to labor camp.

20 At that particular time -- I do come from a
21 family of five. It's two brothers and three sisters.
22 I am a twin and I have a twin brother who, at that
23 particular time my brother had to go in already to
24 labor camp, and we were taken to concentration camps,
25 going to Auschwitz. Of course, we went through
26 different kinds of ghettos, which I'm not listing now,

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 and then in Auschwitz, when we arrived, we were
3 separated.

4 I had my sister with three children, my mother on
5 the one side, the children in the middle, and my
6 sister on the other side. And they were taken on one
7 side. My father, somehow they separated him right
8 away and he went to Buchenwald, which afterwards I
9 found out about it. And I remained with my sister all
10 the way through concentration camps because there were
11 problems because I was taken -- I was in Auschwitz in
12 Lager C, and that was the time that they found out
13 that I was a twin.

14 And twins they were taking for experimental
15 purposes. Somehow I escaped from there and I was with
16 my sister all the way through, and then in
17 Bergen-Belsen, after we were already liberated, she
18 was poisoned by a German SS woman. So all these
19 things come into consideration where my lifestyle had
20 changed quite a lot, to come from a middle class,
21 maybe upper class, all of a sudden to come into a
22 concentration camp where everything was cut out.
23 There was -- I'm not talking any more about luxury,
24 but all the necessities.

25 There was no clothes. Just one dress we were
26 given in Auschwitz with no belt at all. The shoes we

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 could keep. Our hair was -- we were shaved off, our
3 hair.

4 And when we were in Auschwitz there was no
5 bathrooms. I mean, we couldn't go at the time when we
6 wanted. And all the stories I am sure you have from
7 other people told you about it.

8 But then being liberated in Bergen-Belsen, which
9 I went through, I was an SM, which I worked for the
10 CROSS. I was working as interpreter I was in
11 GEL/TE/KISH/EN where I worked in a boat yard, and also
12 in a -- cleaning up the debris in oil companies where
13 -- it wasn't easy, as I mentioned before. You know,
14 it was -- I wasn't used to it and I was -- wasn't
15 strong, but somehow I must have been strong enough,
16 because my sister is not alive and I'm here alive.

17 So, after being liberated and finding out that my
18 sister, who was the strong one, was poisoned, and I
19 was in the hospital for about over a month -- I was
20 taken to Sweden, because all the sick kids -- I mean,
21 I was among the teenagers. They -- they have taken us
22 to -- I mean, if -- like, for instance I'm Czech, so
23 the Czech Consulate came up and they had -- take so
24 many people to come into different places in Sweden.
25 So I was in BUS/E/BORG where they had a convalescent
26 home over there for these young people, and they set

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 up right in their schools, right in there, some little
3 education that we could converse with the nurses. And
4 there were quite a few volunteer workers.

5 After a while, after I started to feel better, I
6 went to school and I was working also at one of the
7 PAP/YER/OS Factory where first I did a little bit
8 manual work, but afterwards as -- again, as an
9 interpreter, because I was fluent in six languages at
10 that particular time.

11 Then in Sweden I -- through the Red Cross I found
12 out that my twin brother was alive and he was in
13 Czechoslovakia. So after a year and a half I went to
14 Czechoslovakia, went back to practicing where I'll be
15 able to enroll at the university.

16 We were not accepted as graciously as we expected
17 because the Czech people -- they were still
18 antisemites. They still couldn't believe that
19 something like this, you know, that again something
20 like this may happen.

21 But anyway, at that particular time I stayed with
22 my brother and I worked and I tried to get on a
23 special quota as a student to university. And since I
24 had an aunt who sponsored me who was in Florida, at
25 Miami Beach, and she sponsored me that I will be able
26 to come. So this was with University of Miami and

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 Prague University, and this way I came to this State,
3 which happened in December, 1947, December the 14th.

4 And I was supposed to enroll on January the 3rd,
5 which there were problems, because again we were not
6 accepted as well as we expected, even at the
7 university. They didn't make it as easy for us to go
8 ahead and just go ahead, enroll with no tuition, or
9 anything.

10 THE INTERVIEWER: Do you see signs of
11 antisemitism now?

12 MS. ISSENBERG: On some cases. Of course, I'm
13 not exposed to it. Maybe some other people who are in
14 a working category, maybe they could see a little bit
15 more. But we were taking a walk right from here,
16 going back to the hotel, and we -- right next to one
17 of the Chinese restaurants or Vietnamese, and there
18 were -- right -- and there was a sign about the PLO
19 and what the Israelies did. I mean, it's so
20 distorted. The media is very distorted.

21 But since then I had -- I had finished up my
22 education. I do have a couple of degrees, working
23 towards more. I have been quite active in the
24 community. I'm past President of Hadassah. I'm
25 President of AK/A/TEK/I Society, and I do go to
26 different schools and I lecture about the holocaust,

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 because something like this we don't want to forget.
3 There are a lot of books which have quite a lot of
4 fictions, which are just negative, which they say
5 something like this has not existed, which the people
6 who were there say, "Well, yes, it was." So actually
7 people have to be educated and re-educated and
8 reminded that, yes, something like this happened. It
9 should never happened again.

10 I believe you got your story. Would you like to
11 have some more?

12 THE INTERVIEWER: I think it was just beautiful.
13 Just thank you very much.

14 MS. ISSENBERG: It's pretty hard to talk about
15 it. Like we came into Auschwitz, the first thing they
16 cut off our hair. They give us a dress. Here I am
17 menstruating and I'm -- and they take away all my
18 napkins. Now, you ask them, "Please, give me some" --
19 "Don't worry about it. By tomorrow you wouldn't have
20 it." Sure enough, they gave us tea to drink. They
21 gave us something, medication, I don't even know --
22 still don't know what it was, and we started to get
23 doped up that we couldn't even tell if today is
24 Tuesday, tomorrow will be Wednesday or Monday. Could
25 not remember from one thing to the other. Young
26 people.

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 See, they tried to do everything possible that we
3 should become like -- we should not hear all the
4 things. And they were smart about it, because if we
5 would have come in like we were and let us do this and
6 that, they would have problems. Like this, we were
7 like little animals. You know, we were just pushed in
8 and we couldn't do anything about it because we just
9 didn't have the tools, we didn't have -- even our
10 capacity of thinking was not there, you see? Our
11 mentality went down completely.

12 So then what -- so what happened so there is no
13 period, nothing at all. You don't have it. So you
14 can imagine going through -- you know, like woman go
15 through change of life, which you haven't gone
16 through, but I'm sure you have heard. I'm sure you
17 have -- menopause, and everything, how many people go
18 through with different kinds of -- you see? Same
19 thing.

20 Young people, you can imagine young people like
21 this, teenagers. How -- what they did. They knew
22 what they were doing. They were quite aware what they
23 were doing. We were not aware what's happening with
24 us. We started to fight with each other, you know,
25 internal problems. There is no room. They are
26 putting you into a little cabin. They called it

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 KO/YA/O/KAY, which was just a little platform. You
3 know, like chicken coups, you see? And they were in
4 three-four different layers. So in each one of them
5 had put to capacity like we were ten people so you
6 couldn't sleep, or you couldn't sit like this we were
7 just lying down like little herring, you see.

8 "You stay over there." You have to go to the
9 bathroom. There's no bathroom, but they will take you
10 to the bathroom. Okay. But you have an urge of
11 going. So what happens? If you do it over there, you
12 are killed. If you do it outside -- you cannot go
13 out. You are killed again. So what do you do?
14 Okay. You hold off. Okay. By the time you come in
15 there are latrines again. Okay. But the latrines, it
16 was not the best things either.

17 There are camps -- at the camps they were taking
18 garbage and also food. Also the food -- just liquid.
19 The people who could not eat, who could not steal,
20 could not do anything, okay, they could not survive.
21 I was the one who could never eat. I couldn't eat the
22 things. Everything was dirty to me, and this, and
23 that. Maybe because of this I survived. You know, I
24 couldn't take it.

25 People who were pushy and who were trying to
26 steal something, they were shot, so they did not

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 survive. So there were advantages and disadvantages.
3 It depends on what kind of environment, how lucky you
4 were. But the lifestyle itself, to cut out all the
5 luxuries, and then to come into something like this,
6 you are thrown in with people from different kinds of
7 lives, lifestyles, different kinds of -- how shall I
8 say? To a different world, you were thrown in over
9 there. And you wonder -- you are fighting with
10 yourself. You don't belong here. What are you
11 doing? Why am I here? Okay. You ask yourself
12 questions. There are no answers. Okay.

13 So -- so then after being liberated, you know,
14 you tried to make the best of it in such a short
15 period. You don't tell -- like, for instance, I have
16 a family. I have three children. I never told my
17 children about the holocaust because I felt: Why
18 should I expose them to the horror of what I went
19 through? Okay. Maybe that was wrong. Maybe I should
20 have, and they would have exposed other generations,
21 other people, to tell it.

22 So now we all have -- the people who are
23 survivors, there aren't too many, have a big job to
24 do. It's a big task to go ahead and inform these
25 people and see if there are a lot of fictions and
26 books that have been written, because everyone is

1 OLGA ISSENBERG

2 trying to make the dollar. They should be completely
3 discontinued and -- or it should be said, "Yeah, this
4 is fiction." You see. But if it's something genuine,
5 the people who did write who were there, they should
6 be really, be there for textbooks, teach the children,
7 have the children read these books, let them write
8 papers. Let them do something better and making use
9 out of this, because after a while it's just history.
10 That's all.

11 THE INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you so much again.
12 I just -- it's very, very moving to do these
13 interviews.

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