

Strenger, Brana
RG-50.481*0009 (one audio cassette)
RG-50.481*0010 (two audio cassettes)
Recorded February 24, 1999

Abstract

(Note that these tapes are missing information and are very disorganized, so some of the information was found from Ms. Strenger's records in the ITS collection.)

Brana Strenger was born on December 11, 1920 in Repedea, Romania. In March and April, 1944 the Jews in her town were transported to a ghetto. In May 1944, Brana was transported to Auschwitz with her sister. She was selected to be a leader in her block, and organized food in a professional manner. Later, she was transported to the labor camp at the Volkswagen factory in Fallersleben with 500 other women. At the factory, Brana organized the women, protected the younger and older women, and was in charge of the kitchen. She witnessed many Nazi atrocities. The labor camp was liberated by the Americans. Brana later went to the Pocking DP camp, and then immigrated to the United States.

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- :02** After Pesach, in March 1944, the Jews were to pack one box and report to the synagogue. Brana and her family tried to hide their jewelry in a well. No one could believe the stories of survivors. They stayed in the synagogue for one week. When Brana asked for milk from a long-time worker, she was refused. Brana fought with them (whom?) and then got into the ghetto.
- :34** A 70-year-old Hungarian man took a Nazi role, but befriended Brana. This Hungarian told her that she could survive. He brought cakes and other food and disinfectant. He wrote a letter telling her to survive for three days without water on the train to Auschwitz. When she arrived in Auschwitz, Mengele made his decision. She was separated from her family. Mengele shoved her sister next to her.
- : 77** When they arrived they drank from swampy water. Someone threw a piece of bread, but she thought it was a brick and threw it back.
- : 92** On the first night a girl started screaming out of control. "My mother is burning." Everyone else thought the barracks were burning.
- 1:05** "You don't know what is happening and you become numb." One thousand people were in a block. Extra people were shot. Brana was selected to be a leader. She and her sister were together. In Auschwitz

you were just numb. Brana always had a conscience and was always the one who could solve problems. She was able to fix a bed for herself and her sister. Brana sat on the bed all day and did not want to do anything.

- 1:90** Brana's friend had four daughters in the same barrack. He asked Brana to tell his daughters that whoever could survive should not look back.
- 2:05** Five hundred girls were selected, had showers, and were given clothes. They were sent to work in a factory but were sent back to Auschwitz because the Germans thought the factory had been bombed. When they returned to Auschwitz, their clothes were taken away, and they received no food. A few days later, they were again on a train, this time to Germany. There were five cars with 100 people in each car. Brana started to organize sleeping arrangements and the bathroom situation in the car. When they arrived at the factory, German civilians were in charge. They ordered Brana to take charge of her lager. She assigned the girls under 16 to sleep together, help clean up dishes, and run errands. Brana also was very protective of her sister, and of older women. One of the women was a rabbi's wife, so on the High Holidays, Brana put her on sick leave.
- 3:60** Brana served all the food for eight months. She was always the last one to eat. Everyone knew she was fair. In the kitchen, the workers were also prisoners, but Brana got to know some of them and was able to bring extra bread back to the barracks. She also arranged for girls to sew for SS women, enabling them to stay indoors. One woman went mad, and Brana was the only one who could talk with her. She hid her and fed her three times a day. Women had been ordered not to fraternize with men, but two women in Brana's care went into labor. A guard, who was a midwife, helped in one of the deliveries. Both babies were hidden and survived for three months.
- 6:61** The bombing started. Brana was responsible for getting everyone into a shelter. She covered the girl who was mentally ill. Later, nobody wanted to go into the shelter.
- 6:82** When Auschwitz was liberated, the Nazis came to the Volkswagen camp. One SS woman was terrible. She slapped Brana in the face.

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- :01** Brana describes how the terrible SS woman found the babies and the mentally ill woman, all of whom had been hidden. She sent them to Bergen Belsen.

- :22** Brana describes a Nazi who came in and tore up beds that had been made. He put mattresses on the floor with hay. Then he demanded that the women remake them. "He was an idiot," Said Brana, but she figured out how to deal with him.
- :38** She tells about a woman who wanted to starve herself to death. A French POW, who was a closeted Jew, spoke many languages, and was used as a translator, agreed to bring the woman medications, but she died. Her name was Har, and she was buried in a Russian cemetery. Her sisters never knew where she was buried. Only five of 500 graves in the cemetery were Jewish.
- :93** Brana describes how she organized food distribution in her barracks at Auschwitz in a professional manner.

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- :01** Brana describes the concentration camp affiliated with the Volkswagen factory. The barracks were under command of Wermacht and SS women. Accidentally, Brana met a dentist from France who spoke ten languages. He was Jewish but was not "out." Brana was able to sneak food out to men who were in another barrack and were in very bad shape. Once they were no longer useful, they were shot.
- :24** Civilians at Volkswagen ordered the SS and Wermacht not to interfere with Brana. They gave her power over them. Brana worked all day serving food. If she wasn't there, Germans gave only to those in front. Brana organized meals. The Jewish dentist helped her and encouraged her.
- :57** Brana heard about health problems, including pregnancies. She was responsible for reporting everything. An SS woman, Ann Marie, helped with one of the deliveries. She kept the babies hidden for a few weeks.
- 1:00** A new SS woman came into the barracks. She was very cruel. When she found the babies who were hidden, she sent them to Bergen Belsen. She also found the mentally ill woman whom Brana had hidden.
- 1:94** Brana describes the Americans liberating the camp.
- 2:12** Brana discusses how people did not want to talk about what happened.

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- :16** When the factory was bombed, the girls had to go out without gloves and their hands froze. Brana reported them as sick.
- :39** Brana did not work in production. She was in charge of selecting people to work in the factory. Every morning she had to fill two shifts, one during the day, the other during the night. She tried to keep young and old inside the lager so that they would not have to go to factory. She assigned girls under fifteen to clean the lager and women over 45 to make clothes, jewelry, and purses for German women. She tried to save as many people as she could.
- :64** The SS women were told not to interfere with Brana. She had to organize everything.
- :89** The women tried to hide a little food in ceiling holes made by bombings. The food attracted rats. The Nazis were furious, but Brana refused to hit anyone.
- 1:02** Brana did not keep records but knew exactly what everyone's assignment was.
- 1:10** Brana brought food to anyone who was in the small clinic (infirmary). Dental care was provided by a Russian dentist.
- 1:17** Sometimes Brana could get women to stop fighting only if she threatened suicide or said that she would go to work in the factory. The women pleaded with her to stay. They felt that she saved them.
- Brana always refused special privileges. After the war, her hometown put up a banner honoring her.
- 1:34** Brana cries as she describes the terrible condition of male POWs. They were so appreciative of every little bit of food. They didn't work except to pick up iron in the snow.
- 1:53** Brana talks about the woman who starved herself to death and was buried in a Russian cemetery. Her sisters never asked about her. Interviewer tells Brana he knows where the grave is - only five of 500 were Jewish.
- 1:79** Toward the end of the war, two additional transports were sent to the Volkswagen factory. Some of Brana's cousins were in one of those transports. They had to crowd the new arrivals into the lagers.
- 1:92** The women were sure they were going to crematorium and they went crazy. The Germans were hitting them and screaming. Brana went over

to her cousin and announced that she would go first when everyone was ordered to line up. This calmed everyone down.

- 2:05** Brana was called “the little tank” because she was always able to break up a fight or solve a problem.
- 2:30** After liberation, Brana was put in charge of the kitchen. She had the Germans peeling potatoes. Some Germans predicted that Russia and America would become enemies.
- 2:70** Brana met her cousin who was working in the crematorium, and he gave her clothes for the women.
- 3:19** She compares the food in Auschwitz to the food in the Volkswagen factory, where the food was a little better. Horsemeat was put in the soup, but everyone threw pieces out because they were rotten.
- She describes the families in the barracks. Relationships were stressed because of hunger.
- 3:63** The Germans needed prisoners at VW factory. Brana describes a blond woman who was like Mengele. After liberation, no one had the courage to kill her because Jews do not kill. This woman was a monster. She was always trying to hit Brana, and she tried to kill a sick woman who was starving herself.
- 3:69** Some German women became a little friendly. One wanted Brana to work in her laundry after the war.
- The civilians at Volkswagen praised Brana. When Brana was too sick to get up, everything became confused. The Nazis still believed that they would win the war.
- 4:20** Brana went to Hamburg but wanted to go to Switzerland. The Swiss borders were closed. She went to a town on the border and organized everything. A French rabbi wanted to help her. Later he wrote a letter asking her to marry him. When they met fifty years later, he said he had never forgotten her.