

Oral history interview with Annie Bleiberg

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Annie Bleiberg was born on October 1, 1920 in Oleszyce (Holashitz, Oleshiche), Poland to Isaac and Sophie Wertman. She had a sister, Helen, who was 5 ½ years younger than she. Her father survived the Holocaust, but her mother and sister were killed January 4/5, 1943 when the Lubaczów (Libatchov, Libechuyv, Liubachev, Lubachov, Lubatchov, Lubichuv, Lubachow, Lubatchow) Ghetto was liquidated. She also lost aunts, uncles, and a grandfather.

When she was 10, the family moved to Jarosław (Jaroslav, Yaroslav, Yereslev), and her father moved into the skin conservation business, conserving leather goods using hides from cows and horses; he had two partners. He often went to the slaughterhouse to get the hides. Annie was raised in a middle class family; she had a happy childhood. She always had a lot of friends and a lot of toys. She was privileged to go to high school; they had to pay for it. She belonged to a Zionist organization, Akiba, where she was a manager and a leader. Officially she was under age to belong to the organization, but her oldest cousin took her along. She was the first person to recite a poem on Theodor Herzl's commemoration. They had kosher food at home; it was not until the war that she ate non-kosher food.

She never lived in a strictly Jewish neighborhood. There was no personal anti-Semitism until 1938 — her last year of high school. They were reading the Polish book, *Lalka*; their professor summarized the book thus: 'Christians and Jews — we will not solve that problem. The best idea is to take all the Jews to the Baltic ... the ocean ... and dump them there, like Brazil does with coffee.' There was silence in the class. The environment in Poland had changed. At 18 she didn't understand the depth of the problems that were coming.

There were no changes to Annie personally until Hitler marched into Poland, and the war started. They were forced out of their house. They could take a satchel, a change of clothes; nothing else. They put the best things they had on — the best coat, the best dress, the best walking shoes. They took something in case they got hungry in a day or two; but they did not take any perishables. Her father took a knife and some tools that were later used to bail out himself and Annie from the train. They crossed the river San in order to get to the Russian occupied territory in eastern Poland. They walked to Oleszyce, to her grandfather's house. At the time, they were lucky because they remained in her grandfather's house — right over the border in the eastern part. There was a curfew during the Russian occupation; but even during the day, the men did not go out. Usually the women went out; but there was nothing to buy — the stores were looted or the people hid everything. If you had non-Jewish friends, they gave you some potatoes. Annie and her father worked; under the Russians you had to work. Annie and her father worked in a sawmill. It was a privilege to work there because they got a pound of bread or a pound of potatoes; even some meat. You had to show income, where you lived, that you were not involved in the black market — for that you would be taken to Siberia.

When Hitler attacked the Russians in June 1941, they now faced violence from the Germans. As the army passed by those working on the roads, they would pull people out for no good reason and shoot them or beat them. The Germans made a bonfire in the city, and the Jews had to dance and skip the bonfire; they banned Torahs, Jewish books, and any books against the Germans. The good work was working in a sheltered place where you weren't exposed to the German army; so Annie and her father continued to work in the sawmill. There were some hours of the day when you could walk out, but if you really didn't have to, you didn't walk out — it was dangerous. On Yom Kippur, the men went through backyards, pulled out a piece of wood to squeeze through, and went to pray. The militia, Polish or Ukrainian, looked the other way. For many years there had been a good relationship with the Gentiles. This continued during the German occupation and before and during the Russian occupation; but there came a time when the Gentiles could no longer do anything — they jeopardized their own lives. People denounced Christian neighbors that hid Jews.

The family went into hiding in a hole in the earth on her grandfather's property. A good friend from Oleszyce offered them shelter, but Annie's mother refused because she was sick; she said that she would only be a problem and told the rest of the family to go. Annie responded with 'We are going all together where Hitler is taking us.' In October 1942, all the towns and villages were forced to the Lubaczów ghetto; they walked to the ghetto — about 8 km; they got there a little later than everybody. They decided to move to the ghetto because they thought that there would only be a partial liquidation of the ghetto. They moved to the ghetto and stayed there about 2 ½ - 3 months. Life in the ghetto was miserable — no food, no medication. In the morning there were more dead bodies on the street. Mainly you stayed indoors; you were afraid to go out. It was dangerous to be seen; if a Nazi didn't like the way you walked, he could shoot you or beat you up. You didn't want to say you were sick because then you were taken out and killed. The ghetto was liquidated at the beginning of January; they were warned a day or two before it was to happen. At the last minute, her father built a little hiding place in the attic where they lived in the ghetto.

On a Friday morning the Germans went up there, and a sonderkommando came and took them out; it wasn't a very sophisticated hiding place. They were all put against the wall, but they were not shot; they were taken to a warehouse a little outside of the city. There were a lot of people there already. Her father took some tools with him; they all got a little sugar and maybe a slice of bread. They were in the warehouse for a day and a half. People were crying; children were dying — from cold, from hunger. She and her father didn't give up. From the warehouse they were taken to cattle cars and packed like sardines; the destination was Bełżec (Belzhets, Belzhetz). Bełżec was not too far from Lubaczów; the people who lived in the town of Bełżec knew and saw what was going on there. In the beginning there was no crematoria; people were gassed in the cars, bodies pulled out and burned in the open air. Annie's father opened the window in the train with tools he had brought; he removed the grates and one or two boards to make an opening. Annie and her father jumped from the running train; they knew where they were being taken. They formed a line inside the train; the men jumped first. The train stopped, and the soldier that was accompanying the train looked inside and saw that there were people missing; it wasn't packed as tight as it had been. But they left them alone; they figured they would get them eventually. When the train started again, Annie's mother pushed her up by her buttocks; she wiggled through the opening above her head, took hold of

the rails where the doors slid, loosed her hands, and fell to the ground. There was a heavy cushion of snow, and that saved her.

She wore a navy blue coat that was very visible in the snow, though it was night. She lay there while the train passed, and then a shot rang out. Her father had told her to go the opposite way of the train, so she started to walk that way. She was completely in disarray — not thinking ... and walking. She went towards a little light that was in a booth on the rail tracks. Annie walked into the booth where there was a Polish watchman who knew that a train containing Jewish cargo had just passed. Although he told her that she couldn't stay, he took her out of the booth and told her not to follow the train tracks. He pointed at a road around the corner that led to some houses. Annie met a woman from the vicinity with whom she walked, and after knocking on many doors, a man let them in and fed them each a potato. She fell asleep until the man woke them and told them they had to leave. She offered the man her watch to let them stay until morning. He refused telling her that she might need it for a slice of bread; also if she was seen anywhere on his property both he and Annie would be killed. She and the woman walked back to the ghetto.

Annie came to the house where her family had lived and decided to go to the attic. She heard her father coming up the steps to the attic with a friend. Annie and her father had jumped separately, with time and distance between them, but this is where they met the following day. Some people came to the house to look for some leftover Jews — there were some hiding in many places — but they left abruptly. Annie and her father went out at night to their non-Jewish friends and neighbors, Anielka and Mikołaj Koshe (ph, sp?), who hid them in their barn and brought them food about once a day. The couple would also bring them to their house to bathe and change underwear. They were in hiding for about four weeks when they were told they had to leave because there were rumors that the couple was hiding Jews. There was nowhere to go — Annie's father wanted to go to another ghetto; Annie wanted to go to the police. Anielka got in touch with another family in town, the Maczaks (ph, sp?), who were good friends of Annie's grandfather; their two sons worked in the Polish underground. One of the sons (Witold Maczak), who was working in the employment agency for Germans, made Annie "Aryan Papers" — false German papers. With an assumed name, the Maczaks brought her to Jarosław where there was a train going to Germany filled with young Polish boys and girls. Annie's father went to a camp that was liquidated and was then taken to a work camp in Lvov (L'viv, Lwów, Lemberg, Leopold). While going to work, her father escaped. Her future husband and his brother were also in the camp; they escaped and became part of the underground. Her father was mainly hiding.

Annie had Polish papers and was on the train to Germany; but she was pulled out from the group, taken, and beaten unconscious. She was not beaten by the Gestapo; she was beaten by the Polish people. She was pushed out and brought to a room where she was told, 'Tomorrow we'll kill you.' They (Polish people) put her in jail overnight in German occupied Kraków (Cracow, Krakau, Krako, Krakoy, Krakuv, Kroke); this was February 1943. The next day she was taken from jail and brought to the Gestapo. She was put against the wall for a number of hours. Annie still had her silver wristwatch, and she offered it to the Polish policeman to let her go; he didn't take the watch. He told her that where he was taking her was safer, at least for the time being, than if he let her go to be on her own in the street. Jewish policemen from the Kraków ghetto came to pick her up. She was considered a dangerous person, so she was put

in jail in the Kraków ghetto — Ordnungsdienst, OD. She was there about four weeks when the Kraków ghetto was liquidated and so was the jail. The liquidation was an awful scene — people were taken from everywhere; men and women were lined up separately; children were taken away in trucks; dogs were barking; German music was playing. Those from the jail were the last ones to be put on trucks and taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau; this was March 14 or 15, 1943.

They drove into Birkenau and were unloaded on the ramp; nobody said a word or made any unnecessary move. They saw the flames, and they smelled the awful smell of the burning flesh of their brethren. She and the rest of her group were taken out and brought to a building where they stayed overnight. In the morning they were taken to a hot shower. The soldiers poked bayonets at their young, healthy-looking bodies. Their hair was shorn, and they were given tattoos. She was given number 38330 and a triangle below it. They were then transferred to a new block, a new building; there were four/five bunks in a row — an upper bunk, a middle bunk, and a lower bunk. For the first few days, the Germans did not send them to work, but they had to get up around 5:00 AM for the appel. The first work assigned Annie was to clean up the debris from the bombing of the houses and buildings — meaningless work. They were under the supervision of German soldiers, SS men, and dogs; if you stepped out of line, you were pulled by the dogs. Lunch was a watery soup. They had to march back to camp, carrying anybody who had died during the day, and be counted again. Supper would be the same soup and a slice of bread; once a week you might get a little slice of margarine. If you saved half the bread for the next morning, some other inmate might steal it. Sometimes Annie worked in a garden pulling carrots.

They all had diarrhea most of the time. The women lost their period, which was in a way good because they had no way to take care of it. When Annie came to Auschwitz, there were no toilets and no running water; there were ravines. Annie was in Auschwitz without relatives and without any friends; she came completely alone. Lights were out at 9 o'clock. In the beginning she would say a little night prayer; but she gave that up. When a transport from Greece came, Annie became their go-between — translator — because she spoke German and Hebrew, and a few of the Greeks spoke Hebrew. Her next job was to a kommando where they sorted shoes ... inside buildings, not outdoors. When this kommando was ending, her supervisor recommended that she be put into the Kanada — the best kommando in Auschwitz because you always came across some food there. Whenever there was a selection, the workers of Kanada were kept at work over-night so as not to be subjected to those selections; their bosses argued that they were specially trained people. By the time Annie left Auschwitz, there was running water — for a half hour or so — and real toilets, not ditches. There then came a time when they started to take people out of Auschwitz and send them to the west — either Germany or Czechoslovakia. In October 1944, Annie was taken by train to a small camp of about 500 in Czechoslovakia, Mährisch Weisswasser (?), where she worked in an ammunition factory. She was there seven or eight months until the end of the war; they were liberated by the Russians.

Annie spoke Russian; and during the Russian occupation, she worked for them as a bookkeeper. She then decided to move on by train — train was free — she went to Prague with two other girls and registered there. They stayed in Prague for a while, and then headed home to Poland to look for her father. She was in a building in Katowice (Kattowitz, Stalinogród) where they registered the newcomers from Germany or Czechoslovakia. She overheard a

conversation among three people going to Lublin; she wrote a note to an acquaintance of her father asking about her father and saying that she was in Katowice. She received a note from the acquaintance a week later saying that her father was alive, and that she should come to Lublin. In the meantime, her father got news that Annie was alive in Katowice, so he went to Katowice. So it took another week or two until they finally got together. Annie's father wanted her to go to Oleszyce, where she was born and where her grandfather had lived. She did not want to go, but her father convinced her; she made it clear that she did not want to stay. Annie had met her future husband while walking the streets of Katowice looking for faces that she knew; they knew each other and each other's family. They married about seven or eight months later — April 7, 1946. Her father had been liberated almost a year before her — the summer of 1944; he never told her much about what had happened to him. She knows he was in Lemberg (ph, sp?) and in the woods.

In order to go westward, Annie and her father had to go to Lubaczów to get a train because the train was not stopping in Oleszyce. Most everyone was leaving Poland because they did not want to stay under the Russian occupation. They had to leave Poland because the Russians were closing the border; most everybody went to Germany. Annie and her father hired a horse and wagon, but they were hijacked by the Polish Underground or the Ukrainian Underground. All their belongings, including the horse and wagon, were taken. After this, they went to Lubaczów to a family that her father knew. They, in turn, notified another family that her father knew; this family sent them 20 zlotys. With this money they bought train tickets to Krakow. From Krakow they went to Breslau (Wrocław, Bresslau) because her future husband and his brother lived in Breslau. Annie and her father moved in with them; they occupied a place that the Germans had left. Her future husband wanted to go to Germany and wanted Annie to go with him. Annie said she would go, but they had to get married first — so they got married in Breslau. They then settled in Bayreuth, Germany; Annie did not want to go to a DP camp — she had “camped” enough. Some German people were friendly towards them, some looked away, and some apologized in a way.

They were supposed to go to the United States in 1947, but Annie had a car accident; and the immigration law in America was somehow changed. Their papers were delayed. They chose to go to America because there was a war going on in Israel; and she and her husband had aunts in the United States. They came to America in 1950; in the meantime their daughter was born in Bayreuth. Life in America wasn't easy; it was very hard — financially, physically.

Annie feels that hope is a very important element in life; they had ups and downs, but they survived. She wants to live the best life she can achieve. Annie feels that justice, in a way, was done to the criminals of the Holocaust; you can't punish a whole nation. She lived in Germany for four years; she got to know many Germans during that time. Yes, they have to acknowledge it; they have to somehow try to make good. When Annie started to talk a little bit about the Holocaust, a relative told her to forget it ... to talk about a good life here in America. Annie stopped talking out of respect for the relative and the fact that she was in the relative's house. But on the way home, she told her husband, “I will be talking.” When her own daughter was young and asked her why she didn't have a grandmother or an aunt or an uncle, she didn't want to scare her daughter; she did not tell her all the atrocities. So Annie just told her that there was a crazy man, and he was killing a lot of people. She didn't want to scare her daughter to be a Jew.

Annie's wish now is to live as fully as she can.