

Oral history interview with Ruth Cohen

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Summary

Ruth Cohen, née Friedman, was born in Mukachevo (Mukacheve, Mukačevo, Mukaczewo, Munkas, Munkacz, Mundatsch), which was then part of Czechoslovakia. It later became part of Hungary, and is now part of Ukraine. She grew up in an orthodox family with her parents, Bertha and Herman, and her sister, Teresa, and a younger brother, Arnold. Her father had a wholesale business manufacturing wine, liqueur and bottling beer. The business was taken from him in 1938 when their part of Czechoslovakia was annexed by Hungary; he was allowed to manage the business. Ruth attended a special Hebrew gymnasium where all subjects were taught in Hebrew. Also in 1938 her sister was taken out of school because her parents were hoping to come to the United States. However, her father decided that he could not leave his mother who was living with them. In 1940 or 1941 they received news that her aunt and some cousins had been deported to Majdanek where they were immediately killed. Life began changing at this time; they were not allowed to do things they had normally done, like going to the theater. The family adopted two of Ruth's cousins when they learned that the parents were going to be deported.

Ruth attended school until she was 14 when they were forced to leave their home and go to a ghetto just before Passover in 1944. Before going to the ghetto, a man wanted to buy their house, but her parents refused. When they went to the ghetto, the man came with a truck and removed all their furnishings. They stayed in the ghetto until the end of May when they were transported to Auschwitz. They walked from the ghetto to a brick factory that became the gathering point for the deportation. That is where Ruth witnessed the shooting of a favorite teacher who refused to get on the train.

At Auschwitz Ruth and her sister were sent together to the right; her father was also sent to the right. The rest of the family — her mother, brother, cousins — were sent to the left and immediately gassed. When Ruth and her sister went to the barracks, a young woman who knew Teresa from summer camp ran up to them. This woman was now a blockälteste, and she made Teresa her personal assistant; she got Ruth a job as a läuferin, a messenger girl. While in Auschwitz, they were able to see their father pass by on a nearby road. They were also able to meet an uncle, who had been at Theresienstadt, by the fence. One day he did not appear; and they knew he had been gassed.

At the end of September, beginning of October, the crematoria closed because there was some form of revolution; there was no more selection, no more killing people in Auschwitz. Ruth left Auschwitz at the end of November and was taken to Nuremberg where she worked in a spool factory. Ruth began experiencing terrible back pain in Nuremberg. Since Nuremberg was being constantly bombed, they were transported to Holýšov (Holleischen) to do similar work. They stayed there until the end of the war. A month after they were liberated, Ruth and her sister got on a train and went back to Mukachevo where their father was waiting for them. He had been liberated from

Buchenwald in April. Their own house was unavailable to them, so they lived in their grandfather's house. Ruth spent a month at the Children's Hospital in Budapest where they could find nothing wrong with her despite the persistent pain. Finally, with the help of an aunt who knew doctors at a hospital, it was discovered that she had tuberculosis of the spine. She was in the hospital for one year; for six months she had to remain motionless in a cast. She then went to a sanatorium in the Tatry Mountains. During that time her father and sister had moved from Mukachevo to Žatec, near Prague, because they were closing the borders. Shortly after that, an aunt and uncle brought Ruth, her father, and her sister to the United States.

When Ruth arrived in the United States, she was still wearing a body corset and couldn't move around freely. She worked to support the family and went to school at night. She learned English quickly because her cousins refused to speak to her in any other language but English.

Ruth has talked to her children about her experiences when they have asked questions. She has gotten financial remuneration from Germany because she had tuberculosis. Ruth has knowledge of the treatment of Nazi criminals within the legal system in Europe, in Germany; and she doesn't approve. She doesn't think it was enough; she doesn't think it was right. She feels that it's being done way too late. She did not meet any SS who she would consider not guilty. She doesn't see the movies that were made of the horrors. She just didn't want to and doesn't want to. She feels that she has to save herself from suffering all over again; so she doesn't. And that goes along with the fact that she just doesn't want to read; she doesn't want to live it. Ruth met her husband in 1952, which was four and a half years after she got here; she has three children and eight grandchildren.