

Oral history interview with Magda Herskowitz

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January 22, 1994. This is the story of my life (English, a voice of a young woman, YM).

This is the story of my life. The day is 1994. My name is Magda Hershkovitz, born Berkovitz. I was born on June 18, 1924 in a small village in Ttransilvania. The name of the village is Dobrichel. We were seven children, 3 sisters and 4 brothers. My father died when I was one and a half years old. I did not know him. My mother's name was Hana, my father's name was Herman Berkovitz. My sister names were... My brothers names were: Mendel, Moyshe, Mayer and Salom. The sisters names were Esther-Bayle and Cipe. I and my mother lived in the village. We had a store and we had land and a mill. My mother had another cousin in the village. Two Jews lived there too.

We had a nice life till Hitler came in May 4, 1944. Then we were taken into the ghetto Dej, where we have been for 4 weeks and from there we were taken to Auschwitz. There they separated me from my mother and I have never seen her again. I was sent to forced labor. We worked very hard. We got one slice of bread a day and one plate of soup made of bran, (do you know what bran is? Its what is left after you take the wheat out of it).

We suffered hunger and cold, my feet froze, I had no shoes. I suffer because of that till today. After liberation from the Germans I fell into the hands of the Russians. They liberated me and they mocked me. After the liberation I walked home for 3 weeks by foot, from Germany to Poland, from Poland to Hungary and to Romania. On the roads I also suffered hunger and cold. Nobody wanted to let us into their house. I was together with 10 girls. We were full of lice. Nobody wanted to let us in.

After I arrived home I met my brother Salom. Only he was at home. When he saw me he could not recognize me. I was like a Muzelman (a walking skeleton, YM). My weight was 65 kilograms (did she mean pounds?, YM). Two weeks after I arrived home I got to know my husband, Moshe Hershkovitz, also from a village not far from Dej. After 3 weeks we married and settled in a little town Retiav (?, YM). I had a house there and a mill that my older brother Moshe has left . He did not return. He did not come back from the concentration camp.

One year after my marriage I had my first daughter Hana. When she was one year old we left Romania toward Germany to a DP camp (Displaced Persons. YM) so we can emigrate to Israel. In this camp we remained one year and then went to Israel. In Israel we lived in barracks. My husband was taken to the army and I remained with a little baby, without furniture, windows, with one cooking pot in which to cook and little food.

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Six weeks after my husband was taken to the army I received 25 lira (Israeli currency at that time, YM) to buy food. After a year my husband was released from the army and he became a policist (? may be a night guard, YM). The pay was very small. It was very hard to make a living for us. He was on guard at night and working day time on a building site, to earn a few extra liras.

When Hana was 7 years old we decided to have another child, so she will not be alone in the world. I had a very hard pregnancy for 9 months. I was very tired. Then another girl, Pnina, was born. When Pnina was three years old we moved to a moshav (cooperative Israeli settlement, YM) named Yad Nathan. There we started a new life working in agriculture. We also had chicken and cows for milk. We worked very hard.

The older daughter went to a boarding school for 2 years. While there, she decided to learn to be a hair dresser. She became a hair dresser. She got acquainted with a young man that came from America. After a short time they got married and he took her to America. I with my husband and the younger daughter remained in Israel. After 2 years I missed my daughter very much, so I went there as a tourists with my Pnina. We stayed there and in Canada too for two and a half years.

My husband worked in a bakery, very hard and earned a little. After two years I went over to America to my older daughter. She gave birth to a son. I did not return (to Canada). I began working at an elderly citizen's home. After 4 months my husband joined me. We worked together for ten years. Then I got sick and left. My husband found a work in a bakery. There he got wounded in one hand, due to hard work. He did not return to work and we live now on pension.

We live in a two family house with my older daughter. She has two sons, one 22 years old and one 19. My younger daughter got married at the age of 19 with a sabra (born in Israel, YM). They have 3 children: 2 boys and one girl. The older is already 17 years old, the girl is 15, and the youngest 13. With God's will I with my husband together will celebrate the last Bar Mitzva.

In Auschwitz I was awoken in the morning and went out to the roll call. We were 1,500 women from 19 to 25 years old. After the roll call we got very little black coffee. Half a hour later we got shovels and marched out to work. We did work for the German tanks, for the German army. I worked 8 hours in snow, in cold winter without any food and water. After the 8 hours I returned to the camp and we got a plate of warm bran soup. One day I became very sick, I was forced to go to work and beaten. Once I saw my good friend standing in the line for soup. She was still holding her plate. Then came the SS man and hit her on her head with a chair and she died.

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Since we arrived to Auschwitz we did not get our period. We got some powder with the name Brom in our coffee. I had a friend that was married and was pregnant when she was taken to the concentration camp. After a month she gave birth to a child. But it was winter and the child could not stand the cold and died after 8 days, even though the Uberfuhrer brought the child some clothes, food and milk. But in a camp a child cannot survive.

From the Dej ghetto, after 2 days and 2 nights in closed wagons, up to 50 people in a wagon, packed like herring, without air, food and water we arrived to Auschwitz. They separated us from parents, from sisters and led us into the shower, thousand women. There were two long tables, on both sides of the tables were standing Mengele and Eichman with SS soldiers. Music was played to distract our minds. We were ordered to undress completely and our hair was shorn, even from the lower part of the body. They took away our belongings and the SS walked among the naked women. After the shower we received clothes, not fit to our sizes. Some were long, some short. I got a dress that was too long, up to the ground. I ripped a piece from the length and made myself a headkerchief. When we met after the bath we could not recognize each other. We looked like meshugene (crazy ones, YM), with the bare heads. They ordered us into rows of five and led us to the tables of the SS officers. They asked for our names and birthdates. Then they led us to the barracks and warned us not to leave them or the SS man will shoot us. As a toilet we had a big room with pots, where we did our big and small things. We were 500 women in one room, head on head (crowded, YM). If you wanted to get out you had to step on each other. At night we slept on the bare floor, without pillows and no bed.

When I went out the SS was screaming at me that I should not get close to the barbed wires, I might get killed. Then I asked him when will I see my mother? He pointed to the chimneys of the ovens, from which a smoke rose up and he said to me: do you see the smoke? There is your mother. I understood they burned her.

I returned to the barrack and began crying. From now on I could not sleep nor eat. The soup made of leaves of beetroots that we were given was full with sand. I was in Auschwitz another 4 weeks. One night we were taken out for a roll call next to the gas chambers, we have been told to undress and once again they inspected our naked bodies – who is fit for work and who will go to the gas chambers. After standing there for a whole night we were taken, still naked, to a big place where we received a gray uniform and climbed the coal wagons, 50 in a wagon and taken to Riga, where again we were asked for names and birthdates and we were taken with big trucks to a port with ships. There we had to carry the heavy boxes with ammunition to load on the ships. Those who were not able to carry the boxes were beaten. I fell down while carrying a

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box of 50 kilo of ammunition. The SS man hit me with a rifle on my ribs. Then for a few days I was walking around with terrible pain and crying.

THE END

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