

Bekefi, Lillian

Interview: July 12, 2008

- 0:00 – 1:30 Lillian was born on December 9, 1919 in Miskolc, Hungary.
- 1:30 – 3:00 Lillian's family was very well to do before the war. Her father owned a store and her mother was a housewife. She had one sister, Suzanna, who died in 1992. Her father's name was Emile Bãrdos and her mother's name was Elizabeth Bãrdos.
- 3:00 – 4:00 The Bãrdos family was aware and proud of being Jewish, but they were not strictly religious. For example, although they ate mainly kosher, they did not use different plates for non-kosher food. Her father went to synagogue every Friday night, but the rest of the family only went on high holidays. They would always fast on Yom Kippur.
- 4:00 – 4:30 The Bãrdos family spoke Hungarian at home. Lillian also spoke German from the time she was young, and she learned French and English as an adult.
- 4:30 – 6:00 Lillian's family members could come and go as they wanted [before the war], however, they were aware of their being Jewish and of the restrictions placed upon Jews. One of the restrictions was that the college had quotas for how many Jews they would allow to study there. Although Miskolc had a population of 100,000 everyone knew who was Jewish.
- Lillian attended a Music Academy where she studied piano and voice.
- 6:00 – 8:30 In 1942 after Lillian graduated from the Music Academy she and a fellow graduate and friend wanted to work together performing on the streets. However, because he was in the army he could not perform with a Jewish girl.
- Lillian attended a Jewish elementary school and later a Protestant all-girls junior high and high school. In the Protestant school Lillian was not the only Jew and she says that the teachers never made her feel inferior for her being Jewish. She says how grateful she is for the education she received there, and she gets emotional while talking about how wonderful the teachers were.
- 8:30 – 9:15 Lillian began professional music training at age 13 or 15 with her mother's encouragement.
- 9:15 – 11:00 The war began in Poland in 1939. Lillian was young and was stunned by the war, but she did not know the truth about the concentration camps and what the Germans were doing to the Jewish people. Because Hungary was

a German ally the citizens were unaware of what went on in the rest of the world. They did not know anything about Auschwitz until they got there. Listening to the BBC was punishable by imprisonment or internment.

11:00 – 12:30 The only concentration camp they had heard of in Hungary was Dachau.

Lillian was deported from Miskolc to Auschwitz. Her family was first moved to a ghetto. In the ghetto there were 2 or 3 families in 2 or 3 room apartments.

The Germans entered Hungary on March 19, 1944 and they were sent to the ghetto within a few weeks. The first thing the Germans did was to make the Jews wear the yellow star.

12:30 – 14:45 Lillian tells a story as an example of her first heartbreaking moment of the war. She arrived home one day, soon after they had begun to wear the yellow star, to see a group of street kids making fun of her father outside her house. Lillian confronted them and made them leave. When she went into the house she saw her father sobbing. Her father had been a decorated officer in the Hungarian army in World War 1 and seeing him being betrayed by Hungarians was heartbreaking for her.

14:45 – 17:30 Lillian's father was sent to a labor camp while Lillian, her mother, her sister and grandmother were deported together.

After the war Lillian found out her father's fate. In the labor camp one of her father's former employees was an officer. He recognized Emile, her father, and helped him escape back to Miskolc. In Miskolc a non-Jewish friend of her father's was the director of the hospital and hid him there as a patient for the remainder of the war. Five days before the Russians came to liberate Miskolc, Hungarians came into the hospital looking for Jews. They found her father and four other Jewish men and shot them all. Some other non-Jewish friends of her father held a funeral for him, found him a headstone and had him buried in a Jewish cemetery.

17:30 – 19:00 Lillian had mainly Jewish friends growing up. She had one Protestant friend who she was very close with.

After the war was over Lillian refused to return to Hungary because she could not forgive the Hungarians, who had ridiculed her father and killed him.

19:00 – 21:00 Lillian and her family were in the ghetto from March 1944 until they were deported to Auschwitz on June 6 or 7.

Lillian spent a week in a brick factory on the outskirts of Miskolc before she was sent to Auschwitz. The factory had no roof and they had to sleep on the floor. To get to the factory they had marched through the city while people spat on them and applauded while they were forced to march away.

This was another moment where she felt betrayed by the country she loved. She had been very patriotic and loyal to Hungary growing up, but after this she could no longer feel that way.

21:00 – 22:00 In the ghetto they had canned food that some non-Jewish friends would bring them, but they had to sleep on the floor.

22:00 – 22:45 Before they moved to the ghetto, Lillian's family had lived in a beautiful apartment filled with beautiful things. Her mother collected paintings and Persian carpets and was especially heartbroken to leave it all behind.

22:45 – 24:00 It was the Hungarian gendarmes who took them from Miskolc to the brick factory.

A few people committed suicide in the brick factory. A friend of Lillian's from school took poison together with her parents. The girl's parents succeeded in committing suicide, but she did not. The girl killed herself during her first week at Auschwitz.

24:00 – 27:30 On route to Auschwitz the Germans put about 80 people in one cattle car. Lillian was traveling with her mother, sister and grandmother. The journey was so horrible, that she is stressed to even attempt to describe it or talk about it. She thinks the trip took about a week.

They were not given enough water and they had only canned food on the trains, but no can opener. Lillian is not sure how they survived. If they needed to use the bathrooms they used cans. The train would stop every once in a while to throw the cans out.

On the train everyone was going out of their minds. Lillian repeatedly describes her grandmother as an amazing woman "a Jewish Mother Teresa," who was one of the only calm quiet people on the train.

They were all afraid of being killed and their only hope was that they would be forced to work and not be killed.

27:30 – 28:00 Nobody on the train had any idea of where they were going or what was happening to them. People got frustrated and angry with each other. For example they got mad at a lady who could not keep her baby quiet. Lillian describes it as a total nightmare.

28:00 – 29:30 The train arrived at Auschwitz during the day. The first thing Lillian saw were men in striped uniforms working. This was very exciting as it gave them hope to see people alive. Her other observation was of military barracks. She remembers the men's striped uniforms with numbers on them.

29:30 – 32:00 Lillian attributes her optimism that aided in her survival to the fact that she was young.

At Auschwitz SS officers forced them off the train. This was the first time she saw Mengele (Dr. Josef Mengele), she noticed him, as he was very good looking and obviously in charge. The officers grouped them into lines of five and began to pick people out and separate them. Mengele approached their line, which included Lillian, her sister, mother, grandmother and one other woman, and asked her sister if her mother was her mother. Her sister had the forethought to answer "no, she is my sister," thus saving her mother. However, this is where her grandmother got sent away. Lillian did not know it then but they were probably sent to the gas chambers immediately.

32:00 – 33:45 After the war Lillian realized who Mengele was, "The Angel of Death." Lillian said she thought 400,000 Jews were killed that summer at Auschwitz.

After the initial selection those remaining were marched back to the barracks.

33:45 – 34:00 Lillian backtracks and says that before they went to the barracks they had to shower and undress in front of each other, which was humiliating, especially for her mother.

34:00 – 36:00 Here their hair was cut and they had to remove their own clothes and were given new clothes.

Lillian was given a silk cocktail dress and two different shoes to wear. One shoe was high heeled and one was not, leaving Lillian to limp. She says this was an example of how they not only wanted to hurt and kill the Jews but also humiliate them.

36:00 – 38:00 After the shower and receiving clothes, they were sent to the barracks. They were able to sleep, but were woken up at 4:00 AM when they had to stand for roll call, to be counted over and over again. She remembers being very cold.

They did not work this time in Auschwitz but they spent their days idle, standing and waiting in the mud in front of the barracks.

38:00 – 39:30 In the barracks there were two to a bed. Lillian recounts the beds being very hard and she felt either too hot or too cold. She calls it a nightmare.

Lillian knows that she arrived at Auschwitz in June and was then deported to Plaszow, but she does not know how long she was at Auschwitz or when she was deported.

39:30 – 40:00 In Plaszow they had to work very hard. The prisoners were made to carry heavy rocks up one hill and back down for no reason.

She cannot compare it to Auschwitz because in Auschwitz they were waiting and in Plaszow it was exhausting.

40:00 – 42:00 Men and women were separated in Plaszow.

The lagerälteste was the head of the barrack and was in charge of their barrack and of giving them food. Lillian remembers this lagerälteste as not having any significance. She was not especially mean. Lillian cannot remember the food but does remember her always being hungry. The älteste's name was Lila and she was Polish or Czech.

42:00 – 44:00 The Germans treated them like pieces of dirt. Nobody in Lillian's group was beaten, but she did see many atrocities. One such atrocity was when she saw a trained German shepherd ordered to attack an innocent girl and rip her clothes off. This was when Lillian realized she was in a slaughterhouse.

44:00 – 46:00 In August they were put back on the trains and sent back to Auschwitz. It was incredibly hot and there was no water. Lillian says she actually felt relieved to be back at Auschwitz because the journey was so difficult.

When they got off the trains one girl was so thirsty that she tried to lick a drop of water off something. She was immediately shot dead by one of the guards in the tower.

Lillian thought she was going to die of thirst. She does not know if it was worse to be hungry or thirsty – this is a question she repeats later in the interview.

46:00 – 47:00 The journey had been made in cattle cars again. They had left Plaszow because it was being evacuated.

[Tape 1, Side B]

1:00 – 4:00 Lillian talks about her returning to Auschwitz for the second time. They were moved to camp B2 which had the same awful conditions as her first experience at Auschwitz.

There was another selection at Auschwitz. At this time Lillian was still with her mother and sister. Her sister put a babushka on her mother's head to make her look younger and healthier. However, they could not hide her mother's skin which had been so badly burned in Plaszow that it was hanging off her legs. Lillian believes this is why her mother was taken.

Lillian's mother was taken when she was in the shower room. She and her sister tried to go after her, but a Jewish capo beat them back with a stick to keep them in line. It was only later that they realized that this capo was trying to save them, not hurt them.

4:00 – 6:30 Lillian's mother was taken with some other women, including a family friend who asked Lillian to take care of her daughter Eva. Eva survived.

Lillian is still haunted by the image of her mother being taken away. She and her sister still feel guilty about letting their mother die. Their only consolation is that she did not die alone.

Her sister was 20 at this point and she was 23. Her mother was 46.

6:30 – 9:00 They were then whipped into the showers. Lillian describes her sister as looking like a zebra from all the whip marks on her.

It was days later that she received the tattoo. She knows that the tattooist was female but thinks it was an SS woman, not a prisoner. Getting a tattoo was not a big deal after all they had been through.

Lillian's number was 20,378. Her sister was one place ahead of her so her number was 20,377. Her number is something Lillian will never forget.

9:00 – 10:30 Lillian cannot remember who the lagerälteste was at this point. She thinks it was a nice Polish girl with a partner (another woman) who Lillian thinks may have been her lover, though she has no proof of this.

10:30 – 13:30 Once the Germans discovered Lillian could sing, she and two other girls (a ballerina and an accordion player) would be called to the officers' barracks in the middle of the night. She entertained both male and female SS officers (but mostly male). At first, being called in the middle of the night terrified Lillian because she thought she was going to be killed. But eventually this became a perk, as she was given food that she would later share with her sister.

13:30 – 15:00 Lillian here backtracks to tell a story that happened on the train ride to the camp. While on the train she found a diamond ring hidden among the buttons on the dress she was given to wear. The ring was not valuable, and she has since lost the diamond, but she still has the ring, which she kept for good luck.

15:00 – 18:00 Lillian believes the SS officers enjoyed themselves while listening to her, but she was not treated especially well or badly by the officers.

Lillian did not know about a brothel in Auschwitz. After the camps she heard stories about girls getting beaten and sexually abused, but she never personally knew of any girls this happened to.

The closest she got to being sexually abused was in Plaszow. A drunk SS officer made Lillian and her sister stop their normal work and scrub his floors. He then tried to force them to have sex with him. When both refused he shot at them. He missed and they ran back to the camp.

18:00 – 22:00 During the death march, when she was really weak, some girls tried to help Lillian walk. However, at the point where she collapsed and was, in her opinion lifeless, it was the commandant (Robert Hochoaus) who revived her by giving her liquor and massaging her heart. When he was at the trial in Nuremberg she wanted to sign something to his advantage, but her sister would not let her because they were not sure if he had killed any others. She knew that he was 32 while working at the camps and she believes he only served a few years in prison before being set free.

22:00 – 25:00 Lillian does not remember many instances of people helping each other because they were all in the same situation. The ugliest moment she witnessed in the camps was when a group of five sisters (the Gross sisters) stole food from people in their barrack.

They were given bread once or twice a week and people slept on their bread to keep it safe. These sisters would steal bread from under people's heads. One night she caught one sister doing this and wanted to steal the bread back, but she couldn't let herself do that.

25:00 – 26:00 Lillian does not remember any real hostile behavior between the prisoners. Prisoners did sometimes fight, but only because of how desperate they all were. She admits that there might have been more fighting but she does not want to allow herself to remember hostility between prisoners.

26:00 – 28:30 In Auschwitz there were some Polish and Czech prisoners but Lillian mainly associated with other Hungarian prisoners. In the factory in Germany there were 180 Hungarian and 20 Polish girls. The Polish prisoners did not like the Hungarians.

One “mean bitch” a Polish girl named Risha Strasberg wanted all the prisoners to suffer and die. She was in her 40s or 50s and hated Hungarians.

28:30 – 30:30 Lillian was only at Auschwitz for a short while during her second time there (from mid. August to early September) before she was shipped to a German factory in Rochlitz near Leipzig.

The factory was small and it was the best she had been treated since being deported. The prisoners were still hungry, but they were not beaten or given death threats. They slept in wooden barracks.

After a time here Lillian and her fellow prisoners were shipped to a bigger factory in Calw near Stuttgart.

30:30 – 33:00 The work in the factory in Calw was very strenuous. They worked from 7 to 7 with a 15 minute recess. They were only fed soup – nothing solid. Lillian does not know how they survived.

Lillian had never heard about people from the zondercommando or muselman. She only heard and read about the muselmen after the war.

33:00 – 36:30 It was not common but Lillian knows of times when people did steal from each other. She believes that she was about to contain her individuality by staying a good person which stemmed from her morality and her upbringing.

Lillian believes she was treated well by the SS officer who saved her life because he felt sorry for her. He had heard her sing Madame Butterfly and commented to her “You should have been.” She thinks he felt sympathy for her. This is not to stand up for the SS. Lillian also talks about the devils” who were mean and bad just to be bad.

36:30 – 38:00 Lillian saw other groups beaten and bleeding. Her only beating was at Auschwitz when she got separated from her mother.

When she had originally arrived at Auschwitz she and all the other prisoners wanted to know where they were. Lillian approached a girl with a Jewish star badge to ask where she was. Lillian did not realize this girl had a high position. The girl slapped her and said “you will find out.”

38:00 – 40:00 Lillian did not realize until she was working in the factories away from Auschwitz, that the Germans gassed and burned people there. She had been aware of the burning but she thought they had been burning garbage



or clothes. She said she would have gone insane if she knew what was really going on.

Some of the Poles would tell the Hungarians that the Nazis were burning their families, but they did not believe them. They thought they were being mean.

40:00 – 43:00 Lillian only knew of one girl who committed suicide. It was her classmate who hung herself on an electric wire.

Lillian did attempt suicide once, when she was in the smaller factory. She was so hungry that, in her opinion, she went out of her mind. She ran out of the barracks to the electric wire. Her sister stopped her, brought her back to the factory and slapped her. This occurred after a few months at Rochlitz, Lillian says she always wanted to survive, but at that point she just wanted to get away, and she was extremely hungry.

43:00 – 44:00 Lillian said that hunger and cold on the trains was the worst part of the experience of Auschwitz. They had been transported in January. She repeats again here that she does not know what was worse, hunger or thirst – both were extremely physically painful.

[Tape 2, Side A]

0:00 – 1:30 Lillian recounts the worst parts of Auschwitz as hunger, lack of soap and water, the humiliation and the fear. If she had known what was really going on the awareness would have been the worst, but nobody knew what was going on.

They were told in a way what was going on, but they thought they were being teased.

1:30 – 3:00 In the factory at Calw Lillian would sing for other prisoners on Sundays, their day off. This gave her the most happiness of any time during the War, as she got to bring some sense of joy to her campmates.

She knows she sang every Sunday at the smaller factory, but at the larger factory they were so exhausted that she only sang when she could.

3:00 – 4:00 In Rochlitz and Calw the SS women came to her and she would have to sing to them. It was hard for Lillian to sing to her potential murderers – especially because of how hungry she was. These women did not give her extra food to sing, as they had in Auschwitz.

4:00 – 5:00 Lillian sang songs from La Boehme, Madame Butterfly and the Liev de Cadiz.

- 5:00 – 6:30 Here Lillian sings a part of an aria from ‘The Madame of Cadiz.’ This is the last song she sang in Miskolc in a concert before her deportation. She sings a little bit and refuses to go on because her voice is no longer strong.
- 6:30 – 7:30 Lillian was so determined to survive that she and her sister always knew they would survive. Survival was their way of getting even with those who did this to them.
- There were moments when her chance of survival was slim, for example, when the commandant saved her life. She still wonders why he chose to do this.
- 7:30 – 8:30 Lillian here tells the story of a time during the forced march when she was very sick and a German lagerlagerälteste (an “evil woman”) came up to her and asked her age. When she replied “24” the woman told her it was time for her to die and told her to “croak.”
- 8:30 – 11:30 Lillian believes she survived because of her youth, resistance and will to live. Most of the prisoners had this will to live.
- She attributes being with her sister to helping her survive, they lived for each other. It was the love between them and their will power to help each other that strengthened their will to live.
- Lillian does not think that her singing helped her survive, but that the dream of being able to sing publicly again after the war contributed to her will to live. She saw singing for the SS as a survival tactic, because if she refused they might not have let her live.
- 11:30 – 12:30 Lillian will never forgive the Nazis.
- She believes that the Nazis perpetrated the Holocaust because they were mesmerized by Hitler (“a mad man”), who was sick and crazy and convinced them to do this by brainwashing them.
- 12:30 – 16:00 As an example of how many Nazis were brainwashed Lillian tells a story about a guard in Rochlitz – the smaller factory. Here she worked at a machine and sat across from a SS guard. The SS officer was a nice looking young woman who hummed a lot. Lillian began humming back. One day the officer asked Lillian what crime she committed to be there. Lillian tried to explain that they were Jews and they did not do anything other than being Jewish. This woman thought that Jews had big noses and horns and had assumed that all the people working in the factory were murderers. This girl was 18 and uneducated and she had been

brainwashed. Lillian is distraught over the idea that the girl did not know what she was doing and what was going on in her own country.

16:00 – 19:30 During the death march they were forced to march at night and then they were put in stables or barns during the day. They had to march for three weeks, from April 1 – 28.

They were set free on the night of April 28. Their commandant had already left them by this time because of the liberation, and another commandant had taken over. Lillian remembers the commandant calling over a Polish girl to him and showing her some papers. She then came back to the group and told them “Kids, we are free.”

The order that the commandant had was to take them into the woods and machine gun them down. However, but the commandant let them go, as he knew that Hitler was gone, the war was lost and this was his only chance to save himself. He was hoping to be able to say that he had let the Jews go and thus he would look like a good person.

19:30 – 21:00 The woman who told them they were free was a supervisor who was a Jewish woman. They were already in the woods when they were freed because they were supposed to be gunned down.

Upon receiving the news they all just sat down on the ground and waited and rested.

21:00 – 22:30 German soldiers who were trying to hide marched by them. At this point [her group] did not look human. Soldiers asked them “what are you?” One German soldier cursed the “bastards” that did this to them.

22:30 – 23:45 All the people in Lillian’s group survived, except one who had died of typhoid in the factory in Calw. 199 women survived. Lillian considers this a miracle and said it proves there is a God because He wanted them to live.

She says that they should not have survived because they were already overworked and overtired and the forced march should have finished them off.

23:45 – 25:15 Lillian said she will never overcome Auschwitz as it haunts her to this day and comes to her in her sleep and in her nightmares. It is embedded in her.

Lillian thinks if her parents had survived she might have gotten over it in time, but the memory of how they died doesn’t allow this.

Lillian herself never turned bad, she stayed the same person – but she says she could never judge those who did go bad.

25:15 – 26:30 The German government required that she go to a psychiatrist in order to receive her pension. She went to the psychiatrist in America. He told her that she can make it easier for herself to deal with but the memories would never be taken away. He helped her believe that she could lead a normal life but she would never get over it.

26:30 – 28:00 Lillian did not talk about the Holocaust a lot because she did not want to harp on it, but if someone asked her she gave them the straight answers regarding what she lost and how horrible it was.

She found that most people did not want to hear about it and if she did tell them about it they did not know what to say or how to handle it.

28:00 – 29:00 Lillian's husband's parents died in Auschwitz when he was in the American Army. His parents were also Hungarian. He wanted to know her experiences in order to know his parents' experience.

Her husband's name was Andrew Becefi. He immigrated to the US with his uncle when he was 18.

29:00 – 30:00 Lillian and her group were liberated in Innsbruck in Austria. After their liberation they went to a "beautiful" lake where they were free to do whatever they wanted. The Americans gave them a lot of food and put them up in a hotel. They then went to Innsbruck.

Two months after the liberation Lillian could still only wear slippers, no real shoes, as her feet were so injured from marching.

30:00 – 32:00 Two months after the US took over Austria it was given to the French government. At this time Lillian was given a job with the French military as an interpreter. She worked with them for 2 years.

She was 25 now and loved her work. She was in charge of the DPs (displaced persons) and helped them get food, and resettle either back home or in a new country. She says that there was great responsibility with her job and she loved being able to help people. She found the French very nice.

Although Lillian longed to see her hometown and find portraits of her father, there was "no way" she could go back to the country where they killed her parents. She and her sister made a vow never to go back.

32:00 – 33:30 Lillian came to the US with her husband in 1951. They had met in France when he was headquartered in Paris as a war crimes investigator. They got married in 1949.

Lillian and her husband met as small children and had grown up together. They fell in love when they were 15 and 16 years old and re-met in France. When they met after the war he was full of rage over what had happened during the war.

33:30 – 35:30 Lillian tells a story about how her daughter, at age 7, got into trouble for making up stories at school. She had told her teacher, when they were learning about American slavery, that her mother had been a slave and her father had liberated her. When Lillian came in to speak to the teacher she told her that it was all true.

Her daughter had asked Lillian what the number was on her arm and had told her that people put it on her when she was a slave. Her daughter was born in 1960, and Lillian always felt she needed to know about what had happened to her.

35:30 – 37:30 Lillian never became an opera singer. Her voice was never the same after the Holocaust. She thinks it was taken away from her. Both voice coaches and psychologists said it was psychological.

Instead, Lillian went to drama school as she wanted to be on the stage, although she never went through with it. Sidney Poitier was a classmate and he became a good friend. James Dean was also a classmate.

37:30 – 38:30 Lillian's message to the future and to her daughter were that she should never forget what she has been told but she shouldn't dwell on it – that she needs to accept her mother's past.

Lillian said that it was most heartbreaking when her daughter wanted to know why she didn't have any grandparents.

38:30 – 40:00 Lillian wanted desperately to get pregnant and it took her ten years. She retells the story of her meeting her husband after being in love with him growing up. They met by sheer coincidence three years after the war when he was an American GI and they fell in love all over again.