

Transcript of Helen Laks interview

Recorded in 1997

Interviewers: Ali, age 12, and David, age 41

Interviewee: Helen, age 74

Ali – Can you tell me about your life before the Nazis

Helen – Before the Nazis – I came from a family of six children – three brothers and three sisters, a mother and father and a niece who was born in 1936. She was three years old when the war broke out, I was a teenager when the war broke out. Suddenly our home fell apart. My father sent his two sons to Russia, hoping they would survive there. one of the brothers when the war broke out was in the Polish army. Because Poland was divided.

Ali – were both brothers in the Polish Army.

Helen – No, only one brother was in the army. The two other brothers when the war broke out – after a short time, the Germans came in and divided Poland in half. Half to Russia and the other half belonged to Germany – which we lived in as part of Poland. In 1939, right after they put all the Jews in the Ghetto,

Ali – wait we should get to that questions because

Helen – you want to talk about before the war. Like I said we have a family of eight, three sisters and three brothers a father and a mother, We were like middle class. A very loving family.

The war broke out in September, 1939. No, you ask me questions...

Ali- OK. What about school?

Helen – I was going to ?? school and then there was no school at all. Not for Jews. We were not allowed to go to school. They sent us to work.

Ali - how old were you

Helen - 15

David - was it hard labor?

Helen - We worked in the factories. We were lucky we were able to work. Those that couldn't work were sent to camps, right away they were sent to death. Those factories, they were making suits for the army, and they were making some kind of furniture they made for themselves, and send it back to Germany, and they would pay us almost nothing.

David – this was in the town

Helen – yes – until 1942 Are you getting this down?

Ali – What was life like when that happened?

Helen – Well, it was no life at all. They took right away... it was two years in the ghetto in Pabianice, where I still had my mother and father, my three brothers weren't there anymore. One was in the army he never came back.

David - so one brother went to the army

Helen - Pinkus

David - the Polish army

Helen - he was a soldier.

David - it sounds strange thinking of a Jew fighting in the Polish army. There were so anti-Semitic

Helen – Yes but still - well my other brothers didn't go

David – where were they?

Helen - well they were at home. My father thought, you know how it was in Poland. looking for money, they could get off. He didn't want to , Pinkus. He was tall, ...he wanted to go. Yeah. He never came back. That was our first tragedy – when it started. And then my father sent his two sons to the Russian side, hoping they would survive there. They never did, they never came back, because they didn't want to go to deep Russia, they were afraid they would never be able to come home again. So then the Germans came in anyway. When the war broke out, with Russia, as long as they had a pact they were OK, but the war broke out, they invaded Russia. So they invaded Russia, the Germans, they came in at night, to that town, and they first thing that they did, they pulled them out and some survived. They were hiding. And they asked where we they were born. and of course they told them where, and they decided, Germany invaded, so they shot them on the spot. Because they ran away.

David – how did you hear that?

Helen – because there were who some survived.

And so we were in the Ghetto until 1942. It was Zoshia and Helinka, Zoshia was my oldest sister, Sophie in English. There was Rena and my mother, still and father and I was the youngest,

David – were you able to live...

Helen – we lived in one apartment. It wasn't bad. We were all working except my mother. Then when they started sending all the small ghettos they liquated in the central Lodz ghetto. So only those that were working – the healthy ones. So, of course they didn't. ...My mother... I never saw again. Because she didn't work – they took her right away. And my sister was hoping she would survive, if she would hide, in the hospital. Rena was a nurse, Rena remained in that hospital. And she took Zoshia and Helinka and my mother to that hospital. My father was a very healthy man, and I was young. So, we remained home, and they went to the hospital. Meanwhile, the following morning, the Germans came in and took all the sick, out from the hospital, and my father, my father, no was with me, Zoshia was a beautiful woman, and so was Helinka, and German officer felt sorry for her and took her by the hand and put her

on the side, where they were sent to the Lodz ghetto, those healthy ones that were sent to the Lodz ghetto. So, she came a day later than I. and Rena remained, since they cleaned out the Ghetto, so they needed a doctor and two nurses, so they kept her, she came about six weeks later. After the six weeks she came, she didn't recognize us, well I didn't look bad, but Helinka, she was begging for a piece of bread, she was hungry, the little one, she couldn't believe it because she never could not eat. Whatever we had in the house, the best was for Helinka. And then we lived together, until 1942, there was a harvest again they took out the children and the elderly to send to the ovens... so I was with my father and Helinka and I were hiding on the roof. Because we lived in a two family house so it wasn't too high to be up, we heard the dogs barking, but somehow we survived that, it was a whole week.

David – so were you outside?

Helen – no it was like an attic. Afterward we came down, my father got very sick, he did not survive that. But he was anyway lucky, because he would have gone to Auschwitz, and he would have,,,gone to the...just two years later they sent us all out...

David – so you knew when they were rounding people up that...

Helen – we knew – I had a friend who was a policeman

David – because you hear the stories that people didn't believe it

Helen – of course, but as I told you we knew

David - so it was you...

Helen – it was only Helinka, Zoshia, and Rena, but Rena was working in the hospital... they needed her... and father, but father died a short time after that. His heart, he filled up with water, first of all he was always hungry, he was a very big man, he was big eater, At home he used to eat twice a day meat, if there was no meat there was not much to eat,... and then after that we were still in the Ghetto to 1944. In 44 we were sent already to Auschwitz, this was the last. So, Rena remained in the hospital. We were hiding again, but they found us. Father didn't live anymore, but Zoshia, Helinka and I were hiding, but my friend the policeman,

David - a Polish policeman?

Helen - No a Jewish policeman, they had inside the Ghetto Jewish police. You know, they had police, they had a mayor, blah, blah, blah, they had everything. So she came, we brought her back, and she was looking for us, she went from train to train, calling Zoshia, Helen, Hela, that was my Polish name. so she found us so she came up we went together to Auschwitz. So they put us in trains, we were about 60 people, you know they were cattle trains...there were no windows, just small windows on top, but we still didn't believe...that anything... we hoped... they told us that we would go work in the fields, to take with us whatever we can...and we did...i was wearing about three dresses and two sweaters, and then when we came to Auschwitz...

My sister Zoshia, she was only 33, she was a beautiful woman. There was a Capo there and came over to my sister and said to give the child over to the lady. She was really a beautiful woman Zoshia, a figure... and Helinka started crying..."mommy, mommy don't leave me...?? In Polish...), so my sister said "of course not, I will go together with you" and her last words to us to Rena and me was " please do

everything possible for you two to survive. There is no one else in the family". So we helped each other, Rena and I, Rena helped me more than I helped her, because she was a few years older,

Somehow we were in Auschwitz for two weeks, they kept us, they gave us one soup... everyone had to take one sip, god forbid you took two sips, they hit you. They were standing, like eight ten girls, and that's what we were getting twice a day. We were there about 10 days, and from there they sent us supposedly to Ravensbrook. We came to Ravensbrook, that was already Germany. It took a few days, no food, nothing, just lying in those trains... Ravensbrook was terrible. They left us completely outside. Rena, was – days it was very hot, and she was fainting, she needed a little water so, I wasn't afraid, I went over to the German, and I said in "Please" in German, my sister fainted, "just a little water" she gave me, she did, she gave me a little water. But the other girls, everyone wanted a little water, so they spilled it out, everyone wanted to pull it out from me...but she gave me a little water... From there we were there about 10 days or so, and at night when we were trying to keep warm, so all the girls, one was holding the other... so one of the German officers, a women, starting yelling at us... she said in Czech, she was from Czechoslovakia, today you would say that "you are gay" she started hitting us. For the Germans, if you were gay, they would shoot you... but we didn't even know what she was talking about. From there they sent us supposedly to Dachau? to work. Until we came there it burnt down. There was not more Dachau, it was bombed. From there they sent us to another place – Mauthausen – there we worked six months. At least we worked, we got up four in the morning, to wash in cold water everyday. The Germans always made sure we are clean. We walked a few miles, they had a factory in the woods... so they Americans wouldn't bomb it...they wouldn't see it. Because we were in the woods and the trees were above, on the buildings there were trees growing. This was an ammunition factory. So I was working and I was still good looking, and a German, you know they used to watch over us , how do you say it in English, she was watching over us, so I was working and she came over to me once, and I was wearing, a red,, from a schmata, I a made a little red collar, she came over and pulled it off, and she said, if I see you again, I will kill you... she was afraid the Germans,, there was an German, an old man...at the time he was around seventy, I thought he was old, in my eyes when you are 17,, 20 that seems old. He used to bring an apple, so that no one should see, he put it aside, there was a drawer,

David - this was a German soldier?

Helen – no he was a worker, an old man. He was working, he was teaching us how to make... the bullets. So he was teaching us how to use the machine, how to do it. so he used to bring me an apple, once in a while a piece of bread. And once, she must have noticed it, after that she was brutal to me. Whenever she could she did something to me. So I told him, please don't bring me, don't put in anything. And then we were six months, at least we were clean, in the morning they would give us coffee and one piece of dry bread, and when we came back from work we had a bit of soup. At least we had food...

David – Rena was there too?

Helen – of course – we were there together all the time. As the Russians were coming closer, this part of Germany was liberated I think by Russians...as they were getting closer they sent us further – they sent us to Bergen Belsen. And if there is such as think as hell – this was hell.....after a few days I already had typhoid... everybody had typhoid. They kept us in one room,, so one caught from the other. I was still lucky because from my home town, my older sister had a friend who was a doctor. She was a ???? I'll never forget her. She heard a Wittelson, that was my maiden name, she heard I was sick and took me in right away. It was like a hospital, it wasn't a hospital but it was like a hospital but at least.... From there, I

had my first Gall Bladder attack. I thought... I was screaming I was begging them to kill me. So she gave me something – you know a pain killer, this I'll never forget. and Rena found had a friend who was working in the kitchen there, so she took her in –“ Rena is alive , Rena is alive” – Rushka they used to call her. So she took her in, she worked maybe a week, she brought me a little soup for me, a little coffee jj couldn't eat anything, a piece of meat, nothing. She was crying over me kissing me, hugging me, a few days later she came down with typhoid. So we were both laying there, almost dying. But I guess we had years, you have to believe in something, my mother must have looked over us. The English came in, we were lucky that we both couldn't eat. We were laying on a bed, not a bed a wooden, what do you call....when the soldiers are laying.... Because they came and they saw and they felt so sorry for us, so they starting bringing in spam and things like that. And we couldn't eat. There were some French girls, and they starting singing the Marseille, and they starting eating... the following morning they were all dead.

David – can you imagine – they made it thru all of that and then they ate too much and their bodies weren't ready

Helen – of course not. They died.

David – and the Germans – they just ran away?

Helen – they ran away. But we were lucky. If it would have taken one more, a few more days, not even a week, because it was all mined, the whole camp was mined. They didn't want anyone to know. But it was too late, the English came in...

David – so they were planning to blow the while place up with you in there?

Helen – with all of us. I mean that History, that's history. And to hear in the news. There was a General Brown. And there were others to this day, you read, they don't believe their ever was... That six million Jews were killed. That it is just a figment of our imagination. I was there. I lost everybody. And so were a lot of other people who survived. Not many. There are less and less of us. In another few years there will not be anybody. So after the end of the war, the war ended, the Red Cross sent us to Sweden to recuperate. That's how I wound up in Sweden.

Ali- I have a lot of questions here...

Helen - it is very difficult. For me. To go back. To this day. When we meet, friends of ours, unless we play cards, if we don't play cards we start talking, we always go back to those times. For the rest of our lives we will always have it in the back of our minds. We'll never forget, and they are trying now to do everything possible so that the next generation, the younger generation never forgets.

David – talk about the younger generation. *Judy takes baby Jonathan out crying*

Ali – is there any individual war criminals that you remember?

Helen – I don't remember the names anymore, but there was one but he died recently. There was one leader who was the head of the ghetto. His name was Huber, General Huber. It was possible to keep the ghetto. Otherwise they would send him to the Russian front. So there was a tradeoff. None of them wanted to go to the Russian front. Then there was the one in Aushwitz, he used to walk... a very tall guy, Dr. Mengele. He I remember vividly. We were walking naked, and he looked, if anyone had anything of a

scar. There was a woman, she was only forty two at the time, maybe not even forty two, but she was very heavy, and then she lost lots of weight, because during the war...you know...and then her body wasn't as firm, so it was hanging here and there... they took her right away on the other side. He gave her a (*points*). He was standing – you go here, you go here...the left side was alive, and this side was to go to the oven. And her daughter Nina, she is still alive, she in touch with Rena, she was going with her mother. At the time, Nina, she was younger than I so she must have been at the time 1944, maybe she was sixteen. The mother she was younger, she was a friend of Zosia, Zosia was thirty three so she was thirty six.

David – so you say the daughter and the mother were separated?

Helen – they were separated. The daughter went with us and the mother went where Zoshia went. Same thing even young people.

David – whatever happened to him - Mengele

Helen – Mengele, supposedly he died in Brazil. They almost caught him

David – so many of those criminals escaped

Helen -sure a lot of them – most of them. They sent a lot of money ahead of them. They bought their entry, and they lived very wealthy, because they had a lot of money. Jewish jewelry, and paintings. What they didn't steal. They came to the house, and saw a nice chandelier, so they told my sister to take it off. So she was "I cant do that" so my father went up to take it off, one of the glass broke, we were shaking, we thought they would kill him on the spot, so he said "oh swine" They used to steal things, paintings, whatever they liked...then they would send it to their homes. We were thrown out from our home right away. We went into Zoshia. Zoshia lived in the part which they kept for the ghetto. We lived on the main street in Pabianice.

Ali – does the hatred that you have still last today?

Helen – Hatred. That's a very strong word... I would never go to Germany. As a matter a fact, your father went and I told him not to. I didn't like the idea. And he went to the Black – I was walking there, the Black Forest, that's where I was walking. I'll never forgive them. I'm talking about Nazis, you can't say all German's. The younger generation, they weren't even alive then. But you are always afraid. Oh, maybe his mother or father killed my mother or father – my mother was shot...why just because she happened to be born Jewish.

David – where you there when your mother was shot?

Helen – no – they took them. As I told you from the hospital. Their own graves they had to dig. You how I know? One of the boys who went there, supposedly to help the elderly, they were killed to, but he made believe he was dead. he survived he came to the Lodz ghetto and told us. Can you imagine, my mother she was maybe all of four nine, skinny, she had to dig her own grave and then they shot her in the back. Babi Yar, you saw that.... and that was a nation of cultured, educated. And such hatred. I mean, what did we do to them? what did we do to anyone? Why are we hated? What did we ever do to anybody? We work hard. Whatever we have we accomplished just by hard work...and trying to better ourselves. I didn't believe that I would ever live to the point where I will have a granddaughter who will interview me. I still, when I start talking about it... but I guess I have years...Thank G-d you are my future.

Ali- What happened on Liberation Day?

Helen – On Liberation Day I was laying sick with pleurisy. Right after typhoid I was sick. Rena was working as a nurse. She came crying, that was May seventh, “the war ended, the war ended”. We knew there were only two of us left. So we both started crying and holding hands. And shortly after in June, they sent us to Sweden. Rena came with me, because she was my sister, and I was still sick. And we never found anybody. We tried thru Red Cross to see if anybody survived... nobody... uncles, Aunts, cousins...

David – I know that we have Uncle Yasha

Helen – my father’s youngest brother. I didn’t know he was alive. I found out when we lived in Sweden that he was in Italy, He found out and he wrote to us. We knew that Father had two sisters in the United States, and my Mother had a brother. And Rena remembered the others because my father used to talk to her. “Remember, that is my sister, Fransis. They will do anything to help. Do you remember my aunt who has a place on Swan Lake? That’s the one. He was close to her, he was the closest to her.

David – that was your mother’s sister?

Helen – No - my Father’s sister. My father was the oldest, and then there were two sisters, ,four sisters...

David – was she nice to you?

Helen – she was nice....not to the point... I didn’t need any help. When came here, Dad right away went to work. And then he started school, he was working at night – it was very hard life. Your grandfather worked very hard in the beginning, he was working late and going to college. I met Grandpa in Sweden. He was still in the army, the English army.

Ali – what are your feelings toward Germans now?

Helen – well, I’ll never forgive them, as I said. I never told you , I was invited to Ravensbrook for the fiftieth anniversary of liberation. They want me to come. They sent me a letter, they want to show that some survived and they way we look...or whatnot...at first I said I’ll think about it, and the second letter I said no. and she called me, two letters and then she called she was a doctor or something. I said I changed my mind – I don’t think I am able to do it. That too bad, we were hoping...they wanted to pay for the hotel, for the trip, ...but... I can’t...it would be too much for me. But I do have friends who go to Auschwitz ever second year. You know our cousin Chris took the children to Auschwitz to show which camps they were. David went and the children. Maybe someday... maybe when you are old enough and I’ll be able to, and I’ll still be around...

Ali – Do you think you will ever go?

Helen – To Auschwitz? I don’t think your grandfather would let me go. He is afraid I will collapse there.

David - Interesting, you say that Auschwitz wasn’t the worst of it

Helen – I wasn’t there long enough. I was there 10 days. And we didn’t work. They just kept us. Some of them remained there and went to work. For us they sent us away to work in Germany. This was actually Poland, Auschwitz was Poland still. In Polish it was // //. But they sent us to Germany. And we were really young. They picked. The cream of the crop, that was us. I had no hair what so ever in Auschwitz. We

thought they were going die. because they gave us soap. They shaved our heads off. But I guess they needed workers. Did you ever watch the movie Holocaust? They go into the gas chambers. They give them soap to wash....

I thank this country to allow us to build a new life. To have family, children, grandchildren. And I hope it will never happen again. Like words say: "Never Again". Have you ever heard that saying?