

**The Southern Institute
For Education and Research
at
Tulane University**

Presents

**STORIES OF
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
IN NEW ORLEANS**

ANNE LEVY

ANNE LEVY WAS FOUR YEARS OLD WHEN THE NAZIS ATTACKED AND OCCUPIED HER NATIVE POLAND IN SEPTEMBER 1939. ANNE'S FAMILY SURVIVED TWO YEARS IN THE WARSAW GHETTO. IN JANUARY 1943, THE FAMILY ESCAPED THE GHETTO AND SURVIVED THE REST OF THE WAR PRETENDING TO BE CHRISTIANS.

ANNE, HER PARENTS, AND HER YOUNGER SISTER LILA WERE AMONG THE VERY FEW JEWISH FAMILIES THAT SURVIVED THE HOLOCAUST INTACT. THEY MOVED TO NEW ORLEANS IN 1949.

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY THE SOUTHERN INSTITUTE'S PLATER ROBINSON.

MAP OF POLAND, ZOOMING IN ON LODZ

AL (Anne Levy)

Pr (Plater Robinson, interviewer)

AL I was born in Lodz, Poland, on July 2, 1935.

PHOTOGRAPH OF FAMILY IN THE WOODS 1:02

Lived with my mother and father and my sister, a sort of typical middle class life. I remember the pleasant, the most pleasant time that I remember is Sunday afternoons with my father, going for ice cream, and balloons, and enjoying things that children enjoyed.

PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE'S FATHER 1:14

That was the way...we lived, in a very nice apartment, a large building. My father had his own a business that he, lumber business, which his family was in.

PHOTGRAPH OF ANNE'S FAMILY ZOOMED IN ON HER MOTHER 1:41

My mother was a house wife.

PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE'S MOTHER WITH ANNE AND LILA 1:45

She even had help for my sister and I. So, typical people as we would think of middle class American.

PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE AND LILA AT THE BEACH 2:02

PR And you took vacations. And there's one lovely photo of you and Lila, your sister, as children before the war, at the beach.

AL We did. We have a couple of pictures that were saved. And that was in the countryside. My parents always teased me that I was a dare devil, because there was big German shepherd there in the country and I had no fear.

PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE AND LILA 2:15

I would go into the dog house with German shepherd. It was good times. I was not afraid. Maybe it made me a better person in the long run that I was not afraid.

PHOTOGRAPH OF SOLDIERS CARRYING A FRONTIER BARRIER 2:37

PR And then comes the 1st of September 1939, when the Germans, unannounced, attack Poland. And Lodz, located in western Poland, is quickly over-run. The German Army arrives in Lodz on 7th of September, 1939. Your father flees to Russia, believing that they won't harm the women and children.

AL My first memories of that the beginning of war is when everybody in house that was there was very upset crying and looking out the window. Out of curiosity I did too, and what was happening was that there was large reform orthodox temple across the street.

PHOTOGRAPH OF BURNING OF ORTHODOX TEMPLE 3:18

And everybody was upset because the Germans were taking out all the prayer shawls and prayer books and putting them in a heap in front of synagogue and finally torched it. This is how I remember the beginning of the war.

PR Your mother dictated a memoir and in it she says that the Germans handed out cookies and candy to the non-Jewish population who stood and watched as the synagogue burned.

AL Well, that was for their propaganda, to show people that everything was all right for them. It was a happy time for them. It was a very, very hard time for the Jewish population.

PR And do you remember that first day when you were ordered to wear an armband with the Star of David?

AL Well, my mother was sitting there having to sew this star on and we were actually wearing it on front and back.

PHOTOGRAPH OF YELLOW STAR WITH 'JUDE' WRITTEN ON IT 4:27

So we if went outside you were forced to wear it. So whoever saw you in street would know you were Jewish. So, my sister in a stroller had to have Star of David on. It was a yellow star that in the middle said "Jude," "Jew." So no matter if you were two and a half or if you were eighty you had to wear it if you were outside.

PR And this was the first time that you recognized that you were Jewish?

AL I never thought of myself as anything other than just as a child. "Jewish" didn't mean

that much. We were assimilated Jews. My parents were assimilated. They didn't look, you know, they didn't wear outer garments that you would obviously know that they were Jewish. We looked like everyone else. You'll see the pictures. Looked like any other normal Polish children. Except that we were Jewish.

PR Now you were different.

AL Very different. That's when the difference began. That's when I felt we were different. And being Jewish was something that caused grief. And you know was just part of the struggle that began.

PR And you were expelled from your apartment by the Nazis.

AL Well, when my father left the three of us together. My sister, my mother, and I. She received orders that she would have to vacate the premises. Because it was such a large building that the Germans would be taking over. And she had a couple hours to clear out, but before she cleared out she had to make sure that the linens on the beds were changed, and the table was set for company. And she was only able to take two little suitcases with her to carry for my sister and I and herself. It was a terrible, terrible time for her. Having to leave everything that she owned and not knowing what would happen. I can't imagine the feelings she that she had to go through.

PHOTOGRAPH OF HENRY TEMPLEHOFF 6:57

PR You had an uncle in Warsaw, Henry Tempelhof. He was a mechanical engineer.

PHOTOGRAPH OF HENRY'S WIFE, MARY MJESTER 7:01

His wife was a doctor. And so your mother made the decision, without your father present, to go to Warsaw, that it was perhaps safer in Warsaw. And when you left Lodz, your mother said, "We left this place with a big scar in our heart."

AL Actually, my father tried to get us back to Russia, but we just never made it because my sister became ill. And so my mother became frightened, and she decided to go to Warsaw. And when we went to Warsaw, the ghetto was there, and all the Jews were in this one...they just kept bringing more and more Jewish people into the Warsaw ghetto. She went there because my sister was ill, and I imagine that by having a sister in law that was a physician she thought we'd be better off there. Of course, it turned out to be the worst place that we could have gone to.

How do you describe the Warsaw ghetto?

PHOTOGRAPH OF EMACIATED WOMAN AND TWO CHILDREN ON THE STREET IN THE WARSAW GHETTO 8:03

Food became such a precious possession, that we didn't have it and there were times when she had to go stand in line to go get ration of bread that she would receive and one time she told us she came back she had received her bread and was just leaving when somebody that was really starving ran up to her and stole her bread and that was all she had to feed Lila and I.

PHOTOGRAPH OF STARVING WOMAN SCREAMING WITH CHILD IN ARMS ON THE STREET IN THE WARSAW GHETTO 8:37

I can't imagine at this stage of my life as a mother and a grandmother, when children tell you they're hungry and they want to eat and you have nothing to give them. It's very hard

for me to understand how she did it.

PHOTOGRAPH ZOOMING OUT OF A MALNURISHED MAN CARRYING A CHILD

9:04

PR There were almost five hundred thousand Jewish people in the Warsaw ghetto and almost a quarter of them died of starvation.

AL Well, I know exactly how they felt because as we lived in the Warsaw ghetto and as it was progressively getting worse and worse. The atrocities in streets were horrendous. I mean, you could look out the window and you would see dead bodies in the street.

PHOTOGRAPH OF DEAD EMACIATED MAN ON THE STREET **9:35**

You would see a wagon picking up all these corpses and trying to clean up. The worst thing that I remember is that seeing people that just dropped in street, they were dead, but because maybe they had a sock or a shoe, or a pair of pants, or some kind of clothing on, somebody then would be passing by and would see these articles and just a dead body who doesn't need it any longer, and they would cover up the body with a newspaper and take whatever possession this poor soul had.

PR Clothing?

AL Anything. And to this day the worst thing I can see is somebody putting a newspaper over themselves because it just brings back the memory. And, this is what we saw. And people, children, were starving.

PR And you were on the verge of death and all of a sudden your father returned.

AL It was um...I wouldn't be sitting here telling you this story if he hadn't shown up.

PR He smuggled himself into the Warsaw ghetto coming from Russia when the war between Germany and Russia broke out. It was a Saturday morning, your mother wrote, in December 1941.

AL And she went to the door and passed out because of the shock that he came back. It was two years that we were separated, so by this time my sister and I were like the rest of the population, emaciated from hunger, and we were to the point of just sitting around in the bed not really moving a lot because of weakness. And I remember my father saying that when he saw us he was afraid to touch us. He was afraid to touch us because we looked so frail. And he brought us back to life because he brought with him bread, butter, and he cut up the bread into little cubicles, and he gave us that a little at time, knowing full well that if he gave us too much and our stomachs were no longer used to it, that we would become ill. That's the reason when I say what happened to us I say that I wouldn't be sitting here telling this story if he hadn't come back, that my mother and sister and I would have perished as every one else did.

PR And your father was a wizard with his hands. He had "golden hands." He could create anything. And so he gets a job in a German factory in the Warsaw ghetto, becomes a manager. But then the raids begin and he and your mother are at the factory and to protect you he fashioned a false bottom in a chest. And you and Lila your sister would stay in that.

AL Well, it was, my mother called it a vegetable bin. A chest that would hold things. You lifted the top and you would store things in it. And so my father put old rags and old newspapers on the top so if you lifted it, it didn't look very nice, you wouldn't want to go through it. But underneath he had built two little chairs, two little benches, or two little seats and a potty and when they went to work, they left with us whatever they had, some water, whatever bread they had, and they would put us into this piece of furniture, and put it against the wall and go to work. If you ask me today how did we do this? It's very hard for me to explain, because having grandchildren it's not that easy to keep children quiet. But it was a different time and place. Children in Europe were supposed to be seen and not heard. As my mother later on in life tried to explain it, she told everyone that she had two very obedient daughters. And I think it was, we knew. We grew up very fast and realized that this was a matter of life and death. That we had to be quiet. That we couldn't talk just anytime we wanted to, once we were in there we had to be quiet. There were times that because when everybody went to work, older people, or able people had to go to work, the Germans would come through building, and you could hear them walking up the stairs. And they came into the room, you could hear them talking, and yet we weren't found. I always think back, had they brought with them the German dogs, shepherds, of course we would have been found. But somebody was looking over us and they didn't. And my parents would come back and of course at night we'd be out with them. There were many things you can't explain, that for some reason I think the Almighty was looking over us.

PR Did you think that God was on your side during the war?

AL As a child, during the war, I never thought of God. I think in my later years now I look at it as, my mother talked to God all the time,

PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE'S MOTHER 16:04

and she really believed in talking to God and she believed that that's what brought her through, what helped her survive and deal with all these things that she had to deal with. Now at my age when I look at it, I look at it like, it is a miracle. Things did happen for a reason. And the only way you could explain it was God was watching over us.

PHOTOGRAPH OF GERMAN SOLDIERS MARCHING PEOPLE OUT OF THE GHETTO 16:35

PR And then the final liquidation of the ghetto commences and in January 1943 your father, through his connections, namely a Polish non-Jewish military officer, arranges for y'all to be taken out of the ghetto, hidden in a garbage truck, and suddenly you're on the 'Aryan side' of the wall- outside of the ghetto. And you have arranged to find lodging with a Polish Christian family.

PHOTOGRAPH OF 'RIGHTEOUS GENTILE,' NOW AN OLD WOMAN IN HER APARTMENT 17:23

AL Well, this is what we call the "Righteous Gentiles," this mother and daughter, the daughter must have been in her twenties they took us in, and they didn't have a very large place, but there was enough room for us to move in. They made an excuse to their neighbors that family was coming from the countryside. That would explain why we were there. The problem there was that we were to live as Christians, as Catholics, and live like the two women. I'm olive complexioned and have dark, curly hair. My sister was fair, she still is, and had lighter hair. She looked very Polish. And I looked Jewish. So there was a problem that if people would notice me, that I might give them, give everyone away. The Poles would be killed just as we would be just for hiding, for having us there.

PR That was the Nazi penalty. Giving shelter to a Jewish person invited death for you and your family.

AL That was the ultimate crime that you could commit. So my mother would take my sister out, my father found a job and he went to work. And my mother would take sister and make believe, you know, they did go to church and go shopping. With me I stayed inside. If company came, I would have to hide in a single door armoire and sit in there until company left. They tried to even dye my hair. They took some old bark off a tree, and boiled it in real hot, I mean boiled water, and tried to dye my hair. Well, it didn't work. My mother feeling sorry for me, since I wasn't getting fresh air, wasn't getting out, at night when it was dark, she would put a babushka on my head, and let me sit on the balcony. There was a little balcony there. And I did this for a few nights. One day, evidently the woman across the street noticed that I was sitting out there only at night, and she went to the janitor that was taking care of the building and told him. She noticed that we must be hiding some Jews there because of what was happening, and that unless they reported us, she would. And, of course, when my father came from work and heard the news, then panic set in because we would all be demised, the Poles as well as us.

But because of his "golden hands" and he was such a good worker, he went to his boss who owned a lumber yard and explained to him that we could no longer stay in this apartment because other family members were coming, and would he allow him to put us in a lumber yard, build a shed that was in the back. He also would be able to be a watchman. And this is what he did. The boss did let us move in. He patched up real fast a little hut, I remember, black tar paper, no lights, you know, that sort of thing, and this is where we went to move, we moved in.

PR And the owner of the lumber yard suspected that you were Jewish but looked

the other way.

AL He definitely did. What happened was that as we had false papers, my parents never changed their name. The last name was Skoretzki, which is a very Polish name. Yet the name was known in the lumber business, because my father's family was known for lumber. And somebody evidently must have questioned him, "Why do you have this man Skoretzki?" He did. He looked the other way. Not 'til after the war did my father really know that the man knew.

PR So many miracles.

AL Unexplainable. It makes you think why us? Why not somebody else? You just can't explain some of these things.

PR Anne, your parents saved you but in a sense you and Lila saved them, because you gave them a reason to continue struggling.

AL I think that's true. I never thought of it like that. But they had a reason through all this horrible things, times that they had to go through

PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE'S FATHER 22:35

PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE'S MOTHER 22:44

All the decisions. They were just one step ahead of us getting caught. So, it's true. They had an incentive. They had a reason to go through all this, and not to give up.

PHOTOGRAPH OF FAMILY ZOOMING IN ON ANNE AND LILA 23:05

PR So finally the war comes to an end. The Soviet Army arrives, the Germans flee to the west. And your mother goes to register after the war.

AL Well, she went back to Lodz to see, first of all to register but when you registered people would come in and see who survived, and you put your name on a list, and people everyday come by and check the list. When she went to register, she said, 'I have a husband and two children.' They looked at her like she was mad. Because the Germans had killed a million and half children. There were no children. My sister and I were an oddity. She actually had to bring us to the office and prove that we were her children. Can you imagine what it must have felt like? They survived, they finally could be free and admit that they had children, and people didn't believe them.

PR So after the war, you lived a number of years in a German village, ironically, and then in 1949 you come to New Orleans. And in Poland you had been persecuted because of your religion, but in New Orleans, you could ride in the front of the bus because of the white skin.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF A BLACK MAN AT A BUS STATION OUTSIDE THE
'COLORED WAITING ROOM.'* 24:35**

AL I worked at this time already, and I was riding buses back and forth to work, and that little plaque that said "colored only," people would get on the bus much older than I, and I'd been brought up where you were supposed to give your elders your seat, you know, you're the young one, somebody older comes in, you're supposed to be polite, and I couldn't do it. And it was impossible, hard to be to move. I could sit anywhere I want, and it was very hard to move that sign just so I could sit in that seat. Because as long as that sign was there, no matter how many empty seats were behind me, the blacks could not sit there.

PR And I wonder, you know, coming from a world that was destroyed, what message you have for people here in this world.

AL It really hurts, and my only contribution and I hope this is the only thing I can contribute to, knowing what it feels like to be persecuted for being Jewish. The same thing goes for black,

PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE SPEAKING TO STUDENTS 26:04

that to teach the younger people, to teach in schools what tolerance is all about. You have to embrace, and be willing to listen to the other side. I mean, we're all the same. And it's a matter of teaching the younger people to be tolerant. Just because you believe in a different God, just because your skin is black or white, if we could ever, ever come to the point that we would judge a person who they are, rather than their looks, or what God they believe in.

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Southern Poverty Law Center**

**In The Warsaw Ghetto,
Summer 1941,
Willi Georg**

**Lodz Ghetto, Inside a
Community Under Siege,
Alan Adelson
and Robert Labides**

**The Warsaw Ghetto,
In Photographs,
Ulrich Keller**

**Troubled Memory,
Lawrence N. Powell**

**Warszawskie Getto, 1943-1988,
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