

The Southern Institute
for Education and Research
at
Tulane University

Presents

STORIES OF
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
IN NEW ORLEANS

EVA GALLER

EVA GALLER, ELDEST OF EIGHT CHILDREN, WAS BORN IN OLESZYCE, A TOWN IN EASTERN POLAND WHERE JEWS LIVED AMONG POLES AND UKRAINIANS. WHEN THE GERMANS ATTACKED POLAND IN SEPTEMBER 1939, EVA WAS 14 YEARS OLD.

THREE THOUSAND JEWISH PEOPLE LIVED IN OLESZYCE BEFORE WORLD WAR II. ONLY TWENTY SURVIVED. AFTER THE WAR, EVA WAS REUNITED WITH HENRY GALLER, HER PRE-WAR 'SWEETHEART' FROM OLESZYCE. THEY WERE MARRIED ON DECEMBER 24, 1946

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

PR Plater Robinson

EG Eva Galler

PHOTOGRAPH OF EVA AS A YOUNG WOMAN

EG I was born in Poland in a little town, Oleszyce, in 1924.

PR And it was a multi-ethnic community of seven thousand people.

PHOTOGRAPH OF FARMING COUPLE ON HORSE DRAWN CART.

OLESZYCE IN 1989, 44 YEARS AFTER WORLD WAR II

EG We shared, like an equal part, Polish Catholics, Ukrainians who were Greek Catholic, and Jews.

PHOTOGRAPH OF OLESZCE TOWN CENTER

We were all friendly to each other.

PHOTOGRAPH OF WOMAN WALKING WITH A FLOCK OF GEESE

We lived there many years, but we weren't like on social basis, we weren't too close. We were very cordial to each other. People did business with each other.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MAN WALKING DOWN A DIRT ROAD NEXT

TO SOME HOUSES

And it was a quiet life. We didn't know anything better, and we didn't have any complaints.

PHOTOGRAPH OF TWO YOUNG GIRLS AT KIOSK

Everybody lived their own life.

PR And your family?

PHOTOGRAPH OF FAMILY WEDDING, ZOOMING IN ON EVA

EG I had an extended family, I had a big family. I by myself, one of eight - the oldest of eight children. And we had uncles and aunts, and everybody lived in the same city the whole time. Unfortunately, I am the only one left. From eight children, I am the only one from the whole family.

PR In the photograph you stand off to the left and below you kneeling down is your sister Hanna.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF HANNA WITH FAMILY

EG Well, she was just a year younger than I was. We were very close. Of course all the children were close. But she was next to me.

PHOTOGRAPH OF HANNA ON THE STREET

And she had a beautiful singing voice. Beautiful. She sung in the choir, in the school, you could just hear her voice.

PR You had a brother who was particularly gifted in ...

PHOTOGRAPH OF PINKUS

SEPTEMBER 1, 1939

EG I had brother, Pinkus, who was gifted in art. He could draw - he was a little boy - anybody like a photograph.

PR On the first of September 1939, the Nazis attack Poland. Seventeen days later, on September 17th, the Soviets invade Poland from the East. Oleszyce, located in Galicia, in the south-east corner of Poland, was really in the middle.

EG The motorcycles came first, and the tanks and they right away wanted to scare the people. Not just the Jews. When they went through the main street, they shot right, whoever was on the street was shot. But the main objective was just how to start to degrade the Jews. Before they killed them they have to degrade them, into turn to nothing.

PR And then one day the Nazis summoned the Jewish population to the market place.

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE MARKETPLACE IN PRESENT DAY OLESZYCE 1989 ZOOMING IN ON THREE MEN

PHOTOGRAPH OF MAN ON MOTORCYCLE WITH CHILD IN THE TOWN CENTER

PHOTOGRAPH ZOOMING OUT OF WHAT LOOKS LIKE A TRAIN STATION

EG They told us to assemble, everybody out from house, all people, sick people, children, everybody had to go out to the market square. If not, they

would be killed. Well, we came out to market square - here we see a bonfire, a bonfire made from all the Jewish prayer books from the synagogue. They emptied out the synagogue. The torah scrolls, the books everything what they found in the synagogues. There were three synagogues in city. From all the synagogues and they put them on the bonfire. When we came to the city, they put a match, they started the bonfire. At the same time we turned our heads, at the same minute, you saw all the three synagogues, we saw on fire. When fire started, they ordered, they pushed young girls to take the old men to dance. We should dance everybody around. We cried. And our neighbors were standing around, all the people, because you knew everybody, it's a small city.

PHOTOGRAPH ZOOMING IN ON A WOMAN IN OLESZYCE

The non-Jews watched like a show, and laughed, and we cried. The feeling that time was so painful. 'Look, we are nothing.' I remember I looked, a dog passed the street. I felt like, I was a young girl and I felt, 'Look, that dog is luckier than I am.' I envied him. I saw he had a master, he was fed. We didn't have anybody to take our side. They were able to do with us what they wanted. So, after the fire subsided, they told us to line up four-by-four and march through the whole city. It was the unhappiest I think, well, next to losing everybody, that was a very unhappy moment in my life.

PR They dehumanized you.

EG Yes.

PR A step on the way to destruction.

EG Right. Then was an order to go. They organized ghetto in neighboring city which seven kilometers from Oleszyce where we lived, Lubaczow. The city was Lubaczow. They closed in a city block. One day they ordered us to take just belongings, whatever we were able to carry. And we had to walk those seven

kilometers to the ghetto.

PR And would you describe the ghetto, please.

EG The ghetto consisted of one city block. Whoever came first got a room. One room. We had a normal size room. We lived thirty-seven people in one room. It was my family, my uncle, and his wife, and his family, some aunts and uncles. Together we were thirty seven people. Now there wasn't any running water. Water was brought in with buckets from the pump. We didn't have any electricity. It was a little wood stove in the corner. We wanted something to cook, but there wasn't nothing what to cook. People lived even on the street. They lived in halls. They lived in the steps they lived in the attics. Where ever they had place. Because of the tightness and proximity and the unsanitary conditions. There were epidemics. Different infectious diseases. So we lived so close, that they spread very quickly. Many people died. Everyday were funerals. Now, to eat, they delivered every day flour and potatoes. It wasn't enough even for one person not to be hungry and not for a whole family. We had to divide crumbs to everybody. And nothing what to do in that ghetto. Not a newspaper. One wall of the ghetto faced the city square in Lubaczow, but the windows from outside were boarded up that we should be able to look out what is going on. And we didn't have a radio, no newspaper. Not any news to know what is going in the world, how the war progresses. We didn't know anything.

PR But there was a Jewish boy who was sent to the nearby death camp at Belzec, who escaped and came back to the ghetto.

PHOTOGRAPH OF BELZEC TRAIN STATION

BELZEC IN 1992

EG And he came and he told us, "People, you should know those trains are going to Belzec," which was located a few stations, a few stations from

Lubaczow.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF BELZEC IN '89

and this only a death camp. When people are coming in they are ordered to take off their clothes and go to take a bath.

PHOTOGRAPH OF PEOPLE AT SITE OF BELZEC DEATH CAMP IN 1990.

Separate men and women. When they come in, the doors are closed from outside, and from the showerheads is coming out poison, gassed, and everybody is gassed.

PHOTOGRAPH OF GIRL AT SITE OF BELZEC DEATH CAMP, HOLDING BONE FRAGMENTS.

In a few minutes everybody's dead. Then they left a few men they should carry out those bodies to the crematorium and burn them and that's where we will go.

PR This Jewish boy, this slave at a death camp, how did he escape from Belzec?

EG I guess he's the only person I ever heard that escaped from Belzec because from Belzec it is not one survivor because it was strictly a death camp. But by chance he told us that a German helped him to escape. A German, he found a German who was a saint, and he let him escape. But the boy died anyhow later. He escaped and he told us what had happened. And then everybody was already on alert. We knew what is going to happen with us, and so people tried to build hiding places. Like our family had a double wall in the attic. From this house people should be able to escape. But it didn't help, because everything was recovered. They found all the hiding places.

PR And then on January 7 [8], 1943, they take you to the train station at Lubaczow.

EG Yes, in 1943, in January. It was so cold, the coldest...we were shivering in the houses, because we didn't have any wood to make warm the houses. And it was so cold. German trucks came in. They went from house to house to chase out everybody from the house. And everybody whom they didn't find before, they found them later. Or those people who were hidden and weren't discovered when they came out and they found them and they were shot later. They walked us to the train station.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF LUBACZOW TRAIN STATION IN 1990

I remember the snow was crunching under the shoes because it was so cold outside. Everybody was shaking. And we came to the train station and there already cattle trains waiting for us. And the German soldiers told everybody to go into the train and they were hitting and children were crying. It was a big chaos by the station. It is difficult to describe. Because families wanted to keep together, and somebody was lost – then they were screaming. Finally we were inside, and the door from outside was closed, locked from outside. When we came, we were stuffed inside like herrings next to each other,

PHOTOGRAPH OF YOUNG EVA

And there were barbed wire on those little windows. Everybody tried, who was close to that window, to pull out those barbed wires. In the meantime, the German soldiers, the SS people, were sitting on the roof. They were warm dressed, of course. They were prepared that time for that weather. They were watching nobody should escape. When the train started moving, people started to crawl out, to push from inside that little window. As the people went out, we heard shots. We couldn't see anything, but we heard shots.

PHOTOGRAPH OF EVA'S FAMILY ZOOMING IN ON PARENTS

Finally, my father, and that was the last time my father spoke to me: and he said, 'You oldest of three, you three.' For me, my sister Hanna,

GROUP PHOTOGRAPH OF FAMILY ZOOMED IN ON THE CHILDREN

my brother. "You go out. Maybe somebody survive to be able to tell what is happening to us, because we know where we are going. And we have to stay with the little children together. Because the little children no matter what, they won't be able to survive, even if they were free."

PHOTOGRAPH OF AZRIEL

But my little brother, the youngest, who was three years old, and he started to cry, "I want to live too! I want to live too!" And these words stayed with me the whole life. No matter how I tried to forget.

PHOTOGRAPH OF BERKO

PHOTOGRAPH OF HANNA

First my brother, he was the first, then my sister. I was the last one. When I jumped, pushed out from inside, I ended up in a ditch, a deep ditch of snow, and probably they shot after me, too, but as the train was in motion somehow the bullet didn't hit me – didn't hit me, didn't even touch me. And I listened and I heard the train and when the train I didn't hear any more the noise, the train passed by, I got up, and the first thing - we wore in our city some yellow star, we had an armband with star, I took off that armband, and I said, "No more. I'm not wearing it. Whatever happens, I'm not wearing it no more."

PR The armband with the Star of David.

EG Star of David, yes, and I walked back first to find my sister and my brother. As I walked back I saw just corpses. All those people whom I knew, I knew everybody. It was a small Jewish community. Everybody was dead. I found my sister and my brother dead. From that train I was the only one to survive.

PR So once you jumped from train you went back to Oleszyce.

EG Yeah, after I found the dead bodies. And I saw I can't help nothing, so I go back to Oleszyce to a lady, a widow lady, she was Polish, to go to her. I walked and I came back to her. She was afraid to let me in because it was a law, whoever saves, I mean hides a Jew, their whole family will be killed. She was afraid that her family will be killed. She let me stay 'till evening. Later she gave me a shawl to keep warm, half bread, few Polish zlotys, and I went. She told me to go. It was dark outside. I went to the end of the village. It was another family that I knew. They didn't open door. They were afraid to let me in. They were farmers. I went to the stables, where they had the cows. I figured I will stay there to get a little warm. I went into the stables, and it was a little calf, a new calf was born in the corner, I embraced that calf and lie down with that calf to fell asleep. The lady came in later to check on that calf, and she invited me in, she saw me, she felt sorry. Let me tell you, she told me, right in the morning to go. She was also afraid that law, to hide the Jews. So I walked thirty-two kilometers to another train station that nobody knew me. And I bought a ticket to Cracow. I came to Cracow. In Cracow, I didn't have anybody to go. Sat in the train station at night, daytime I walked around. Took a few days I didn't have any more money, I didn't have any more bread. One day I went out a little further. It was a farmer's market outside market where they sold vegetables. The farmers brought out to the city, vegetables. As I went to that market, I saw big trucks are coming in, and they started to pull out young people. They took me, too. At that time,, somehow I wasn't so scared because I

saw they were not Jews. This time I pretended to be Polish, but I found out later, because the German men all were fighting a war, they were in the army, the small farmers didn't have people to work, so they appealed to the occupied countries people, that they should volunteer for work in Germany, but not too many wanted volunteered. So they tried to take by force. So I was caught between these Polish boys and girls, because in Cracow they didn't have Ukrainians. Only Polish people. And they took us after a physical examination. Those people they didn't have documents just as I didn't have, because they went just down to shop. So they asked us just the name and birth date, which I gave everything invented. Because I gave them a Polish name. Of course, I didn't give them my name.

PHOTOGRAPH OF EVA'S FAKE DOCUMENTS

PR And what name did you invent?

EG Katarina Chukofska. And even the birth date with the birth city another city, because I didn't want anything with Oleszyce anymore, I was scared. Anyhow, they took us to Vienna, and in Vienna the farmers came to pick their workers, one family picked me, which was a German family who lived on the Austrian-Czechoslovakian border.

PHOTOGRAPH OF EVA AS YOUNG GIRL

We were eighty kilometers from Vienna. There I survived until the end of the war, pretending to be Christian. Went every Sunday to church, and tried to... whatever anybody did, I did, too, because I wasn't familiar with the Catholic, they were Catholic, with the Catholic religion. I saw how important to know different religions. That time I was too much sheltered, because we lived in a different atmosphere. There I survived. To that part the Russians came in and liberated us. We thought to go back to Poland. Then two younger men joined us: one name was 'David,' and David decided to marry my friend Annie,

PHOTOGRAPH OF WEDDING PARTY ZOOMING ON HENRY GALLER

PHOTOGRAPH CLOSE-UP OF HENRY GALLER IN UNIFORM

And we prepared for a wedding, and David had to go Cracow. My husband Henry, he was in the Polish Army, and he came back, he fought from Stalingrad to Berlin. He came. The First Polish Army by the name of *Kosciuszko Division*. So by that time he came back to Poland. He was stationed in Poznan. He was supposed to go to Warsaw with some papers, change trains in Cracow, and David and Henry recognized each other on that station. Henry wanted to know who survived from our city. David told him, "You have to come to the wedding. I won't tell you." So Henry couldn't go, because he was in the army, he didn't have a permit, so he came AWOL to the wedding. When he opened door, I was sitting on the chair. I thought I was seeing a ghost. I almost fainted, and Henry came to me and said,

PHOTOGRAPH OF HENRY GALLER IN UNIFORM

"We are getting married." I said, "No, we are not getting married right now, because I'm going next week to Sweden." I think it was the end of June, the beginning of July I left for Sweden. Henry came in November and illegally on a coal boat. When he came to Sweden, we were married in Sweden, December 24 1946.

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE MARRIED COUPLE

PR You eventually came to New Orleans in 1962.

EG Yes.

PR And now you and I travel the Deep South telling your story to high school and middle school kids,

PHOTOGRAPHS OF EVA WITH STUDENTS

and I wonder: what's the message you want to impart to them?

EG Well, first of all, everybody should know, and this everybody, not just children, this is, I lived in several countries, the United States is the best country in the world to live. The second is, we have all to avoid prejudice and hatred. Because all those atrocities result, their results, only from hatred and prejudice. We have to teach our children, we have to start with the young, older people sometimes difficult to convince no matter what you will tell them,

PHOTOGRAPH OF EVA WITH STUDENTS AND OF OTHER STUDENTS

it is ingrained in their character to hate. But I think everybody should be treated equal and everybody should be given a chance. And I hope the history won't repeat itself.

PHOTOGRAPH OF FAMILY WEDDING ZOOMING OUT OF EVA GALLER

Of course, I can't forget that I had a family, what way my family was taken away from me. I hope that forgiveness will teach people not to do what was done before.

PR There's a Polish poet, Wyspianski, and you've quoted him before to me.

PHOTOGRAPH OF HOUSE ZOOMING IN ON ROOF AND CHIMNEY

EG Yeah, I remember still a Polish quote (in Polish). It means, "Remember the good what people did to you, but try to forget the bad."

PHOTOGRAPH OF EVA AND FAMILY

EVA AND HENRY GALLER HAVE THREE DAUGHTERS.
AFTER THE FAMILY MOVED TO NEW ORLEANS IN 1962,
HENRY OPERATED 'MR. HENRY CUSTOM TAILOR.' EVA
TAUGHT HEBREW. IN 1979, SHE RETURNED TO SCHOOL
AND EARNED A HISTORY DEGREE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW ORLEANS. "IT WAS THE HAPPIEST TIME OF MY LIFE,"
EVA SAID.

EVA AND HENRY HAVE EIGHT GRANDCHILDREN.

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