

The Southern Institute
for Education and Research
at
Tulane University

Presents

STORIES OF
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
IN NEW ORLEANS

FELICIA FUKSMAN

FELICIA FUKSMAN WAS NINETEEN YEARS OLD WHEN THE NAZIS ATTACKED HER NATIVE POLAND IN SEPTEMBER 1939. SHE LIVED WITH HER PARENTS, TWO BROTHERS, AND TWO SISTERS IN LODZ, A LARGE INDUSTRIAL CITY. DURING THE NAZI OCCUPATION, FELICIA WORKED AS A NURSE IN THE LODZ GHETTO; IN 1944, SHE WAS SENT TO RAVENSBRUCK CONCENTRATION CAMP.

LIBERATED BY RUSSIAN TROOPS AT WITTENBERG LABOR CAMP IN APRIL 1945, FELICIA RETURNED TO LODZ AND DISCOVERED THAT NO RELATIVE HAD SURVIVED. SHE MOVED TO NEW ORLEANS IN 1950.

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

PR (PLATER ROBINSON)

FF (FELICIA FUKSMAN)

PHOTOGRAPH OF POLAND ZOOMING IN ON LODZ

FF I'm coming from a very poor home. My father was a tailor. I have two brothers and two sisters and we hardly made a living. But we had a very happy life because we had each other. And I had a lot of friends in school. I was a happy teenager. And I thought I am on the top of the world because I didn't experience no better life and I thought that is the best that I can have, and I was happy with that.

PR And you told me once, before the war you were a Polish patriot, and that you loved Poland.

FF I loved very dearly and I was very proud to march for different occasion, holidays from the school with our flag. And I was very proud to be a citizen of Poland.

PR Before the war, you were a nurse.

FF I wanted to be a nurse, but because my parents were very poor and they couldn't afford to send me to special school. So I worked during the day time and at night I went to Red Cross school for two years. I was going to school to be nurse. And I needed five years of school. So then the war broke out, and I couldn't continue my education to be a nurse.

PR Before the war broke out in the summer of '39, you thought that Poland

would be victorious.

FF Well, they were talking about a year before. Nineteen thirty-eight we heard already what is going on already in Austria, and we had the feeling that eventually we will have a war with Germany, but everybody said, 'Don't worry. We will have help from France and England and we might win the war.' And we were so proud of Poland that we didn't want to believe we are going to lose it.

PR And you didn't know also that it would be a war against the Jews.

FF No, no, this we didn't know before. We were just talking about the war. But the war against the Jews? There were two wars actually: one against Jews, and one on a regular front.

PHOTOGRAPH OF SOLDIERS AND MEN WITH THEIR SACKS

FF The 1st of September when I saw the coming airplanes and, all of a sudden, bombs from the airplanes. We didn't see the airplanes and the bombs but we saw that a little house completely upside down. The roof was on the ground, and that was next, closer than next block. And my grandmother said, 'Come on children to the cellar.' We had a cellar in the house. We went down into the cellar. We said, *Shema Israel*, a prayer, and we stood there for a while until quiet down and we came back out and she said, 'Now we know the war is for true.'

PR They sought to dehumanize you, and to create dissension and confusion among the Jewish ranks.

FF They had always had a satisfaction to see us dehumanized, to see us that we fighting over a piece of bread, that we're taking away the last crumb of bread from our children. Even in the camp when they gave us, they were supposed to

give us a slice of bread. They didn't give us the slice of bread. They gave us a whole little loaf. And we were supposed to divide it for ten, and very seldom you could measure centimeter, or with an inch, every slice was just same, and then the fight begin, too. Because one got a crumb more and the other one had less. And they [the Germans] were staying and laughing heads off. They were having a lot of satisfaction and to see us fighting over that crumb of bread.

IN FEBRUARY 1940, THE NAZIS ESTABLISHED
A LARGE GHETTO IN LODZ. BEHIND WALLS GUARDED BY
NAZIS AND THEIR COLLABORATORS, 170,000 JEWS WERE
FORCED TO LIVE IN AN IMPOVERISHED DISTRICT OF THE CITY
MEASURING ABOUT 1.5 SQUARE MILES.

PHOTOGRAPH OF PEOPLE WALKING INTO THE GHETTO

FELICIA'S FATHER AND OLDER BROTHER WERE SEIZED BY THE
NAZIS AND TAKEN FOR 'WORK'. THEY NEVER RETURNED.
BEGGING FOR BREAD, FELICIA'S YOUNGER SISTER FROZE TO
DEATH ON THE STREET. HER OLDER SISTER DIED OF
TUBERCULOSIS. HER MOTHER AND BABY BROTHER ALSO
PERISHED IN THE GHETTO – AFTER FELICIA WAS TORN FROM
THEM.

THE NAZIS BEGAN DEPORTING THE JEWS FROM THE LODZ
GHETTO TO DEATH CAMPS IN JANUARY 1942. THE FIRST
TAKEN WERE THE MOST DEFENSELESS: THE ORPHANS.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF CHILDREN IN LINE BEING BROUGHT TO THE
TRAINS*

PR You were a nurse in a factory within, inside the Lodz ghetto. I wonder if

you would describe the Lodz ghetto.

FF The Lodz ghetto was in the very beginning, we were trying to survive and we were hoping that it will come eventually to an end, but the starvation was big and the disease was big and it was very hard to survive in the Lodz ghetto. I had my sister died with tuberculosis in the Lodz ghetto. They took off my father and brother off the street in the Lodz ghetto and never returned back. And they never told them where they taking them, for what purposes. And the ghetto was isolated with barbed wires around and we were sitting and waiting. The furniture, we didn't have any furniture because we were assigned to one little room in the ghetto. So at night we rolled our bedding, whatever we could bring from home at day time we rolled it up and we sit on it. And we waiting, because every ten days we were getting a ration of a piece of bread, and some marmalade, some barley. This was just enough to eat for one person and not to have enough. Not just provided for ten days. But we were trying hard and to survive on it. And then the Germans built factories in the ghetto. I was working in the hospital so sometimes we kept a dead body a little longer in order to receive a slice of a bread for this dead person because it was counted, so many slices of bread per person and we counted the dead bodies sometime so we had a couple of slices of bread more.

PR How did you keep going when everything seemed so...

FF It was very difficult but I had a friend and she came to stay with me before ghetto. Her name was Bronia.

PHOTOGRAPH OF FELICIA'S FRIEND BRONIA WITH TWO MEN

And her maiden name was same as my name, and we got very close. Of course, she was older. She came from Austria. They killed her husband in 1938, and she was born in Poland so she has to come back to Poland. But she had two daughters, twelve and ten years old, and that was a free emigration to London

for Jewish children at the time, in 1938, and she sent those two girls to nobody but to London. And I was very close with her and she has a very strong will power to live. Her determination to survive was so great that it had a lot of influence on me. Because she had, she wants to see her children. She says she has to see her children. And she will see her children. And she had a lot of influence. That's probably, her courage probably gave me a little bit, too, and it was very hard, and because I came really from a very poor home and not starvation but we didn't have any luxury, so I gradually got use to this kind of life in the ghetto, too, the coldness. It was very cold in winter time and with the food and we tried to survive.

PR People committed suicide in the ghetto.

FF The intelligent people, they commit suicide because they knew exactly the outcome from it, what will be. The poor people, they were just striving a day at a time. Everyday they push to survive. But the intelligent people like doctors, or pharmacists, they commit suicide because they know that will be a tragic end anyway. So they do it better this way instead of go to camp and be killed there.

PHOTOGRAPH OF SMOKE AND MEN THROWING THE BODIES INTO THE FIRE

PR In the ghetto you never heard of the death camps that were furiously at work.

FF No, no. We just knew that they sending people away for "work". It was a big lie.

I was in *Ravensbruck* two months and everyday I have to go to work. One day I was very sick. And my friend, and I didn't want to leave the barracks, because I didn't feel good. I had fever, and I didn't care.

PHOTOGRAPH OF FELICIA'S FRIEND, BRONIA, AND TWO MEN

So she broke a window. And she pulled me out. She say, 'You know what will happen to you?' Because they had the ovens, the big chimneys, and the smell we could smell every day in *Ravensbruck*. So she pulled me out and she put me, I sat on bricks. Because we have to stand in the morning two hours to be counted, so I was sitting on the bricks and it looks like I was standing up. Because I couldn't stand. And I went to work, and for some [reason] I got better. And after two months we went to the labor camp.

PR She saved you.

FF She saved me. Many times she saved my life. She pulled me out from there because in the morning we have to leave barracks and they lock the doors, and many times I gave up. Because I know I left my mother in the ghetto sick on the floor and she was holding on to me, and the Germans pulled me away from her, and my little brother, I was still with him 'till last day, they took him away and they put him, they formed two lines in the courtyard, and they put my little brother in the line with the old, sick people so I know he will not survive this either. And I knew my family's going. So I gave up. I really didn't care if I live or die, but she pushed me to it. And she had so much influence on me.

PR *Ravensbruck* was a women's concentration camp in the province of Mecklenberg up on the Baltic [Sea]. It was very cold.

FF Very. They gave us only some light clothes to wear. And a little blanket at night, a mattress from straw, a sack with straw, and a little sack with hay. And that was all, but we wrapped ourselves with paper in Wittenberge when we worked. We could have more paper to wrap ourselves. So we were not so cold, but in *Ravensbruck*, it was terrible.

PR Wittenberge was the other concentration camp and you were there when

the Russians arrived and liberated the camp.

FF This was a labor camp. I worked there in a factory and we assembled, we built parts to airplanes, and after we finished with the parts, they assembled whole airplane from this factory. And the same way they gave us just a uniform to wear from blue jean material. Nothing underneath. No socks. Not even underwear. So it was very cold. But we wrapped ourselves in the paper. This uniform I was wearing nine months. Until the end of war. I never took it off my body. I slept in it. I ate in it. Whatever it was to eat, and I worked in it. I walked in the morning, they count us. Everything in that uniform.

PR Were you allowed to bathe?

FF We didn't have any water. We had outside a wash room. But the winter was so hard and the pipes were frozen so we couldn't even get water to wash ourselves. So the coffee, or the tea that they were giving us in the morning and night, this was our wash water. We washed in this water. We didn't wash more than our hands and face. And for the whole time we were in camp we didn't wash.

PR And then that day: the Russians were approaching, the Germans depart. You wake up that morning. There are no whistles, no dogs.

FF No. Nothing. It's quiet. Very quiet. The night before we received more bread than usual. And it was very suspicious to us, but nobody ate the bread. We were afraid it might be poison in it. But in the morning, and we didn't sleep all night. But when it got light, the daylight came, and we noticed that the gates are open from the camp. And we didn't know what happened. So we ran out and the first thing on our mind was to get something, to find something to eat, potatoes. And went and we filled up the bucket full up with potatoes. And when we came back to boil the potatoes, the fire was on, we couldn't went down into the bunkers. Because the Germans put dynamite around all the barracks

before they left. And the ones that survived all the harassments, all the atrocities, they died in the fire. And we waited until it was quiet. And the Russian came in and they told us that we cannot stay there because this is the front. They still fighting the war. On one side of the Elbe, on the other side the Germans were there. So we went into a house, to a German house. We got clothes and we went downstairs, went to the cellar, and we filled up another bucket of potatoes. And I came upstairs with another friend. And we boiled the potatoes

PR She was a Russian girl.

FF Yes. She was a Russian prisoner. But we were very close, and as we boiled the potatoes a shot came through the window and she fell immediately dead. And without any excitement, with no feelings, I stood, she was lying in the front of me dead, and I stood to finish boiling the potatoes. We couldn't wait to be ready. We were hungry. And I'm just thinking: what became of me at the time? I was so cold, so without any feeling. And we left her behind and we took the potatoes. And we couldn't stay in the house either because the Russian told us to go home. We didn't know where home was. But we found it out. And we have to go home. And so it took us a whole month until we got back to Poland.

PR And then you went to Lodz, your hometown.

FF Then I was a whole year back in Lodz. I thought maybe somebody from family come. They will hear from me. I will hear from them. But nobody came. And I went to house where we lived before and I notice that they have everything still up.

PR A Polish family living in your apartment.

FF A Polish family and they have our beddings, what we didn't took with us, our green velvet bed spreads on the bed, and she say, she was so surprised to see me, that maybe I should apologize to her that I'm still alive. And I said, 'I didn't came for nothing here. I just came in case you have some papers or photographs, I would like to have them.' But she said, 'No, we burned everything. We don't have, and the Jews not welcome any longer here in Poland.'

AFTER THE WAR, FELICIA LIVED IN A 'DISPLACED PERSONS' CAMP IN BERLIN FOR THREE YEARS. SHE THEN LEFT FOR THE UNITED STATES AND SETTLED IN NEW

ORLEANS. THERE SHE MET MAX FUKSMAN, A FELLOW SURVIVOR FROM LODZ. HE HAD BEEN LIBERATED AT BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP WHERE HE LATER HELPED BUILD A MONUMENT TO 30,000 JEWISH VICTIMS OF THE CAMP.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MAX FUKSMAN AT BERGEN-BELSEN AFTER THE WAR

FF Max Fuksman. He was a very different from me because he had a lot of energy, and he survived with his brother. Well, I came to New York really and I was glad to be in New York because I didn't know English at all and I came down and there was nobody there to deny that I am not the person who I claim to be. Because I didn't have nobody. And I say I will stay here in New York. But the Jewish Welfare Federation was responsible. And I have to come to New Orleans. I was working for the old lady in New Orleans. And a young man came to stay. A lady across the street rented out rooms, and a young man came to pick up his luggage from the Customs House. And a lady came to me from across the street and said to me, 'You know, a young man is staying in my house and he's from Lodz.

PR Your hometown.

FF Yes. Maybe you know him? But I didn't know him, and he was going to school not far away from my school. But I didn't know him in Poland, in Lodz. He just have to come down to New Orleans for me. And we wrote to each other. He was living in Atlanta. And he was not willing to come back to live here in New Orleans, but I said, "This is my place where I was assigned to be." And he came down and we married.

PHOTOGRAPH OF FELICIA AND MAX WITH THEIR GUESTS AT THEIR WEDDING ZOOMING IN ON THE COUPLE

PHOTOGRAPH OF MAX, FELICIA, AND THEIR THREE DAUGHTERS

And we were very happily married. We had three daughters. Wonderful three son-in-laws, but he's deceased already eighteen years. We really didn't marry for love in the beginning, because we just have the same need for each other, so much in common, that we thought it will work out eventually. But it worked out very well. We were very happily married.

PHOTOGRAPH OF FELICIA AT SCHOOL

PHOTOGRAPH FELICIA HUGGING GIRL

PHOTGRAPH OF FELICIA

PHOTOGRAPH WITH TWO OTHER GIRLS

FF I hope I can be sometime useful to the other people. That they will understand. Because we're dying out really. The Holocaust survivors dying out. And who will be there to stand up and deny those denials what they're coming up today, all the books, and written by intelligent people. So really it worries me especially that there will be somebody who stands up and say the Holocaust did exist.

PR So the message that you want young people...

FF To fight. Because it's up to them. They can prevent from happening again because history repeats itself, and it can happen again if we let it. And it's very difficult. I'm still thinking of, there is not a day or night not to dream of my people. It's just something that you cannot forget. And if they will be alive they will share. Even my husband will share

happiness, too, because he didn't live long to see his grandchildren. Only one. So it's, that's life goes on, and you make the best out of it. And I hope my children will have a better life.

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Max and Felicia Fuksman

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In memory
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