Ann Federman Testimony Transcript

I am Ann Federman. I was born in August of 1925 in Poland. I come from a large family. There were nine children in my family. My mother died in 1935, my father died in 1942 in the war. I had five brothers and four sisters. I come from a large family. My father and mother had brothers and sisters and they were all very close and we as far as I can remember, being a child, and growing up, we used to walk to everyone's houses on Sabbath and on the holidays and getting all treats and everything. And our community was a very active community. And there were a lot of intellectuals in our town. There were many organizations. There were libraries and it wasn't just a little town that slept. Our family was very active in our community.

My father was a very religious man, and was very well-known in the city. My father was sort trying to help people to find places to live. You call it a real estate person. But he wasn't quite the big realtor. But he really studied a lot. He studied a lot and knew the community and was very much with the ritual community involved and the community and he knew a lot of the people. He was a big man in the town and always would bring home people from other cities who happened to come in for the Sabbath or the holidays. He would always bring them home for meals. I remember being a little girl, and many were the days when nine kids would sit around the table and one didn't show up maybe or didn't come in time for dinner that my father would bring home an extra guest to eat and we just had our dinner and the person who wasn't there was out of luck. That's all.

But life was not too bad for us when we were youngsters when we were growing up. But a lot of people in my family emigrated. And my father said he would not leave his hometown. He was not going to break up home. And that's the way it was. Most of the kids went to school and studied and we all played instruments. All the boys played instruments. I had two brothers who played the trumpet. And my brother, the violinist, played three different instruments. And we had a good time. My oldest brother was served in the Polish army and I remember him coming home for break. I still remember him. I was a little bitty thing. I still remember him coming home in his uniform. And we walked to school and we borrowed books. I remember on cold wintery days, if you needed a book and you didn't have a book to do your homework, so you would walk to a friend's house to get the book, do your homework and then you bring the book back, so she could do the homework.

Interviewer: How did the Jewish kids get along with the Christian kids.

Not good at all. The Christian kids did not like the, I remember being believe I was, maybe seven years old, when a little gentile girl, who supposedly was my neighbor on the lot where we lived, and I remember her like today, saying wait till she was stamping her feet and she

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would say, “you Jews go to Palestine” in Polish. She would say to us, “wait till Hitler comes.” I mean, little kids who were six, seven year old used to hear their parents talk about that.

In 1939 the Germans invaded Poland. And immediately, we had to wear arm bands, young and old, we had to wear armbands. The first thing that the biggest shock in my community was when they first burned the synagogue and nearby neighborhood. We were children playing outside and we saw the big flames coming out. It lasted all night. There were quite a few people who died. Most all the people in the synagogue died, except forty people escaped. And when they escaped, there was a church across the street that was kind enough to open its doors, and those people were left alive. They also burned fifty Jewish homes, just only Jewish homes that the Germans burned that evening. That happened to be on the Sabbath, on a Friday night, when you know, there were a lot of people at the services.

My community, when I grew up, was a very nice community. We you know kids played. Kids went to school. We didn’t feel anything really at the beginning of that. We were just living a normal life. And some people who were a little bit older, belonged to different organizations. And my father, when the war first broke out, never wanted to agree that anything will ever happen. He kept saying that he’s not going to dissolve the household, he’s not going to split up the family, that we’re going to stay where we are and nothing will happen, although, a lot of people have emigrated. But he never believed that it would happen. So it went on and on and finally we had our brothers were the first people who were taken into the camps.

We stayed in our hometown until 1942. And a lot of people came in to our community from surrounding areas. That we, who have maybe two rooms in our home, to raise that many children, have to share our quarters with other people. We had to give up, I still remember, a family came to us, a man and a woman came to us, and we gave up our kitchen so that they’d have a place where to live.

In 1942, we didn’t have a ghetto in our town at that time yet. They called us to the square. They put up a notice and they went all around in every home and they said all Jews must get out from their homes in 1942 and they also said that if they don’t, they’ll be killed, they’ll be pulled out and they’ll be killed. Naturally, all of us reported to the square. This was a square where people used to play football. It was a football park. It was all fenced around. Because I remember going there and we picked up my sister-in-law, my brother’s wife, who already had two children, one was seven and one must have been five – two little girls. And the woman who lived with them, they lived with a Polish woman at that time, and the woman in Polish language said, “Please leave your kids here.” And my sister-in-law didn’t want to. Well we didn’t know. We had no idea what they were gonna do with us, so we took the children. And it was a cool September day. And the kids were immediately separated on that square, where they took the old on one side, they took the young and grouped them together and they took the children and put them in separate groups. And we never saw the kids since.

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So that was in 1942 where all the Jews had to leave their homes. And the old people, they put on different buses. And the young people, they put, like myself, they put on different buses. And they took the children away from their mothers. And what happened was that was the time when they sorted out the people. If you were sick, you didn't have a second chance. If you were somebody of my age and well, then they put us together and their plan was to put us at the camps. And the kids, I'm sure that the kids went immediately to the ovens. We were on the bus, going to the train from my hometown. We never went back home. My sister and I were lucky. We stayed together and somehow we were fortunate to be together all that time. We wound up, my sister and I, wound up in Czechoslovakia in a camp. In Parshnitz was the name of the camp. It was near Tranteam, in Czechoslovakia in the mountains. But they took us up to this all night long train ride. And we immediately got burlap bags, with burlap outfits and with wooden shoes and they put us to work. This was girls' camp and we worked for a private company. We worked for a German company. The name of it was Hazeh. There was an owner and we were the prisoners and we worked twelve hour shifts.

Interviewer- What kind of work did you do?

For a little girl, who was seventeen years old, at that time already I was seventeen. They put us they were making thread from raw materials. They started from cotton. Bales of cotton were put into the machines. And it was that different machines did different chores. My sister worked in a cotton machine, and she got very sick from it. Then, I myself, had three machines that I attended. That most Czech men we worked with Czechoslovakian people that most people in that factory – men, had two machines. We girls, had three machines that we tended to. We had an SS man all day long watching us. When something went wrong with the machine, we had to fix it. So, on it went and we had, you know, each girl we were lined up. And we worked three machines, which produced at that time the cotton, made the strips and from the strips we made rope or string for the materials, for weaving. That's what we were doing, making the strings for the weaving. So, life was pretty tough because we none of us knew what it means to put out a day's work. We were students. I had just finished seven grades, when they took me to the camps. September was when they took us into the ghetto and to the march. I had just finished my seventh grade when we went up there. So, we didn't understand. We didn't know, but we did work because cause you had someone standing over you.

We also had SS women who were working with us. They were pretty tough. Some were just awful. Some were doing these things because they had to and they were afraid otherwise. But most of the SS women were just absolutely miserable. And we worked twelve hours. We got up in the morning and they let us lay down for half an hour during break at midnight and then we continued our work. We delivered this cotton. And they had people coming in from all over to check us out. There were these men coming in these SS men. We never knew what they were doing or what they were going to do to us. But we tried to save our lives, so we worked. Twice a week we went out to be counted. We went out to the yard, and they counted the women. If you didn't stay in line, they shaved your hair. They didn't give us enough soap to clean

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ourselves with, but the girls that had lice, and so they shaved them and immediately sent them out, you know.

So we got our portion of food. Twice a week, they gave us a piece of bread so much bread, so much jam, so much butter. And it's like, you have it now and you can eat it all or save it. But you know, when you're hungry, it's pretty tempting. So some of us would share, and there were girls in the camp, who had ulcers and they couldn't eat a lot of the food. So we tried to interchange, because we were given like horsemeat, a piece of salami, which was horsemeat, and a little bit of jam and a quarter of a loaf of bread. We had those little lockers that we were supposed to put them into. And we were looking at this little piece of bread and thinking, do I eat it now or do I want to eat it another time. Do I want to save it.

So, if you didn't stay in line in that camp, you were in troubles. There was a family, there were two sisters in my camp and one of the sisters had a pair of shoes. In those days, you could still get a pair of shoes repaired. And one of the sisters asked the woman in charge, the SS woman, could she have the shoes fixed and she said, "absolutely not." And the older sister, who was very protective of the younger one, got in a fight with the SS. She physically had a fist fight with her. And they took the sister immediately and shaved her hair and took her out to Auschwitz. And I mean, that was the way it was. You couldn't play around with SS people. Some were nice, but most of them were just awful. And especially toward the end of the war, they were just very bad.

Anyway, there was a kitchen where the Germans used to eat. It was a cafeteria. You know how they have in factories and they have cafeterias. And in the cafeteria, they were free to go up and buy their dinners and everything and the aromas from all this wonderful food you know, that we were smelling it. So the girls were sort of waiting to be called maybe that they would ask us to come up and help peel potatoes. The German people they steam potatoes. They put them in steamers and then you peel them. And we were sitting after a long twelve-hour shift, we were waiting for someone to call us and say come up and do some potato peeling. So if and when we did, we wore these burlap kombinezons so we would put some of the potatoes into the combinezas to bring them to some other girls who weren't as fortunate as we were to, you know, get this nice bite to eat. So many were the times when they would inspect us and go down, all the when down to see what is happening, you know, that we would smuggle potatoes, and they would take them away from us.

Interviewer- Did anything else happen if they caught someone smuggling potatoes? You said they would take them away did anything else happen as well?

They punished them, they punished them. We got a few slashes, and mostly what they did to the women was shave their head - because in our camp it wasn't yet at that time like Auschwitz camp. You know, some of the women had hair and some didn't have. So that wasn't you know it didn't go over. We had quite a few slashes. And but you know we didn't give up.

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We'd go down in the evenings, they had a warehouse with all the vegetables that they were cooking for this cafeteria. So we would go down at nighttime some of us and unlatch the window. Then when everyone was asleep, we would crawl into the little window, jump down, sometimes you jump down and you don't know whether the potatoes are gonna keep you up or you'll fall down, and organized the potatoes, and brought them up to the camp. There was a woman who was heating the camp with coals so she would sneak in some things for us and cooked them - cooked cabbage. There was a woman in my camp who had epilepsy. And they immediately - when she came into the camp, she didn't have it, and then all of a sudden, they sent her out.

But my little sister, my youngest sister, who was at that time twelve years old, was going to be left in Poland as they had a few people. My older sister was instrumental in doing some things in the community. She sort of looked after my little sister. And my little sister was going to be left by herself. So we were, my sister and I were very good workers, cause we had to be. So we asked one of the managers if we could, in those days it was still possible, if we could possibly bring her to us and that she would be a worker and she would be a good worker. Which they did, they let her come. She came to us with her little package under her arm and they put her to work. And she worked with us a few months and was looking good. She got the same treatment we did. And one day she was running a high temperature. She got ill because where she worked, the steam, there was a lot of steam. There was a process where the thread has to come through a steam and the steam is water and that's awfully hard to breathe and it was hot inside. And she came and worked those machines and she became very, very ill. She had breathing problems and she was running a high fever. We were debating, we thought well, we just can't go on any longer, we've got to help her. And there was no medication, there was not aspirin that we could give her. So we thought we would let her into, on the premises we had a little hospital, so to speak this big room. And there were people who were there for many months and they survived. They really never got well, but they let them be there. And my little sister was only there a few days, and where we were bunking, the room where she was, that hospital room, was right next to where we were living. It was a great big warehouse, actually what it was was a cotton warehouse, that you know we lived in. And she we heard the wooden shoes and my little sister came to us, and we were awakened but she came up and said to us, "I have to go. I have to leave." We had no idea, it had never happened in our camp before. So it was a new experience for us. And we took a look and there were a whole bunch of prisoner women from Auschwitz, with shaven heads and with the striped coats, with the wooden shoes, and the caps on. And they just took all of the sick people out of there. We gave my little sister, I believe it was a toothbrush and ah, just a few little necessities. And she ah, we never seen her since.

There were a lot of incidents in our camp, I mean, you could not get out of place. There was a woman, a mother and a daughter, in fact they came from my home town and they were going to escape one evening. And they shaved their heads. And they put on babushkas and they

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thought they would look like some foreign people who lived in the city and went out for something. And they escaped from the camp that evening and they found them not too far away from the camps immediately that night they found them, the mother and the daughter, and they shaved their heads again, they stripped them, and they sent them out. There were a bunch of SS men came into our camp one day and we didn't know what was going on. They started a big office. They picked up one room they drew circles on the floor – great big circles on the floor – and they had all the girls strip naked. And we had to sign our names, and we went through- we stood in line, in fact, to go through those circles. And these guys were just having one big time. They were sitting and watching us go around the circles. And it was probably for the reason if we were sick or we had any kind of handicap. You know, that they were gonna send us out. And they did that. And at that point they put numbers on us, because we didn't get tattooed. Only in Auschwitz and other camps they did that but not in our camp. So that they should never call us by our names, you know, we don't have names. So they would call us by the numbers.

And in the meantime, some Czechoslovakian people from outside were working in our camp and that was a lifesaver. We were very fortunate, because they are wonderful people, the Czechoslovakian people. They would come in in the morning, and bring us the news of what's happening in the world -how far we are from liberation, and what is happening and who is doing what. And so, one in particular person, one Czechoslovakian person, would say go to, number three barrel, you know we did our strips of cotton in big barrels, you know, when a barrel was full we put another one on there and he said, "number three barrel – you'll find something. " So there was a sandwich sometimes under the cotton or an apple or something.

But you know, we worked this cotton, and a lot of the girls were getting sick with TB because no nourishment and the dust was just settling on your lungs. If you could see some of the girls dragging those bales of cotton. No man could do that. And they would put them into those great big machines. And work those machines without a staff. If something went wrong with those machines, we had to know what to do with it. I mean, there was no person around that could fix it. Whether we knew how or not we did it.

So, there was this one girl in our camp, they gave her this big job of cutting rope. So the guy gives her a dull hatchet, you know a little hatchet. And she was just cutting those pieces with the hatchet. It was like cleaning barbed wire. So, naturally, she cut off her little finger. Doing this she just, you know, misjudged and cut off a piece of finger and you know, she put that piece of finger in her pocket and she never said a word about it. She just went about her business. They could have sent her out. Cause she already was a handicap.

Every single morning, we had to go out and be counted. Well, they counted. It was cold, and they wanted to make sure that we are counting for the numbers, and they left us out there when the weather was cold. And in the meantime, they went into the camp, into the barracks or the warehouse where we were, and we had those little lockers, so to speak, where whatever they

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gave us, they cleaned it out in the meantime. By the time we got back, what little we had in it, they just took everything out.

We only got one outfit. It was made out of burlap and wooden shoes, and that's all. When we came home, we were dusty and dirty and that's what you wear and no changes, none at all. And the pictures that I have over here, is the reason most of us were not able to save pictures, because they took everything away from us. But we somehow had the foresight, my sister and I, took those pictures with us when we went to work. And most of the German people have these workbenches, you know, they have a little box where they put the change of clothes in. And we just took those pictures and put them in a workbench and they stayed there and that's why we have pictures. But most people who didn't do that, if they came in and emptied your cabinet. That was it. You were not that fortunate. So we really are lucky that we have what we've got. I don't have my mother's picture or my brothers' pictures but what we had - the last thing, or the first and the last thing we did, was when they called us to report, we got those pictures and took those pictures with us. And we were able to maintain them. And we worked three solid years, day and night, day and night, hot or cold.

I was liberated from the same camp, in Parschnitz. Fortunately, I was in one camp. And I was liberated in May of 1945. We I'll track back about three months before the liberation, they took us out and made us work in the ditches dig big ditches. And some of the people the Czechoslovakian people would come by on bicycles and they'd realize that we were prisoners. And they would say, "The war is almost ending." And so we knew why they were digging ditches, and that was, you know, just an added attraction for us. They gave us a big job. They put great big rubber boots on. We were standing in the water and digging. But in 1945, as I said, we got liberated by the Russians. The Russians liberated our camp. And of course, we watched them through the window, we watched the German soldiers. There was a creek nearby our camp and we saw them throwing away the ammunition and the creek was just packed. It was just stuffed with ammunition and the Germans were running away.

But then we were happy and we were sad. We didn't know where we were going and what our home will be, and really what to do. We were stripped. We could stay in the camp if we wanted to. But we had to have some kind of a plan. Most of the girls some people , I think, settled a few people people settled in Germany for a while. And some people, the Czechoslovakian people were trying to get them to stay. And we naturally, didn't want to stay in Germany. So, my sister

Interviewer: We? You and your sister?

My sister and I who were liberated from the camp, so we tried to make our way to Poland. Because all kinds of people were saying that a lot of our family was left alive, and but no one really knew the details. There was so much commotion and people were so confused and mixed up, that they thought they saw somebody that they knew and had the names confused. So

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we thought we're gonna go and find out for ourselves. And we found my sister-in-law's, the one that went with us when we had to report, her brother was in one of the cities in Poland, it's called Peterswaldau. And there was a nice community there of a lot of displaced persons in that town. That they went in and took over maybe some German home and made just a temporary life for themselves. So we stayed there just a few months in that camp in that town. And traveling was very hard because a lot of the train tracks were broken and the transportation was just awful.

We made it by foot and by bus, we made it to that town and we stayed there just a few weeks when one of my brothers, who survived and lives in Kansas City, and had learned that we were in Peterswaldau, in that town and we were, on a Sunday afternoon, we were sitting on the porch looking out and he came by with a bicycle and took us out of there. And he said, "you know, I am in Bergen Belsen, and my other brother is there." And he said, "we're all going to be together." So he brought us to Bergen Belsen, which was a displaced persons' camp and they made it possible for us to have nice shelter -it was an army camp – and adequate food. And we parked ourselves there for a while. And we lived there quite a few months until, you know, we could see our way through. So, from there, in Bergen Belsen, my brother and my other brother, so I already had two brothers, and so, we made our way to a camp a city nearby, it's called Bad Nauheim. It's near Frankfurt, where we lived there for a while. And in Bad Nauheim, we lived about nine months there.

Interviewer: Where did you meet your husband.

In Bergen Belsen. I met Isak in Bergen Belsen, through my brother. And that's why we made our way from there to Bad Nauheim because we knew that in Bergen- Belsen, we didn't have a future. We weren't going to live there. We went to Bad Nauheim, which was a very lovely city. And all of us, my whole family, went there. From there we waited to be emigrated. And we waited nine months to get our permission to get check-ups. So, we went to Frankfurt and they sent us a telegram to report to Frankfurt. And we got to Frankfurt and they processed us. We had our check-ups healthwise and otherwise and that's when they opened the doors and they gave us the cards and we came by ship here.

Interviewer: This is Isak Federman and his wife, Ann. We understand that you met in Bergen- Belsen. Can you tell us about it? What year was it?

Isak: That was in August of 1945. And as I started to say, this was the best thing that came out of Bergen-Belsen. But I told her right away that we going to America. We got to get out of here. So, a few months down the road, we decided to get across to the American zone. Bergen Belsen was in the British zone, as I told you before. The British took me there. And we decided, again, to travel and get to the American zone. And when the American consulate opened up in Frankfurt, in April or March of 1946, we were there to register to go to America.

Interviewer: You were married by then?

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Isak: No, we married in Kansas City.

Ann: We made a promise to ourselves not to get married in Germany. So we waited. Because we knew we were going to emigrate to the United States, so we waited and got married three months after we came to Kansas City.

Interviewer: Can you describe that trip?

Isak: Yes. They picked us up with buses, no trains, and took us to Bremen, and gave us $50 a person, and then they gave us a ticket to get on the ship. And when we came to the United States, we were eleven days on board, and when we came to the United States, they picked us up in New York. The HIAS took us over. And they took us New York in a hotel. And they told us we ought to go to and they picked ten of us. And they said we ought to go to Kansas City. And we said, "Where is Kansas City?" and they said, "Well, that's a nice town." So, we had nothing to lose. That's fine.

Ann: The people had awaited us at the Union Station. You know, we traveled from New York by train. And the Family Services in Kansas City, had a social worker, not a social worker, excuse me, a volunteer, who came and picked us up and took us to our respective places wherever we gonna live. The boys were in one place and we were in another place, the girls. And she took us to a room and board place. Most people rented rooms in those days, so just room and board. And we waited about three months till Isak met this rabbi and I'll let you talk about that.

Isak: Later on I got acquainted with Rabbi Stern and he was writing a book at that time. So I kind of looked up things for him. I had nothing else to do sometimes in the evening. We were just two blocks away. So, I kid Ann a lot that I never proposed to her. Because one night he said to me, "Hey, how long you gonna mess around with this girl? It's time you get married." I said, "Call her up and tell her." He did.

Ann: And we made a date for September the 22nd.

Isak: So we did we got married and the City was at the wedding.

Ann: They had this big article in The Jewish Chronicle that Friday, before our wedding Sunday. They were talking about two concentration camp people who were going to get married. But the wedding took place, and no invitations, just an announcement in the paper. We had to have 500 people at that wedding. Those days the community really showed up! We had a reception wedding.

Isak: They were wonderful!

Ann: We to Denver on our honeymoon on a Greyhound bus.

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Isak: We went to night school and we learned how to read and write and speak a little bit and then we went to citizenship class.

Ann: And then after five years, I was pregnant with my son, when I got my citizenship papers, five years later.

Isak: We were very happy to become American citizens.

Ann: It was the most wonderful feeling to be in that courthouse holding up a flag to become citizens of this United States. And we're just very lucky to be here.

Source: Ann Federman video testimony - https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/federmanann/

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