

June Feinsilver Testimony Transcript

My name is June Feinsilver and I am a survivor.

Interviewer: When you were a young girl you lived in Lodz Poland, is that correct?

In Poland, Lodz. The city I lived in was a big city – industrial city. We were not rich in what meaning of rich here, but we were comfortable. I had two brothers – one was three years younger and one was three years older. And my younger brother was a genius. We started school at seven. When I was seven, he knew more than I did. He started right away and when he started, he started at second grade and the principal said to my mother, if the law would permit, he would take him to third grade. My older brother was a bright boy too, but he was interested in soccer. He was a very good soccer player. And instead going to school, he went and played soccer, and he got into more troubles. And my mother was so embarrassed because she was a president of PTA and very active in school affairs. But he grew up to be a really fine boy. He was my really my defender always. When I got beaten up, I always say, “Wait till my big brother catch you” - and stuff like that. He was crazy about me. My younger brother always fought with me. We used to go to my grandmother’s for vacation, at least I had to go every year. I loved my grandmother. And there was another aunt of mine, who lived there in the small town, she was a teacher, her husband was the principal of the school. I had a little cousin, who was also my younger brother’s age. And we played together always very nicely. We were very family minded and very sheltered. My father was a very handsome man and my mother was beautiful – she was short but she was beautiful. And my younger brother was just gorgeous.

Interviewer: You were telling us about leaving the small town with your grandmother and going to Warsaw. What year was that?

It was in 1941, which was like two years since the war started. And we went to Warsaw because my aunt, who was a teacher, used to live there. And so we all, my grandmother, my other aunt went all there to Warsaw. I mean this was ghetto. People were dying out of hunger on the streets and burying them. It was horrible. I had a friend that we almost were engaged, but he was in different town. When we left, he said, “You will see me in fourteen days.” I said, “This is impossible, no one comes into the Warsaw Ghetto.” Fourteen days somebody knocks at the door. My aunt who lived there, she didn’t know him, only from my telling her. My other aunt knew and my grandmother knew. Well, he came to visit me and he came also with the papers for me. I should go out of Polish Ghetto as Irene Norbuck, my name would be, to smuggle myself with a smuggler who was paid to smuggle me to the ghetto he was in Tomaszow, it was another small town. But he was originally from Lodz, except I didn’t know him at home. But he was older than I was, which pleased me naturally. I was seventeen and he was probably twenty or twenty-two. I never had friends that old. We had a very good time. He stayed with our family, then all of a sudden he got a telegram from his parents. He had parents

and one married sister and two single sisters. One of them was my friend that's how I met him. "My aunts are very fond of you but they said they have no authority to let me go without any of my parents' permission." And they wrote to my mother and my father and my mother said that she trusts my judgement and if I wanted to go...because he said, "You don't have your parents here, I have my parents there so we'll marry there. Well, I didn't know what to do. It was my first love and I didn't know really what to do. But I said, "I can always come back here to my family. I went and they were really very good to me. I opened a library there. I brought a lot of books with me that I had from home. That's all I had was the books, clothes were all wearing out. And I opened a library with one of his sister, the married one and I stayed with her and we were renting the books out. And it didn't work out. I didn't take my clothes or nothing. I just walked out and went to one of his sister's friends to live with because she was the only one who would have me.

I was starving there. Things were very bad. People were dying out of hunger and they were also I didn't know nobody. Yet I had my pride. I was always hungry. I was always going through the fields to a kitchen that was giving away some soup so nobody would see me. And I was trying to help the family that I was living with. They were baking bread and we were distributing and, you know, selling it. It was risky but they were nice to me. And I went to an employment office. I got acquainted with a girl my age and her father worked in this place where I did later on. And I was trying to seek a job, because that was the security, because, otherwise, if you didn't have a job or a working card, then you were the target to be sent away. So I met her and we tried to get an employment office always some kind of job cleaning, cleaning offices or cleaning schools and so on. Sometimes we bought five decagram, which is like I don't know, very little maybe two spoons of flour and cook it with salt and water. She had a father, an older sister and a brother, who was also working there in the employment office for the Germans.

Anyway, we were on one job cleaning that school building, and next to it was a factory. And I went out and I saw there was a man and he talked Polish and I said, "Where are you from?" and he said he's from Lodz. And I said, "I am from Lodz too." And I said, "Do you hire any women, do you have any women that is working in this factory?" He says, "No," but he says, "I will try to get you a job someplace." I says, "This is very, very important because we are so hungry, I and my girlfriend, we have nothing to eat." You know that next day he sent us a loaf of bread, some cheese and some preserves, which was something. Ah, we had a feast! And you know I could see that he was, I couldn't even see him close, because it was over the fence and how he sent it was a Jew who was working in that factory. He was a foreman. He said, "I have a friend and they are going to open a house shoes factory here that maybe you can get a job." And I said, "Fine. That would be great." And that's how I met him. One time he came. He said, "Meet me at the gate of the ghetto." I look and he is wearing brown uniform and a red band with swastika on it. I almost fainted. He was a Pollock (sic), but he was of German descent. I said, "He's going to help me? I better not talk to him anymore." And see the job was at night but to

that Jew he was sending some food and then he wrote me a note and he said that this boss over at that factory, that's supposed to open is going to come to town and he will be on a bicycle, meet him. Well, I went in early and comes a soldier and he was not in uniform either. He was a German, but he saved my life. I'll tell you. He was in charge of a big outfit that was sending food for military, you know, always traveling with the military. And we had everything. So, the first time when he hired me, he said, "You come for interview." And he hired me. And he took my employment card and sent it to gestapo and so it would be stamped. Meanwhile, there was a truck. Meanwhile, they were liquidating the ghetto. They were sending people on a transport. So all the people who were working for that factory, that place, in German it was *Verpflegungslager* (food for the soldiers).

That's where I met my husband. He was working there. His brother-in-law was working there. A lot of Jews was working there. You know, I talked with him and he was going to take my girlfriend's card and send it too to hire her. I mean, he was an older man, probably had children my age. And he hired a lot of Jewish people. Then he said, "What can you do?" I said, "Well, I can clean the offices. I can whatever." They were hiring women to sew burlap sacks. "I can do a lot of things." Well, he told me to clean the floor and he was standing there and watching me. He saw the way I was wringing out the mop. He says, "You are not a cleaning woman." I said, "Oh no I am, but you make me nervous." Well, he hired some Pollock (sic) to wash at night and become his secretary.

I had a roommate and he was supplying us not just food, but coal to make the ovens heat in the houses and everything. See all the people lived in one building. We were walking every morning to the place and coming back to the ghetto. After five o'clock, you couldn't get out. And then whenever there was a selection in the ghetto and they were trying to send people, he brought all the people who worked there to the place of work and said, "You spend the night here because they are going to take people from the ghetto and send them out, you know, till there was no ghetto anymore. Well, one time he brought me - You know what? I used to take old clothes from people from the ghetto and bring it to him and he used to sell it to Pollocks (sic) for food and I gave it to the people. So it was a lot of people benefit by it.

Then one time I had a pound of butter and was taking it to the ghetto and they caught me. Either somebody snitched on me or they were just looking for ... and I got 25, I mean with a leather whip on my bare ass and I said, "I am not going to cry, I am not going to give them satisfaction that they hurt me." And the next day I said well, everybody was kidding me, "Can you sit, can you sit?" I said, "Well, for a dollar, I'll sit down." But that was one of my worst experiences. It was the Jewish police doing it and a German standing there. And the less I didn't cry, the more they were beating on me. Anyway, that was it. Everybody knew. Anyway my boss was sent away. He said, "June, let me tell you", he called me Junia, you know he said, "They give me another star and send me to the Russian Front to fight." But Hitler, anyway, lost his war. So he (boss) wrote from Front letters till later on and then anyway, we left. But before he left he assured me with the guy who took his place, that I'd get a job, but it was not the same.

On March 5th 1943 the Germans make announcement – everybody who wants to go to Israel –to Palestine at that time- if they have relatives they should register and we will see that they go. Well, my roommate said, “You know what? I have a brother there. I am going to register.” She said, “You should do too.” I said, “I don’t have nobody in Palestine.” She says, “Well, why don’t you put my brother’s name, say this is your cousin, we are cousins.” So I says, “Ok.” And, you know, on March 5th, we came back from work. My friend was not there. They all took them out and several miles behind the city, they shoot them.

I came back and my husband at that time says, “Well, what you going to do? You going to live by yourself here? Come on I am going to see that we get married.” - get some cantor because there was no rabbi or get some religious Jew that we get married. “Pack your things.” Well, I didn’t know if I should pack the things or not pack the things. I didn’t know if wanted to or not. I hoped that he would not come back. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. But he got somebody and we had a party, because he had a lot of wine from that place where we worked and so on and that’s when we got married.

Three months later we were sent to concentration camp. We came to Blizyn. We opened the camp. We were the first ones to arrive. And it started as a labor camp but wind up to be a concentration camp. SS with big dogs and people were shot if somebody tried to escape. We were lined up and every tenth person was taken out. I mean, all of that was in front of us. There was a young boy who was maybe nineteen years old. And they took him out. I mean, he was lying on this SS man’s boots and kissing those boots, he says, “Please let me live. I didn’t have any life yet. I’ll be a good boy.” For nothing, just because somebody tried to escape. Now that was in front of us. I witnessed that they brought a transport of families from Bialystok, which is on the border of Russia and Poland on the east side, and they took away their babies and taking them by arms and hitting against the walls. Still today, I can’t face a baby crying, because when I hear it, I always see that picture -and of course, the crying of the parents and stuff like that. I went through three epidemics of typhus, the third one I finally got.

I worked in the kitchen, I worked in the hospital, I worked anyplace they put me just to survive. My husband stayed in different barrack. Women stayed in different barrack. On Sunday we had [unclear] - that was in beginning, before the SS and the gestapo take over - the Nazis. It was just like I told you Wehrmacht, we were patrolled by them. And they were a little bit more sympathetic so we had Sunday afternoon free, so my husband could come to my barrack. I never went to his barrack. And that was the life, more or less, till they liquidated that camp and took us to Auschwitz.

When we came first there, they took us to a shower, took our clothes away, just took us to a shower and we didn’t have nothing to wear. From there on, all the girls working were mostly from Czechoslovakia and they were cutting our hair, with such pleasure. You know, one took off, the other started. I had no hair left. Next day, I didn’t know what happened to my husband, but I found out that he’s on next camp. It was separated from ours by electric wires. And I came

there. I said, “I have no underwear, I have no bra, just this long black dress.” He didn’t recognize me. Any many times we start writing to each other letters on a cardboard so we could tear off those pages so we could have some more letters to write. And many times I was caught by the camp head, which was a woman also from Czechoslovakia, her name was Suzy, and she threatened me that she will shave off my eyebrows and my lashes, so that will be my punishment.

We actually didn’t have any work to do, just sit there. This was July and the sun was beating on us. There was no way to take a bath or wash. We traded sometimes, a portion of bread for a pan of water. And three of us, I and two other girls, we had the numbers of each other, and three of us, we used that water and washed ourselves. After certain time my husband was sent away to another camp. I didn’t know which camp or where. I said, “Well, I am on my own now. I have to, in order to survive, I have to be more aggressive.” After a while they were taking us to outside commando. At that point it was Fall time and we had to, I didn’t have good shoes to wear. All we begged is to have shoes with two holes – one the mud will come in and second hole the mud will come out. With all that, there was still humor. We made the best what we can, because we were young. There were selections and we had to parade nude with one arm up to see if the ribs are showing. If the ribs are showing, you were too skinny to work or to have the strength to do anything.

We marched like every morning we left Auschwitz camp and marched to that place where we were working. Our work was senseless, like the river Sola was going straight and they wanted it to curve. And we stood there in the mud and dig and dig and dig. We carried with us, from night before the supper, which was usually cabbage or sauerkraut and peas, such food that we were not accustomed to. And a lot of people got sick and a lot of people couldn’t tolerate it. But every morning we walked with SS men and big dogs and it was heel down or heel up and we had to slide because we couldn’t manage to get there otherwise we were threatened or hit with a gun or spade or something like that.

We worked there till almost wintertime – November, December. At that time the Russian army started shooting and coming close to Auschwitz. So they wanted to send the people away. So they sent me to Bergen-Belsen. That was January 1945. And I looked over women lying on the floor on straw that was filthy. I says, “Well, we are going to die here.” And she said, “Well, let’s do something. Let’s go, clean. There was washroom full of soup bowls. “Let’s wash it, maybe we can this way get a job.” And we did it and you know, we didn’t have to sleep on the floor, but we had a bunk bed, you know, that we slept on, which was good. The food was horrible. We didn’t eat nothing. We didn’t have no changes of clothes. I mean, I wore two different socks – different color - and a coat. For a belt I used a string and there was a cup hanging, a tin cup hanging from the string so we could always catch a little cup of soup, when somebody would be carrying the soup, so we can catch it. We were like five girls together that we tried to keep with each other company all the time.

In April 15, 1945 the English army liberated our camp. I couldn't believe it. We were afraid to do anything – to get out. 'Cause we were afraid, no, this is not true. They came and they will leave us, they won't stay here. The Germans will still come. So we didn't believe, but it was true. And we didn't know where we will go now. And they tried to put some kind of order, like open a canteen with food. There were so many sick people, see, and that's what happened. They gave them too much food and people couldn't take it. Anne Frank died in this camp. My husband's sister died in this camp and I didn't know where to turn.

Well, these few girls, they came from the canteen and said there is a list made by Red Cross, and your husband survived he's alive and he's in Buchenwald, another camp. Well, how I go to Buchenwald? The trains are not going. It was such a disorder all over Germany. But there came two men from Buchenwald looking for family in Bergen-Belsen. So they wanted to take me with them. I said, "Where am I going to go to strange men? The trains are not going. I won't go. I wrote a letter, and I said, "Look up this guy and tell him I am here." So that's what happened, but by the time my husband came to Bergen-Belsen, they sent us to the border between Holland and Germany and he had no transportation.

So he was liberated by May 8th, 1945 and he told American soldier that he would like to have a bicycle. He was a cyclist from before the war, that he wants to seek his wife and so on. He wants to go to Bergen-Belsen. And the American soldier stopped some German, took away his bike, and gave it to my husband. He came. He didn't know what to do either. He came back to Bergen-Belsen since this was the biggest camp - DP camp in Germany. Then they wanted us to go to Israel and fight. There was no Israel yet, it was Palestine and Haganah was trying to get all the young people to go. Well, I didn't want to go, I was tired. I wanted to have a normal life. I was married already a few years and never had a home. So it was coming to America.

Source: June Feinsilver video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/feinsilverjune/>