

Clara Grossman Testimony Transcript

I'm Clara Grossman and I was born in Hungary in a small town called Nyírbátor and we were, I had three brothers and sisters. I had an older brother, Emery, and a younger sister, Magda, and a little brother, Yanu. And my father's name was Arman, and my mother Anna.

I was born in 1930, September 6th. And we were a religious family, quite religious. It was a happy family. I have very fond memories. Started school at five and went into kindergarten. And I remember, my brother, being a year older, he... I felt sorry for him. He had to get up at 5:00 in the morning to go to *cheder* and study and then go to school the whole day. And in our home, we always had either an aunt or some kind of relative living because my mom just took care of the whole world. We went to school and played and helped with my aunts – the aunt who lived there. We all had chores. My father traveled a lot on business. He had a raw chemical business and took him away during the week, but on Friday, he was always home for the Sabbath. And that was our family time together.

Life in Nyírbátor, I remember being even six, seven, was very difficult for Jews. We were always constantly persecuted, beaten up, harassed. There was never a day that we could just walk along on the street with our head high up - always had to look around if someone was lurking around to beat us up. So it was happy and yet very difficult and sad.

As a little girl, I just, from conversation with my parents, my mom always wanted to come to the United States. She had an uncle who wanted to bring us all out and sent constantly affidavits. But my father being so religious, he just never felt that he could practice his religion and his business was well-established and, you know, it was a big step. And they always kept putting it off and putting it off.

And as time went on, we went to a Jewish school, no, we went to regular school and then later on we were not allowed to go anymore. I think at the 6th grade we were suddenly – or asked not to come to school anymore. That was in... I think in '43, '42 something like that. And the Jewish community set up a Jewish school and all the Jewish children attended that school.

Life went on and was talk that the Germans will be coming in. They were occupying more and more. And my father's business, which was the chemical business, one day was just taken away from him. He couldn't own business anymore. He had to take in a Gentile partner. And that, you know, that was, you know, quite difficult. And one day we were told that we had to wear a yellow star, first on the arm and then on our, sewn in into our clothes. As time went by, more and more information was coming about how bad things were, and that the Germans are very, very close. And one Sunday, I remember it very, very, very clearly, they just walked in, into town. They were just all over the place, with trucks and tanks and all equipment. They

were there and I just knew that after that, life never be the same. I was scared and I could see that my parents were so scared for all of us. It was in March 19th in '44.

One day they just rapped on our doors and the Hungarian *gendarme* – the police – came and told us that to pack up baggage, suitcase that we could carry, because we will be taken to an assembly area and possibly go, you know, go to a ghetto, not far from our home town. They picked the synagogue to assemble us and before we were taken away, my parents called each of us and showed where they hid some of the jewelry, in the basement into a steel box and some of the valuable items where we had a crawl space in the attic. So, each of us knew. And I said to myself, “Well, we really don’t have to know this, because we’ll all be together.” I just couldn’t even accept the fact.

And we were in the Temple, the synagogue. All of us looked scared, and trying to figure out what will be the next step and all the elderly were trying to get some news. And then after a terrible night next they assembled us and they said us we are going to a small town called Simapuszta to the ghetto and it was like 30 kilometers walking. And lots, like 3,000 Jews there were in our town all lined up and walking and fellow Gentile people just stood on the sidewalk and cheering along some of them, “Get rid of you!” and terrible things. And I just, as a child, I couldn’t believe this is really happening.

We finally got there. It was a farm area. Nothing, there were temporary barracks they built to house us and straw was laid down and just blanket over it and everybody staked out their little corner or area. And the outside was an open, like a grill, you know, area to cook and you were each family was responsible for their own food. Only they gave, you know, milk and some soup. The rest of it, you know, we had to provide. We were there for about three weeks.

One day they told us to gather our belongings and we went up to Nyiregyhaza where the trains were. And they had all the boxcars lined up – huge. I don’t know how many - but ten or twenty of them, and gathered us, 75 or 80 of us, into a boxcar. And I just thought this was it. There was little slits on the train - on the cars. Crowded. No sanitary equipment. I mean this was it. You had to do everything in this car. You couldn’t breathe. You were choking. There was no food. It just... It was so inhuman. It was so horrible. We thought, this is it. We will never make it. My mother, she was trying so hard. She keep saying, “It will be ok, not to worry.” My father praying - always praying. No one was listening. It took, it seems forever and ever. Some people just never made it. They died. And they tried to shield it from the younger ones. Finally, after three days the train stopped.

It was like 5:00 in the morning. People looked out and saw people lined up in striped uniform and lots of noise. It was a big platform and they opened the doors and lights all over, glaring, cold morning. It was I think in May - and lots of soldiers, SS soldiers, with their guns and bayonets, and all the workers. We saw a sign that said Auschwitz. You didn’t know what was happening. It was just... German shepherds. Dogs all over. Lined up screaming, “Come

fast, fast. *Raus, Raus!*” And “Drop everything. Everything will be sent to you. Just leave it where it is. Line up five in a row.” Separate the men and the women. And my brother and father and my cousin to one side and we were on this side. We still didn’t know what was going on. My cousin who was visiting, Shari, who couldn’t go back, she was tall and she was on the end in the front holding my hand, and my little brother was holding my hand and my mother and my sister. Suddenly just no - we were cut like this. We went through on one side and they went through on another side. That was the last time I saw my mom, and my sister and my brother.

We were pushed to, to one side, it seemed like mostly young women. I was 14 years old and about as tall as I am now and developed. And it’s, fortunately it was dark so they couldn’t see, you know, how young I was. I don’t know it was fortunate or not but this was decided that I had go. I mean you didn’t know what side you were on. And they marched us into an area and we had to undress, just keep our shoes on and chairs were lined up. It was like a big tiled area, and all the Gestapos and SS all running around everybody and suddenly you pushed into a chair and they shaved your hair completely. And you were like in a daze - you just really didn’t know what was going on. You were moved along like in an assembly line and they just pushed you completely. I just kept holding my cousin, trying to be together and not to be separated. And we were then taken into a huge shower area and we really didn’t know that much about the Crematorium at that time, you know, what was going or what will be. But water came out and they said scrub yourself, and DDT, and all that and threw us some clothes and some kind of shoes. And we put it on and just looked at each other - we just couldn’t even recognize each other – who was friends, or cousins, standing next to me.

We were lined up and taken out into a barrack area, C Lager, and put into a huge barrack. Lots of people were there and was taken to a bed area – it’s all, it was wooden beds. And it was just wood and one single bed, blanket. And we were shown that was it. There were ten of us in this small little area. And this went on very long room. And there was a young woman who was in charge of the barrack – a *Kapo* - and she was always screaming. And food – I mean, there was nothing at first. First of all, we really didn’t care. I mean I didn’t. I didn’t really want to live at that time. It was, why, what for?

And we were called outside to line up for *appell* every morning - two hours till they counted thousands and thousands of people. It was very cold and if you moved, they pulled you out and just shot you right there for no reason. They just went through, walked, the German, the SS soldiers, with sticks and constantly beating or pulling out or doing something. And if someone was missing, you had to stand for hours and hours. Either it was extremely cold or very hot - later on - and then you were sent back into the barracks and just waited doing nothing. And that in the evening again, was the same thing, twice a day. And we were trying to get some news from family and from anybody. We just couldn’t find out. Finally, someone came - it was not far from - our side it was all women but further down on, on C Lager was men barracks that my brother and my dad were in one of this, this Lager. And I snuck out and took a chance, because they were constantly watching you and you were not supposed to be walking out during... unless

you had something to do – some kind of work detail you were sent to do. I ran down to see if I could see them, and I saw someone from my home town who called my father out. And he was... when he saw me, he just hugged me and said, “Try to be strong. Try to stay together with all your cousins.” And my brother came out and he looked so small and so helpless. And I said to my brother, “Take care of Father.” I had some bread ration that I never ate and I had it in my dress and I pulled it out and gave it to my dad, because I heard he won’t eat the food, because it was not kosher. And I yelled at him. I said, “Kosher?” I said, “What’s kosher?” I said, “There is no kosher here. It’s nothing.” I said, “God is not watching and not looking after us.” I was angry, so angry. And that’s the last time I saw them - saw my father.

We had stayed in Auschwitz, it seemed it was forever, but fortunately only for like five weeks. Days dragged on. We were constantly hungry. I mean, lost 30 pounds within four weeks. There was absolutely zero food. I mean food, we were... Garbage would look good if we could find it. We always volunteered for work detail to get out - to try to work close to the garbage dump. To see if we could get some potato peels or whatever to try to survive. It was constant pain - hunger pain and the weakness. And some of my friends and cousins which was a huge support system, which is really responsible for all of us to be alive because we really sort of took care of each other. I was the youngest in the group, but fortunately strong, and tried to take care of myself as much as I could. The more we volunteered for the work detail, it seemed that it helped because one day they called us to an *appell* around noontime and we didn’t know what it would be. This is it - be sent to the gas chambers. By that time we knew what was going on. Every day the smoke was billowing out and you just, we were like zombies. We never wanted to think about it that this is happening. We just went on and tried to make each hour or each day. And that day when they called us to the *appell* at noon and they started looking at everybody very closely and they picked out from this line or that line and we were five of us, my cousins, and they threw all five onto one side. And they picked out a thousand young women that fairly you know, looked in fairly good condition still, but we didn’t think so and took us into, back into another area and undressed us and showered us again. Which each time you went in there you didn’t know that this was the water coming out or gas.

So we were sent out into, we actually we didn’t know, but it was a thousand of us, to the train again, into the boxcars and sent to Stutthof. This was another camp. Before we left they said they selected us for a work camp and if you work hard we will be fed and taken care of but if we didn’t we will be sent back to Auschwitz to die. So naturally the main goal was to keep eating as much – I mean eating...there was no food – but try to gather all our strength and work hard. And me being the youngest, I was constantly threatened to be sent back if I didn’t work hard to Auschwitz.

We did shoveling coal, digging ditches very, very deep. Laying pipes, sewers. They took us every morning to a work site. We worked from 8:00, 7:30 in the morning to like 7:00 at night and hardly any food – I mean just little soup which was water and little piece of bread and some black water that they called coffee.

The camp was terrible. It was just as bad almost as Auschwitz. We were constantly [unclear]— after we - before we went to work we had to stand *appell* and when we got back we were... You had to pull all your strength together, because if you showed any weakness, you were finished. And at night, I mean, just, you just fell into bed. I mean, we had... Maybe it was better if you just didn't have the energy or the the time to, the strength, the time to think about how horrible things were, how hopeless it was. And we, I said, we tried to encourage each other and help each other.

Then one day, they were lined us up, got all the thousand girls to an *appell* again, and they on the loud speaker came through that we are shipped to another work site - the work was finished here - a new group is coming in – to Braunau (Broumov). We were again taken with another train, transport to Braunau, which was near Lublin I think. Near Warsaw in Poland. It was on the Polish/German border. This was in July of '44. We tried very much my cousins the five of us, we always, you know, stayed together, but we had from our hometown some of my other cousins and friends to stay together. I worked for a while. First, the winter was coming, worked outside with, with different...again building, laying pipes and shoveling coal. It was getting so cold and yet no clothing. We were frozen. Our hands were frozen. Our feet were frozen. Shoes were just nothing. We tried papers and cardboard to keep us warm. There was the chance to go in to the factories and be warm or being poisoned, because it was all hand grenades. We had to... Actually, we were doing as the bombs were coming through and we had to look through a light. Sit at a table and they all come through and if there was any little crack then you had to pull it out because it was defected. And you inhaled all the poison. We got lips green. Our skin turned all yellow. Our hands were all yellow and everything tasted bitter.

There were rumors coming that they are taking us back to Auschwitz, that the war is coming... the Russian troops are coming on one side, American troops on the other end. It was in January of '45. Then one day we, after *appell*, they said that we will gather everybody in another hour and we will have to get out of the camp. And they didn't offer any other information, just that we will walk toward a train station and go, will ship us back. We have, the orders came that we should go back to Auschwitz. So we lined up and we started walking. It was...

Interviewer: Was your cousin, Shari, with you?

Shari was, came out from the hospital and she couldn't really walk, so we all took turns, they made a sled for her.

Interviewer: They meaning?

The German, one of the German officer, a woman, the Wehrmacht, made a sled. And she said, "You take her on this because she can't walk." And we pulled her and walked. The snow was this high. No clothing. We so cold. It was terribly cold. And it came towards the evening and we saw a big barn, two big farm houses. And they split us up. And we went into the barn.

And that's where we spent the evening. And our group, we sat and we started thinking what we should do. And we talked about trying to stay to the end of the line and see what happens, and if they really watching us that closely or not. We saw that they were sort of trying to hide themselves, and get away and not really... didn't care as much about us anymore. They, they were scared, because you could hear from far off that the bombings and they knew the troops were coming closer. And we just kept saying that they won't have a chance ever to get us back to Auschwitz. So we, the next morning, start marching again and was kept going back and back and back to the line and suddenly we looked around and there was no soldiers around us, no one were guarding us. So, we couldn't believe it and kept looking and looking and said, "What happened?" And they just sort of took off. So we, five of us, and Shari, naturally, wanted to... saw a road, and we said, "Well, we'll turn off on the first road." It was a huge farmhouse.

Interviewer: Were you still pulling her on the sled?

Yes, and suddenly a German woman, a guard from the camp, which we knew her, she said, "I'll take her." And we said, "No, we are." And she says, "No, I'll take her." And she just took her and left. And I was hysterical. I didn't want to be separated from her. I didn't know what. I said, "That's it. They gonna kill her." And we stood - we couldn't do a thing. She says, "If you move I will shoot you all." And she went off with Shari. And we were just... cried and we didn't know what to do. And I said, "Well, we should walk after her." And she said, "I don't want any of you to move." So, we walked on down to the little road. We walked into this farmhouse and no one was there. It was empty. We didn't know where we were – what town or what area. I think it was like seven, eight or maybe ten of us – my cousins, some of my cousins and my uh, some friends from our home town. We were there for like five days, maybe, you know, a little longer.

And then, one day we heard, you know, that bombing and the war noises coming closer and closer. Then one day five Russian officers on horseback came in. They said we are... and we put up a flag - a white flag. And we said, "We are from a camp nearby." One of the officers came, gathered us in one room and he said, "Look, I would advise you girls to leave. The troops are coming through here." We gathered as much food as we could, you know, carry with us and started walking into Lublin. We walked into Warsaw and we finally found a train that was going to Krakow and we had no money. And then, you know, finally they let us go on the train.

Interviewer: Were you still wearing your uniform?

Yes, still wearing... all shaved, no shoes – hardly any, just some rags. Head filled with lice. We were filthy dirty. Had never, you know, no bath. Only that, you know, the showers that they gave us – maybe once, you know, and twice. Sick. And we got to Krakow and then slowly, somehow, worked our way to the Hungarian border and into Budapest. Came back to finally to Nyírbátor. And it took us, you know, quite a while - at least two to three months to, you know, somehow, a little bit pull ourselves together. And then each day someone else came.

My brother, one day, Summer, just walked in to our home. We had 53, Hercz cousins living in Nyírbátor, and 12 of us came back.

We decided to go back to Budapest and the Russians, the Communism, the Russians were there and Communism was just really starting to flourish and we really didn't want to be a part of it. I was constantly asked to join the Communist Party and I refused all the time, and it was getting more and more difficult and it was time to leave. And we went up to Budapest, sold everything, got as much money together and got somehow through to Vienna. And from Vienna there was already HIAS and UNRRA set up to help the displaced people. And we, they contacted us and we were taken to Ulm. And it was like a little, regular little town. It had schools set up and it was the hospital and we lived out of the camp area. There were apartments set up. There were orphans, babies, all ages and us, the older children, took care of... Went to school during the day. Regular school was set up by the Army, you know, the American, one of the organizations and then during the...after school we worked in the nursery and the hospital, all different chores we had, and took care of the younger children.

And one day we were called that the papers have come through and we were [unclear], flown to Bremer... we took the train to Bremerhaven and boarded a ship - my brother and I, and came to the United States.

Interviewer: When was that?

It was in April of '48. And I never forgot the day when the ship pulled in, into the harbor and we saw the Statue of Liberty. It was... I never thought I would ever see that or make it and come back. I was just... freedom. Never have to worry and be scared, beaten up, and humiliated. You could look up and be proud that I am a Jew.

Source: Clara Grossman Video Testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/grossmanclara/>