

Bronia Roslawowski Testimony Transcript

My name is Bronia Roslawowski and I live in Kansas City, Missouri. Before the war my father had a store, we were in business. Before, when I was born, my father was playing the lottery in Europe and four men won a million zlotys. And my father won a quarter of a million zlotys, so he went in business. Before that he wasn't a businessman but he had a good business head and we had all kind of materials – clothing and materials, raw stuff and stockings - everything. A gallentaria - we used to call it the Gallentaria Store. We had everything. You come in to buy a needle and you could walk out with a hat. So we had everything. It wasn't as big as in the United States but we made a living – we made a decent living.

We had a good life and I had two brothers and two sisters. I went to public school and then I went to Hebrew school – like a Hebrew school. I went to Beit Yakov – it was a religious school. We'd come home from school at three o'clock, we'd eat our dinner – the whole family would eat at three o'clock – the children with parents - and then at four o'clock we had to go to Beit Yakov. And five days a week, we were there till seven o'clock in the evening and we're studying Hebrew and we dance and - you know, just a religious school - so we were educated in Polish and in Jewish. I also studied German. And in the seventh grade but we studied French. I studied just one semester. Yah, because I just finished seven grades of school – that's all I had. And I felt after the war that I was illiterate. 'Cause I would have went farther and farther because my older sister she went to seminar when she was sixteen years old in Krakow and she was a teacher. So I would have had an opportunity to do whatever I want to but war broke out and we couldn't go to school.

In 1939 when the Germans came in I came from Turek, Poland – when the Germans came in, everybody said that our part of the country will be - this is the Third Reich and this is Hitler's heart and we are going to be the first victim. And they said that our part is going to be bombard and the battlefield will be right there. So my father and mother decided that they are going to run away to Szczeciński– it is close to the water – it is a Polish water and over there they said it wouldn't be as bad as it would be at the Third Reich. So my daddy and mother and all the brothers and sisters were going to go run away from the Germans in September '39. And I said to my mother, "I'm not going!" And I meant exactly what I said. And I even said, "You can hit me, you can do anything you want." My parents never hit us – we were never touched. We had a very happy, good childhood. So when my mama said to my father, "She means it and she's going to do what she's saying."

Interviewer: How old were you at the time?

I was thirteen or maybe fourteen years old. So and I said, "I'm going to watch our house." And I saw that my parents worked very hard and "I'm going to be the watch dog." So my mother and father went in another room and they were consulting between each other and my

mother came out and she said, “Okay, I’m going stay with you.” Because they are not going leave a child by itself. So my father went with two brothers and two sisters and they were running away from the Third Reich.

But I saw how the war started because I was right home when – in September 3rd or 4th, the Germans came into our town and the Polish people tore up the white sheets and they hanged out flags – white flags and when a person hangs out a white flag that means that they are giving up they are not goin’ fight against them and they shot three times in the air – the Germans shot three times in the air. And those people hanged out the flags and they didn’t bombard our town at all. They didn’t touch it. And the soldiers marched in. And I watched them – you know a kid watches soldiers march. I didn’t know anything about the war or anything.

So after a few weeks my father and brothers and sisters came back and they told us that they were throwing bombs. The Nazis were throwing bombs from the airplanes on the civilian population and the bombs went just, you know just. And lots of people got killed but we were fortunate nobody got killed. My father came back maybe two, three weeks – something like that and the family was together. It was a wonderful feeling the family was together.

My mother hired a teacher, because we were not allowed to go to school. So my parents were pretty well off. We were not wealthy in no way but we had enough. And she hired a teacher so she would come in in our house and teach the children because we needed education. Because mother used to always say, “People can take property away from you, people can take money away from you, people can take gold away from you, but what you have in your head no one can take it away from you unless you die.” What did we do? We studied with the teacher. All the children were sitting and she was teaching us – German and Geometry and Chemistry – all kind of subjects what we needed to know.

But unfortunately it didn’t take very long and a Nazi came in and my father had a little goatee and that Nazi came in and he put his hand on the table and he took a candlestick and made my father sit down right next to him and he was going to burn off my father’s beard. And I was playing outside but I saw some commotion going on in the house so I ran in in the house. And I saw my mother and father and sisters and brothers staring and crying and that man had the candlestick in his hand. And I said – and what did I do? I came in from playing and I said, “This is my father!” And I pushed his hand away from the table and blowed out the candle and I said, “This is my father. You cannot do that. Human beings don’t do things like that to other human beings.” And the man was very tall about six feet four or five and he gave me a very dirty look and walked out and didn’t do nothing to my daddy.

So it didn’t take very long – my, our picnic wasn’t very long to be home in our own home. After a few weeks they ran us out from our own home. We had our own house – a brick house – a nice house. They came in and they put us in in a ghetto. The ghetto was a street that was called the *Breite Gasse*– the wide street. Most Jewish people lived there and the synagogues

were there. And all the people -most Jewish people lived in that neighborhood so they put all the Jewish people there. We never lived in that street. We lived out of the skirts of the town. We lived with all kind of people. And in 1940 they ran us out from the ghetto. In the ghetto they had barbed wires and they got all the Jewish people in that ghetto and maybe ten people lived in one little room. And but as long as the family was together, we did not care. We didn't have enough to eat. It just didn't matter. Whatever we had we all shared together.

In 1940, they came in with big trucks with horses and wagons, you know and took us out in the countryside. And they ran us out about seven/eight kilometers from Turek. And they called it Heidemühle. This was not barbed wire but it was a big piece of ground. And they gave us little houses like little shacks. They were lime houses – made from lime. And they said, “You have to grow your own vegetables. And you have to produce whatever you are going to eat you have to produce yourselves.” So we worked the soil and we grew green stuff. You know, like cabbage and carrots and beets and all kind of things and another person would grow something else. So we would exchange for one another. It was not so bad.

But when we were in Heidemühle a few weeks, they started taking out one person from each family. So they took my older sister. I was too young, and they took my older sister and at that time you could exchange a head for a head. I said to my mother, “Momma, I'm not going to let my sister (her name was Anna) – I'm not going to let her go to camp. She's not going to live two weeks there. I'm going go for her.” My mother said, “It is her destination. You shouldn't do that.” I said, “No, momma, I love my older sister. I'm going for her to camp because she's not going survive.” Well, what can a mother do? I made up my mind and packed up my backpack and I went in and there was a desk and that woman was writin' down the names of who was there and who was goin' out. So I went in and they called out my sister Anna Kibel, you come out, your sister wants to replace you. And I gave my life for my sister. Unfortunately, she's not alive, but I am alive.

So pretty soon they took us – we were about 250 people. They took me to Inowrocław. We walked maybe seven eight kilometers from Inowrocław. They took us to Grojno and they put us in a barn, and there was straw, and they put us we slept on straw – no sheets, nothing. And we walked – every morning we walked to Kruszwica. And we worked in the canals in the waters. And we cleaned – we had big rakes and we were cleaning the water – taking off the scum from the water and if the SS men didn't like it, he made you go in to the water and do it barefooted. And it was cold, bitter cold. I was in Grojno till 1943. And they took us – made us pack up what we had.

They took us Auschwitz. They took us on big trucks. And then they took us to train station. And the train station has those – it wasn't the trains where passengers are in. It was cattle – where the cattles are in – they put all the people. There was little windows with little crate, you know, covered – very small. When they took us in to the train station and I saw they were putting us in those cattle trains, I said, “It is a disaster.” So we went in the train. We didn't

have any seats. We were sittin' on the floor. And there were little children and old people. For three days and three nights the train went like that – back and forth and back and forth. Little children were cryin' and screamin'. They didn't give you nothing to eat. They didn't give you nothing to drink. People were defecating, people were vomiting. People were dyin'. And finally we arrived to Auschwitz.

When we arrived to Auschwitz there was that SS man with the big gun. And he start saying, “*raus, raus, raus, raus.*” That means get out, get out get, out, get out. And if you didn't walk just real fast, he took that gun and hit you. And if you didn't move faster, he took the gun and just shot you right in front of everybody's eyes. It was horrible. Okay we got off the train. So there were a bunch of SS men standing, laughing and giggling with the dogs. And they would one go this way, one go this way, one go this way, one go this way.

Then pretty soon they put us in a big room and there were two SS women with the dead heads, you know and on the head, what they had and they were holding our hands like this. One held your hand like this and one went with a needle and put on a number. And I said, “Why are you puttin' a number on my hand? I didn't do nothing wrong.” And she took her hand and she slapped me on both sides of my face. And she said, “If you don't shut up I'm going to put it all over your hand.” And after they put on a number, they took off - they cut our hair. And pretty soon they gave us uniforms from the Russian soldiers – lice infested. And we put on the pants and the jackets from the Russian soldiers – the uniform.

And they put me on Block 13 and we slept on *pritcher* - on bunker beds. And we slept like herrings, you know. On the side you had to lay on the side – four or six people, it depends on how wide the bunker was – four or six if it was a little wider, six people. And we couldn't move. We just had to lay like this and sleep on it. And five o'clock in the morning we would get up for a we used to call it- *zahl appell* – that means like a roll call. And the SS man would come and he would count us. And we would stay barefooted on the cement. We used to bite our lips so our lips would look red – we would bite them. And we would pinch the cheeks so they would be looking red so we wouldn't look sick to them. If you looked sick they would take you right away to the crematorium. And then we had to walk – go to work. I worked – we built forests. One girl would cut out a piece of soil. We worked three in a group. And one girl would hold a tree in her hand after I cut the piece of soil she would put in and take out - scoop out the dirt. And then I would put in the tree inside and march around it and stumble, you know and one girl would stumble around the dirt so the tree would grow.

And one time, his name was Herr Wunsch – the SS man's name was Herr Wunsch. He liked me. Everybody, most people liked me. I spoke - I was fortunate. I spoke German. And I believe because I spoke German, I'm alive. I'm alive today. So this girl was just taking a breath – she was just catching a breath, you know. And she was standing by the spade, you know. And he walked over and he sees that she staying and she wasn't working. And he took out his bayonet and hit her. He said, “You lazy!” And my mouth reacted quicker than my brain and I

did to him, (while shaking her finger at him) “*Der lieber Gott wird bestrafen.. Sie haben geschlagen ein Mädchen unschuldig.*” I’m going translate to you in English. I said, “God is going punish you. You are beating up on an innocent girl. She was not lazy.” You know, and I did it with my finger just like I’m doin’ it now. And he gave me a very dirty look and walked away - didn’t do a thing to me. After a few days, he wasn’t comin’ to work. We hadn’t seen him – somebody else was coming to watch us. He came to work and he was walkin’ on two crutches and had a big cast on his foot. I found out in a joke he was jumping over a fence and he broke his leg. And when he came - and a few days he came back to watch us again- he said, “You – (just like that – indicates pointing at her) you wished it on me!” Just like that. He did it exactly the way I did it to you. I said, “Oh no. I didn’t wish that - I don’t wish bad things for anybody. But God punished you. I didn’t know any secrets.” And he looks at me and he walks away. The next day he came back and he had in his back pocket a half a sandwich. And he walks over to me, looked around that nobody should see. He said, “*Kleines Mädchen hast du Hunger.*” That means, “Little girl, are you hungry?” I said, “I’m hungry all the time.” But he brought me every day he came to watch us – he brought me a half a sandwich. Do you think I ate that half a sandwich by myself? No. I took a bite, this girl took a bite and the third girl took a bite.

After a while I became also a victim to go to the crematorium. In 1944 I became a *muselmann*. I weighed 65 pounds. So I became so ill. Finally they took me to the crematorium – they took me on a selection and I was goin’ to the crematorium. I was already on the truck to the crematorium. So, what did I do? I say to the other girls – there were a whole bunch of young girls with me. I said, “I am goin’ jump. I am not goin’ to the crematorium.” And I begged my girlfriends to do the same thing. They didn’t do it – I did. And I jumped down. There were two girls who were opening the gate when you walked out. So when I saw the truck was moving out and the two SS men were sittin’ in the front where the radio was playing, they were drinking whiskey and singin’ – as soon I saw they were singin’, they are happy, I was nude I, I didn’t have any clothes I didn’t have anything, I jumped off of the truck anyway. And when I jumped down, I landed on two feet. I didn’t break a leg or anything. Nobody saw me.

So I was hiding – I saw a ditch in the ground. I jumped in in that ditch and covered myself up with snow. And when I saw the truck was already gone – I didn’t see it any more – I ran back to the camp. I had to go back through the gates from where I went out. And I said to that girl who was in charge, I said, “Reinya, I jumped down from the crematorium, please throw down your coat.” And she threwed down the coat so I wouldn’t run around nude. I went back to the block from where I came from because I didn’t have any other place to go. I went to that woman. Her name was Gissi Moskowitz, she was a Czechoslovakian girl. And I said to her, “Gissi, I jumped down from the truck when they were taking me to the crematorium.” She said, “You did?” And the first thing she said, “I’m not goin’ get a ration for you, but I tell you what. I will I will make give everybody a little piece bread less, and there will be a ration for you anyway. And you will work in the camp. But I can hide you out just for three months – no

longer.” I said, “Why three months?” She said, “We have a roll call from the big officers who come in from Germany.” And when they came to the camps they took out a bayonet and they would put this through the mattresses.

We were sleeping on straw mattresses. But not on everyone – or somebody is not hiding, see? So she explained to me. So she cannot keep me because they can take her - they kill her and kill me and she has two sisters and cousins. So I said, “Gissi, that will be fine – three months instead of three months being burned in the crematorium, bein’ ashes. Let me live three more months.” So, Gissi Moskowitz, the woman who was in charge of the block, took me to the gate also – to the same gate where you have to come in and go out. So I stood up in attention, “Prisoner 57365, jumped down from the crematorium.” And he looked at me up and down and he took his ugly hand to my face and knocked me down and I fell down on the cement and he walked over and stepped all over my body. And he said, “I’m goin’ let you live.”

But I still wanted to escape from Auschwitz. One time, I was in the toilet, I saw a a man - a civilian man comin’ in to pick out 200 people to go to Germany to work in the Telfunkin factory. When I saw he’s pickin’ out people to go this way go this way, go this way. So I walked over to him. I figure, I speak German. I can speak German just as good as he does. I walked over to him and I said to him, “Oh Ach, I would love to go to Germany. I have never been in Germany and I’m a very diligent person. And I know how to work.” So he made with his finger like that. So they took us to Telefunken. I worked in Reichenbach. There was a big factory.

And then from Reichenbach they took us on a dead march. This was called a dead march. They took 12,000 young women and we walked miles and miles. And when the night came, they put us in barns. They came with the train, with the open train. The wagons were open. And they were taking us to different places and finally they took us to Salzwedel. And Salzwedel let us in and I was liberated in Salzwedel. In Salzwedel in April 19 – the fourteenth or fifteenth of April. And the Americans came in and this was a beautiful day in my life when the Americans came in and liberated us.

So when the Americans came in they sprayed us with like you’d spray for bugs – you know, what you call it - DDT. They sprayed us. They gave us clean clothes. They burned the barracks. They took us out from the barracks. They put us in the barracks where the soldiers lived. They gave us to eat. They told us not to eat too much – very careful. And there was a captain, was standing - they took out a table and he was standing (indicated on it) and he said, “You’re free. We take the town of Salzwedel, you’re free. You’re goin’ be back to bein’ human beings like you were before. Don’t worry. We are goin’ to help you.” That was the most prettiest day I have ever in my life seen – my happiest day.

And then they said, “You can go wherever you want to.” After a while, not right away. They said, “You can go wherever you want to.” I said, “I’m not goin’ back to Poland. It’s too many pain for me. I don’t want to be in Europe ever!” I said to the American people, “I lost

everybody. You are my father, and you are my mother. You are everybody I have in the whole world and whatever you will go, I will go with you.” And the Americans took me and we went to Braunschweig. And in Braunschweig we went into it was some kind of a camp – a DP camp. But I didn’t stay in the DP camp. I just, in the DP camp, I wanted to learn something. I was useful to the Americans. I learned how to type. I was always in office. I did something. And I was willing to learn. I went to school and I studied. I wanted to become a nurse.

Then in 1947, I got married. In 1947, we came to the United States. And when I came to the United States, when I saw the Statue of Liberty, I said, “Thank you dear God that we are in America and I kissed - I swore that I laid down on the ground and I kissed the ground. And then we came to America. We came to New York – the organization – the Joint Distribution Committee – picked us up. They put us in – they gave us a little room. And I was pregnant already and the social worker – there was a social worker – and she said, “You cannot stay in New York.” I said, “Show us the map of the United States and we will see whatever. We were both young. We were twenty, twenty-one. And we should look at the map and we said, “President Truman is from Missouri. Kansas City is the heart of America. Let’s go to Kansas City – Kansas City here I come.” And Kansas City was so wonderful to me. The Kansas City people are the nicest people in the whole wide world. And everybody was good to me and I love the United States, I love the American people.

Source: Bronia Roslawowski video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/roslawowskibronia/>