

Chana Sander Testimony Transcript

My name is Chana Sander. I was born in Poland - Dabrowa Gornicza my town. I lived there. I went to school there. I went to Hebrew school there. I had my parents. I had my – I had a brother year younger from me. And I had a sister year younger from my brother. In three years we was three children.

We was not a wealthy people. My father was a shoemaker. He worked for his sister in a factory that was making children's shoes. And he was there like here they call a manager. Over there it was like manager over there they didn't call it a manager. I don't know how to say that word even in Poland – what in Poland was. That's what I went there to school. I lived in a big, big apartment building. We was a lot of children there on the yard. We played normal like all other children here in the United States. I - we started school when we were seven years old. I had a cousin – but she's still in Poland. She taught me and I didn't go to the first grade. I right away went into the second grade. From the second grade, I was very good and I went in right away a year later to the fourth grade. And then I finished mine grade school. I started to go to a third town – a bigger town – to Sosnowiec – to a business school.

I was there one month. They told us to go home. They gonna let us know and the German came in. We didn't can go to school. I don't remember exactly what year the German came in but September. They came in before the other town. My mother's brother came with six children running to us. And I had a dog. The dog got very wild and barked and two hours later came into my town. And right away they took the big synagogue. And I was close living to that and they put the horses and they started to burn. My uncle took the children and went home. The same night they burned the synagogue in that town. My uncle was hiding there. They throw him in the fire by life.

And from this time on we didn't can go out on the street whenever we wanted. A month later we already had a different street. That street where I was living was like they said ghetto. I didn't see a ghetto because we went straight to camp. My father was a very – like he a senator from the city – he worked for the Jewish like Federation here. It was not as big where here. But he worked then they said that we have to go there and register. And I was sure – we children – we were sure that my father was such a big shot that we gonna not be hurt, we gonna not be send away. The German came in a month later they started to rid – catch the people on the street and to send it away. Then came, they said they're gonna send us away for work. That's what I can't remember – I remember that was February the 7th. I don't remember 1940 to 1941. But I believe in my mind that was 1941. I left my parents and I and my sister, was, we went to that place – it's was in the same school where I wanted to start the business school. And then we was there. They said one of us gonna go out – I or my sister. I was the older one. That I s'posed to go out. I just said, "No, I'd rather go. She's too young. I'm gonna go." And they asked my father which one he wanted to go. He picked up his hand by the head and he said,

“God, makes up my mind. You asking me which child I should give away?” Then I said to dad, “Dad, don’t worry. I’m gonna live through. Don’t worry. You go home and be healthy and be with the family. I’m gonna live through.” And that was. I lived through. And my sister didn’t live through and nobody lived through. I am the onliest of a family over 200 people.

And then they took us by train from the place from the gymnasium – that school. They took us by train. The train was going back and forth. They wanna mix us up that we should not know to if we run away to run away today. And not go on plan to run away today. We came to Grünberg [unclear]. It was in the night. We came in. We were just 500 girls – 500 girl from mine city, from like my husband’s city about two miles away, the other city three miles away, from the little cities and we went. We was there 500 girls. We worked for Way Baraye [no location known by this name]. We maked materials – from the scratch to materials – was a very clean factory. In beginning, was clean. Then start to come in bunch of people, bunch of people they bring during the night people. We didn’t know to that was that a girl that was boy, because everybody was shaved the hair. We didn’t knew who what were girls.

They started to get very, very, very bad. The hunger was unbelievable – unbelievable the hunger. The girls run to the garbage and tooked out the food what the people – the German – throw away. And they ate it. That was already when I was a year in the camp. I didn’t have as bad as the other girls, because the Juden älteste was from my city. She had her family still in my town and belonged and my father did can send them away or not send them away. Then she helped me. She helped me a lot. I heard other what they livin’ then on to Canada. From my street, I never talked to her before the war. She was the second house on me. I never talked to her. In camp, she helped me a lot. She helped me and thanks to her I really, really am alive.

Then what I’m gonna talk about – that camp was a long, long years. The bugs – the bed bugs – ate us up alive. They was cutting up all the girls hair. I didn’t have cut my hair – never had been cut my hair. They called me that sauber girl – that clean girl. Constantly, when my whole mind was to see to go to wash myself to be clean. Ah but just was a very bad camp. I don’t think -we just didn’t knew what’s goes on in other camps. We didn’t knew nothing. We would still receive mail. It was a forced labor camp. Then they start to be a concentration camp. They didn’t kill by us. They didn’t burn us.

By 1944 I think, by the end of 1944 they took us to the march. That was the death march. We was going, walking a lot of hundred of miles. It was snow and it was cold and they didn’t give us food. We had a small little pot with a spoon. We was scraping the snow to the pot and that’s way we ate. In the night they put us in together with the cows and the horses. The horses got wild. They saw so many people that they bite the girls the cheeks the hands – whoever was closer to death. One time everybody, we had to get out from that barn and I said to my other friend, “Let’s not go farther. I can’t go farther any more. Let’s hide here in the straw.” We was thinking that we was just the two of us. We started to dig. We was over twenty. And they came

in and they took us by horse and buggy to some sport. We was very hurt. We was beat. From this time on I didn't run away anymore.

We came in to Bergen Belsen. We walked to Ham – no, to Hanover. We walked to Hanover. That was maybe seven, eight hundred miles. We was on the road without shower, without washing, without changing our clothes for seven weeks. The lice start to eat us up alive. They was crawling all over us. They come into the eyes – wherever was hair. We was, they ate us up alive. And we was not used to death to see it. I was thinking that that's gonna be that way we gonna live. Why do I have to mail? (15:00) Because I wanted that'll kill me. I didn't can take it anymore.

Then we came to Bergen Belsen. I saw Hanover. They put us on a train – on a train together with the cows and the horses, such a train. They locked up, no water, no toilet. And we was for four days on that train – nothing to eat. We start to get wild. We knocked on the doors. We needed to go. We just human we had– no answer, no nothing. And the Germans opened the door. They start with the bats to hit us and to call us names – what we never heard that names that language – what we never heard us. We came to Bergen Belsen in the night and I didn't knew where we was. We didn't knew where we were. We came in the night and that's what we was wearing. They took us to the shower and I had the mail. And I went to the shower with that mail. And I didn't wanna get it away. Two SS men gave me 25 on my bare body and blood was coming from my back and they putted a bucket of water - cold water on me. It that was in January.

And they put us a thousand girls in one room. We was laying on the floor like herring. When one turned around we have to beg other one to turn around. You didn't can lay all the time on the same side because your back was hurting. We had to turn around. Then we would say, "Please, turn around." Talk. There was already two dead ones. And we was afraid to tell them that there were dead one, because they give a little soup without the spoons and we was reaching with their hands and that way we ate. Was more lice and the rats – and the mice was running all over us. The girls was dying like flies – young girls, beautiful girls, from very good homes. That was Bergen Belsen. We came with 4,000 girls and left with 68 girls. The rest was dying and when you looked out the windows, was bunch and bunches laying to the tops - killed they didn't bury. They was laying in that way – was going that way for the mice and the lice was spreading. Then we can't get even rid of them.

Then I had typhus. Came a lady, she knew somebody in my town. And I knew that person. She was a Jewish lady. And she had something to say. She put me with the sick one. Then it was already good that we were six, or seven girls in one bridge. Four was dead already and we didn't say it because we wanted that piece of bread. We wanted a little soup. Then they're saying, they were saying the bombs are going on. We was in that like to say a hospital. It was no hospital - no quality, no nothing. Then I don't know nothing 'bout the liberation because I was sick and I was laying on that bridge and nobody cares if I am alive or not alive and

I didn't care if somebody else was laying with dead people. We were selfish. We was hungry. We was dirty. We was not human at all – not human at all. Then the English came and the Scot. When they woke me up I saw again the was a soldier. That's what they said. I was screaming and I fall asleep again. They woke me up again. They took me to a bathroom and they gave me a bath. I have every place lice and not in my head. They never cut my hair. I had every place full of lice – my hair, not. They were so surprised and it was after the liberation already. Then they can't clean. Even the English didn't can't clean up this camp. They throw out the American from the barracks – not the American – the Germans – from the barrack – from the clean one and they put us down there. When we moved into that barrack, we was very weak, very weak. And people started to die more.

Interviewer: Was this still at Bergen Belsen.

Yeah, they die more, because we start to get the food. Our stomach was not use anymore and we was hungry. The people reached very fast for everything – what everything they can put on their hand, because we was hungry. We didn't see good food for so many. They gave us something that was like nothing. We was young. We was hungry. An awful lot, an awful lot of people died. I was in Bergen Belsen maybe I cannot even think of that. They wanted to take us - I was already on the trucks – to go to Sweden – what we did for sick girls. Then I have there – she called herself a cousin – we have together the same uncle – the uncle was mine uncle was her uncle from her father's side, my uncle from that side. She was alright. Then she came up to notice that told them that she gonna take care of me.

And slowly then, my husband, somebody went to Buchenwald. I don't know how they went to Buchenwald. That's behind my mind. I don't know how they have strength to go. They hitch hiked, you know – got a cab, got a touro, wherever it goes. And he found out that I was in Bergen Belsen. He came on a bicycle. Buchenwald was liberated by the American. That people from the American side had very good, because our country is a very rich country and they gived the people a lot of food. And he took us – my cousin – took us to Buchenwald. It took us, oh, maybe a week to go to Buchenwald. We hitch hiked. A English truck goes by, we was, I was on the English side till you came to the American side. We was in Buchenwald then the American have to go out from Buchenwald and the Russian came in. We went away.

We went to Poland. We went 'bout twenty people to Poland to look for families - everybody that was looking for families. From Buchenwald we went to Poland. On the train, it was not easy to catch a train, we was going for days and days. I don't even remember how many days. We came on the train. I saw a girl – a Polish girl. She knew me and I knew her – we recognized. And she said, “Chana, you don't have, you don't want to go home. Nobody's alive.” I said, “Nobody is alive?” I get up in the morning in Poland, in my home town. [unclear] she took over school, was a little janitor woman cleaning and she looks at me. She said, “Where did still a such a fat one live through?” I said to them, “We gonna stay here in Poland? That is I said I outgrewed already Poland. I don't wanna stay here. I don't want to stay in that

antisemitic that dares she tells me - janitor- that tells me that I lived through and I am still a fat.” I was fat, but I was swollen up from the typhus. And I was in the same city. I went to the cemetery. And I always in camp I used to say, “I’m gonna rent myself an apartment near the cemetery to look it out and just to stay and I never gonna marry. I never wanna have got children, because to bring up children and to give it to the German that’ll take by the feet and kill them. I said, “No.”

But I was the first I got one. I got married, because when I came in, I saw the girls with the boys together. And they said, “Where did you get married?” And I said, “No, we didn’t get married.” I said to my husband, “We didn’t have a rabbi there. – was no rabbi.” I said to my husband, “If you wanna get married, it’s alright. We’re not. You go one way and I go the other way.” We went to a big city – Lodz, because in the group was two people that was from Lodz. When we went to go to Lodz it took us another six, seven days to go there, because trains were not going regular like it’s s’posed to go. We went there and we got married there. And I said, “No, I not going to stay here in Poland for no money in the world. I don’t ever want to look here. We have to get going.” And I really didn’t want to go to Germany either. I wanted to go where the American are. And we came to Frankfurt Am Main.

I came to Zeilsheim a displaced camp – a displaced camp they called this and we was there ad we got everybody. The German had to go out and everybody got a room. I was married and I have a room for myself. The kitchen - we shared – that was a house and this was three, four bedrooms and washrooms and beautiful garden. And I got pregnant. Then I had a baby boy. And from Zeilsheim we writed down, they had an announcement – you can go to Canada. We sign our name to Canada. We can go to Australia. We signed our name. I say, “Where they gonna call us first? There we gonna go. Germany we don’t wanna stay. “Where they gonna call us first? There we gonna go. They gonna call us to Israel – we gonna go to Israel. Where we wanna go, there we gonna go.” They called us to America and we was glad. And I worshipped, worshipped the ground – every little stone what I am stepping on it in America is to me the biggest precious – like I would step on diamonds, on pearls. Nobody can buy that pleasure what I have when I step on the street.

Source: Chana Sander video testimony - <https://mcheckc.org/portfolio-posts/sanderchana/>