

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Holocaust Project

Personal Experiences

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ESTHER SHUDMAK

Interviewed

by

Mary Anne Seman

on

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INTERVIEWEE: ESTHER SHUDMAK

INTERVIEWER: Mary Anne Seman

SUBJECT: concentration camps, life after and during the war, losses suffered

DATE: April 22, 1980

SE: This is an interview with Mrs. Esther Shudmak for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Holocaust, at 183 Melbourne Drive, Youngstown, Ohio, at 7:30 p.m., on April 22, 1980, by Mary Anne Seman.

How about if you tell me a little bit about your present life now, your home, your family here?

SH: My present life here, which is very pleasant, is my husband and I. I have one daughter that is married and lives in Youngstown. Another daughter lives in New York and goes to Columbia University pursuing a Masters in Art. After living in many countries I find life in the United States beautiful. I wish American-born would appreciate this as much as I do because if they would travel all over the world and see the freedom and plenty with all the complaints of today it's no place like here.

SE: Could you tell me where you were born?

SH: I was born in Czechoslovakia in the city of Rachov. It was a small place really, but it was well-known for its minerals, health baths, ski resorts. I cling to Czechoslovakia as my country, although living there until 1939 one night we were so-called liberated, by Ukrainians. The country was taken over for almost nine months. After nine months with fighting and so on, the Hungarians occupied the country. From 1940 it was Hungarian rule with some German.

We were a big family. I don't remember much of my sisters and I living today because as a child I remember my sisters married with children. My home life was good considering

the type as compared to today. We had a home. My father was a tailor and made a good living. We were a very happy family.

It started close to 1941, 1942 when they started to deport the Jewish people in our city who were born in Poland. Anybody who was not born in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, in that region, had to leave the country. They separated families, fathers, mothers, and transported them to Poland. My mother really was a Polish born, but somehow with my father's influence in the police my mother stayed with us. He was an officer in the Austria-Hungarian Army of World War I. In those years we already felt the pinch of not being free to do anything. They started to deport people, take away Jewish stores. The Jewish students were slowly expelled from school; it did not matter age; just because of being a Jew they were expelled. I did not finish more than nine grades. We had to wear the yellow star and there was a curfew; you could not go out. Life got very difficult because Germans went through our city with machine guns, tanks. We lived close to the Polish border and Poland was already occupied. At that time we already sat home, most of us. We could not go places. Food was scarce. We used to get up at 4:00 in the morning and stand in line to get some food. We stayed like that under those circumstances and difficult ones until 1944. We were officially under Hungarian rule, but it was partly German occupied. Life itself, thinking about it today, was still good because we were a family together. We never realized what would come with the shortage of food and my father and mother allowed to work. We had to do the best we could. We had our own children and a cow, so it wasn't so difficult really. With money or selling jewelry or things like that you could buy things. Neighbors who had vegetables or potato farms you could buy from. I come from a family where we observed strictly the laws so we were limited to a point, but we bought from the farmers. We did not buy anything except dairy and corn, things like that.

In 1944 it was already mostly occupied by Germans. You usually saw German military with the Hungarian police. On April 16, 1944 in the morning, at dawn, SS soldiers came to the door with machine guns and gathered all of us, the whole Jewish community. They told us to pack some bedding and to take just what we could carry. I remember it was like the last day of Passover. That evening my mother baked her own bread; she prepared the dough and everything to bake the bread the next day. Then we left the door. It's like going out from Egypt again. We got a task in the school from the city that we bedded down families in one, huge gym. Everybody was put together in a corner and they couldn't go out. We were guarded by

police and by Germans. You walked out of your home across the street or around you. All your good neighbors just looked from the window and nobody said a word. In school we found ourselves together. We took our complete family, aunts and uncles and all the nieces were brought together.

I was really sensitive because neighbors and the girls that I went to school with didn't care. We were in school together from a period of ten to two weeks. People could not go anyplace. It was really nothing to buy your freedom. You were guarded badly. You were given a little food, but very little. It was just what the city provided.

From there we were transported deep into Hungary. Then we were taken to a ghetto where people lived in houses with many families together. Everything was occupied. We ended up getting a space in the attic with other families. We had a ladder to climb up. There we started to realize that we had to get ourselves together. We realized we would not go back home. Our hope was there though. We started to organize ourselves there. I think that was the first time I realized how much I loved children and that what I would like to do with my life was teach. I played with all the kids. We were not there long. After a while we were gathered again, but in enormous masses of people that we did not see before because we were not allowed to go out from the yard, from this house.

We were taken to a train. The train was cattle cars. Families were put together. All of us were sitting down and there was no place to move. It was so crowded and families tried to get together in one car to be together. They were given some bread and water. Inside the wagon in the two corners were barrels for human waste. From there we started to travel. That was strictly Hungarian and then taken over by the German SS. How long we traveled I cannot tell you. We stopped at places and took out the barrels. Can you imagine the stink and everything that went on, the cry of children, the hunger, and a society of people being hurdled together like cattle? I have to recall one thing because it stands out in my memory. We went through the battlefields because we heard shooting and fighting. One of the older boys came home from college because he was expelled and he wanted to be with his parents. We thought he was more grown up and more mature. He stopped to talk about what was happening to us, like the pulling of the train starting and stopping again. He told us the story of what was happening with the shooting. They are digging holes and digging each train car into the holes and they were shooting the people. It was not logical. It was understood that it wasn't possible because of the railroad and everything. He couldn't cope and finally he

lost his mind. The first time we were hurdled out the SS were neatly dressed in their boots with the dogs and machine guns. They got us out of the train. There were hundreds of people and they started to line up. We came before a huge gate. We thought we were finally at someplace where we could work and finally settle our lives. Then we started to see what was happening. They started to separate the men from the women. That was the last time I saw my father. Then they started to separate young boys. My sisters who had children were separated from us. I went with my mother and we ended up--my mother and five sisters--going to the right side, which meant life. We marched through a camp and did not see anything, just bonfires and barracks. It was something to look at and not to understand. We saw a woman standing behind wires with long, gray hair. My younger sister looked at them and they were just kids. There sixteen year olds are mature, but they were not.

Next we were taken into a huge barrack where we had to undress and give up every possession. Some of us tried to hide momentoes from home, like a ring or anything small. We were searched in mouths and anyplace on our body. We ended up naked in front of SS men, which was something very degrading for us. The worst thing that bothered me was thinking about my mother who stood in front of us naked, who gave birth to nine children, and her body for the first time is what I thought about. It did not take long for them to shave our heads, underarms and all over our bodies. The beautiful long hair that each of us had we did not realize that those men would also shave our most intimate places. Then we were put in the shower. We had a shower luckily. A grey dress was given to us then, just like the other women's. Then we were marched to the barracks. This was Auschwitz-Burkenau. We were in Burkenau and we saw . . . Each of us were assigned bonds. By itself the barrack was huge. I don't know how many women were there, but it had to be at least 1200. The length of the barrack had three layers of bunk beds. So many people were assigned for one bed. There was one blanket for the bottom and one for the top. When we slept at night we were put head and feet, just like sardines. When one moved then everybody had to move. In Auschwitz we were given the bunk and had to stay inside. The next day at dawn they would shout and we had to line up inside, outside, and wait until the SS counted us. I remember thinking--what is the counting for? The whole camp was surrounded by electric barbed wire. There was no way of escape. It was easy to escape and meet death. When we were counted we were given our ration of bread, which was approximately less than an inch of dark bread, and dark coffee. It was a very thick type of coffee. In the beginning we ate our bread and that was breakfast. Then soup was given to us at noon. In the evening the black

coffee was given to us again, but we were supposed to have divided our bread from morning until evening. We didn't the first day, and then we learned. We learned that if you ate in the morning you didn't have a piece at night. In Auschwitz everything was scheduled. We would go outside first, then to the latrine. You could not go early, just as at a certain time of the day. After we were counted we were just left there. We slept in storms outside. The whole day nothing special was scheduled. We tried to communicate with other people. At night there was the smell of the chimneys, burning flesh, which brought a lot of questions to our minds and we started to learn about people.

In our barrack one girl got scarlet fever. It was like an epidemic. The barracks were closed down and we could not communicate with anybody. A girl died across from us. Who died on the other side we don't know because in the morning when we were chased out we saw a dead body covered in a blanket by the door. That went on day in, day out. If somebody did not make it in time to be counted, then she was punished that day. The punishment was to kneel on her knees with two bricks in her hand. When we stood in the line I got very angry and started to yell and say, "Why her? I am young; I can do it." My mother put her hand over my mouth and said, "Don't pay attention. Think what you're going to write today." I got a small pencil and I used to collect brown papers and I wrote poetry from the day we left home. I used to tuck it away because we were on the top bunk behind the shingles.

The routine was always the same thing; we started to learn about what was happening and what was going on. We learned about the selections of people, people who could not make it, of the black van that takes the people to the cemetery. I was in Auschwitz just a few weeks and many times we had to line up naked outside waiting for the SS to come. We had to walk in front of Dr. Mengele and he looked over your body. If he didn't like anything he had a club in his hand and he pointed to you and that person was taken away. He was God; the right of life is what he had. That went on so often. The last time we were selected, with death waiting outside, my mother and my other sister were separated from us, from the left over three. She was put in another barrack. We had to sneak over, and it was very dangerous. After a few days she was transported to a camp with my sister. We were told not to worry, that anybody who leaves Auschwitz in that transport gets to a work camp. We did not see her anymore. The three of us stayed in Auschwitz until we were selected and given clothing like a regular dress. We were transported from Auschwitz to a camp. When we traveled it was not so crowded and the conditions were a certain amount of food.

We ended up in a city called . . . In the outskirts of the city there was a small concentration camp. There were 900 women transported there. We could see the houses and where people lived. It had small barracks surrounded by electric barbed wire, and observation posts. There it was new and clean. Each of us got a bunk bed. It had straw; we received blankets, a bowl, a spoon, a mug. We were left alone for a few days in that camp. There was the same routine of getting up in the morning and being counted. We were fed breakfast, lunch, and in the evening we got something light. After a few days we were divided in groups and assigned to work. We were taken to a factory. They made machine guns there. We did not see a complete machine gun, but there were certain parts that we made and checked and so on. We worked there in two shifts: From 6:00 in the morning until 6:00 in the evening. We got a forty-five minute walk. Towards the summer a grey striped dress was given to us with a jacket. Across from the barracks there was some type of toilet and someplace to wash. We still could not use it to our will, but it was there. The front of the barracks were ground and we were asked to plant and to keep it clean. Inside was a stove type of fire because winter was coming close. We were fed pretty decently. When we worked nights then the next day we had to get up at noon and collect the garbage. We would take it out from the camp. We walked far out from the city. After that we had to work again for twelve hours at night.

Punishment was for every small thing. A woman who came with us among the 900 was somehow pregnant. She was due to give birth in the infirmary. There was an infirmary, but people were afraid to go and they were afraid to report anything. Many of us had swollen feet, wounds, boils and were trying to take care of them ourselves instead of going to the infirmary. That woman gave birth and the SS came that night and took the child. It was February and she took the child and put it on the steps to freeze to death.

In camp winter started to come upon us and we had to go to work. Most of us did not have any shoes. We got cloths for the bottom and there was a stripe on it. We walked for forty-five minutes to the camp and it was very long. I was afraid to be clobbered over my back with a machine gun. Many times I took off those shoes and walked barefoot. When we worked the twelve hours our foremen were all German men. One man tried to tell us if the American soldiers were getting close and he would also bring us socks to wear.

One thing we looked forward to were air raids. We had to take certain machines down into the basement. We also got courage in another way. We were P.O.W.'s and were neighbors with other French P.O.W. men.

The German people always say, even today, "We did not know. We did not see." We walked through the town. People were walking on the street, women with their children. They did not know and they did not see. Where were they? They saw the camp; they saw the electric barbed wire; they saw our marching back and forth.

In that camp in the springtime, we were not fed enough food. They stopped taking us to work every day. The way I understand it the factory did provide the food, as little as it was. Still, it was potatoes, soup, and a slice of bread. There was rationing of coal for the stove. It was a difficult life. It was a life where we had to watch; we were punished; we were beaten. For example, one of my friends who worked one shift while I worked the other, one weekend she forgot her spoon and asked me to leave mine. It was the weekend and I could not go to work the next day. She asked me to borrow one so I gave her the spoon. The next evening I walked through camp to her barrack to ask for the spoon and an SS woman caught me. She did not ask any questions, just started to slap me over my face until the blood started to run. At the end she asked, "Where are you going?" I told her and she could not care less; she just turned around. She was just in the mood of being brutal and to have somebody to beat up. I walked into the barrack and I cleaned myself. I lost a tooth that she knocked out and I was swollen for a while.

When we stopped going to the factory, food was what we gathered ourselves. We were taken into the fields in springtime and we were shown what to pick. Today I know what I picked because it was dandelions; that is what they cooked. We used to go to the garbage pans to collect the peels from the potatoes. We used to cook the peels in secret in the camp. All of us looked sick already. We were there for eight months. After the Americans came closer and the battle came closer they took us in a train again and deported us into Germany away from places they thought sooner or later would be occupied by the Americans. We traveled and were taken to Dachau. In Dachau we were put in one barrack with straw on the floor. We were not bothered too much anymore. We got that little bit of soup in the day and a slice of bread; that's all. We were able to go out in the yard then. You felt the end of life, of freedom. It was one of the two; you felt that something was wrong. We were in Dachau for a few weeks and then they started to put us in a train again. We heard the battlefield and the sounds of the heavy armor and so on. The only thing that happened on that road was that the SS started to be a little more humane to us; they started to talk to us. We were stopped by a train and then truckloads of care packages were given to us. The Red Cross appeared after such a long time. We

traveled some more and were given our ration of bread too. Suddenly we saw tanks coming. The doors of the train opened and the SS went out and they threw down their machine guns, gave themselves up, and they said, "Free. Go!" There was nobody to tell us anything. We were frightened. We didn't know what to do. The thing that happened was we opened all the wagons and one wagon was full of bread, filled up to the top with bread. Everybody ran to that. We were together with men. That was a big transport, including the men. Some people went into the city. The Americans opened the shoe factory. They threw out shoes from the window. Those who went into the city came back with shoes. We came back to the trains. We were afraid to go; we were afraid of the Germans and everything. Then the Americans started to organize and asked the Germans to take the people in. They started to collect us. I have a very fond memory of a black officer. It was the first time, except for movies, that I saw a black person. He was very kind. He talked to us in broken German and English. We was very concerned about what was happening. In that city we got a little bit of confidence. They started to gather us and we were taken to a little camp. We were given men's pajamas. We were guarded by Americans and we had certain rules and regulations. We were fed a certain type of diet. Boys could not come in the girls' rooms. They tried to show us movies and to gather us, to give us some kind of guidance in life. In the camps there was a certain type of reorganizing. You got back your name and were a human being again.

At that time in Czechoslovakia a group of representatives came. We were anxious to know who was alive. They started to tell us to go back home; we belonged; we were born there; what happened was over. We were told to register that we were alive. Their approach was very good. They came with cars and trucks and we just left. We went to Prague and registered. We got on trains and they were very hectic. There were problems with the Russians. The Russian soldiers drank and raped girls. The Germans did not do that, the Russians did. From there we came to Budapest. At every place they had set up a certain center where you could register, look up the registration and find who was alive or who was looking for who. It was already like people coming and going. Somebody might already be home. Our town was occupied by the Russians. It was not under a strong Russian rule, but still. People said there was nothing home and they were going back. They were going back to Germany to the DP camps. People started to travel back, but we still went home. We learned that two brothers and a sister were waiting. My older brother who was in the Army, when he came from Russia back to our city he was a deserter because he took off his uniform. He went to Romania and through registration he found out who was alive.

When we came to Budapest somebody on the way already told us that a sister and a brother were in Budapest. They knew that our transport came through Budapest and we had to register; they were waiting for us. When we came into Budapest we walked to the center. I walked through a street and I recognized an address. At home my older sister who was married and had two children . . . one of them got polio. There was an epidemic in 1935. Her daughter was six years old when she got polio. My sister took her to Budapest to a clinic. She rented a room at that address. There was a girl my age and my sister's little daughter always asked her to write me. We started to be pen pals. We wrote to each other for a long time and never met. I recognized her mother from a picture and she told me that my brother and sister were there. The first thing I asked was, "My mother is dead, isn't she?" My brother did not want us to know, but there are certain ways. She died after she was liberated. She was with my other sister on those long marches. She found my younger brother and he was very sick. She carried him in her hands and she nursed him to health. As soon as he was on his feet she died. My sister swears that the bread they got was poisoned. My sister and brother were waiting at the center. We went back to the house of my friend who I met for the first time personally and we sat there one hour mourning after my mother. We decided the next day to go home and to join my other brother.

At that time my brother was married. His wife came back and their child was going with the grandmother, so the child and my sister-in-law survived. From then on we traveled from country to country back to Germany. We lived in Czechoslovakia and the Communists started to take over. My brother, who was seventeen years older than I, was very careful. He was very much against us living under Communist rule. We snuck over the border back to Germany at night with suitcases and everything. We lived in Czechoslovakia for almost a year. We worked; the Czech Army was very good to us, but still we were governed by the Russians.

Then we lived in Germany again in a DP camp. We waited to go to Israel or the United States. In the meantime I **got** married and a daughter was born in Germany. We did go to Israel. There I got most of my education. After living ten years in Israel we came to the United States in 1959. Here we are, alive and happy. I hope that a thing like that will never happen again. This is just surface, because if I went into so many things that happened it would be very difficult.

SE: Thank you.