

YONGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

The Holocaust

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1761

Elizabeth Stein
Interviewed

By

Debbie Ramsey

On

November 29, 1995

Elizabeth Stein

Elizabeth Stein was born on May 28, 1927, in Czechoslovakia to Ludwig and Helen Mandel. Elizabeth had happy memories of her early childhood, until the Nazis established ant-Jewish laws in Czechoslovakia. The Nazis did not allow Jewish children to play in parks or go to school. Because Elizabeth was Jewish, she was deprived of her childhood. As early as ten years old, Elizabeth was forced to wear an armband with a yellow star on it. This was the beginning of a nightmare for Elizabeth.

In 1940, Elizabeth's sister was taken to Poland for forced labor. Elizabeth and the rest of her family were kept from being deported because they were farmers. In 1944, fearing deportation, Elizabeth and her family attempted to cross the border to Budapest, but the Nazis captured them. Their valuables were taken, and they were sent to a forced labor camp.

Elizabeth spent her teenage years being sent from camp to camp, where she worked under deplorable conditions. Elizabeth worked in cold weather without proper clothing, food, or water until her and six other captives escaped to a cemetery. Elizabeth hid for ten days until the Russians rescued them in 1945.

Elizabeth was eventually reunited with her family in Slovakia. She never really felt secure until moving to the United States in 1952. Elizabeth was married to Michael Stein in 1952. She now has two daughters and is self-employed.

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Interviewee: ELIZABETH STEIN

Interviewer: Debbie Ramsey

Subject: The Holocaust

Date: November 29, 1995

R: This is an interview with Elizabeth Stein for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Holocaust, by Debbie Ramsey, on November 29, 1995, at the Jewish Family and Children's Services at 10:00am.

S: Well, Debbie, I will tell you where I lived and how we were affected by the Germans and how we let it happen. I was ten years old, and I had first wear a yellow armband in 1940 in Czechoslovakia. Then a yellow star on my chest was in 1942 to be notified that I am a Jew and that I was not privileged to go places like to the park or any place or where the other kids were going to school neither.

R: So this would be about 1937 in Czechoslovakia.

S: Right, right. Well, it started actually in 1938 when the Germans marched into Poland. So I was eleven years old, not ten. We were not allowed to go to the park or public places. We were just limited with our activity. Then in 1940, they started already taking sixteen years old, which I was not yet sixteen. My sister was. I have a sister, and she was taken to Poland where they were building the camps. So by 1942, they would have taken us from our homes. They were deporting to Auschwitz and Meidonick and all these places. But, because my father... we were farmers. My parents were farmers. Because of that then they decided to let us stay there in our farm because they needed somebody who will take care of it. So we stayed there until 1943.

R: This is still in Czechoslovakia?

S: In Czechoslovakia I am, yes. In 1944, they are ready to come and liquidate completely. They left only doctors, and they left only, you know, people that were important to Germans to continue their things to go through, like services. So anyway, in 1944 or, we got a notice that they are going to be deporting us, my parents and myself. At that time, we went across the border to Hungary because they were not yet prosecuting Jews. They were wearing stars and everything, but they were not liquidating Jews as they were in

Czechoslovakia. So we went there. From there on, as we came to Hungary to Budapest, right then and there the Germans marched in. So that was the end of it for us.

Right away, they put us in camps, and it was a very tough thing. We had no food, of course. They started with death. The young kids, like myself, they take away from the parents. They said that they were going to go to a children's home, which as not a true story. But some of them, if we were not old enough, if they were not old enough like boys or girls, they kept us there as a transit. Young Jewish people were taken as war prisoners to be exchanged for other soldiers.

R: So you know what camp you were at?

S: Yes. Mauhtner in Budapest that was.

R: Did they march you there? Is that what you said?

S: Well, they took us on the trucks and transferred us there. If it was not that, then they were like trains, and they took you from one camp to another. There were Sharvar, which was also on a border of Germany. So they took us, and mostly we were at places where they were making bricks, big brick factories, the whole big land. You were there with, of course, no facilities of comfort, no food, no nothing. We were glad if we got some water. For a few das, we were really starved there. Anyway, from there I did not know where my parents were, and I was in this camp. There were a lot of young people there also my age. Some of them ran away from there because we knew that the Germans are coming to take us. Some of them escaped from there because there was a chance to escape. They younger ones had no where. We could not. We knew if we escaped, they would kill us right then and there on the street.

From there, I got to another transit camp where I was. The life was very, very difficult. You had to work, which was not bad because we were young and we wanted to work. But the circumstances were so very unbelievable, you know. In the morning when they got us, if we looked a little sick, then you were already put on the side and you were going to be put to death. Many of us who were ill or who looked ill tried to go and pinch our cheeks so we could look red that we do not look sick because we knew that was the end of it. You know, that they are going to kill us right there or take us to the crematorium. Things were very, very unbelievable.

Not that we did, the people who were there, but there is such a thing that you cannot imagine. You cannot even picture that, except many times now like now I am talking to you. I do not believe the story I am telling you, what I went through. How the people will believe that this such thing can happen? I myself who lived through this here and I am here survived. I very, very seldom talk about it. I remember my husband also, you know. His parents went to Auschwitz. He had only one sister who was sixteen, and that is why my Judy is named after her. She arrived in Auschwitz, and she held on to her mother, who was also a young woman, and she did not want to let go. So they put her in the gas chamber. (Crying) So it was very difficult to go and say these things because they are so unreal. They are so unbelievable that this could happen to the human beings, that they were so tortured.

So I was very fortunate because I went from one camp to another, and they needed work. We worked in the factories and so on. So we survived, many of the young people, but elderly people had no chance or children of surviving because they could not use them for work. Immediately as they arrived, they were separated to another places, and we knew we will never see them or never have contact with them again.

R: Let me ask you something. How do you feel you were able to survive on the low rations of food and with the working conditions?

S: You would be surprised how much you could do, what a person is put through. I do not know. There were other times we were eating, like if we went out working. So there were grass and dandelions or whatever, we picked up. We ate it. That was good food. In the summertime, we would get lucky because there were all kind of things that we could pick and eat. But in the wintertime...

R: I was going to ask how did you survive in the winter because they did not give you very much.

S: No clothing.

R: Did you have a coat?

S: No, no, no.

R: There was one person I had interviewed before, and they happened to get a coat because, at that time, they were putting numbers on the coats.

S: Yeah. No, I had no coat. I just have clothes over clothes, and if somebody died, we were very fortunate to be close by and pull off the clothes that they had on. If somebody was killed or left there for a while, we took off the things, the shoes or whatever they had, their belongings. We were accumulating a little like that. But it was very little clothing and very little that you had. In the wintertime, we were sleeping and everything. When you wanted to do and wash your clothes, which we did at night, or course by morning it was not dry. So you put it on, and it froze on you. Your body then kind of gave it the heat from the body.

It is difficult for you to believe or understand, and I am just so shocked that now the world wants to know this story. Why did they not want to know? Then, we were trying to survive and trying to leave because we were hoping then that upon our return, people would want to hear our stories but no one was interested. The Slovaks who befriended the Germans were not happy that we came back because they had to return the possessions (lands, homes, etc.) to us that they had stolen. But when I was survived and came back, Debbie, it was a big disappointing because people said to us when we came back home, "Oh, you came back," because they had to give us our home or whatever. It was very disappointing for us. This is what we were fighting to survive for our lives, it was not worth it.

R: Why? When you came back to Czechoslovakia, how did the people react? Did they seem to welcome you or not? Is that what you are telling me, or they were just indifferent?

S: They were very disappointed that we came back, very.

R: So you were able to return to your home that you left?

S: At first upon my return I stayed with friends at their homes.

R: I was wondering if people took stuff from your home.

S: Everything, everything. Everything was gone, our belongings. It went, how shall I say it, slowly with them because first you have to give your valuables to Germans. If you were left jewels, your valuables have to be given to them. Came the order that 10:00 or 11:00 you have to be at this and this place and bring your valuables, and you have to turn it in. Some people could hide. Some people did. Some of the people there who were around you, a lot of times they went and they reported you. So they killed you right then and there. They did not even wait for what happened or take you. So it is hard. I cannot go into the details with this here, Debbie, because it is so much and it had been so long that to put together these things it is difficult. It is very difficult.

R: What I would like to ask you about is Czechoslovakia. Before the Nazis came in, how did the non-Jewish population treat the Jewish population? Were the relations good?

S: Some of them were good. Some were very good, and they helped Jews. Some of them who were from German decent, they were so cruel. They were so mean. They helped Germans to do things because the Germans could not by themselves do everything. The nice families in Czechoslovakia (good, nice people) actually warned us what was coming – to go and hide from the Germans.

R: Did most of the Jewish population believe what was happening at this time?

S: We knew.

R: By that time?

S: We knew already in 1939 in Czechoslovakia because from Poland and Jews were running to the border. You see, they were not organized yet, Germans, exactly how they were to become a professional killing machine. In 1943 and 1944, that was already a professional killing ground, you know.

R: Did people believe what was happening?

S: Yes, we knew. We knew what was happening because Jews from Poland ran away, and they were hiding through the night. So did I myself then.

R: When you were trying to get to Budapest, right?

S: Right, right. We were running from one place to another. How shall I tell you> When they came from Poland and we lived on a farm, so they were hiding in the hay. One morning my father goes in, and there he finds a couple young men. So, of course, they were frightened. They did not know who we were or anything. So then my father came in, and he said, "There are two young men, and I do not know how they got in our place where we have the hay and everything for the animals. But they are telling me a horrible story." These strangers had no idea that we may be Jewish when they told me father their horrible try story. Unfortunately for many Polish Jewish people that escaped and told others their stories, many were recaptured (turned in by non-Jews) and sent back to Poland where they were tortured and killed. At that time, Germans did not have yet the gas chambers. They had only graves, mass graves. These guys came back and telling us what happened.

As a matter of fact, one of the persons who ran away from the mass grave, she pretended that she was killed, came out, and it took her from Poland to come back. She is alive, and I know her. I know her very well. She is in Los Angeles. I am 68. She is about 85 year old woman. She came back, and she told us she was in a grave. They killed her husband, her child she was holding and everything. They knew that she fell in a grave and she is dead. At night, some how they were not covered up completely. She crawled out of there, and through the winter she was crawling only at night. She came back to Czechoslovakia to our hometown, to our village, not hometown, because that was a village. So it is such a story that I do not know if they world even believes that we went through that.

R: How were you liberated or about what year? You were going from camp to camp.

S: Right, right. Then, we already knew that the end is coming. So we ran away and hid in the cemetery in a crypt. The crypts there are not like here. It is a thing that was underground, and they had crypts there. So we went to the cemetery. That is where we survived, and that is where I was liberated.

R: How many people did you leave with?

S: How many people?

R: Hide with, yeah.

S: We were about six people in this bunch.

R: How did you survive on the food? How long were you in hiding?

S: Well, at night we could go and get some.

R: Get food?

S: Yeah, and return back to the cemetery.

R: Who liberated you, the Russians?

S: The Russians, yes.

R: How did they treat you when they saw you?

S: They were nice. They were nice, and they saw how we looked and our bodies like skeletons. So they gave us food and everything. I was close to a camp where people who were liberated died from overeating. They were so thing their bodies couldn't handle the food. If we find potatoes in places or little leaf of cabbage, that was a delicious food. That was a treat.

R: How long were you in hiding in the cemetery?

S: In the cemetery before I was liberated, we were there about ten days.

R: So when were you liberated? I know it was in 1945, but what month?

S: In April.

R: April.

S: April. I do not know what date. Not that I do not know, I do not remember.

R: That is okay. April is fine.

S: April we were liberated.

R: So where did they take you when they liberated you? Did you just go yourselves?

S: You went wherever you wanted to go. Of course, right away after the liberation there were some Jewish people who were liberated and older than we were grown up people. So right away they organized a shelter for the people who survived in a camp. I am 17 I turned 18 in May 1945.

R: Close to 18 in 1945.

S: Right, some people liberated with me were my age, others in their 40's. We thought they were the mature ones. So they survived also. One lives in Detroit, my girlfriend, and we kept in tough for a while. But after so many years, you lose touch. But a couple of these people that were from the area and friends I still keep in tough with. Anyway, they made a sanitarium. We were fed there, and we got clothing. Right away the people, as I said, were very disappointed that we got back, and most of them were very mean to Jews. They were Polish.

R: So they were meaner after? In Czechoslovakia before the Germans took over, you said it was okay to live there. So after it was worse?

S: After the war it was definitely worse to live in Czechoslovakia, the people were disappointed we came back.

R: You mean they were disappointed that you came back?

S: Back, yeah. That they had to return our belongings. But we knew that they had some of them they gave us and some of them they said that the Germans took.

R: Did any of your family survive, your parents or brothers and sisters?

S: Yes, yes.

R: Oh, they all did?

S: My mother and father and my sister.

R: You were all reunited in the farm village area we from.

S: Right, right. Which was about in end of May or so in 1945.

R: So you stayed there for a while?

S: For a while, yeah. But we were still afraid. We were so scared. They fear in you they put you through; you are not a free person. Even though we were already liberated, we were scared what is going to be now and what are they going to do to us. The only time when I felt secure, when I came to this country. That is when I felt safe.

R: When did you come to the United States?

S: I immigrated to Toronto, Canada, with my parents in 1950. I married my husband in 1952. That is the only time I felt secure and free and not to be afraid when we came to this country. I mean to Canada. I came to the United States because my husband came here to the United States, not to Canada, and we met there. So I was not an American citizen, so I could not come immediately here. So it took a while. He lived in New York. He worked, and I was in Toronto. Then, I got my papers, and I came to the United States. But until then, we were not secure. You were not because...

You know, you cannot blame these people either there that what they did or whatever they helped because they were so brainwashed and they were forced to do that. If they did not do it, if they would not go and turn us in if they find, they were putting their life on the line to be killed and their family. So, they had not too much choice at the time during Hitler time. You know what I am saying?

R: But some people in certain countries were more that willing. Am I right?

S: Right.

R: So it was both. Or there were people that helped, too.

S: Yeah.

R: Do you know any stories where non-Jewish families hid people?

S: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, many of them. They put their lives on the line. There were many of them. Although I was young I remember the people who had the most to gain by being supportive of the Germans were those who didn't have anything to lose. They had no property, possessions, but knew if they helped exterminate Jews they would gain financial security. You follow me?

R: Yes.

S: There were many good people, families that were willing to help. Would you go risk your life for someone you do not know? Sometimes these people were afraid to trust someone saying "I'm Jewish please help me I will pay you or do anything just help me." This could be true or it could be a German pretending to be a Jew to see if you were sympathetic to Jews.

R: I understand that, but I just do not understand why people acted the way they did when you came back.

S: Well, because they were so brainwashed already. Even then they're on the news, on everything, advertisements. "Jews are responsible for everything. The Jews are bad who have money." The propaganda was so high that young people or older, they started to believe really that Jews are bad and no good and they have to be exterminated. They have to be killed.

R: How did you know that the people were disappointed when you came back? You could tell, or they said it?

S: Yeah, they told us. They told us. This couple where my parents left things, they said, "Oh you came back." The Slovakian people were majority. Majority, as I tell you, were good-natured people. SO did the Romanian. Romania did not give up the Jews until the almost last minute, and that is why they have so many survived. In Hungary too, it is only started in 1944. Where in Czechoslovakia in 1940, already they were taking all the young people. You know, build their crematorium, and build their gas chambers. All of them worked there, and they died there because they could not go through for four or five years. You could not. It was impossible from beating and not eating. In the winter, you could not survive. There was very, very few that they made it through.

R: Before the Nazis came in, were you allowed to practice Jewish religion like holidays in general?

S: Yeah, in hiding. We hid. Anti-Semitism really began when we had to start wearing the yellow armbands. Before that it was okay to practice Judaism.

R: Was Judaism just not allowed in Czechoslovakia, or was it just all religion type of thing? In Russia, for instance, at the time it was all religions. In Czechoslovakia, was it more that they just did not want Judaism practiced?

S: Judaism, Judaism. Not before the Germans came in.

R: Yeah, before they came in? What was it like when you were small?

S: Yeah, we openly were celebrating. We were not in hiding.

R: So you could celebrate in the open.

S: Yeah, yeah. But we were very careful because already 1936, 1937 already Hitler was coming in power and brainwashing constantly. So we were already. I will tell you. From ten years old, I lived in fear. I lived in fear. That is why my husband and myself, we never told our children about this. We never talked about Auschwitz. We never told them.

R: Were you in Auschwitz or you just know of it?

S: No, no.

R: Your sister-in-law.

S: Right, right. I was not there.

R: His sister was killed there.

S: Right, in Auschwitz.

R: His sister and mother?

S: And father, yeah. A cousin came back who lives in Romania, and she told us that she did not let go of her mother. The cousin who came back told us that my husband's mother would not let go of her mother at Auschwitz. That is why my husband's mother also died.

R: They wanted to take her mother and leave her for work, but she hung on to her mother?

S: Right, she would not let go of her. You see, in Europe it is different. Here, fifteen-year-old kids or fourteen, they are very independent and dating. In Europe when I left, when they took me away from my parents, I was... I cannot even begin to tell you how

dependent I was, how everything. Here, which is very good that the kids are brought up that way. Of course, they are smarter than we were.

R: But still, I think even kids today at that age in that type of a situation would still be.

S: Fear, you know, fear is everything. O was just...

R: Were you with any of your brothers and sisters in the camps?

S: No.

R: Oh, separated. Were they younger or older?

S: My sister is older.

R: Oh, that is right. You did say that.

S: No, I never was with her, no. I did not even know she was alive. With my parents I was for a very little time in Budapest, but that was just maybe a week time when they put us to one center where they were sending people, they young people separately and the old people.

R: Do you did see the selection processes?

S: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Sure thing. Sure, they do not just... They took the young people separately if we were able to work.

R: Were these selection processes kind of confusing? Was there a lot of yelling and rushing and hitting?

S: Yeah.

R: So there was not much time to talk or thing, right?

S: There was no time. They did not even bother to. They kicked you. You were kicked like a football if things were not going or you did not stay at the line where you had to be or you touched things that you were not supposed to. It was just inhumane, and that is all I could tell you.

R: Did the doctors do the selection processes or just the Nazis? Did they quickly look at you, or they just went basically by age?

S: By age they looked at you. Doctors, they were already in Auschwitz, you see. I did not make it to Auschwitz, luckily. I probably would have survived there because I was young, you know. They look at you by age, if you are able to work or they could use you. If they did not, then they had...

R: Did you have to get your hair cut?

S: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Sure. That is immediately. Your clothes were taken. Everything was away as soon as you come there to this ghetto. Everything they take.

R: What kind of work did you do for the most part in camps?

S: In the factories, honey. In the factories I worked. I do not know if that was for war things or what, but we were making things and shipping. You name it. If it needed outside work or whatever. I was not in Auschwitz. I was very fortunate I never made it there any my friends either.

R: Is there anything else you wanted to say?

S: Well, this is all very hard. It is very hard to talk about it. You probably do not understand that because this here, I want to forget that. I do not want to even admit that this happened. I do not want to admit it. How? With today thinking in my looking back, I do not know how this was possible. It was inhuman. As I told you before, I am telling you these things, and I am doubting that really did I go through this because it was so unreal. How could they do that to a human being because I was born to the Jewish parents? As a little girl, I was not allowed. This is how we started and then gradually went to the death. In the beginning before the crematoriums were built, there were only mass graves. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all went to mass graves. By 1943-1944 the professional killings with gas began. The perfect killing machine was put in motion. My grandparents and relatives had been transported to Meidonicly, Poland and killed there. In the beginning the Germans tried to cover up everything they were doing so the world would not know. When people, like my grandparents, were transported to Poland the Germans gave them postcards. They were forced to write to any relatives they had left behind and tell the relatives, how wonderful they were being treated by the Germans. They Germans were unaware that people, like my grandparents, ended the postcard with a code word, HRADEK, (a Slovak word meaning cemetery). This alerted the people receiving the postcard that the person was headed for the Jewish cemetery (HRADEK).

I do not understand how the world allowed this to happen. How could the U.S. know all of this and not do anything to stop the German killing machine. All of those innocent people slaughtered. I didn't know anything about politics; I was a young girl as was my sister. But the point was that they wanted to get rid of all the Jews, acquire their wealth, what they had valuables. He felt, Hitler, probably that if he going to have that he will be able to go on and win the war. Who knows what would have happened to you guys here if he... God forbid that. Well anyway, Debbie, that is all I could tell you. If you want to asked me anything else... I wish they had asked me twenty years ago. It is tough now. I am old. I do not want to talk about it. At that time, I could have probably done it easier. Today is a big strain on me to talk about it.

R: I think you did very well. Thanks.

S: Yeah. Okay.

R: Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it.

S: You are very welcome. That is all I could tell you, honey.