

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN KENTUCKY INTERVIEW PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE INFORMATION

Emilie Szekely

Residence: Lexington, KY.

Length of interview: approximately 6 hours.

Date(s) of interview: 11/15/99; 1/18/00

Related resources:

- Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation interview, conducted on video 11/13/96 (see summary below)
- Various articles on Ms. Szekely in local papers

Evaluation/further information about interview:

See summary below for information about her life history. In our interview, Ms. Szekely clarified some of the things that seemed sketchy below, and talked in detail about her post-war life. The interview meanders quite a bit. She has been ill and talks in some detail about the conflict between her compulsion to speak about her experiences (which she has done quite often, and is proud of) and her illness, which has made public appearances quite difficult.

Summary of Shoah interview:

Born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1920. Brought up in Czechoslovakia until '38, when part of Czech where she lived became Hungary again. Close family; mother religious, father not so. Every summer, stayed in Budapest with grandmother and aunt. Parents had a hard life. Father a pharmacist, as was his brother. One sister; the two of them were very close. Recalls activities with Zionist organizations; first date. Memories of grandparents, and story of how mother and father met.

In 1939, met future husband. ES was in Budapest in 1940, finishing school. Engaged in 1941. Parents did not show for engagement party; learned that they were in prison, due to their Russian nationality. ES terribly guilty about this—her sister was with them, and said “I’m going where my mother goes.” All the Jews in the group were deported; ES never saw them again. ES in hiding in various places for about 3 years. Her husband was in a labor camp for 4 years. ES was in terrible condition—wanted to commit suicide. In 1943, lived with her mother’s sister Ilona Schwartz, who took her in as their child.

March of 1944, Germans occupied Budapest. Terrible bombings. In mid to late May, moved into ghetto. Married in '44, when husband was in briefly from labor camp. In June, he came to ghetto to try to help her. His sister was working on getting Christian papers for ES. He planned on returning next day, but ghetto was surrounded after he left by gendarmerie, and ES was deported—marched to brick factory, and then packed into cattle cars and taken to Auschwitz. Describes arrival. After 2 weeks, assigned to work detail sorting blouses, and tattooed with a number. Forewoman of barrack was Czech—

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saved ES' life when she had rheumatic fever, by warning her that she must work, or she'd be sent to gas chambers. Was beaten for not walking fast enough.

1/27/45: Had to leave, because Russian front was approaching. Forced march in snow. Anyone who could not walk was shot. No idea how she survived. Eventually put on open cattle cars, and three days later, arrived at Bergen-Belsen. It was a horror: overcrowded; starvation. Worked in sewing room. She was sick and very thin.

Night of 4/14/44, horrible bombings, which stopped in the morning. Tanks rolled in to camp: the British army. Taken to a hospital, and kept there for weeks. In July, taken to a regular building, and given clothes. Had opportunity to go to Holland or Sweden, but chose to stay. Invited to work in office as an interpreter. All who worked in office were taken to Nuremberg by car at some point; there, they were on their own. ES took train to Prague, and then to Budapest. There, was reunited with her uncle, Eugene Schwartz, Ilona's husband; and 3 days later with her own husband, Frank, who was "a stranger"—they had been separated after 2 weeks of marriage. Went to Eger, Hungary, to live with Frank's sister. There until Sept. '46. In November of that year, ES' only surviving child, George, was born. Paul was born in '49, but died of croup. In '54, had a little girl, who was premature—died within 6 hours of birth. "The Russians killed her, because they didn't have incubators in the hospital," says ES.

Everyone had to work—ES worked with a book publisher, which made dictionaries. She typed a whole Russian dictionary. In 1956, the year of the Hungarian revolution, ES and her husband had a chance to escape. An attempt was made the following January, but it failed. The Hungarian police were aware of the attempt at escape, and made their lives miserable afterwards. Were soon able to get passports to England. Left for Vienna in May of '57. Stayed there 17 months.

Photos shown of sister; self at age 22; etc.