

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ELSE TURTELTAUB

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Edith Millman

Date: July 14, 1987

© 1999

Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

ET - Else Turteltaub¹ [interviewee]

EM - Edith Millman [interviewer]

Date: July 14, 1987

Tape one, side one:

EM: Edith Millman interviewing Mrs. Else Turteltaub, July 14, 1987. She is a first cousin of my mother. Else, could you tell me when and where you were born?

ET: I was born in Teschen [Polish name, Cieszyn], upper Silesia, on October 24, 1916.

EM: Could you tell me a little bit about your family, your brother, sister?

ET: My brother is still living, thank God, in Florida. My parents and my sister, who was 20 years old, was gassed in Auschwitz.

EM: What was your maiden name?

ET: My maiden name is Waldner.

EM: Could you tell me something about your parents? What kind of work did they do?

ET: My parents had a very nice house in Teschen and they had a restaurant and we were middle-income class. We had a good life, we went to private schools--my brother, sister and I, and till the war broke out everything was O.K. with us.

EM: Could you tell me if you encountered antisemitism before the war?

ET: Not really, because I was still young and in Teschen there were not so many Jews. I worked in an office but I cannot remember any accident special.

EM: Were you active in any Zionist movement?

ET: Yes, I was in *Hanoar Hatzioni*.² This was a Zionist organization in Teschen. I attended every meeting and I was very interested in Palestine.

EM: Was your brother and sister also Zionists?

ET: My sister was. My brother belonged only to the...

EM: *Maccabee*?

ET: *Maccabee*.

EM: Could you tell me something about the religious life?

ET: Religious life?

EM: Was your family Orthodox?

ET: No, we were, like you say here, Conservative, but we had a kosher house, and we attended always the synagogue on the big holidays only.

EM: Did your mother light candles on Friday night?

ET: Yes, yes, I remember she lit the candles on Friday nights.

¹née Waldner. See also her brother's interview, Alfred Waldner.

²A Zionist *halutz* [pioneer] youth movement founded in 1931 whose aim was to achieve harmony among the various social classes, is affiliated with *Histadrut* and guided its members to the *Kibbutz* way of life.

EM: Now, Teschen was a divided city between Poland and Czechoslovakia; did you live on the Polish side or the Czech side?

ET: We lived on the Polish side.

EM: On the Polish side.

ET: It was the border and there was a river Olza.

EM: Could you tell me what school you attended, it was private school elementary school and did you attend any *Gymnasium* or did you attend commercial school or business school?

ET: Yes, I went first to private schools, which was given by the nuns. They called them the *Borromeorinnen* [schools established by Carlo Borromeo, canonized saint of the 16th century], and then I went to...

EM: It was a Catholic school?

ET: This was a Catholic school, but the Jewish girls attended, very few, and later I went to business school, three years.

EM: Now, could you tell me, were you still in school when the war broke out?

ET: No, I was working already in the office.

EM: O.K., when Poland annexed part of Czechoslovakia was there a change in the situation for the Jews?

ET: No, absolutely not.

EM: It was the same?

ET: The same.

EM: Was the Czech part of Teschen annexed to Poland?

ET: Yes.

EM: Was it a peaceful transition, do you remember?

ET: Yes, it was peaceful, peaceful.

EM: O.K., now when the war broke out in 1939, where were you?

ET: I was in Teschen working by a lawyer.

EM: Your job was at a lawyer's office.

ET: Yes, like a secretary.

EM: Now, could you please tell me what you remember about the beginning of the war when the Germans marched in?

ET: When the Germans marched in, this was in September '39, right away we had to wear the *Armbinde* and I worked in the...

EM: Was it a white armband or was it blue?

ET: With a blue *Mogen David*, and I worked in the *Kaserne*...

EM: The barracks.

ET: In the barracks. The Germans took it over from the Polish Army.

EM: Now, how did they know that you were Jewish?

ET: Because all the Jewish people of Teschen had to register and they took away right away the radios, the telephones and everything else. The restaurant which my parents

had went over to some Polish people and my parents lived upstairs and they had no right to go in the restaurant. This was the first thing what they did.

EM: They took away really the livelihood, the restaurant.

ET: The legal right. Alfred, my brother, was there my sister and I. I don't remember where Alfred was but I know where I worked in the barracks. We had to clean every day the barracks.

EM: For the soldiers?

ET: For the soldiers, yes, for the German soldiers.

EM: Do you remember if your sister, your brother also...?

ET: I think my sister worked there too. My brother I don't remember exactly what he did.

EM: But your parents did not have to work?

ET: No, no, because they were so old and my father was a sick man.

EM: Now, how long did you work at the *Kaserne*?

ET: I worked till I left illegal to Slovakia.

EM: O.K., when was that?

ET: I know already, in December.

EM: In December of what?

ET: In December of '39.

EM: Of '39, you went to Slovakia.

ET: Because the Jewish people were already afraid that something is going wrong. We saw already that people were leaving for L'vov, Lemberg, or they moved. Nobody knew where they are going, but I went to Slovakia. The reason I left Teschen was because my father got a big statement from a very well-known doctor in Teschen and in this statement he said that my father has to have somebody take care of him and this was my sister Jennie. My brother left already for Nisko. This was a big *Arbeitslager* where they had to work, but later he was in Auschwitz too. So I went to Slovakia; first I was...

EM: Excuse me, was there a ghetto established in Teschen?

ET: No, not yet, when I left there was no ghetto.

EM: Do you know if any people were being sent to any camps or was it just people running away from Teschen?

ET: I don't know because I left, but I'm sure they were taken to Sosnowiec, Bersburg, and from there they had to go to Auschwitz. My parents were in Teschen till June '42 because they called them *bevorzugten Juden* [privileged Jews] and we had a big house and they made room for every Jewish family. They paid a lot of money to the S.S. and those were the last Jews going out from Teschen.

EM: And they stayed in their own house?

ET: They stayed in their own house. They had one room.

EM: And the other Jews?

ET: Had the other rooms.

EM: Had the other rooms, so they were what you call privileged Jews.
ET: Privileged Jews, yah.
EM: And your sister, Jennie, also...?
ET: Was with them the whole time.
EM: Until she was sent...
ET: ... to Auschwitz with my parents.
EM: With your parents and...
ET: In June '42.
EM: And you never heard of them again?
ET: Only after the war. I heard from Dr. Leo Zipper, he was a lawyer in Teschen and he was the head of the Jewish Community there and in [Dziedzice - Polish], he told me, they took him out of the transport because this transport went to Auschwitz directly and this is how he lived.
EM: So he told you that they were on this transport?
ET: On this transport and Jennie too.
EM: Now in the meantime you went to Slovakia?
ET: Yes.
EM: Where did you go, what town?
ET: First of all, we went through the Beskids [Beskid Mountains-Beskydy in Slovak]; this was illegal.
EM: The Beskiden Mountains.
ET: Mountains, and they caught us but the Jewish communities from Slovakia, I don't know how this was, they arranged we should go back with Slovakian police, but they left us in the woods and we went back again to Slovakia and I was in Zilina.
EM: Zilina.
ET: Zilina, yeah, and I was in...
EM: Do you know how to spell Zilina?
ET: Yeah, Z-I-L-I-N-A.
EM: So you went to Zilina...
ET: And there they put us in *Hachsharot* and there I was in Zilina illegal, everything illegal. The Slovakian offices didn't know that we are there, only a few, but others were Jewish *Halutzim* and this is how I was there till March '42.
EM: There was persecution of Jews in Slovakia?
ET: Yes, it was, it was.
EM: In what form?
ET: Because they looked for Jews. It was antisemitic, but not so bad like let's say in Poland or so.
EM: But they didn't send anybody out?
ET: Not yet, till '42.
EM: Till '42. Now tell me what happened in 1942, what month.

ET: What month, in March. I came to Auschwitz from Zilina. They took us in big wagons, in trains, and they said first that we go only to work for six weeks--*Arbeitslager*--now I can tell you about Auschwitz.

EM: When did you work in sand pits?

ET: When I came to Auschwitz.

EM: O.K., now tell me about your arrival in Auschwitz.

ET: There was only the men were there--ten blocks, and we got--because I'm in Slovakian transport, my number is 3931. This is the second Jewish transport. The first transport were only German prostitutes and they were our *Kapos* and I was in the sand pit...

EM: Sand pit.

ET: And we had to--with shovels, we had to put sand in lorries and put them on a big hill. It was very, very hard work.

EM: You were pushing the heavy lorries.

ET: Pushing the lorries with the sand up the hill.

EM: And what was done with that sand, do you know?

ET: They put it on big hills.

EM: Big mountains?

ET: Big mountains, yes, and I got very sick. I had typhus. I saw the people are moving their lips, but I didn't hear anything.

EM: You went deaf.

ET: Deaf, not completely. I think completely because I didn't hear anything. So one of those days the *Oberaufseherin* came and they were looking for people who could work in an office because you have to know that in the beginning of '42 Auschwitz was like a new city. They looked for people--for working people who can do this, who can sew, who can iron, who can wash, I don't know whatever, but first they looked for people who are office workers. So, I thought at least one day, I will be out of this sand pits and I put on a red kerchief on my head because I was bald--they had shaved my head--and in this time it was my destiny that I am now alive. The *Oberaufseherin* called me and 20 other girls went to the office. First we went to an examination. It was very funny because one girl before me, I remember like now, she said, she was not so young, that she's 20 years, she had experience in the office. And I said the truth. I said I was three years in a lawyer's office and we had to type, we had to do different things and I was admitted to this office. Right away they put us in the shower and they gave us fresh clothes and everything because we still had lice. And from this time I worked until the 18th of January '45 in this office. I filled out--my luck was that my penmanship was very good and the S.S. man, his name was *Unterscharführer* Kristan, liked my penmanship. What I did I wrote out the death, I filled out the death certificates.

EM: Could you tell me more about filling out these death--first of all, how many girls worked in that office?

ET: I was in the *Standesamt*; this is like the Bureau of Registry. In the *Standesamt* worked around 25 girls. It was to fill out the files when somebody wrote to the office (to the *Standesamt*) [registry] they wanted the death certificate of the father or the relatives, this letter got the *Unterscharführer* Kristan and then another girl looked in the files, took out the name and she gave it to me and I had to fill out exactly as it was in this big, big books that was taken for the registry. First, we had to fill out, even for Jews, but later, I think it was in '43, only Gentile people who wrote to them, to the *Standesamt*, got the death certificates from them.

EM: You mean that every Jew that was taken to Auschwitz was registered officially with--that if they died it was noted that that person died, in this book?

ET: They didn't take it so exactly with the Jewish people. In the beginning we had all the details, but later they didn't do it any more. They didn't register Jewish people any more.

EM: But in the beginning they registered and if somebody died they wrote it down?

ET: They put it down, but later not, especially when somebody went right to the gas chamber. We didn't have any dates any more.

EM: No, you didn't even have the name.

ET: No, absolutely not. Like this I didn't even know that my parents and my sister was there.

EM: So that's what you did, you were filling out death certificates.

ET: Correct.

EM: Now, could you tell me a little more about the cause of death that you had to put down?

ET: It was written down sometimes when they saw it was an old man, they said, *Altersschwäche* or heart attack or pneumonia. They wrote down whatever they wanted and if somebody wanted the ashes, they thought maybe this is the ashes from this person, but they went to the crematorium and filled out a little bag and sent it to them. They didn't care.

EM: But who put down, for instance, a heart attack or whatever reason for death? Was it from a doctor first or was it left up to the girls to put it down?

ET: This was left to the girls who worked in this office. They wrote down whatever they thought is the right thing to do.

EM: O.K., so it wasn't really the truth?

ET: No, absolutely not. It was only--let them believe.

EM: And could you tell me about the living conditions and the treatment that you received?

ET: Sure. Our treatment, these people that worked directly for the S.S. had better treatment and we could keep ourselves clean and we got a little tiny piece of bread. They didn't steal it from us because they were afraid we would go to the S.S. and tell them. So

our living conditions were much, much--one hundred percent, maybe more than let's say in Birkenau or Auschwitz. We lived in *Stabsgebäude* [general staff building]. This was very important. This was in the cellar, one big room where all these girls who had contact with the S.S. lived because the S.S. didn't want to have sicknesses or lice. So we were really kept clean.

EM: And you lived in a big building?

ET: And they called it the *Stabsgebäude*. On upper floors lived the S.S. women and we were downstairs.

EM: O.K., how many girls to a room?

ET: This was a big, big room so I don't know how many.

EM: You lived on bunk beds?

ET: Bunk beds, but we had at least clean. Everything was very clean kept.

EM: You had blankets?

ET: We had blankets.

EM: You had pillows?

ET: No, pillows we had, maybe, but I think it was straw inside.

EM: And could you tell me, did you wear uniforms?

ET: Yeah, we had striped dresses, striped.

EM: Did you have any kind of insignia, some sign who you were, that you were...?

ET: They recognized right away because we looked different, more like human beings.

EM: How about your hair, was that shaven?

ET: I had my hair shaved I think three or four times.

EM: It had to be shaven.

ET: Yeah, because the S.S. women didn't want that we should look like women.

EM: Could you tell me something about your experiences with S.S. men or S.S. women and about the attitudes, about the...?

ET: As I mentioned before, I had typhus when I came to the *Standesamt* and there we had a *Kapo*, he was a *Volksdeutscher* [ethnic German] and he came from Koenigshütte. Koenigshütte was not far from Teschen and he spoke Polish and German. I was the only one who came from Poland, because this was in a Slovakian transport which I was taken, so I told him in Polish that I cannot sit on a little chair, so he really brought me a big chair and I could relax a little my back. He helped me a lot. He was, at least, a little bit human. But one day I had a very bad experience. I filled out some forms and there was ink with pen and the whole ink spilled on these papers and the S.S. came in--I don't know who came in--which one, I know already *Oberscharführer* Quackernack was his name and he said, "Who did this?" So this *Kapo* had to tell that it was me so he hit me over my face maybe twenty times. And I thought I was sure he would send me to Birkenau and this is like death for me, it would be like death for me. But he didn't send me so I survived

and then I got better, I got better. I didn't go to any *revere*, this is a hospital, because I asked when you go to a *revere* do you register and they told me yes, so I didn't want to go. And it is destiny that I went through such a bad sickness. This was my very bad experience, but later I was good in my work that I did and this *Kapo*, his name was Krupka, liked me...

EM: This was the *Volksdeutscher*?

ET: It was the *Volksdeutscher*. But he liked all the girls because they worked for him. He was responsible, and the Jewish girls were very good in the office work so this is how I was there till 18 January of '42.³ From this time started my bad experience. We went with cattle trains to Ravensbrück and we thought this is the end. I was with my dear friend, who lives now in Tel Aviv, and one day--it was already very bad, we didn't have anything to eat.

EM: This was in Ravensbrück?

ET: This was already in Ravensbrück and they sent us to Camp Malchow. This was Malchow. So I went to one friend of ours, which was a doctor before the war, and we asked her, "How long will we live?" She said, "The most is six weeks more," but then it was already liberated on the third of May of '45 and I came to Prague.

EM: So where were you liberated in Malchow?

ET: No, they called it...

EM: Where were you liberated?

ET: On the third of May the S.S. came, "Everybody out, out, we have to go, we have to leave this camp." So we went and we went with dogs and suddenly they disappeared completely and we were on our own. We were afraid to be on the streets. Here bombs were falling and we saw so many German soldiers, but they didn't mind us any more and we looked very bad. And we came to Trewitz. There came the Russians and the Americans.

EM: Both?

ET: Both came but the Russians stayed.

EM: Where was Trewitz, East Germany?

ET: East Germany. And we came--we walked and we were very careful. There we were a group of ten girls, I remember, and we went to houses. We saw even on the table warm food, but we didn't touch it. We were afraid maybe it's poison. So we took farina a little bit. Some of the girls died. Because what I heard later, they ate everything and they were not used. We were very hungry; we were already *Mussulmänner*, but we were careful.

EM: Could you tell me what did you do in Ravensbrück or in the other camp?

ET: Malchow, this was near Ravensbrück. I worked with boxes, *Kartonage* they called it, and we got a little bit food. This was, I think, like a factory but it was very bad. My friend at this time didn't work, so I brought her a little bit food. This was my very, very bad experience, like I mentioned before, from January till May '45.

³It appears the correct year should be 1945. See pages 5 and 9.

EM: I would like to know a little bit more about your experiences in Auschwitz itself. Could you tell me what you remember about your S.S. supervisors or the *Kapo* and anything you can tell me about his treatment of Jews?

ET: Yes, this I can do. We had--our boss was *Unterscharführer* Kristan. He was very young. When he came in the room, even nobody was in his office, he saluted to Hitler. There was a big, big picture of Hitler and he was responsible for this whole office. One day we saw it very often, he went to the window and there were big, big, like here, mini-buses full of Polish men, Gentiles, and they came from jails, we knew that at this time, and they came to be executed in Auschwitz. He looked from the window and then he put on the gloves, and there was a crematorium, which was not in use, and he shot them.

EM: He shot them in the crematorium?

ET: In the crematorium. He came back and he started to laugh as if nothing would happen, but when he didn't look at us, we looked from the window and we saw the men and they showed us that they are going to be killed. We didn't want them to know so we made with our heads that no, no, you're not being killed. But they were laughing. They gave us to understand that they know they came to Auschwitz for their end.

EM: You mentioned something that he liked flowers, this...

ET: When he looked from the window we had in the window some flowers in his office. He looked and he was very interested if they are growing or so--sometimes we could see that he was a little human being, but he hated the Jews. He said that we are the enemies and he was very, very bad to us. He knew that we are his enemies and we hate them too.

EM: Did he hit the girls often?

ET: No, no.

EM: How many Jewish--were there all Jewish girls working in this office?

ET: Only Jewish girls. My friend Lore Shelley, wrote a book about--the book's name is *Secretaries of Death* because they told us we won't live--we won't be alive any more. We know too much. They will kill us. These were the secretaries of death, but what could we do? We worked in the office. It was destiny that we are still alive.

EM: And then when you were evacuated you were evacuated with other people from Auschwitz?

ET: Sure, all of them. They came all together. There came a big, big transport on the 18th of January '45.

EM: Did you know what was going on in Birkenau? Did you know about the gas chambers and the crematorium?

ET: Yes, yes, we knew but the people didn't want to tell us too much because we had enough knowledge already. There were the crematoriums and there were friends who told the people that they are going to the gas chambers that they should do something, but they didn't believe them. They thought that they are factories.

EM: Who? The people who were going to the gas chambers?

ET: Gas chambers, yeah.

EM: Were you in contact with anybody that was in Birkenau?

ET: No, we couldn't, it would be death for us.

EM: Now, let's go back to the time when you were liberated. You said that the Russians and the Americans came but the Russians stayed...

ET: Occupied.

EM: Occupied. Now where did you go from there?

ET: From there we went--I went with the Czechoslovakian girls. There were Polish groups too, but I thought I would go to Czechoslovakia because I knew my cousin is living there so we went by train to Prague, Czechoslovakia. I wrote a telegram to my cousin, Arnosh, and he wrote me quickly back I should come to them and I was there a few weeks, but I wanted to go to my city where I was born.

EM: Excuse me, now Arnosh, was he married to a non-Jewish girl?

ET: Yes.

EM: So was he in camp, do you remember?

ET: His wife...

Tape one, side two:

EM: So you were telling me about your cousin, our cousin, Arnosh. Could you tell me where he was during the war, do you remember?

ET: He was in labor camps, but he was married to a Gentile girl so he didn't go to Auschwitz, let's say, but the last year I think he was in Theresienstadt, but thank God he survived and he's still alive with his wife and his family. But with him I went to Teschen and I looked for my family, but nobody was here only my brother, Alfred. I was in Czeske, Teschen...

EM: That is the Czech part of Teschen.

ET: The Czech part of Teschen because he said they start again the pogroms in Poland, so we were there and I met already my husband, which was during the war in Russia and we married in 1946.

EM: Where did you get married?

ET: In Katowitz [Katowice], this is in upper Silicia.

EM: That was in Poland.

ET: In Poland and my son is born in 1948 in Katowitz and we emigrated to Israel in 1950. From 1950 to 1955 we were in Israel and we came to the United States because my husband had here a sister living and from this time I'm here in New York. My son and his lovely wife, Joan, and my two grandchildren are in Boston. He works for the Department of Transportation and they are very happy in their marriage and this is all what I have.

EM: Could you tell me a little bit about your life in the United States?

ET: In the United States from 1955 it was very, very hard in the beginning, but later it was better and we lived in the Bronx, but my husband passed away in 1970 and I remarried in 1972 to Oscar Turteltaub. But he, I'm sorry to say, passed away in 1976. From this time I'm a widow and go from time to time to Boston and my cousins in Willow Grove.

EM: Could you tell me if you are in contact with some other women who were at the camp?

ET: Yes. The girls who lived in Statsgebäude who worked in the offices or in the *Nähstuben* or so we still are seeing each other or call each other. We meet and thank God everybody is pretty well off and we got older. It's 40 years after the war, even a little bit more, and we see each other and I write to my friends in Israel and Switzerland.

EM: Could you tell me, who was the girl who wrote the book, *Secretaries of Death*? What was her name?

ET: This is a book and she gathered from all of our girls who worked in the *Politische Abteilung* and in *Standesamt* [registry] and this girl was 17 years old when she was in Auschwitz. She worked in the *Politische Abteilung* and she had a dream to make this book. Thank God her husband is very well off and this is a gift from him because the book

came out. I don't know how many people bought this book, but it came out by Shengold [*Secretaries of Death*, Lore Shelley, New York: Shengold Publishers, Inc., 1986.].

EM: But what is her name?

ET: Her name is Lore Shelley, L-O-R-E, second name, S-H-E-L-L-E-Y. She lives in San Francisco.

EM: She wrote about all your experiences in Auschwitz?

ET: No, every girl had to write and I wrote there too.

EM: Now, is there anything else you would like to add?

ET: I would like to mention that I remember something that is very interesting. I hope for you too. After the war I met two girls, sisters. They came from Belgium and they told me something like this. I forgot to mention that when we lived in Stabsgebäude and we had to go to the toilet we were watched by one S.S. man and he wanted always to talk to us and we didn't answer him because we knew he wanted to find out something or so. After the war this Belgian girls told us a story like this. It was the evacuation from Auschwitz and one night we were sleeping in *einer Scheune* [barn].

EM: In a barrack.

ET: In a barrack and some girls escaped. The two girls and maybe three or four more went with this S.S. man, he knew them. I think he was in their office too, working, and he took a wagon and a horse and brought them to a Polish house and I think they were hidden there by the Polish people. He was very nice to them and they said to each other that after the war when somebody will occupy, they didn't know if the Russians or Americans will occupy them, they will give him some clothes and they won't mention that he was an S.S. man in Auschwitz. It was already the Russians arrived and they were free, happy, as you can imagine. Suddenly this S.S. man said, "*Ich bin ein Jude*" [I am a Jew]. They couldn't believe it, but he started to cry and he said the *Shema Yisroel* by heart. It was very touching and I remember we all cried and he was really a man who came to the S.S. and to Auschwitz, I think from Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia and it was really one in thousands that something like this happened.

EM: Is there anything else you would like to add, any other story that you remember?

ET: No, nothing special, only this, that my son still belonged to the second generation. He's very interesting [interested] in the Holocaust and I hope that it won't happen again and the people all in the world should remember what Hitler did to the Jews.

EM: Thank you very much. We appreciate your time.

ET: You're very welcome.