

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Kate Bernath
March 22, 1990
RG-50.030*0023**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Kate Bernath, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on March 22, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

KATE BERNATH March 22, 1990

01:00:19

Q: Will you tell me your name please?

A: Kate Bernath.

Q: Where were you born and when?

A: I was born August 27, 1927 in Szikszó, Hungary.

Q: Tell me about your family and and your life in Szikszó.

A: Uh, I come from a family of three children. I had two brothers and I was the youngest, a girl, and my father was a businessman and we were sort of middle-class Jews in town and, uh, I look back on my childhood as quite happy and, uh, even though there were a lot of dark clouds on the sky, we children were always protected and and, uh, shielded sort of and, uh, had quite a happy life. I, we thought so anyway. Until the... it really began to get bad and we started to hear all the the different rumors about, uh, what's happening all around us but we thought that maybe some people are exaggerating it and, uh, it would never happen to us. We are loyal Hungarian citizens and, uh, nobody would harm us. Our father, grandfathers fought for the country and, uh, and, uh, it's really just scaring us with these things. But then in, uh, April, March actually, 1944, when the Germans came in, we had to put on the yellow star and Jews were not allowed to leave leave their houses actually and, uh, we were not allowed to travel, have businesses or go to school or do anything. I mean we knew that it is happening. It is happening. And, uh, within a few weeks we were all rounded up and sent to a ghetto in, uh, the nearest bigger town named Kassa¹ where we were in, uh, very bad circumstances already. No money was allowed to brought with, only certain amount and we had to leave all our possessions at home. Just everybody was allowed, uh, uh, backpack of some little clothes and and no food and no money and then we didn't, no, no future. Didn't know what's going to happen to us. As and surely enough, uh, we were, uh, there four weeks maybe in the ghetto when the Germans took us out from the country.

01:03:34

Q: Before we get to that, were you seeing a young man in the middle of all this?

A: Oh yes. I, I was, uh, quite, uh, popular (laughter) and, and, uh, seeing we were ri...as I said we had a very social life and, and, and very happy life in a way. When we were not, we

¹ Košice, Czechoslovakia.

couldn't go to, we couldn't go to, uh, the movies so we entertained ourselves at home. I mean we tried to make the best of a bad situation and, uh, this certain young man was, uh, more attentive than others and (laughter) we sort of became semi-officially engaged. Uh, he had to go off to the forced labor camp, but, uh, we promised each other that if we both come back, we going to get married someday. But that was, uh, a very iffy situation of course because you really didn't know what was going on, but but when you're young you don't really think that way. I mean you don't really think you're going to die. You may say it, but, but it doesn't feel like, you know, you don't feel it. You don't realize it what the word really means. So we (pause) going back to back going back to Kassa, one, one, uh, day the Germans brought in these, uh, wagons and we were rounded up, I think eighty of us in a wagon, old and young and and sick and, uh, crying and and, uh, even whatever little we had they took away from us. No food. And the doors were locked on us and was, everybody was looking out under little windows in the cracks which way we're heading, because nobody told us anything. I mean we, everything was rumored but no...nobody said you're going here or you're going there and we thought we're going to work. Everybody said, oh, you're going to work so it's not the worst thing. We're going to work but, uh, my father sort of, uh, he was, uh, we called him a pessimist. (laughter) He he felt that he knew what that that it's going to be terrible and, uh, he said that we're heading for the, out of the country. I mean because if we were going to work, they would have bring us to the other direction. The trains would go to the other direction. And, uh, sure enough, in three days time--it took us, wait a minute, three days--yes, three days to arrive to Auschwitz.

01:06:36

Q: Tell me about that trip. What was the trip like?

A: Well, you hardly could sit down in the wagons and, uh, and, uh, I don't even remember having any food. We must have some food with us but, uh, I don't really recall recall it. And, uh, some people were sick, really out of their mind, old people, senile people and they were crying and yelling all night long and if somebody had to go to the bathroom, then then there was a little, uh, little pail there, and everybody, men and women together, everybody, uh, seeing that you're going to the bathroom. It's, it was just so humiliating, humiliating and, and, uh, horrible. So all they can do is cry or pray or or or try to soothe each other and, and sitting down on the floor and and mothers with their children and, uh, resting in their heads in their lap and it was just an awful trip. And, uh, little did we know that at least we were together. As soon as we arrived to Auschwitz, uh, they were waiting for us. We didn't know what Auschwitz was or where we were and was all of a sudden they opened the doors and these these, uh, men with, uh, striped uniforms started to drag us out and the Germans, uh, patrolling with their German Shepherds and and yelling, " _____, _____, schnell, schnell." Everything has to be done "schnell" all the time. And as soon as we got off, even our backpack what we could carry with us, uh, we tried to get it. They threw, they threw it all out on the side and we didn't need it anymore actually, but we didn't know that. And, uh, and men and women were separated right away. Separate lines. And, uh, when we were going in the lines, uh, this this, uh, German officer in a uniform, he was just telling which way to go for everybody, left or right. I remember him asking my mother how old she was

and she said, "Vierzig" [GER: forty] That's all she was. And he sent her to the other side. (Crying) But at that point we thought we going to see each other yet. I mean we had no idea of, of, uh, what was waiting for us. And then they told us that you're going to see them later, that you're going to see them at night. They're taking the young people to work and, uh, at night or or on the weekend you're going to be together.

01:09:42

Uh, first they asked for the twins, if we had any twins between us. I remember some who were twins and they took them out and then they were asking for other occupations, uh, to step aside. They wanted. The rest of us were marched to the bath, to, to take a shower, to a bath. We had to take all our clothes off and put them nicely in a pile when we come out to find them, and they brought us into this huge room where the showers were overhead and they locked the doors on us and, uh, and, uh, hot steaming water came out. Little did we know that our parents got the same showers with the gas on. Uh, when we came out from the showers we came out on the other door so we never got our clothes back, our shoes or anything. Even the last pin from my hair was taken out and, uh, we got a a dress, a grey cotton dress. No underwear. I got a pair of shoes which was three sizes too big on my feet, wooden shoes. And we were marched into a barrack where there were these, uh, so-called bleachers (ph) what we were sleeping, uh, lay ourself, uh, bunks. Twelve of us on one, so if one turned around, all twelve had to turn. Uh, one bowl of, uh, soup without a spoon or cup or anything for the twelve of us, so each took one sip and and handed to the others. And, uh, these, uh, Jewish girls, uh, were Czechoslovak, from Czechoslovakia, were our Blockältesters. They were the overseers. And they were telling us, tried to orient us of the camp routine, what, how, what was waiting for us and they told us that, uh, you'll never see your parents again. You might as well forget about it because they are already in the, marched into the gas chambers. We just couldn't believe them you know in our wildest dream that that something like this could happen. We thought they were just, uh, being rude to us. They they wanted to punish us for, for not being here the same way like they were for so many years already. And, uh, we just shrugged it off.

01:12:50

We we, but in the meantime they told us if there will be a selection, just volunteer, volunteer for anything. Go out of here. This is a death camp, and, and, uh, the farther you get away from it the better it is. So happens after three days we were shipped, uh, the, the transports were coming in day and night from Hungary. Actually I was in the first transport to leave Hungary to Auschwitz, and, uh, day and night they were bringing in people and even the gas chambers couldn't work fast enough for it, so they had to make room. We had to make room for the newcomers. We were sent to, uh, Cracow, P_aszów the Lager was called. It was the most horrible place on earth. I think it was worse than Auschwitz, even though it had no crematorium. But we worked very, very hard there. Four o'clock in the morning we had to get up to for Zählappells, uh, counting of the rolls, and stay there for hours under the stars in our one piece of clothes and it was freezing cold. This was in May,

but it was in the mountains, and we had no clothes on and we had no food and everybody was cold. And, uh, staying there after after the Zählappell we were marched out to work. The camp was situated on a, on a mountainside and our work was to carry these big wooden planks up on the steep mountain, that we we stood like three girls or five girls on there, one of these big wooden plank and carried it on our shoulders up on the mountains. And, uh, German...of course like I said everything had to be done "schnell" and, uh, and, uh, they were coming with the German Shepherds to chase us to go fast. Now when you have a three size too big pair of shoes on your feet and the mud, and it's muddy and and go up on the mountainside, it's, it's terribly hard, and we were doing this work all day long. And by the time we came back home on the other side of the mountain, uh, sometimes the food ran out already. Uh, the last people didn't get any or or else we got some soup with, uh, some barley, barley soup. That was our mainstay for three months, every single day. Barley soup.

01:15:59

And, uh, lot of, uh, after a while we were issued some clothes because it was, like I said it was very cold there in them. We had some sweaters and, and coats and by the time we realized it, it was full of lice, this clothes. So, so whenever we could escape a little, hide from the work, our pastime was to kill the lice, the, the; it was, uh, we suffered a lot there from, from, uh, from the other people. From the other camp-mates who were, who were not, uh, not good to us because they felt that we were, uh, spoiled or, or we just coming from, from our, our, uh, homes and they were already suffering for years and years and they thought we're not even Jewish, Jewish, uh, prisoners because you don't speak the language. We don't belong. But nevertheless, uh, we settled down sort of a routine until until the partisans began to really raid on the, make a lot of raids around the camps and, and the front was coming closer I suppose, so, so one day we were evacuated from there. And we were sent, we were sent back to Auschwitz.

01:17:36

Of course we didn't know we're going there and this is, uh, uh, maybe a three-hour trip Auschwitz betwe...between Auschwitz and Cracow, the distance should be three hours. It took us three days to get back in the hottest summer, August 5th I remember. Hundred and thirty us of us in one wagon. It was so hot that I remember one night I, I must have dozed off and I, the train stopped so I woke up and it was raining and water was coming down on my head. I thought to myself I must be losing my mind because I know that we started out with a covered wagon. How can it be raining? Until I found out that the humidity in the wagons was so high that it was coming down in drops from the ceiling. We had absolutely no water, no food, no air. After three days when we finally arrived in Auschwitz and they opened the wagon doors, we give thank God, thanks to God that we are in Auschwitz and we're perhaps going to the gas chambers, and this will be the end of our journey. (Pause) Uh, but we didn't go to the gas chambers. We went back to another lag...uh, camp. I think it was the C Lager they called it. And, uh, our, we were full of lice I told you, so our hair

was shaved. Before they didn't have time because usually when a transport arrives, the women are all shaved. Their hair is shaved off but when I first came there, it did...it didn't, they were such, in such a rush that they didn't, they didn't do it to us but when we fir...came back to Auschwitz, they shaved our heads which was good because we were full of lice, like I told you. And, uh, they tattooed me.

01:20:05

This was just another...we really didn't care at that point. We didn't think that that we, we, we really ex...ceased to be human beings. We were just a number already but who care...I mean it was beyond us already. And, uh, in Auschwitz, in Auschwitz I didn't work. It was just a transport Lager ahead...an an an experimenting Lager. We...we didn't have to work. But, of course, the food was very, uh, skimpy and, uh, and also we had to stay in li...in, uh, Zählappell for hours long in the cold nights, so much so that I remember we used to, a group of us used to huddle together and keep each other warm. And, uh, I don't know. The rest of our times just, uh, went by, uh, without doing anything. Just...just waiting, and...and... and...and uh (pause) they kept saying, uh, there were constantly selections. Selections from us, but we didn't, uh, know where the selections were going. So everybody was trying to avoid it. But nevertheless these, uh, inmates who were there a longer time kept telling us, "Just try to get out from here. Because it's, uh...here it's, uh, the crematorium is always working. Uh, if...if you go away, maybe you'll be lucky and, uh, survive." So one day, when there was a selection in our block, uh, I was together with a cousin of mine. We decided that, uh, "Let's...let's go for the selection." They needed five hundred girls for this selection; and, uh, I was the four hundred and ninety-ninth and she was the fifth...fifth...five hundred[th] to be selected. And there was two more girls with us--also cousins--who were cut off, and they remained in Auschwitz. They never came back alive. We were...we were, uh, really lucky ones. We were sent to, uh, a factory to work in Augsburg, Germany. Uh, I believe the factory belonged to Messerschmitt. That's what I was told. It was, uh, situated on Ulmerstrasse in Augsburg; and it was not a concentration camp in the regular sense, becau...we were locked up. I mean, we were not allowed to leave the buildings; but, uh, we were living in the factory building. It was a huge L-shaped building and we were living in one on one side of it with the Ger...with our German guards and, uh, we were working in the other side of the building, so we never left the building.

01:23:46

We went through the basement, up to the other side to work and, uh, our food was a little better than if we were not working. And our guards were not hitting us like they were in Cracow with the, with the leather--uh, I don't know what you call them--and there were plenty of beatings there and and so we were, uh, handled more humanely. Nevertheless, uh, we were hungry constantly but, uh, there was five hundred of us. Five hundred Hungarian girls and, uh, we were working hard for the Germans. The German civilians worked in the same place but not together with us. Separate, separate departments. Uh, had a lot of air raids in those days in Germany. The Americans came constantly. Every night we could set

our clock by it that what time the air raid is going to be and we were happy about it. We were glad. We were wishing they would bomb the place down and, uh, with us together (laughter) whatever but, uh, the Germans didn't--we had to go to the air shelters every night because the Germans wouldn't leave us up there. They were afraid we, we might signal the airplanes. One day there was a bomb fell on our courtyard and it never exploded. The German workers said that it's because the Jews are here. They, they already felt that they lost the war. Actually the Germans felt it. They knew it. But of course everybody was afraid. They were afraid. We were afraid. They wouldn't talk to us, uh, but, uh, they they knew that, uh, it's getting out of hand. Don't forget this was toward the end of the war and, uh, we tried we tried to do our work so we should sabotage a few of their airplanes but I don't know if it succeeded or not (laughter) but uh...

Q: How did you do that?

01:26:25

A: Well we were we were I was working in the _____ they called it where our job was to, to these parts we were dipping into these chemicals so they shouldn't oxidize because when they put them in the planes they're, you know, rusty, they're not treated, uh, good enough so we tried to manipulate a little that it shouldn't be so good but I don't know. It was just a hope that maybe we did some good. And, uh, I don't know. Our, uh, German the, the Hauptscharführer (ph) who was, uh, the after a while he became very mean and we, we heard rumors that his son was killed at the Russian front and he took his frustrations out on the Jews of course and, uh, but we were, we were--uh, in the midst of all our troubles we were trying to cheer each other up. If one was feeling very low, we, we tried to tell them, we, we dreamed about things what we were going to do when we got liberated. We were all...we never thought for a minute, I never thought for a minute that I'm really going to die. I, it just did not sink in. I mean with all these horrors around me I, I always thought that we were dreaming of, of things--when I got home I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that and I just want to see this, this war end and just live for the day when we see the Germans defeated. And that kept us alive. Never to lose hope. If you lost hope that was the end of it. It was so easy in Auschwitz. All you had to do is reach out for the barbed wires. They were electrified. We will not do them the favor. We said if they want to kill us, they'll have to kill us. We are not going to die (laughter) becau...because it's, it's, uh, if we knew that our parents would be alive or, or we said we, we, we fight. We can do it. We, we, we are going to stay alive.

01:28:55

But of course it, it became more and more heated the the war. It it, uh, to us, uh, middle of, beginning of April we had to leave Augsburg because the bombings were unbearable and, uh, I suppose the factory shut down for whatever reasons. They, they put us back into the wagons and, and, uh, we were headed for wherever camp would take us and we were taken actually to several camps where they had no room for us. And finally we wound up, uh, a

place called Mühldorf. At this time we belonged to, we were under Dachau jurisdiction I suppose. Uh, this, this belonged to the camps Dachau already and, uh, we stayed in, in Mühldorf. When we arrived there we saw people there who were in much worse shape than we were. I mean they really looked, uh, walking corpses. And, uh, we had to go out to work, uh, mostly these bombed out places. They took us to the town of Mühldorf I suppose and, uh, cleaning, uh, bricks of the house that were bombed out and uh ...the middle of the area was such a bombing... that my ...cousin was laying next. We were laying on, uh, on the ground, uh, during the attack, next to a tree and and we couldn't see each other from from the smoke. But, uh, nevertheless, we didn't care about the bombs. I mean we were happy that there were bombings. One, uh, I just you, just didn't think about, uh, living or dying or whatever may come or, or you were a fanatic just to see the Germans defeated. That's all we lived for. And we knew it full well it, it will be done but the question was will we see it. With all our dreams and our deep-down each and every one of us knew that they're going to kill us in the last minute. They're not going to let us live to, to come and testify. It was just by accident.

01:31:47

Q: What happened to you?

A: What happened to me? This Mühldorf, Mühldorf was evacuated. About six thousand people altogether I suppose. I'm really not good at, uh, these things because I don't know. I was just shoved here and I was shoved there. Nobody told me anything and, uh, and, uh, we were in, as I said put into wagons again and, uh, supposedly, I heard rumors we were heading to Innsbruck which was, uh, exterminating pla...uh, Lager again to to finish us all off. But, uh, the Ger...the the front was over more, all around us, the fightings and, uh, there were more important things for the locomotives than to transport us. So we were stranded for days here and days there. I mean the train didn't move. We were just left, uh, left there on the tracks. And, uh, one day, one day somebody noticed that all our guards left. And, uh, somebody, I don't know how, some man or broke out of their their wagons and opened all the wagon doors and they said, "Uh, we have no guards. The war is over. You're free." Let's go wherever. So where should we go. You know, we were a group of, uh, girls together who were all the time sticking it out and, uh, finally we saw everybody is running away from the wagons. We started to walk. This was, uh, fields there and, uh, finally we came to a farmhouse. Uh, came to this farmhouse. Uh, somebody who spoke German told the German man there that we are from a neighboring, uh, concentration camp and we were left on our own, and we were very hungry. Could he please give us something to eat? So he said to go up to, for us to go in the back and, uh, he's going to try to find us something to eat.

01:34:18

A little later he came back and brought some, some food and no sooner we started to eat, this SS soldier came with his machine gun pointed at us and tells to the German guy that uh _____ Juden so and uh Raus, Raus, everybody. Raus. They brought these these, uh,

trucks. They rounded up all six thousand people back to the wagons, but it was beating and shooting and and, uh, it was just a terrible, uh, situation. On top of all there was a big thunderstorm and, and, uh, we were pulled back and and bleeding and, and, uh, wounded and pushed back into the wagons. No sooner we were back in the wagons, the American fighter planes came and started to bomb all around us. So much so that there were a lot of, lot of casualties at that point and, uh, and, uh, in the middle of the night finally the wag...the train started to move again. We, we were going to, to, uh, we were on our way. People were crying and, and, uh, it was a hopeless situation. After a couple of days one night when we were standing on the tracks, the, somebody opened the door and asked if we had any wounded or dead in our wagons, because they are from the Swiss Red Cross and we were liberated. We were near the Swiss borders. We couldn't believe it. We were so, so we didn't care anymore and, uh, and, uh, the girls started to shout they're not moving out of this wagon anymore. Come what may, we're staying there. And, uh, so we stayed the night and in the morning we saw the American soldiers coming by with the trucks and, and, uh, and they started to bring us some food and, and, and, uh, then we knew that that the war was over and this was May 1st, 1946²

01:37:02

and, uh, from then on and, uh, from then on, uh, they took us into a neighboring, uh, place called Feldafing which was, uh, it originally a Hitlerjugend camp. It was a beautiful place. It was on the Starnbergsee. It's a big lake. And, uh, they they disinfected us. They took us, took away all our clothes whatever we had. They gave us, they didn't have any clothes for us, so they gave us pajamas, whatever they could find and, uh, fed us and, uh, from then on it was, uh, much easier. But of course, uh, we didn't know what happened to our families and, and, uh, anybody around us and it's just, uh, you couldn't think. You couldn't, uh, do anything and it, it took many, many months before we became human again. It's, uh, (pause) I, I of course I skipped a lot of things over, over a lot of things which, uh, which was, which was worse than the camp itself, all the dehumanizing, all the suffering, the not-knowing what happened to, to our loved ones, whether we're going to see them again or not, and our properties, without we're left without everything and anybody and and it was just a horrible horrible experience. But uh....

Q: Did you go, did you go back home?

01:38:53

A: Yes, I went back home after after a good while because the transportation was very bad. I mean there was none. There was none, and we just had no way of, uh, turning. There was no papers, no money, no, no transportation. So I remained in this camp for, uh, three, four months I believe after the liberation. No, well in September, September when we heard there were some trains going already back to Hungary. I went back to Hungary and I found

² 1945.

the brother who was already home. He was, survived the camps. My other brother who was with him was killed in the last days of the war. And, uh, he was on one of these marches uh--they were, they were together all the time and and, uh, and this younger brother of mine became sick so he was taken to another camp and my older brother thinking that he was going to go that camp to be with my younger brother again, he went on this march and he never came out from there, in the last days, yes.

Q: Did you meet up with your fiance again?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell us about it?

A: Well, he was, uh, waiting with open arms (laughter) and he was waiting with open arms, but, uh, we were not ready to get married. I was, uh, there was no, uh, nothing and nobody and we really had to get ba...back to normal life to get adjusted. We, we didn't know what, uh, was happening to us. And, uh, but after a few months back in Hungary we, we felt that this is not the, we could not live here any longer. All the feelings what was in us made it impossible to, to readjust to life in Hungary. With all the hatred and all the non-caring what we received from our Hungarian friends and neighbors, we just did not see life possible there anymore. So we decided to try to get back to Germany and there, from there as displaced people we were going to be able emigrate either to Israel, uh, Palestine or America.

01:41:41

He had relatives in America who wanted him to come here and, uh, so we went back. We became engaged in Hungary and, uh, started out on our journey and, uh, finally we got married in Germany in Leipheim . This was DP camp, and on the way we got of course a lot of help from Jewish organizations, mainly from Joint, United Jewish Appeal and, and, uh, UNRRA kept these camps open. Of course the life was very harsh in these DP camps, but, uh, I suppose, uh, we had our freedom. Our freedom to go nowhere because actually nobody wanted us until finally the Congress passed an act in 1948 or 9 and we were allowed to come to America. And we're ever grateful because we found that, uh, we had a good life, uh, with all our memories and all the, even even more so because we appreciate it more, whatever we got and, uh, whatever we achieved, uh, we are, we are allowed to achieve, we're very thankful for it and we see the contrast, how people are. It was really unbelievable to us that, that it could happen that, uh, that, uh, of course the German people paid for, for their mistakes and everybody does for the mass hysteria what swept through Europe.

Q: But you, you have been happy now?

01:43:33

A: Yes. We are, uh, I mean happy. Of course, we miss our families terribly and we, we never forget about them. We always talk about them. It's become part of our lives. No matter how much we don't want to, whenever I get together with my friends or relatives, the subject comes up. We always wind up in the concentration camps. But, uh, we somehow we learned to live with it. I suppose it's, uh, some...uh, sometimes you don't believe it yourself that, uh, you really went through all this and you are, you, you still are a human being.

Q: Is there anything you want to add?

A: Uh, what I want to add is that, uh, people should be vigilant all the time not to, not to think that, uh, this really doesn't matter. All these all these, uh, hate mongrels what come up in the world and and people, if they're not personally marked they think that it's nothing. It will pass by. It will blow away. But, but if you let it go out of hand, then this, this can happen. Also I want to add that never lose hope. Until there is life there is always hope. If I, if I wouldn't give two cents for my life. I, like I said, I always felt that no matter how much, uh, front we're going to put up, they, they at the end they're going to kill us. And and but we did not give up hope. We didn't go around--I'm going to lay down and die. At the end, uh, some of us survived.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Thank you.

01:45:44