

Testimony of Estelle Sapir

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My name is Estelle Sapir. I am 70 years old and I am a Holocaust survivor. I was born in Warsaw, Poland where my father was a very successful banker. My father owned and operated his own banking business and worked very hard to provide our family with the affluent lifestyle which I had known in my early years. I was very proud of this business which my father had established. His banking business employed about 20 people and specialized in investments and currency. My father also operated a shoe factory and owned several buildings in Warsaw. My father was a man whom I admired. I will always be proud of him and all he did to provide such a lifestyle for my family.

I have very vivid memories as a little girl in Warsaw. We had a large house with servants and many luxuries. My family was able to travel and vacation frequently. I was a very lucky little girl.

When the war came, everything changed drastically for me and my

family. The once beautiful neighborhood that I had called home was completely destroyed. The bombing was never-ending. I will never forget September 14, 1939. On that day, the big beautiful house which had been my home was bombed. The damage was devastating and irreparable. My family lost everything. We were forced to take refuge with my uncle, who himself had suffered horrible damage.

My innocent young mind had seen horrors beyond my most awful imaginations. I thought that there was nothing more horrible which could happen to the people and the country I had loved so much. But I was naive. Far worse horrors were yet to come. It was at this point that the German troops came in and occupied Poland.

I was mistreated and tormented from the start because I was a Jew. I was forced to wear a white armband with the blue star of David on it. This led to my being arrested on the street and forced to labor in the Krsinski Garden. I was forced to wash tiles and parquet floors with my undergarments. My undergarments became torn to shreds

and were wet and dirty. But this did not matter to the soldiers who made us put them back on as torn and wet as they were. As a result of this, I contracted double pneumonia. I was malnourished and the medical treatment given me was poor. Consequently, I have felt the consequences of this for many years.

On April 16, 1940 I thought that perhaps my salvation was on its way. I was able to flee Poland with my brother and sister for Italy. We were unable to take even the barest of necessities. The three day trip was difficult, but, after passing through many countries, we finally made it to Italy. The Italian authorities took us under their protection. From Italy, I was able to meet up with my parents in Paris. My father still had access to large amounts of money that he had wisely deposited in banks outside of Poland, including Swiss banks. I once again became hopeful. Life was peaceful and I was happy just to be in this foreign land and with the family that I loved. We lived very comfortably since my father was a wealthy man. This tranquility and happiness was not to last. The German occupation came, and with it the bombing, the exodus, and the horrors.

We fled Paris in fear. We took refuge in Bollene in the South of France in Avignon and hid there. We then paid a very high reward in order to get an abandoned cottage in the woods. The cottage was very small and had no room for my brother, so he was forced to separate from us. My father hired a man to help us flee to the safety of Spain. It is so very painful and ironic. My father's efforts to protect us and hire the best turned out to be a tragic mistake. But this man betrayed us to the Nazis. We took many precautions for we lived in fear for our lives. These fears became a reality and we were betrayed and arrested. The man my father had hired to protect us took our money and then alerted the Nazis. He was later convicted for these crimes.

My entire family was brought to the concentration camp at Perpignan. My father was eventually transferred to the camp at Rivesaltes. In November of 1942, I spoke with my father for what would be the last time. I spoke with him through the wires of the gates. I will never forget what he told me. He repeated it over and over again in several languages. He told me that I had to survive.

He said to remember what he told me and that there was enough money for all of our family. He told me that this money was deposited at Swiss banks in Geneva, Basel, Zurich, and Luzane and at a British bank in London. He made me repeat after him. He knew that our family savings could be the key to our survival. I would never again see my father after that day. My father died in the Maidanek concentration camp in 1943.

Once in the Rivesaltes Hospital with my mother, I received news of my brother and was also told of the devastating news that my father had been deported. My mother and I managed to escape from the hospital. A car took us to Narbonne where we caught a train to Bollenes. Once in Bollenes, we hid in a small stable divided by a partition. There was no bedding, no water, no way to clean ourselves. We lived on straw. We were not able to go outside from June of 1943 until we were liberated in August of 1944 for fear we would be found. We had no reliable source of food. When they could, the peasants who were hiding us were kind and decent enough to bring us what they could spare. We could not cook what

we did have for fear that the smoke from the chimney would give us away.

One day, we heard of a large-scale round-up in the village. My mother and I fled in anxiety and dread. We escaped by my carrying my mother on the luggage rack of my bicycle. I saw a German vehicle on the highway and, in my fear and haste, fell into a ditch. I was severely injured by the handlebars but there was nothing that could be done about it. I had to endure the injury until after the liberation when I was finally operated on. The God whom we were persecuted for our devotion to watched over us on this day. For, by his grace, my mother and I made it back to our hiding place without being seen.

All of us suffered from malnutrition and lack of basic human hygiene. What started out as stomach pains led to an ulcer. I had no money, so this ulcer went untreated and eventually ended up in a tumor. As a result, I had to have part of my stomach removed. This is just one of many scars which I will carry with me to my

grave. But this is nothing compared to when I think of all who were hunted and killed like animals

Six months after seeing my father for the last time, my mother and I returned to the house we had rented in Avignon. While searching the house, my mother and I found a number of small ledger books with bank deposits and account balances. In Paris in 1946, I met with the family accountant and we discussed the bank holdings that my father had provided for. I was able to recover about \$10,000 from the bank in London. I was never able to recover any of the money from the Swiss banks.

Throughout 1946 and 1947, I traveled to Switzerland and met with bank officials in Basel and Geneva. I met with members of the Credit Suisse bank in Geneva. Both this bank and the bank in Basel admitted to me that they had accounts belonging to my dead father. They refused to give me any further information or access to any of the money. They claimed that since I could not provide them with a death certificate for my father I could not gain access to my

father's account. Because my father was killed in a concentration camp, I would never be able to produce a death certificate and they knew it. I eventually abandoned my hopes of ever receiving the money which was rightfully due my family. Each time I contacted the Swiss banks they were rude and arrogant. Their treatment perpetuated the pains of the Holocaust. My family pleaded with me to stop with my search since it was killing me.

Many other hopes I'd had and which my parents had had for me were abandoned. I was unable to finish my studies and never married because of the health reasons I spoke of earlier. I lost everything and everyone that I had. The Nazis stole my home, my childhood, my innocence, and the father whom I loved so dearly and was so proud of. After the inhumanities inflicted upon us by the Nazis, I was once again dishonored and my father's memory disgraced by the Swiss banks. I have lost enough in my lifetime. All I ask for is a chance to reclaim what is rightfully mine and my family's and with it some of the dignity which was taken from us.