

Transcript:

Henrietta Diament

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31m07s

Interviewer: Thank you so much for coming.

Henrietta Diament: It's...it's no problem, really.

Interviewer: I don't have your interview in front of me. I think it's probably en route. We've been actually--

Henrietta Diament: That's OK.

Interviewer: --traveling for the last week. So, forgive me. I'll probably ask you some more questions. What we're gonna talk about is a little bit about where you grew up, what it was like a little bit about your family and we're going to talk a little bit about the actual invasion of...what country are you're from?

Henrietta Diament: Poland.

Interviewer: Poland, OK. So, we'll going to talk about the invasion and we're going to talk about, are you a camp survivor?

Henrietta Diament: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: OK, we're going to talk about the camps.

Henrietta Diament: Yes.

Interviewer: And we're going to talk a little bit about the liberation?

Henrietta Diament: About what?

Interviewer: About the liberation--

Henrietta Diament: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: --and what you remember from it.

Henrietta Diament: Oh yeah. I remember very well.

Interviewer: Feel free to speak openly and freely. I may stop you along the way if I have some questions if that's OK.

Henrietta Diament: Yeah.

Interviewer: And then we'll just go from there, OK?

Henrietta Diament: Yeah.

Interviewer: OK. So, just tell me a little bit about where you grew up.

Henrietta Diamant: I was born in Poland in a city called Łódź. Łódź was a very industrial city. The population was about 600,000 and half of the 600,000 were Jewish people. The other half were Polish Catholics and a lot of German folks and people that came from Germany to settle there. Since there was such a large Jewish population, I hardly knew anybody that was not a Jew there. I remember when I went to school, the school was a public school but only Jewish children went there. And what I remember the best is the first day I went to a public school and it was another one that was closer to my house and I always tell this story because it's more or less how it was for Jewish people there. We were sitting in a classroom, two girls in a, how do you call it, on a bench and in front of us, the teacher asked us our names. And then, she said, "Who can read and write?" And since I had two older sisters and my mother, I knew how to read and write. And I said I could and she asked me to read something and the girl that was sitting next to me, she said, "You dirty Jew." Since I was smart, I must have been a Jew. Well, I said, "I am not a dirty Jew," and I took the inkwell that was there and I poured on her blond hair. And I left it and I said, "I'll never come back here," and I went home. I supposed my father had probably some trouble for me but he was very proud of me. And then, I went to another school that was only Jewish kids and it was wonderful.

Interviewer: Was that your first encounter with antisemitism that you remember?

Henrietta Diamant: Oh, no, no. That was not the first time. We knew that it was there, you know. But since I was a little girl, I didn't have the occasion to meet with whatever it was. I came from a family where there were 7 children in our family. My father married a nice lady and she died in the first war. I think...I don't know, I think she died from typhoid or whatever. And she had 3 children, then my father met another lady and it was my mother. And they had 4 more children. So, there were 7 children at all. The first 3 kids were, a lot younger...I mean older than I was. There was my sister Regina, my brother David, and then, a 3rd one was Hella. And by the time I was growing up, the 2 older people, Regina and David were married and each of them had 2 boys. And my oldest sister, Hella, when she reached the age of 18, she went to Belgium to study because in Poland, it was very hard for Jewish people to go to the university. Most people that could afford it went to France, Belgium, and even...also, they went to Germany and Austria. That was before things turned so bad for Jewish people. Well, my home life was...I mean, my parents were Orthodox Jews and my home life was, when I look back, it was just like a wonderful dream. It was just warm

and loving and it was...I lived in a house that I never knew how many brothers and sister I had because whoever needed help being somewhere, he came to stay with us. I remember 3 or 4 people that I was so heartbroken when they left us finally to be on their own because it was...I mean it was just a kind of life that...it was just wonderful, really. We knew very well what was the Jewish situation in Poland but this time, I don't know my parents stayed in there but that's the way it was. And later, when it was so very terrible, there was no place for us to go anywhere.

Interviewer: Tell, me about the invasion and what you remember.

Henrietta Diamant: The invasion, I remember very well. I think it was the second day of September that we already saw the Germans on the street. Now, I was 21 years old and I was much more optimistic than I am now and I remember sitting at the window and I figured myself, maybe it will last 2 or 3 months but then, the French and the British will come and we'll be liberated because by this time, we already knew that they entered the war also. I remember shortly before the invasion, the summer before the invasion, I saw a French film called *La France Voit* (sp?) that means "the French are watching." And they showed us all the wonderful things that they did to save France and to save the world [unintelligible 0:96:47] and everything and I was sure that they would be, I mean that they will save us anyway. Of course, I mean you know how things turned out anyway.

Interviewer: Tell me about the day that you were separated from your family.

Henrietta Diamant: Oh, from my family? Well, I people...I mean people didn't really know what they were doing. We're living in Łódź and Warsaw was a city 100 kilometers away and Łódź was a part of Poland that was right in a, how do you call it, that the German took over for them and my parents thought that maybe Warsaw will be a better place for us. So, they stayed in Łódź and they sent all their children to Warsaw. My older brother and his family went there and they took all the children, I mean myself and my 2 brothers and sisters with them and my parents stayed in Łódź and we thought that we could meet later but we never did. For some reason, they couldn't leave or whatever and I never saw them again later. And when I went to Warsaw, I had my fiance with me,

Stephen Diament, and he left his family and he went with me too and we were married a few days later. I remember before the war, I was discussing with my parents that I didn't want a big Jewish wedding that will cost a fortune. I just want to get married and that's it. And I got my wish because...and when we came to Warsaw, my husband was a printer. He came from a family that was in the printing business for about 200 years. And that's what we do in Memphis too when we came to live in Memphis. For a few years, he worked for somebody else and then, we opened our own printing business here.

Interviewer: So, you were 21 years old. You had married Stephen.

Henrietta Diament: Yeah, I was...yeah.

Interviewer: Your wedding day was...?

Henrietta Diament: Excuse me?

Interviewer: Your wedding day, your family was not there.

Henrietta Diament: No, but my older brother that also lived in Warsaw was there and his wife and a few friends and I mean we just got married. That was the most important thing. I think that the Germans forbade Jewish people to get married but we never paid attention to whatever they said because whatever you did, you were threatened with the death penalty. So, it didn't matter what...

Interviewer: Tell me about that time. What did you really understand of what's happening? I mean really...

Henrietta Diament: I understand very well. You know, it's...it was not a surprise to me and it was not a surprise to the Jews in Poland. We knew that our lives, you know, even before the war, our lives were hanging this way and that way, we always set to look for a way to, I mean, for a way to survive

and we knew very well what was waiting for us under Hitler. We knew it very well. But I mean each day was a day more and maybe something will happen. I remember the day of...June 6th I mean, we didn't know June 6th but this was the day that, I guess, I was in Auschwitz or whatever and for some reason, we...somebody knew and, you know, it came...I mean we knew about the Japanese war. We knew about all the wars. I don't know how it's came to us but we knew about it. And what it...I mean...I remember my father once told me that I was a lucky person. It never will happen to me. And I guess, I mean, all the time of the war and the camps and everything. I never thought that I'm going to stay there. I always knew that I will survive. I don't know how but and I mean if you doubt about yourself, if you lost faith, I mean you were gone right away.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about then. How old were you when...were you sent to a ghetto first before you went to Auschwitz?

Henrietta Diament: Oh, yeah. I mean I was living--

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about the ghetto.

Henrietta Diament: I was living in Warsaw. I'm sure you heard many, many things about the ghetto and...

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience with the ghetto. What do you remember the most?

Henrietta Diament: What I remember the most is seeing children dead in the streets. There were a lot of children were...I mean didn't have any parents. Their parents were sent somewhere. They left the kids and that's what I remember the most, seeing children. I remember, there was one little boy [unintelligible 0:12:28] Hamburg. He was about 5 years old and I saw him in the street and he was sitting and crying and we...I took him to my house to my room, and he lived with us for about 6 months and then he died. I don't know what he died from. But this is what I remember the most, I mean children dead in the streets. There was, you know, we were always hungry. I mean for 5 years, I was hungry,

hungry, hungry all the time. And I mean that was not only my situation. Everybody was hungry.

Interviewer: Were you there with Stephen?

Henrietta Diamant: Yes, I was there with Stephen. I was there til May 1943 and I tell you, the most beautiful day was April 19th when finally...I mean we stood up and [unintelligible 13:23] I mean it was just a wonderful day, really. I mean we were just...

Interviewer: You left the ghetto and you went where?

Henrietta Diamant: I didn't leave the ghetto.

Interviewer: You didn't leave?

Henrietta Diamant: No, no. We were taken...I mean we were taken and we were deported to Majdanek.

Interviewer: OK. And then tell me about the...

Henrietta Diamant: Well, Majdanek was a camp like Auschwitz.

Interviewer: Were you deported with Stephen?

Henrietta Diamant: Yes, I was deported with Stephen and then, after 2 or 3 days, we were separated. He was sent to another place. He was sent to a place where they were building planes for the Messerschmitt family, whatever. And I stayed in Majdanek for a couple of months and they sent us to another place called Radom. In Radom, there was still a ghetto and we were

sent to the ghetto and we were...I mean...I have a problem with some years ago, I had a little stroke and I couldn't find words anymore.

Interviewer: No, it's OK. That's OK. From there that were in a concentration camp.

Henrietta Diamant: Yes.

Interviewer: What did you do there?

Henrietta Diamant: We didn't do anything. Whatever they told us to do, most of the time, we were carrying stones from one places to another. I remember one incident in Majdanek camp, we were taking things from one place to another close to the...close to the entrance or whatever. And on the other side of the entrance, there were a couple, I mean a bunch of German soldiers standing there and talking about somebody. And there was a lady and a little girl. She was maybe 4 or 5 years old, I suppose. She was a wife of an officer and she lived there and then, from another place, there came a soldier and he had a little Jewish baby maybe 5 to 6 months old and he dragged him by his legs. And when he came closer to the group, he threw the baby in the air and shot it. And the little girl that was standing there with her mother, she clapped, she said, "Noch einmal!", "Once more."

Interviewer: You remember seeing that?

Henrietta Diamant: Oh, I remember hearing it. I mean it...sometimes, at night I don't sleep, you know. Last night, I didn't sleep too good. I mean it was all fresher to me. And seeing a little girl, a young little girl, whatever. I was--

Interviewer: In that camp, you were at the camp for how long?

Henrietta Diamant: I was in that camp about 2 months...about 2 months. And then, they sent...took about 500 or 600 people. They put us on a train and they

sent us to Radom. Radom still had the ghetto and we worked for them. I forgot whatever they wanted us to do. I remember I made a basket. I painted houses and whatever. And then, we stayed there till about...till the summer of '44 about August. And they sent us to Auschwitz from there.

Interviewer: And what was Auschwitz like for you?

Henrietta Diamant: Well, you know, I didn't have...I mean I didn't stay too long in Auschwitz. I stayed there maybe 4 or 5 weeks.

Interviewer: How long had you gone without seeing Stephen at this point?

Henrietta Diamant: Not too long, about 3 months.

Interviewer: Three months.

Henrietta Diamant: I mean he was at that camp and yeah, it was called [unintelligible 0:17:23]. There was a big factory for Messerschmitt and he was there. And he worked there as a mechanic. Although he was a printer but they didn't need printers or whatever. He was...I mean he was a kind of a man that did everything with his hands he could do. And he was very resourceful, really. There were a lot of I mean if... people from their country, they came to work there, they were Polish people. And if they needed something, they needed a little, whatever, a ring or a basket or whatever. They came to Stephen and he always find them something and he got a piece of bread for it. So, he was in pretty good shape. I mean he had a little more to it.

Interviewer: And you were liberated...

Henrietta Diamant: Well, whatever. After I was sent to Radom, we stayed there till about a few months whatever. And then, we were sent to Auschwitz. That's was when the Russians were getting very close to Poland, whatever.

And in Auschwitz, I didn't stay too long, maybe 4 or 5 weeks and one day, you know, they took all the women from a certain block. We were told to undress and we were walking in the street. And there were people there who were watching us and the one that...hi. Yeah, here.

Interviewer: It's OK.

Henrietta Diamant: The one that looked a little better were taken to the right side and the one with...I was on the right side and there were about 500 women with me and we were sent to a work camp. It was called Hindenburg. I think it belonged to the Krupp company. Over there, we were working for the armaments, whatever we did. Things there were a little better since we worked for them. I mean we got maybe a little more soup or whatever. I remember one day in my whole story, I was very sick and that was after lunch. They had a little more soup and they gave me the little more soup and I got terribly sick from eating some more, whatever.

Interviewer: You actually got sick from eating more soup.

Henrietta Diamant: From eating more soup, yeah.

Interviewer: And you...tell me about what do you remember about the liberation? You had heard rumors that the Russians were coming in?

Henrietta Diamant: No, we were not...we were there in that Hindenburg camp till November '45 and the Russians were coming so we were...they took us out on the death march. We were marching towards west of Germany and I think--

Interviewer: Death march.

Henrietta Diamant: Yeah. There is a painter in Memphis, called Penczner. He is a Hungarian. I don't know what he did in the war but anyway...

Somehow, he heard about the march. Maybe he was there also, I don't know but he painted one of those pictures, the death march. And he gave it to me and I gave it to my son later.

Interviewer: Tell me about the march.

Henrietta Diament: The march, whatever you read about it, that was it, you know.

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience with the march.

Henrietta Diament: Well, I guess, you know, I was young and I made it. I don't know. I made it.

Interviewer: What do you remember most about it?

Henrietta Diament: It was cold. It was cold. It was cold and it was hungry...I mean it was just...I guess in my group that we went I mean...everybody was young there. I mean if you were old, you were dead. But a bunch of us made us to...we were taken to Bergen-Belsen. I mean we walked all the way from Poland to Bergen-Belsen, whatever. I mean right now, I can walk at 100 years.

Interviewer: How do you attribute your survival?

Henrietta Diament: I was young.

Interviewer: Young?

Henrietta Diament: I was young and healthy. I mean basically.

Interviewer: There were...there were lots of young and healthy people.

Henrietta Diamant: Yes, I know, I know. Of course--

Interviewer: How do you think personally you survived? How did you make sense of what was happening to you?

Henrietta Diamant: I did not make any sense. We were not thinking about anything. We made a decision. I mean we had a lot of friends and we just supported each other the best we could. I remember I had a typhoid fever about 1 month before the end of the war. I guess that was the same story with Anne Frank. And I was laying on the floor and I had a wonderful friend, Aida [unintelligible 0:22:44] and she did the best she could. She gave me some water once in a while and that was the only medicine I had. And I had another friend there Helena Finkelstein. She was the most gorgeous person that I ever saw. She was so beautiful. And I remember one time, Helen told me, "Don't worry. You'll be OK. You'll be alright." And I was thinking to myself, "Of course, I will be alright." I mean I never...I always knew that I'll be alright.

Interviewer: You think that comes from your father?

Henrietta Diamant: No. I mean this is the way I was, whatever. And I had a grandfather that was like that. And then, when I came out of the coma, Helen was dead. Helen Finkelstein, this beautiful young girl, she was dead and she...I mean she always gave me courage that I will live and I did. And...

Interviewer: Tell me about the day of liberation.

Henrietta Diamant: The day of liberation, it was a morning of April 15 and we already knew for a few days that the German guards disappeared and there were some Hungarian soldiers there and we didn't get anything to eat or drink for a few days because there was nobody there. And were just sitting

outside and waiting for something to happen. And then, they came, some tanks--

Interviewer: Had you thought about escaping?

Henrietta Diamant: There was no way to escape. I mean first I had a number. That's nothing. But there was no way to escape. I mean in Poland, you know, if you saw my husband's picture, he looked like a Jew and Polish people were blond and blue-eyed. And he looked like King David. I mean there was no way he could escape, I mean the first thing. And I mean, the moment he would -- did you see the movie "Pianist"?

Interviewer: No, not yet.

Henrietta Diamant: Well, anyway, this was a story more or less of the Warsaw ghetto from his point of view because we didn't... But there was no place to go. I knew a few people that tried to escape and they didn't go maybe a thousand yards and that was the end of them.

Interviewer: So, you saw the soldiers coming in?

Henrietta Diamant: We...I mean they came on the tanks and they looked at us and we looked at them and that was the most beautiful and the saddest thing of ours because we didn't, you know, while we were there, we didn't think much about what happened to our families. I don't know, maybe there was something in our brain but we didn't... This was the moment that we realized that was the end of our form life of anything. We were just alone by ourselves. And what also happened that so many of us died there because we started to eat and eat and eat and that was the end, really. And I mean the British took care of us the best way they could, you know, but the war was still going on and they had their own troubles and after all, we were Jews so what's the big deal.

Interviewer: How soon until you saw Stephen again?

Henrietta Diamant: Well, what happened you know, after the war, when I was in better shape, whatever, I had a sister who lived in Belgium, Hella, the one that went there to study and she stayed there and so, I tried to contact her by the Red Cross and she was still alive, which I mean the Belgian people were a little more decent than the other people. And I tried my best to join her. And of course, I didn't know anything about my husband or my brothers or sisters, anything and we always told each other whoever survived will go and join her. And I went there in July and I remember when my sister saw me, she said, "You look better than I did," and I did look better 3 months later. I was weighing maybe 3 times what I used to do. We left our names wherever the place was in our camps and the Red Cross and I said, "If my husband is alive, he's gonna find me." And I was there 3 weeks at my sister's house and one day, the bell rings and I opened the door and he was there.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Henrietta Diamant: Well, I mean it was the start of everything. It was wonderful, really. I remember he was wearing a British uniform. I don't know how... I mean a soldier's uniform.

Interviewer: At that moment, how long had it been since you'd seen each other?

Henrietta Diamant: It was 2 years and 3 months. And of course, being me, I always knew that he would survive.

Interviewer: From there, where did you live?

Henrietta Diamant: We lived there til April 1952. We lived there for a few years. My husband... I'm gonna tell you how stupid we were. After the war, with everything that happened to us and we were still so innocent. He came to Belgium and he had to tell the people, the Belgian whatever that he wants to go and join his wife. So, they say, "You cannot come here. We're going to send your wife to Germany," and he said, "No, I don't want her to live to Germany. I

want here.”They said, “If you promise us that you will work in the coal mines, we'll let you go.”So, he said yes. I mean he didn't...he just said yes and they let him go in. And since he promised, he went to work in the coal mine and he stayed there for 6 months, and one day, we opened our eyes and we said, “What are we doing here?”And since he was a printer, he went to work for a printing company and we stayed there until 1952 and we had a little boy that was born in 1947, Michael.

Interviewer: And where...what brought you to the United States?

Henrietta Diament: Excuse me?

Interviewer: What brought you to the United States? Was it the printing business?

Henrietta Diament: No. We just I mean I didn't want to go to live in New York. I didn't like big cities. So, they said, “Would you like to go to Memphis?”And I said, “Oh yes.”You know, Memphis is on the Mississippi. They will have beaches and everything. And we came here and we came here I mean we came here the 5th of April 1952 and a week later, I had another baby.

Interviewer: You've been here ever since.

Henrietta Diament: Yeah, oh yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: And you liked it here?

Henrietta Diament: Yes, I do. I really like it here, yeah.

Interviewer: And your husband passed away?

Henrietta Diament: My husband passed away in December '85 from a cancer, yeah. Well, this is more or less the story.

Interviewer: I want to thank you very much for sharing it with us.

Henrietta Diament: Oh, you're welcome.