Episode 4 -- Sally F. Horwitz

Episode Notes by Dr. Samuel Kassow

Sally Finkelstein Horwitz was born in Zwolen, Poland, on July 12, 1928. The war broke out when she was 11. By the time she was 14, she had lost both of her parents and found herself in one of the most notorious German labor camps. Liberated when she was not yet 17, she built a new life in New Haven, Connecticut, where she arrived around her 21st birthday.

Sally’s testimony offers a harrowing account of war, senseless cruelty, and mass murder seen through the eyes of a very young girl whose childhood ended all too soon. It also shows how, in times of disaster and breakdown, the bonds of family gave people something to hold on to and live for. A key theme of Sally’s story is how three sisters stuck together, took care of each other, defied the odds, and lived to see the liberation.

Zwolen was a smallish town in central Poland near Radom. Its 7,500 inhabitants were divided almost equally between Jews and Poles. The two groups were, as one scholar put it, “intimate strangers” — separated by religion, language, and history; linked by economic ties and casual friendships. While Zwolen was not spared the rising anti-Semitism that gripped Poland in the 1930s, Poles and Jews lived side by side and, on the whole, without violence. Indeed, Sally’s family lived in a house owned by Poles. Sally also recalled helping a Polish neighbor decorate her Christmas tree and set the table for the traditional Christmas Eve meal, the Wigilia.

Sally was one of five children — four girls and one boy. Her father, nicknamed “Hoykhe Leybl” (Tall Leon) because of his height (he was 6’4’’), was a carpenter. The family of eight, counting Sally’s grandmother, lived in one large room. But the Finkelsteins, while not well-to-do, were happy, close-knit, and did not lack for basic necessities. Like most other Jewish children growing up in interwar Poland, Sally went to a Polish primary school where she acquired fluency in Polish. In the afternoons she attended a Jewish school. Her close childhood friends were both Jewish and Polish.

Sally’s happy childhood came to an abrupt end on September 1, 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland. The Germans bombed Zwolen on September 6, killing about one hundred people and destroying many buildings, including the Finkelsteins’ home. Two days later, the town fell to the Germans. Beatings, constant
harassment, and roundups of Jews for forced labor began almost immediately, and many of the Jewish men who were taken away never returned.

At Sally's mother's urging, Leybl and their young son Meir went off to hide with a Polish farm family they knew well. They were never seen again. After the war, Sally learned that they had been turned over to the Germans and killed, although she never found out if it was that particular family who had denounced them or someone else. (Poles risked death for hiding Jews and about 750 were indeed executed. But their greatest fear was not the Germans — there were relatively few of them in the provinces — but being informed upon by their neighbors.)

In 1940 the Germans established a ghetto in Zwolen. There was no surrounding wall, and Jews could easily trade with Poles for food, but conditions were harsh. Sally saw German violence firsthand. Her last glimpse of her father's mother was just after an SS man had broken the elderly woman's arm. Her mother's mother died in the ghetto. Sally was especially shaken when she saw Germans abusing the town's rabbi, pulling the elderly man's beard while blood streamed down his face. In April 1942 the Germans sealed the ghetto and began to deport groups of men to nearby labor camps. At the same time, conditions in the already overcrowded ghetto worsened when the German forces forced 4,000 Jews from surrounding villages to live there in preparation for the final deportation.

On September 29, 1942, the second day of the Jewish festival of Sukkot, Operation Reinhardt, the German plan to murder all the Jews of occupied Poland, reached Zwolen. All Jews were instructed to gather in the main square. Special squads of German SS and Ukrainian guards then ordered all 8,000 Jews in the ghetto to make the 10-mile march to the nearest train station at Garbatka, where they would board a transport to the death camp of Treblinka.

While they waited to board the train, Sally's mother comforted her younger brother Velvl, one of Sally's beloved uncles, who had been badly beaten. Sally recalled how her mother cradled Velvl in her arms and wiped his brow, while Velvl's four-year-old daughter, Esterke, pranced around, unaware of what awaited them.

At the last minute an SS man picked out a number of young women from the crowd to get on a truck that would take them to a labor camp at Policna. The group included Sally and two of her sisters, Manya and Franya. That was the last time they saw their mother and their youngest sister, Leah, and Velvl and Esterke, all of whom were murdered in Treblinka.

For some months, Sally and her sisters stayed at Policna, where they picked potatoes from dawn to dusk. A kindly Polish foreman, Gogacz, took a liking to Sally
and offered to hide her and adopt her as his daughter. (He and his wife were childless.) He also saved her life once by jumping in front of a German guard who was about to shoot her. Sally appreciated Gogacz’s offer but refused to be separated from her sisters. After the war, Sally learned that the Germans had executed Gogacz. He was one of several Polish acquaintances who showed Sally kindness.

One day in late 1942 or early 1943 the Germans chose 40 girls, including Sally and her two sisters, to board a truck to the dreaded labor camp of Skarzysko-Kamienna. Skarzysko had been an ammunition factory that produced bullets, shells, and mines for the Polish Army. After the occupation, the German firm HASAG took over the plant, enlarged it, and by 1943 it was producing about 30 percent of all the ammunition used by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front. HASAG’s director, Paul Budin, was a ruthless Nazi and a skilled bureaucratic infighter who kept HASAG independent of SS control, even as he worked closely with the SS to bring thousands of Jewish laborers into the camp. Most did not make it out. Of the 25,000 Jews who passed through HASAG in Skarzysko, 20,000 died.

Sally and her sisters wound up in Werk A, where they made artillery shells. There was little food, typhus was rampant, and there were constant selections, where the Germans dragged weakened and sick prisoners off to a nearby shooting pit. Each day the prisoners had to endure the torture of standing in line for hours until the Germans had made a proper count. There were also public hangings, which they were forced to watch. Sally and her sisters all came down with typhus. Had they been alone, they would not have survived. But they took whatever risks necessary to help each other. Once Sally saved Franya from imminent execution by begging a German to save her life.

In the summer of 1944, as the Russians drew nearer, Sally and her sisters were transferred to the HASAG plant in Czestochowa, where conditions were somewhat better. The rapid Russian advance left the Germans no time to evacuate HASAG Czestochowa, and the camp was liberated on January 15, 1945.

For most survivors, the long-awaited liberation was a mixed experience. The joy of survival was tempered by the psychological trauma of confronting the enormity of loss. Once the struggle to survive the Germans had ended, new challenges emerged. What now? Where do I go?

Postwar Poland was dangerous for Jewish survivors. Many Jews who returned to their former towns were murdered by Poles who feared that they had come to reclaim lost property or their former homes. Many killers of Jews had another convenient alibi: Jews, supposedly, supported the hated new Communist regime. Jews were pulled off trains and shot. Forty-two were killed during the Kielce
pogrom on July 4, 1946, which broke out after a rumor spread that Jews had kidnapped a Polish child. Historians do not agree on how many Jews were killed in Poland after the war: estimates range from 500-600 to 1,500, with the higher number being the more probable.

When Sally returned to her hometown of Zwolen after the liberation, she asked a Polish neighbor, to whom the Finkelstein family had entrusted many possessions, for some clothing. The Polish woman swore that the Germans had taken everything, but Sally later noticed that the woman’s daughter went to church wearing Sally’s aunt’s coat. The memoirs of a number of Jewish survivors from Zwolen—which were recorded in Yiddish in the Zwolen Memorial Book—relate how, in most cases, former neighbors and even former friends were openly hostile. A few Jews were murdered, and Sally herself narrowly escaped death when shots were fired at a place where she had been staying. Paradoxically, one of the few Poles who acted decently was one Kochanowski, who was known before the war as a rabid anti-Semite. He gave some survivors food and clothing—and warned them to get out of town if they valued their lives.

No wonder that Sally, like many other survivors, wrote that after the war, she felt safer in Germany than in Poland. Most Jews who were left in Poland, as well as the many Jews who had survived the war in the USSR and had returned in 1946, fled the country after the Kielce pogrom and wound up in displaced persons (DP) camps in the American zones of Germany, Austria, and Italy.

These DP camps, supported by UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, helped give many survivors a new lease on life. Organizations like ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training) taught them new trades and skills. Many, like Sally’s sister Manya, married and began new families. The birth rate among the Jewish DPs between 1946 and 1949 was extraordinarily high.

By 1949, U.S. immigration restrictions had finally relaxed to the point where many Jewish DP’s could relocate. Sally arrived in the U.S. in July 1949 and settled in New Haven, Connecticut. She met her American-born husband Morton a year later. They had three children. Sally became an important figure in the survivor community of New Haven and was also active in the Jewish Historical Society. She passed away in 2014.

Additional readings and information


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**Transcript**

**Sally Finkelstein Horwitz**: My name is Sally Finkelstein Horwitz and I come from Poland. I was born in Zwolen, a small town. We were right smack in the center of Poland.

We were very, very close to my grandmother, she was always with us. My house was always full of people, because my grandmother was with us, so everybody was coming to my house. And, um, nobody’s left.

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**Eleanor Reissa**: You’re listening to “Those Who Were There: Voices from the Holocaust,” a podcast that draws on recorded interviews from Yale University’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. I’m Eleanor Reissa.

Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Two days later, 11-year-old Sally Finkelstein was playing outside with a friend when bombs started falling from the sky. The town was engulfed in flames. Sally and her sister helped their elderly grandmother escape into the woods.

Within days of the bombing, German ground troops arrived. They forced the Jews of Zwolen and the Jews of neighboring towns into a ghetto.

Nearly forty years later, on May 2, 1979, Sally Finkelstein Horwitz is preparing to be interviewed by Laurel Vlock and Dori Laub. The location is Dori Laub’s office in New Haven, Connecticut.

Sally is sitting in a high-backed chair, wearing a taupe-colored blazer and a blue and red polka dot scarf loosely tied at the neck. Her frosted hair frames her round face.
Sally recalls one morning in 1941. She and her family had been living in the Zwollen ghetto for two years. It was the second day of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.

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**SFH:** We were sleeping, and all the sudden, we heard the church bells, and trumpets, and bands, whatever they did, and "Juden, geh raus, alle Juden, geh raus," and we all had to get out and meet in the marketplace. And there was a lot of shooting and a lot of hitting. And then they made us march 12 kilometers.

And the people we stayed with in the ghetto times, one of their daughters, she was 17 or 18. And she was pregnant. She was very big. She must have been in the eighth or ninth month. And it was very warm. And she wore her father's trench coat. And her feet were very swollen. She wore big shoes. My mother, and her mother, nephew, and her father, and a few people made, like, a circle around her. So that they shouldn't see her, because they were afraid they'll do something to her. And my mother had some water. She always used to give her a little bit of water.

And then we came to the train station, and we all sat down on the ground. And we were joined by people from different smaller cities and ghettos. And there were trains in back of us, we're all sitting on the ground. There must have been 10,000 people or so. And we could smell, like, chlorine from the trains. But we didn't know this is going to be for us.

One of my sisters, oh, a few days before was taken to a farm, which was a few kilometers from my hometown. And one of the Germans was walking by where I was sitting, and he pointed to me, he pointed I should get up and komm raus. And my mother pushed my other sister—this was her fear, always, go, you'll have to take care of her, she won't be able to wash her hair... This is the last words I remember. And he took out about 21 women, girls. And we walked another three miles to the farm where my sister was there. And we worked there on the potato farm.

And, uh, anybody who made a move was shot right away. And they had those big German shepherds always on us. And the food was horrible, naturally. But at least there was potatoes. And we picked potatoes from early in the morning until late at night. And then when it got cold and there was no more potato picking, they took, picked out about 35. And I was one of them, my sisters, my two sisters. And we were sent to Skarżysko.

Skarżysko was worse than any concentration camp you can imagine. We worked in a factory, an ammunition factory. They used to wake us up very early in the morning...
and count. There was the counting, the counting—the counting used to drive us crazy. And then when we got to the factory, we were counted, and then when we came back, we were counted. Constantly the counting.

Now, if you stayed back, they shot you. So you had to go every day. And then people were getting sick. And I had typhus very bad. My hair came out completely. And there was no food, naturally. They gave us a piece of bread, which wasn’t bread. I don’t know what it was, ersatz of some kind. It was one—once a day. And once a day we got some soup, which was like dirty water.

And, uh, so when we were sleeping, they would, um, they would woke us up one time—no, we were walking from work. And we saw—I didn’t know what it was they were building. It was a, um, for hanging. A scaffold. Now, they hung—at the time, I thought it was a man, because I was young. The older I get, the younger that face looks. It was a boy. I don’t know if he was 18 or 19 years old. And he did something, he stole a belt, a leather belt of some kind, from the machines, to fix his shoes. And therefore they put him and they hanged him. And we had to watch that boy be hanged. And they left him there for a very long time, for... It seems for days. And he was hanging there. And somebody even took off his shoes. He must have been there for about three, four days or more.

Then when the Russians started to come closer, they, um, uh, separated us. They took some people to go on the trains and take them deep into Germany. And then some people were supposed to stay behind. Of course I almost was separated from my sisters, which was terrible. And they had stationed guns to kill us, so nobody would see what they did, because everybody looked terrible.

But somehow the Russian armies came in too fast for them. And, uh, in ’45 we were liberated. And, but unfortunate, when we, the war ended, we were actually afraid to leave the place. It was a very funny feeling, the three of us were sitting holding hands. We were afraid to go out. We didn’t know what’s, uh... It’s very funny. Who’s going to what—or what are we going to do? What are we going to find? Finally, when we did go out, we found, we found something terrible, like nothing. And, uh, and the natives weren’t too friendly either.

I went back home. I thought my father was hiding in a village with my little brother, that he’ll survive there. And I always, I was very, very attached to my father. He was, was over 6’4”, he was beautiful person, and a beautiful human being. And I thought he’ll survive there. And always thought he’ll need me. I’ll, I’ll have to help him heal sick, or like I am, and he needs help. This what made me go.
I came to the city. There were already a few people. And, uh, they told me that my father and my little brother was turned out to the Germans. My sister came to get me because the communications were bad. She says they were killing Jewish people. They killed, at the time, some people in Kielce. And, um, my sister came to tell me that we have to get out of the small towns, because they were killing the Jewish people. This was after the war.

And, uh, there’s another thing which sometimes I’ve always said I would go to a priest and ask him why, because being, always going to a Catholic school, you’re so interwoven with the, uh, things that, um... We gave, um, to one of the Polish people there some of our, um, clothing and things to hold, because we thought, we’ll come back, uh, when they were going to the trains.

And those people—and, you know, we lived with them for generations in the same street and we got along very well with them. We didn’t live in any ghettos or anything before the war. And I came in and I told her who I was, and she crossed herself when she saw me. And I asked her if she wouldn’t mind to give me some, something to wear, any clothes, anything. And she swore that the Germans took everything away from her. She didn’t offer me a glass of water or anything.

And, uh, I was staying across the street with my girlfriend. And on Sunday, her daughter walked to church wearing my aunt’s coat. And this has always bothers me something terrible. And one of these days, maybe I’ll get enough nerve up and go and ask a priest why. She crossed herself telling me she had nothing, and then she went to church wearing my aunt’s coat. And she let me walk away with nothing.

So we had to get out of Poland. And, uh, I went back to the land of Germany, would you believe it? I felt safer in Germany. Only because there were the Americans, I suppose, we felt safer there.

Laurel Vlock: You didn’t try to block it out.

SFH: Uh, I can’t. I can’t. I’m not that person to block it out. I, um, I can’t. I live it. I have, like, a panorama in front of me constantly. I could be in a room full of people, and, um, if... There was a time when I was, let’s say, in Skarżysko, I didn’t, I didn’t talk at all. And, um, I just, I just couldn’t believe it. I just didn’t talk. It’s funny. I’m thinking of it now that, um, how I split myself. That it wasn’t me there. It just wasn’t me. I was somebody else. It wasn’t me.

And then I was constantly talking after the war, because then I realized I, I was afraid. If I won’t talk, I’ll see everything. It’s just like a panorama with all that stuff coming to my head.
**Dori Laub**: What would you see now?

**SFH**: I see my father walking with my little brother, or walking... I used to love to walk with him Saturdays in the fields. He used to show me things and explain things to me. Or my little brother was very good. Even being six years old, he was carving things. My grandmother. She was in her 80s. She never would tell us how old she was. We just adored her. My aunts, so many aunts and uncles. We were a very close, very close family. And little cousins. And, um, so I always think about those people.

I don’t have any pictures of them. I don’t know. Maybe I feel guilty that I’m here and they are not. Who knows? And then always wonder about my little brother and my father, because the two of them were together. You always say, How did they die? What happened? Because we saw when there were, um, when, uh, they took us out of, uh, our home, home, room, that... What they did, which a lot of people left their children in carriages, hoping somebody will take them. But nobody did, so... They knew they were Jewish children. They just grabbed them, just threw them under trucks. And the old people, just threw them. And cripples, they just... Right in front of us, just in the head, just shot in the head, just like they were no human beings. It’s, um, something you don’t forget...

And, uh, of course I came to the United States and met my husband here. And we have three children.

And when I became pregnant with my children, I got terribly frightened. And, um, every time I, I thought of that woman, Rachel, Rachel Goldfarb was her name. What happened to her baby? What, uh... She was very close to having her baby. And, uh, her face is always in front of me. What did they do to the baby? What did they do to her?

Here I am. And I did have the children, because, uh, I always said if, um, that’s what Hitler would want to, we shouldn’t have any children, or we shouldn’t, to just disappear. So my children are named after my father, my brother, my mother, my sister. And, uh, it seems I, I lived through my children the things what I hoped my little brother would be, maybe, or, um, or my sister. And, uh, I’m scared.

**DL**: Of what?

**SFH**: Of something might happen again. I don’t know. I’m just scared all the time.

We have good veneers, we pretend a lot.
ER: For the rest of her life, Sally Finkelstein Horwitz devoted herself to her family and the Jewish community. She served as secretary of the Jewish Historical Society of New Haven, and was vice-president of Greater New Haven’s Holocaust Survivors Fellowship.

Sally took great pride in her three children, nine grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. Until age robbed her of her memory, she could name each of the more than 90 family members who perished in the Holocaust.

Sally Finkelstein Horwitz died on February 18, 2014. She was 86 years old.

To learn more about Sally Finkelstein Horwitz’s life, please visit thosewhowerethere.org. That’s where you’ll find additional background information, as well as photographs.

To hear more from “Those Who Were There,” please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. You can also go to thosewhowerethere.org.

"Those Who Were There" is a production of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, which is housed at Yale University Library’s Manuscripts and Archives Department.

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