

Agnes Veronica Wieisz Vogel: Holocaust Survivor

Interviewed by **Katelyn Marie Dunn, Fishers Junior High School, Fishers, Indiana**

Kelly Alfrey, a 2001 Mandel Fellow from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is conducting an oral history project with a group of her 8th grade students. Her students are conducting personal interviews with Indiana survivors and liberators, which will be published in a book entitled, *Indiana Voices of the Holocaust: Teens Talk to Survivors and Liberators*. Copies of the book will be sent in the spring to Indiana schools, libraries, and synagogues in hopes that future Indiana school children will know the Holocaust is not an event thousands of miles away or decades ago, but affects people in their community. For more information, contact Kelly through the USHMM or at her school.

On January 21, Martin Luther King Day, a day when the world remembers a man who fought for liberty, justice, and freedom for all, I talked to a woman who was robbed of all those things and thrown into the open jaws of the Holocaust so many years ago. This woman's story is a part of a project to get the stories of Holocaust survivors in Indiana.

Agnes Veronica Wieisz was born in Debrecen, Hungary, in the 1930s. She has faint memories of growing up with a big back yard and going to birthday parties and movies with her friends on rainy afternoons. She grew up as the oldest of four girls. Her father worked as a representative for a farming machinery company. Overall, Agnes had a very normal childhood. That was all about to change.

On March 19, 1944, at her home in Debrecen, Agnes recalls watching enormous black planes fly across the dark, cloudy sky. The German planes landed in the city, and the next morning German soldiers roamed everywhere. From that point on Agnes remembers everything in fast forward. On April 5, she was told to wear a yellow star, and one month later on May 6, 18-year-old Agnes was taken to the ghetto in the heart of the city.

In the beginning of June an air raid struck the city. A voice on a loud speaker informed all Jews to be out by afternoon. The Nazis were liquidating the ghetto. Agnes and her family followed the orders, although they had no idea where they were going next. In the afternoon, two men and one

woman made their way through the city, checking to make sure no person took anything of value out. Agnes remembers the woman taking her mother into the back room and physically feeling her over to ensure nothing was smuggled out.

The family (made up of Agnes's mother, father, and three sisters) packed bare necessities. Besides small amounts of food and clothing, Agnes's mother begged the people checking their belongings to bring two hand-painted porcelain pieces that her daughters created. Of course, the heartless inspectors confiscated the priceless memoirs and Agnes recalls coming back years later to find the artwork shattered on the floor.

Agnes and her family were taken to a larger ghetto. Soon after that, the family was moved yet again, this time to



a schoolhouse closed for summer vacation. There, they stayed for about a week, and then one day they began a long walk to the brick factory on the outskirts of town. Agnes recalls walking in the middle of the road, on the way out, and people coming out of their houses to watch them walk past. As one of the only Jewish girls at a Catholic high school in Debrecen, Agnes had many Catholic friends. As her family walked out of town, one of the girls whom she remembers walking to

and from school with came out, picked up a rock, and threw it at her. The outright humiliation of this experience stays vivid in Agnes's mind today.

As they entered an empty brick factory on the outskirts of Debrecen, a rusty bathtub full of salt pork was seen, and they later learned that was to be their food. They stayed in a school, and each day they walked to the old brick factory. After a few days the German guards began to group people together for unknown reasons. The factory was an ideal spot for waiting considering it was located close to a railroad station. Every day groups were shipped out, and soon the time came for Agnes's family to load the cattle cars with about one hundred other Jews. The train of 25 cars left, headed for the border of Hungary and Czechoslovakia on the route to Auschwitz. By this time, word of Auschwitz and other camps was known, but many did not believe it, including Agnes.

At the border the entourage stopped and the cars were left sitting there overnight. When asked about her feelings,

knowing she was on her way to a death camp, Agnes responded emotionally. "It was all too overwhelming, I could not take it all so fast.... That was the first time I really thought it was the end."

After a night of mental torture- knowing where they were headed, but not sure why they were stopped- the cars started again. After looking out the small cracks in the transport cars, everyone was surprised to find that they were headed back into Hungary. They stopped for water in Budapest and headed onward until they realized they were in Austria. In the small town of Strasoff, between the Hungarian border and Vienna, their cars stopped once more.

In Strasoff there was a camp that had not been used. They unloaded and immediately formed two groups: women on one side, men on the other. Agnes followed her mother and sisters into a very large room, big enough for hundreds. They were told to get completely naked and a German doctor came in to inspect them all. Agnes was wearing a delicate silver chain with the Star of David on it around her neck. When the

young doctor reached her, he tore the necklace off her neck and stuffed in his pocket. He proceeded to go on but a woman behind Agnes, bravely standing up for her, said something to him in German. She has vivid memories of the woman who so bravely stood up for her, rolling around on the floor in pain, after a hard kick in the back from the insulted doctor.

Again Agnes's family was put back on the cattle cars and taken to the industrial part of Vienna. They stayed in a school, and her father soon went to work at a factory. While Agnes and other young women her age went to work at a housing project every day, her mother and young sisters stayed at the school where they lived.

At the factory, after almost eleven months of tedious work and unbearable living conditions Agnes and her family were taken back to Strasoff for reasons unknown to them at the time. Strasoff was in a terrible condition, and there was no food. After a terrifying, but short time there they loaded the cattle cars for one of the few remaining times, supposedly headed for Bergen-Belsen, in northwest Germany. As they sat in the cars, ready to leave, an air raid began. Agnes recalls the unmistakable noise that a bomb makes as it falls to the ground.

Amazingly, not one of the twenty-five cattle cars was damaged from the vicious bombings. After that, they were let out of the cars, and the conditions got considerably better. They had no way to clean themselves, so the hygiene wors-

ened, but there was enough food for a while. Lice were everywhere, and hope seemed to be running out.

On April 10, 1945, sounds of fighting could be heard from all directions. The Russians were coming from the east, and the Americans from the west. Agnes laughs as she imagines the Germans who had guarded her that same day, crawling like babies, running away from Vienna. The very next morning, the Russians marched into camp. Agnes shuddered as she explained the terrifying time. That afternoon some Russian soldiers began gathering up young girls to "go peel potatoes in the kitchen." Agnes's mother and two aunts would not let Agnes out of their sight, so luckily she was spared the nightmare that many young women faced that night. Each returned at midnight screaming with terror and pain because they had all been raped. It is these kinds of unthinkable things that make Agnes's liberation process a terror in her memory.

The Weisz's stayed for only three more days, and then were told to get out. They could not go West because fighting was still going on, so their only option was to go back where

they came from. They gathered their last possessions and started walking east, on a journey for home. As they walked, the Russians were coming the other direction and at one point a Russian soldier came across the road to ask Agnes's father to light his cigarette. Being a polite gentleman, he obliged and lit the soldier's cigarette. As he did so, the Russian spotted a shiny watch on her father's arm. The Russian demanded he give the watch to him. Of course Agnes's father refused.

The Russian went across the road, came back with an open bayonet, and said, "Give me your watch." Agnes's father gave him the watch.

They continued on their way, and stopped at the Hungarian border. They loaded cattle cars, and headed back to their hometown. As they trudged into the city, looking tattered and worn, a few young men stopped them. Through the conversation the men let them know they wished the Germans had done what they intended to do. Dumbfounded and exhausted, they came to their home, only to find it completely empty.

Not long after returning home, Agnes decided she could no longer live in Hungary. She quickly made plans to move to the United States to stay with her aunts in Detroit. There, she claims, she started her life. She has worked to move past her devastating tragedy that affected millions of other Jews just like her. Through it all, she has learned valuable life lessons. "Hate is a waste of time... It does not pay. Forgiveness? Up to a point."



The Story of Mrs. Blumental-Slominska

by **Sophia Kirshenblat, Chernivtsi Gymnasia #2, Chernivtsy, Ukraine**

Hello! I'm Sophia Kirshenblat, fifteen years old, and I'm Tetyana Sporinina (computing teacher) who was the translator of the story of Mrs. Blumental-Slominska. Why were we so interested to translate it? Maybe because one of my favorite subjects is history and the Holocaust was one of the saddest events in the history of 20th century. And it'll be good if people remember about victims of the World War and try not to repeat mistakes, which can bring us to the war again.

"My dear savior.

It's the 28th of June, Friday. The workers of Bukovina are meeting the Red Army. I was a first-year student of the historical faculty. In the end of June I was invited to visit the Ukrainian writer Olga Kobylanska. Sixty years have passed since that moment, but I won't forget that she was my rescuer. I didn't forget. I remember everything.

Olga Kobylanska lived in the silent street. She was seventy-seven years old. Her grandson, Igor Pachuk, told us that she didn't walk for two years. She met us sitting in the wicker chair. I stood far from her, because I was a bit embarrassed and I was looking at the writer while others were talking with her. She had smooth hair, braided, not grey, yet her face was thin and she had dark eyebrows. But her eyes! They weren't old at all but young, dark and pure; they radiated kindness and wisdom. Her voice was pleasant and calm. She remembered all her friends: Osyp Makovey, Vorobkevich, but especially Lesya Ukrainka. I recollected the poem of Lesya and suddenly read it aloud.

She called me and asked my name and invited me to

visit her. I did it two times after that meeting. On the 22nd of June the fascist Germany attacked Soviet Union. Romanian minister Antonescu struck a bargain with Hitler. All students of Chernivtsi University passed their examinations in the bomb shelter. Students from the dormitory were sent to unload some boxes at the railway station. It has happened when fascists have already occupied Chernivtsi.

My friend Valya and I went out to the platform. There was something terrible: horrible screams, thousands of people, train with broken windows; people were hanging on the stairs. I saw that Olga Yulianivna was on the platform not far from us. We were going to come back to the dormitory but she called me.

I came to her, and she said, "Child, run away!" I replied that there wasn't vacant place and she told us to climb on the carriage roof. Boys from the echelon helped us; we got on the top and lay. I got up and waved at her but I didn't see her. The train set out and thousands of people left on the platform. There weren't trains anymore. Those who didn't hide died.

That's why I'm calling Olga my dear savior. Kobylanska cancelled to go because she told that there weren't vacant places for people and she would engage the whole carriage. The honest heart of the Bukovinian eagle Olga Kobylanska stopped on the 21st of March 1942. Everyone has recollections, which are dear to this person. Mine are connected to that visit to Olga. I won't forget the writer in the chair on the platform. These recollections I keep in the bottom of my heart."

Leon's Story

by **Zhivka Dincheva, German Language High School, Sofia, Bulgaria**

Leon Rosenberg is a German-Bulgarian Jew who was born in 1944 in Plovdiv. His life and destiny were not that dramatic as the one of his ancestors, who suffered a lot during the Second World War. Although it is not very easy to talk about the Jews' sufferings he agreed to share with us the story of his family for the **Holocaust/Genocide Project**.

Interviewer: Mr. Rosenberg, could you please tell me what you know about the events in 1943 and what happened to your family at that time. I know that there were unpleasant consequences for plenty of the Jews.

Leon Rosenberg: Yes, that is right. I was born almost at the end of the Second World War and I could not define myself as an eyewitness, but I have heard the story of the Bulgarian and also of other European Jews from my mother many, many times.

My mother was a Bulgarian Jew and my father was a German Jew. They met in Bulgaria and got married in 1937. They settled down in Germany, where my father's relatives used to live at that time. My parents believed that this would be a

better place to live until 1938 when the anti-Semitism became so strong that they decided to come to Bulgaria. They settled in Plovdiv, where my grandparents used to live. Until 1943, my parents lived peacefully and did not fear for their lives. My father had a small shop for clothes and he earned enough money to get by. Meanwhile they found out that most of my father's relatives were sent to concentration camps in Poland, such as Sobibor and Treblinka. Nobody heard of them since then.

In 1943, Germany wanted Bulgaria to send 20,000 Jews from the whole country to the concentration camps in Poland. A few weeks later all the Jews in Plovdiv were told to take some clothes in a small bag and that the luggage should not weigh more than 5 kg, because they were going on a short journey. According to my mother, who told me this story, the Jews were forced to leave their houses, and the German soldiers who were responsible for the deportation of the Jews were extremely rude to them. All Jews were gathered in the schoolyard and expected to be sent to Treblinka.

Bishop Stefan even wanted people to change their religion in order to save them from deportation. Meanwhile it

turned out that Tzar Boris III cancelled that order, and Hitler agreed to leave the Bulgarian Jews in their country because Boris said he needed workers. In fact, the Tzar asked Hitler for this favor because he wanted to save the Bulgarian Jews. The men were supposed to build roads or to work in the field. The work in the camps was not hard and the conditions were much better than those in Treblinka, where my father's relatives were killed. The attitude towards the Bulgarian Jews was good, and nobody was tormented or murdered.

Meanwhile my father, who was in Romania at that time, was sent to a concentration camp in Poland. As a German citizen he was at the top of the lists, and he was sent to Sobibor where he died. Luckily, my mother, who was visiting relatives in the country at that time, was saved. A few months later my mother bore me, so I have never met my father. The things I know about him I have learned from my mother's stories. After the end of the Second World War, I immigrated with my mother to Israel where we lived for twenty-nine years. In 1974, I came back to Sofia and I have been living here ever since. My mother used to tell me often when she was still alive that our

family was a big one and that I had a lot of cousins, but just a few of them survived the war. It's a very sad and painful story for all Jews, but this is history and you cannot forget or stop talking about what happened in 1943...

I: Mr. Rosenberg, thank you very much for this interview of April, 2001.

