# Life Under Occupation accountsoftheholocaust.org/

 ROBERT KATZ (New York, United States)

Thank you for sharing your stories. But I still feel confused about what really happened during the war even though stories, reports and rumors have trickled in over the years… Let’s start a conversation here about what really happened.  Please can we go back a bit - what was life like in occupied territories?

Helen Lehman (Pułtusk, Poland)

When the war broke out it was school holidays… The Germans walked into our town. They came into our town first… to destroy the army that was stationed there. When they walked in... the house shook, the glass from the windows shook. The Germans walk right into the house and said you have to vacate the house. We were not the only one.

ROBERT KATZ

What do you mean?

Helen Lehman (Pułtusk, Poland)

They had a list of every Jewish person that lived there and we all had to come to the park.

ROBERT KATZ

But where do they get a list from?

Lili Bermant (Belgium)

In Belgium all the Jews had to register, get a ‘Jew number’. Including the determination that a Jew was a person with one Jewish grandparent. So there were some priests in the line…

Helen Lehman (Pułtusk, Poland)

The whole Jewry from that town landed up in the park with their little bag of money and jewellery. That's all we could take.

ROBERT KATZ

There must have been so much confusion and panic?

Helen Lehman (Pułtusk, Poland)

We had Germans standing above the park… with rifles – whoever disobeyed was shot… There were cripples that were killed. Anybody that said anything was shot… They said the army is now disarmed, you can all walk with your army to the Russian border… It took us weeks to get to a border.

ROBERT KATZ

You walked for weeks? Tell us what that was like?

Helen Lehman (Pułtusk, Poland)

It was such a chaos… people were travelling on bicycles…  some of them had cars and when the petrol ran out they left the cars standing. There was such a chaos on the roads and there were dead people lying all over the place. The Germans were not following us just from above they were shooting us.

ROBERT KATZ

Did no one try and help you?

Helen Lehman (Pułtusk, Poland)

My father managed to buy from a farmer a horse and carriage… because my granny couldn’t walk. Some of the farmers would let us go and sleep in the barn. And some were scared – I don't blame them – they were also threatened with death if they hid us.

ROBERT KATZ

And where were you in all this chaos?

Helen Lehman (Pułtusk, Poland)

I was with my mother. My brother and sister were in Warsaw with my aunty, they were not with us. They went for the school holidays… That is why when we reached Bialystock my father said “I’ve got to return, I’m leaving you here with my friends and I’m going back to Warsaw, I’ve got to get the children”… We never saw them again

ROBERT KATZ

I am so sorry to hear that ***Helen Lehman*** – I don’t know what to say. Was it like this in other occupied countries? And in Germany itself?

KITTY WERTHMANN (Austria)

Hitler gave us free radios so that we could listen to him, he was a great orator and then he nationalised the radio station and we were warned that if we turned on a foreign radio station like British broadcasting or Switzerland – death penalty. So the newspaper before it hit the streets, it was censored by the government, so the only voice we had was the government radio station and the government controlled newspaper.

 ANONYMOUS (Hamburg, Germany)

The arrests of homosexuals began in our town. One of the first to be arrested was my friend with whom I had a relationship since I was 23. One day people from the Gestapo came to his house and took him away…. Following his arrest, his home was searched… Books were taken away, note and address books were confiscated, questions were asked among neighbours.

ROBERT KATZ

Did you see him again?

HANS HAUCK (Germany)

[They took us to the] Department of Racial and Hereditary Welfare. It’s where I and others were condemned. They examined us and measured our skulls. It’s hard to explain this to ordinary people. They measured our eyebrows, eye color, noses, etc. We were lucky we weren’t euthanasia victims. We were sterilized…. I didn’t have a full anesthetic. It was all over in two hours.

JOAN (Paris)

My parents were originally from Poland and both of them had lived in Paris during their adult lives… With the rise of Nazism, even though France was still independent, it was obvious what had happened in Poland – both of their families, their parents and some of their siblings still lived in Poland… By mid 1939 it was obvious what was happening and although my parents were very assimilated and mixed with non-Jews and to all outward appearance weren’t particularly Jewish… my father realised that when they went out to public places, to restaurants, that people who were friends of theirs, non-Jewish people, even some Jews, didn’t want to associate with them because of course the French Jews didn’t think it would happen to them so they kept Polish Jews at an arm’s length.

ANONYMOUS (Hamburg, Germany)

After four weeks my friend was released… However, the effects of his arrest were terrifying. His hair… was shaven off , he was totally confused, he was no longer what he was before… We had to be very careful with our contacts. I had to break off all relations with my friend. We passed each other by on the street, because we did not want to put ourselves in danger… We lived like animals in a wild game park, always sensing the hunters.

KITTY WERTHMANN (Austria)

We also had a secret police force commonly known as the Gestapo and they were everywhere in civilian clothes. You didn’t know who they were. People disappeared all the time and no one knew where they were, they just disappeared. And the Gestapo they watched everybody, everybody’s comings and goings… They created a network of informers. We could not trust our neighbours, we could not trust our friends, we could not trust anybody, we couldn’t trust a mailman – nobody – we were afraid to talk to anybody about anything political because we did not know who was informing on everybody.

FAY LEWIN

My uncle had been working for the Russians when the Germans came.  They accused him of being a communist and killed him in front of us.  The local Poles, who did not like the Russian control, supported the Germans in their treatment of us.

ROBERT KATZ

That sounds awful…

HANS HAUCK (Germany)

It was depressing and offensive, I felt only half human… We had to sign a paper saying that we agreed not to marry people with German or half-German blood.

ROBERT KATZ

 And what was life like in France during the occupation?

JOAN (Paris)

The Nazis invaded Belgium and France in May 1940, all within a few days, and initially they began deporting the foreign male Jews, which meant on the whole the Polish Jews. My father was taken very early on and he was actually imprisoned – they took them to an ordinary prison in France because they hadn’t geared up to transporting the Jews from France and Belgium and Holland so he was there for quite a while…

ROBERT KATZ

So initially they only took the men? How was your life affected?

JOAN (Paris)

My father actually managed to escape… He had contacts and the place we stayed at was run by people who became part of the resistance…. Officially my father was a ghost, he had to stay inside the whole time but officially we still lived with freedom although we had to go every week to register. But at that time they were not deporting women and children.

ROBERT KATZ

Where did you have to register?

JOAN (Paris)

It was the local police station… so they had a list of everyone, they knew where people lived because we were alien… That was common practice, if you were an alien, although not from outer space but, you know, from Poland, you were an alien and you had to go and register every week…

 KITTY WERTHMANN (Austria)

In my last year of college I was sent to a small village in the mountains… When I arrived in that village I was told that they had about 15 mentally handicapped people. One man I knew very well, he was the janitor at my school – Vincent. He could not read or write but he kept the school very clean. One morning I looked out of my classroom window and there was a van outside from the health department and all these people were being ushered into the van… The principal said – oh no the health department came around and asked their parents if they want to institutionalise their son or daughter to learn how to read and write. Gladly the parents signed the papers and off they went. Six months later the letters came to the parents that their sons or daughters had died in a natural but merciful death. The news travelled very fast in the village. People all said they had left in excellent health and why should they all die within 6 months. It dawned on the villagers that they were being euthanized.

ROBERT KATZ

Was there no warning – I still wonder if more people should have known what was coming…

HELEN LEHMAN (Pułtusk, Poland)

The Germans walked in immediately with a plan what they were going to do. They had a different plan to what anybody thought – nobody in the world could have thought they had the plan they had – nobody.

Borrowed with the permission of Accounts of the Holocaust. To learn more about Accounts of the Holocaust, a new way to tell the meaningful stories of the Holocaust using the present day format we know and love, Facebook; go <http://accountsoftheholocaust.org/Life-Under-Occupation.aspx>