

Esther Bratt's Story of Survival

By Meghann McGuire

This is the story of Esther Bratt *as told by her* in a videotaped testimony housed at Albright College Holocaust Resource Center.

Esther Bratt was born in Vilna, which was then part of Poland, on March 8, 1929. Vilna was a big city, with 1/3 of the population Jewish. Esther attended a private Polish school for which her parents had to pay. The teachers were mostly Jewish, and although most subjects were taught in Polish, the teachers did teach the Hebrew and Yiddish language as well. Esther also took French privately, because her mother's family lived in Belgium, and they used to go there for the summers. In her home, the languages that were primarily spoken were Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. As Esther's father progressed in business they gradually moved to larger apartments. They lived in a very nice apartment until 1940, when the Russians occupied Vilna. The occupying troops decided the apartment was too big for a family of three. They decided the apartment was needed for some communist officials, and Esther and her parents were sent to a much smaller apartment. They lived in this apartment, just outside of town, until they were taken to the ghetto in September of 1941.

Esther had a lot of friends, mostly Jewish girls her age. There were some children in the neighborhood that she played with that were not Jewish, but for the most part there was a lot of anti-Semitism. For example, one day Esther was playing with a neighbor girl and the girl invited Esther to her house. When they entered the home, the girl's grandfather became very angry that she had let a Jewish girl into the house, and he told Esther to leave. She remembers being very hurt, but she explained that you simply had to get used to it.

Esther went to a Polish school, so only the Jewish children were off on Saturday and went to school on Sunday. This made it easy for the other children to identify and alienate them, and they would throw stones and call the Jewish children names. Esther remembers one time her mother found stones in her coat, and when she asked Esther why, she answered that they were to throw back at the other kids.

Esther's parents were never involved in any political organizations, and they always discouraged her from belonging to any groups. They seemed to be worried, as everyone was, but didn't realize it was going to be as bad as it would become. She recalled that they knew about Hitler at this point, but not anything close to the full truth.

Esther's father, Samuel, was a businessman, and was primarily concerned with making a living and providing for the family. When the Russians came in 1939, Samuel lost everything he had as far as his business was concerned.

Esther's maternal grandparents had moved to Belgium with one of Esther's uncles in the early 1930s, so Esther and her mother would go to Belgium for two month periods during the summer. They went in 1935, 1937, and 1939. When they were returning to Vilna after the visit in the summer of 1939, it was an awful time. Everyone knew that the war was going to begin. They returned on August 27, and the war began on September 1. According to Esther, "all over Europe it was terrible; it was like a volcano, you knew something was going to happen, something was going to explode."

Most of Esther's mother's family was in Belgium, except for her oldest sister. Esther's

aunt lived in Vilna and was very close to her. When the Nazis came in 1941 her aunt's son was killed. He was one of the first Jews to be killed in Vilna; he was only 18 years old and was the only son. Esther's aunt was never the same afterwards. She and her husband were also in the ghetto with Esther and her parents, and were killed during their time in the ghetto.

The Russians and Germans divided up and occupied Poland in 1939 under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Under this agreement, Vilna was taken over by the Russians. The family didn't make any plans to leave because they didn't realize how bad it was going to become. There really wasn't much of a way out at the time anyway. When the Russians appeared, they confiscated Esther's father's business and their home. They were given a small apartment, and the standard of living decreased considerably. Esther was also forced to go to a school with only Jewish children. She remembers the communist influence in the school, and she remembers drawing pictures of Lenin and Stalin in school. Esther notes that she could draw the profile of Stalin and Lenin in her dreams. There was an extreme amount of communist propaganda, and Esther remembers that as children they would fall for it. Esther's parents always complained about their situation and always were very careful to tell Esther to make sure she never repeated what she heard in the home.

For a brief time, the Russians gave Vilna to Lithuania, but they quickly reoccupied the area when they decided to take over all of the Baltic States. Then, the Germans suddenly invaded Vilna on June 21, 1941. Esther remembers that it was a beautiful June morning, and she was going to a school picnic. She lived far from school, and when she finally arrived at school the doors were closed. The janitor told her there was a war.

She then heard sirens and ran to her friend's house next door to the school. Her friend's parents told Esther she must go home quickly because of the bombings. Getting home was a slow process because every time she heard the sirens warning of another bombing, she had to run to shelter until the bombings stopped. Esther and her family lived across the river from school, so on her way home she had to run over the bridge. She remembers that as soon as she got over the bridge, the sirens began again. By the time she was home, the bridge had been bombed. She made it across with minutes to spare, half an hour at most. When she arrived home her parents obviously knew the war had begun, but they did not know what to do. They ended up going to a shelter to be protected from the bombs, and within two days the Nazis occupied Vilna.

The Nazis didn't waste any time; they immediately implemented laws against the Jews. All of their possessions were taken. They had to give up their jewelry, gold and silver. Esther remembers turning over her bicycle at the police station. Anyone could come into a Jewish home and rob the owner. German soldiers came into Esther's home and started taking things, and after her father began talking to them, they softened a little bit and left a few things. Esther remembers the family even having to give up their radio.

One of the first restrictions that was placed on the Jewish population was the yellow Star of David that they were forced to put on the front and back of their garments. They were also not allowed to walk in the streets, but only in the gutter. They were restricted access to many places. Those who disobeyed were often shot by the police. They would also go into Jewish homes and take young boys and men. They would say that they were taking them to work, but instead would take them five or six miles outside of the ghetto to be shot. Men would often be beaten and shot in the streets, especially men with long beards.

Non-Jewish friends were afraid to help the Jews because in Vilna the occupiers had put up gallows in the main square, and they had hung a Polish man there with big signs saying

that he was hanging because he helped Jews. Basically, everyone was fearful for his or her own life.

In September of 1941, the Germans established a ghetto in Vilna. Wires and barricades surrounded it, and there was one main gate through which you could enter and exit.

There were actually two ghettos in Vilna. The first was the large ghetto, and the second was a smaller ghetto where they put people when they ran out of room in the first. Most of the people in this second ghetto were killed. Luckily, Esther and her parents were sent to the first ghetto.

The day they were taken to the ghetto was unexpected. They could see Jewish people from the neighborhood walking with bundles on their backs. The Gestapo was going from house to house rounding up the Jews and taking them to the ghetto. When they arrived at Esther's house, her mother opened the closet and told the neighbors to take what they wished because the family could not carry it all anyway. Esther remembers putting on a dress, a sweater, and a winter coat. It was warm outside, but they didn't know where they were going, and it was difficult to decide what to carry. They took food, a pillow, a blanket, and whatever else they deemed most important. Esther remembers taking a small doll.

When the family arrived in the ghetto it was late and they were exhausted, both physically and mentally. The ghetto was already overloaded with people, and Esther's parents found a small store with its doors open. They went into the store and slept on the floor for the first night. The next day they found a place to stay, it was a small corner of a room with some other people from their old neighborhood. There were roughly 16 people stuffed into the room. The family ended up staying in this room for a few months. Esther remembers that the women would all sleep sideways on the one double bed in the room, and the men would sleep on the floor. There was one couch in the room, and there was a young, pregnant couple that slept on the couch.

When the woman eventually delivered her baby, it was a little girl but it was announced as a stillbirth. Esther was only 12 years old at the time, but she doesn't remember any children that were born in the ghetto that were not stillbirths. The Jewish doctors did this, because the baby would not have any kind of chance in the ghetto. It was deemed best for both the mother and the child, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

There was little food in the ghetto, and there was a constant shortage of clothing, soap, and all basic necessities. There was a ration so the people would get some bread. Esther remembers that she was not exactly starving, but they never could eat as much as they wanted to eat. Her father worked outside of the ghetto in a factory.

Esther remembers her father taking all of the family's jewelry to a storage place where he had buried it. The jewelry was still there when the family went to the ghetto. While in the ghetto, the people would be forced to give gold, a watch, or piece of jewelry to the farmers in order to get small amounts of food. While they were in the ghetto, they needed the jewelry desperately. During the time Esther's father was working outside of the ghetto, he thought he had found a German soldier whom he could trust. He told this soldier that he would give him some of the jewelry if he took him to recover it. One day when he was outside of the ghetto working, the German soldier said he would go along to recover the jewelry. Esther's father took off his yellow stars and they went to the hiding place and started to dig for the jewelry. The German guard scared Esther's father by saying he thought the Gestapo was coming, and that they had better run away. They left before Esther's father had time to retrieve the jewelry, but not before the German guard could see where the jewelry

was located. Esther's father found out later from neighbors that the soldier had returned to the hiding place the next day and had taken the jewelry

One time in the middle of the night, everyone in the ghetto was told to get up and register with the police. Everyone who worked was given either a yellow or a white *schein*, an identification card. They learned that those people who were given yellow *scheins* were allowed to leave the ghetto with four family members. It was usually a husband, wife, and three children. Those who were given white *scheins* had to stay inside the ghetto that day. Everyone quickly realized that the yellow *schein* meant life and the white *schein* meant death.

Esther's father was given a white *schein*. The family knew that if they stayed in the ghetto it would be surrounded and they would be taken to the Ponary forest to be executed. Esther's father decided that their best chance for escape from the ghetto was to separate. He went one direction, and Esther and her mother went in another. There were hiding places in the ghetto, but they didn't know where any of them were. The women continued walking towards the main gate, hoping for an opportunity to leave. There were guards at the gate who were counting five people to a yellow *schein*. It was getting towards the end, and Esther could see the trucks and Germans with guns waiting outside of the ghetto. As soon as the people with yellow *scheins* had left the ghetto, they would enter and take all of the remaining Jews to Ponary to be killed.

Suddenly, Esther and her mother saw a couple with only one child that they slightly knew. They had a yellow *schein*, and Esther's mother asked them if Esther could leave with them. Esther was holding on to her mother, and she doesn't remember quite how it happened, but she didn't want to let go of her mother. Then, the guard counted to five and let them all leave.

Late that evening they went back into the ghetto, and Esther recalls that as everyone walked back into the ghetto it was like entering a cemetery. It was eerily quiet. After they left the ghetto that morning, about 5,000 to 6,000 people were taken to Ponary to be killed. Some had survived by hiding and were still afraid to come out of their hiding places. When they realized that everyone with yellow *scheins* had returned, they began crawling out of their hiding places. Some people escaped from Ponary and had managed to come back to the ghetto to tell about it. Esther's father rejoined them later that night. He had also escaped while the people with the yellow *scheins* were leaving, and he had gone to his place of work and was hidden for the day.

The family remained in the ghetto from 1941 until September 1943, when the Nazis liquidated the ghetto. They established a labor camp where they would take roughly 1000 of the Jews from the former ghetto. The rest of the Jews were killed. Esther and her parents were fortunate to be sent to the camp, but Esther notes that it only meant that their lives might be prolonged a short while longer.

The people in the ghetto that were not sent to the newly established HKP 562 forced labor camp were either sent to Ponary to be killed or to other labor or concentration camps in Germany or Estonia. Esther's family left for the camp a few days before the liquidation. They were sent by truck, and she recalls that it wasn't far, maybe a half hour drive. When they arrived at the camp, they saw two large, grey buildings. They shared a room with two other couples. Esther's father worked in a mechanical workshop in the labor camp.

The living conditions were basically similar to the ghetto conditions except the two buildings were outside the city, so it wasn't as congested and there was a little greenery around. There were barbed wire fences and a gate guarded by Germans.

There was a main kitchen in the camp where soup was given out once a day. There was also a store that supplied bread and sometimes sugar or some kind of fat. These rations were all given out on a coupon system. Everyone wore whatever he or she had brought from the ghetto. Esther remembers that she still had her winter coat, but she had outgrown most of the clothing by this time. Her mother gave her some of her clothes.

On March 27, 1944, a horrible thing happened in the camp. The Germans took away all the children and killed them all. Esther remembers the gate opening and a big black truck pulling in between the two buildings. German soldiers with guns in their hands began running through the camp collecting children. They were ripping children out of their mothers' arms, and they pushed all the children into the truck. Children were screaming and mothers were hysterical. The only reasoning behind this was that the children were not useful to the economy of the camp.

Esther remembers that during the incident, a German guard pointed a revolver at her head and tried to push her towards the truck. She was only 14 at the time, but fortunately she was tall for her age, and her father, who was standing next to her, had the presence of mind to tell the guard that she was not a child, and that she was in fact a worker. The guard let her go, but they took 30 to 40 children that day.

Esther worked in the sewing factory repairing the clothing of German soldiers. Her mother worked in the laundry, and her father fixed motors and other things. The main purpose of this particular camp was to refurbish motors.

They worked six days a week, and on Sunday mornings they were taken to buildings to be counted. One Sunday, when they went outside, they found a newly constructed gallows. The guards brought a family of three before the prisoners of the camp. It was a husband, wife, and a little girl. The guards said the family tried to run away from camp and were caught in the city. They warned that if anyone else tried to run away they would get a similar fate. Esther remembers a guard picking up the small girl by the neck, like a cat, and shooting her in the head. Then they shot the mother for screaming, and put a rope around the father's neck and hung him in front of the crowd.

In June 1944, it had become obvious that the Germans were losing the war. One day, Esther's father returned from work and told them that the Russians were approaching, and that there was little doubt that the troops would be there shortly. At that point, the only way to survive was to run away because the first thing the Germans would do before retreating would be to kill all of the Jews.

Esther and her mother left in basically what they had been wearing and walked right out of the camp past the guard who was drunk and not paying attention. They immediately took off their yellow stars and walked on the sidewalk rather than in the gutters. Esther's mother told her to smile, because she noted that at the time you could tell a Jewish face because they were always sad. They went to a friend of Esther's father, named Nicoli. He got very scared when they approached him on his porch because if anyone had seen him talking to a Jew he would have been killed; however, he opened up his cellar door and let the pair inside. Esther remembers feeling secure in the cellar, just sitting there quietly, away from everything. They stayed there for a few hours, and when it got dark the cellar door opened and Esther's father came in and joined them. Esther recalls that he was white as a sheet because within an hour of the women's exit from the camp, German reinforcements were sent to the camp. When the people in the camp saw the guards, a huge panic broke out. People began running through the gate, and the guards opened fire on the crowd. Esther's father was one of the people that made it out without being killed.

Nicoli took the family to the countryside to escape the bombing. Esther and her parents stayed in the cellar and hid. Nicoli left them some water and said he would return in a day or two. He wasn't able to return for more than a week, maybe longer. There was an opening from the cellar to the kitchen, and Nicoli had left grain for the chickens, so they snuck in there when they could and took food. This, along with the water Nicoli had left, was enough to help them survive. Within approximately two weeks, the Russians liberated the city, and Nicoli returned and said that it was safe to leave the cellar. Esther remembers crawling out of the cellar and going into the apartment where she saw curtains on windows for the first time in years. She remembers thinking that the place seemed like a palace. They stayed with Nicoli and his family for a day or two, and then Nicoli took his family to Poland where they lost contact with him. When they regained contact, Esther's father was always quick to help Nicoli and his family as much as he could. They were very grateful to Nicoli for saving them.

They instinctively returned to the camp to see what was happening, and many of the survivors had the same idea. They found out that some people had stayed in the ghetto and tried to hide. Some people didn't realize that hundreds would be attempting to hide in the same places, and there wasn't enough air. Many people who were hiding ended up suffocating. The Germans also found some of the hiding places, and they dug shallow graves in the yard and shot the people. When Esther's family returned, these graves were barely covered.

The family stayed with Nicoli and his family for a few days until they were able to get situated. The Russians began to open some businesses and institutions, and Esther's father got a job in an office. There were rooms in the back of the office, and the family stayed in one of these rooms. They found two of Esther's cousins who had survived, and they lived with them in the room as well. They family stayed there for about a year, and Esther began going to Russian school. She recalls that this was a very hard year, and they still didn't have much of anything, and the Russians didn't really have much of anything either.

In May 1945, the war ended and there was a tremendous celebration in Russia. The family returned to their former home in Vilna and discovered that the Gestapo had sealed it for a time, and then later it was reopened and looted. There were new people living there, and some of the neighbors still lived in the building, including the woman who Esther's mother had given a lot of clothing to before they left for the ghetto. The woman cried because she no longer had any of the clothing to return, but she gave Esther's mother some navy blue fabric. The women went to a dressmaker and had two skirts and a jacket made, which was what Esther wore to school for an entire year.

Soon after, Esther's parents decided that there was no sense in staying in Vilna, since wherever they turned there were bad memories. It wasn't really home anymore. Since they were citizens of Poland before 1939, they could legally leave Russia and go to Poland. In July 1945, they went by train to Lourdes, a city in Poland. The trip, which would usually take about one night, took three weeks. There wasn't enough fuel to pull the trains, and the engines kept leaving to get more fuel and return to pull the cars for a while longer. Three weeks later they arrived in Lourdes. There were many survivors there, and it became a meeting point of sorts. The family stayed there for six weeks, and at that point it was their aim to go to Palestine. There were young men in Lourdes who had illegally left Palestine to help the survivors. They gave Esther's family documents saying that they were Greek Jews who were heading south back to Greece. They were briefed about what to do and what to say if the Russians stopped them. One night they illegally crossed the Danube with the documents. They arrived in Austria, in the British zone. They had wanted to be in the American

zone, but had to stay in the British zone. They were eventually taken in trucks to Graz. The conditions in the British area were very poor. There was little food, and there was to drink except beer. They were then sent in open trucks to a place in the American zone. The conditions were much nicer, consisting of hotels previously owned by the Germans. They tried to teach the child survivors English and Hebrew hoping they would end up in either Palestine or the United States. Esther and her parents stayed there for about nine months, and they were some of the very first people to leave, when Esther's mother made contact with an American rabbi, a Chaplin from the army, who helped her to contact Esther's uncle in New York City. The family boarded an army boat and arrived in New York City on June 18, 1946. Esther remembers seeing the Statue of Liberty when the ship arrived, and she notes that most people on the ship were crying as they approached the New York harbor. A few of Esther's mother's siblings met them at the harbor.

The family made a home in Washington Heights, and Esther went to school at George Washington High School. The uncle that sent Esther and her parents the affidavit owned a hosiery factory in Reading, Pennsylvania and had a wholesale distribution center in New York. He passed away very young, and Esther's aunt didn't know what to do with the business, so she asked Esther's father to run the factory for her. Esther's father eventually started a lumber and plywood business in Reading, Pennsylvania.

Esther met her husband, Sidney Bratt, over Labor Day weekend on a trip in the Catskills with a Zionist youth group. They were married in April 1951 in a synagogue in Washington Heights. The couple lived in Esther's parents' original apartment in Washington Heights, since her parents had already moved to Reading. They stayed in New York for five years. Their oldest daughter, Evelyn, was born in New York and was about three and a half when they moved to Reading. During the move, Esther was pregnant with their second daughter, Corinne. Because Esther's father had already started the company, Industrial Plywood, and the business had grown, Esther's husband decided to join the business. Their youngest daughter, Lisa, was born in Reading in 1962.

Lisa received her degree from Reading Area Community College, and worked with children in a daycare center.¹ Corinne received her degree from Drexel and is a registered dietician. She is married to Andy Wernick and has two boys, Brian and Aaron. Evelyn received her master's degree in business from Temple. She married Jay Lipschutz and has two daughters, Michele and Stacey.

Looking back on the tragedies she endured, Esther notes that her faith in Judaism never wavered. She didn't think she would survive, however, and was hoping to at least live to be a teenager. She notes that although she doesn't talk about the events of her past very often, she does think about them.

Esther comments that after living for so many years in a free country like the United States, it is hard to imagine that in her lifetime one man was able to destroy the lives of so many innocent people. She ends by saying, "How did the world allow that to happen? Hopefully it will never happen again."

Note

¹ Lisa passed away on December 31, 2010.