

DORA NIEDERMAN: STUDY GUIDE

BACKGROUND

Dora (Zalmonovich) Niederman was born in October 1928 at Bhuce, a town in the Carpathian Mountains of the Czechoslovak Republic, which was established at the end of World War I. Her region was called 'Carpatho-Ukraine' (located in present-day Ukraine). Dora's town was inhabited by about five hundred families - both Christian and Jewish. The Jews lived in town, and the Christians on the outskirts. She described the relationship between Christians and Jews as good. Her mother Chaya Pearl (Berkovich) was "the nicest person in the world." Her father David Zalmonovich died of tuberculosis a few months before Dora was born. Her mother married Israel Schlomovich, who moved the family to Nagaf (Yargof). Dora's step-father was in the import-export business involving fruit and grain. Dora had a step-brother named Martin Israel and three step-sisters. Aunt Fiegel ("my daddy's sister") was with Dora on the cattle train to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the documentary, when Dora speaks of being separated from her aunt on the 'ramp' at Birkenau, she means Fiegel. Aunt Fiegel, her six year old son, and her infant girl were murdered in the gas chamber on arrival.

NAZI TERROR

In 1938, Dora's region was annexed by Hungary, a Nazi ally. As Dora tells us in the documentary, her step-father was terribly beaten by Hungarian police. Dora's teacher was murdered and his body left for three days in a ravine (for public 'viewing').

KEY TEACHING POINT: The Nazis ruled by the principles of unbridled terror and collective responsibility.

DEPORTATION of HUNGARIAN JEWS in 1944

The Germans occupied Dora's town in April 1944. She was sixteen (in the documentary she mistakenly says eleven). Dora tells us that nobody knew about the mass murder of Jews. The 'final chapter' of the Holocaust was acted out with lightning speed.

KEY TEACHING POINT: In 1944, after three years of Nazi extermination of Jews and others in neighboring Poland, the majority of Hungarian Jews didn't know about the Holocaust. In fact, Jewish leaders in Budapest and Brno knew about the Holocaust but kept this information to themselves. They bartered with the Nazis and managed to exchange their silence about Auschwitz for safe transit to Switzerland.

See: I Escaped From Auschwitz, by Rudolf Vrba.

With the assistance of Hungarian policemen (local collaborators), the Nazis concentrated the Jewish community in a ghetto, robbed Jews of their valuables, and (several weeks later)

ordered them onto cattle cars whence a tortuous three day journey to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Nazi occupied Poland. German records show that 147 cattle trains departed fifty-five Nazi ghettos in Hungary and Romania between May 15 and July 9, 1944, and carried 434,351 Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau. By early summer, 12,000 Jews were being gassed daily at Birkenau, the main extermination center of the Auschwitz complex.

Two hundred thousand Jews remained in Budapest, the Hungarian capital. In October 1944, the Nazis began deporting these Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In all, 565,000 Hungarian and Romanian Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.

‘SELECTION’ on ‘RAMP’ at BIRKENAU

As Dora tells us in the documentary, she was separated from her family during the “selection” at Birkenau (Auschwitz II). Along with other young and healthy Jews, she was sent to ‘work.’ Her family (too old or too young to work) was sent to the gas chamber (disguised as showers). The victims included Dora’s 100 year old grandmother. Dora and seven girls from her village survived the initial “selection.”

KEY TEACHING POINT: The eight girls, including Dora, remained together during the rest of the war - and derived strength from one another.

BOMBING AUSCHWITZ

When U. S. Air Force bombers flew over Auschwitz-Birkenau en route to bomb nearby German factories, Dora hoped (futilely) that the planes would bomb the camp.

KEY TEACHING POINT: Why didn't the Allies bomb the railroad lines leading to Auschwitz-Birkenau? The War Department (Pentagon) decided early in the war that it wouldn't participate in refugee matters (i.e. rescue of Jews). Jewish requests in 1944 to bomb the railroad lines were rejected. The proposed air operations would have "very doubtful efficacy," wrote a top American official on July 4, 1944.

Historian David Wyman has written, "To kill the Jews, the Nazis were willing to weaken their capacity to fight the war. The U. S. and its allies, however, were willing to attempt nothing to save them."

See: Wyman's The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945.

DR. JOSEF MENGELE

Dr. Josef Mengele ('Angel of Death') conducted macabre experiments on prisoners (particularly on twins). He presided over 'selections' on the 'ramp' at Birkenau and daily roll-calls.

KEY TEACHING POINT: Nazi doctors played leading roles in the camp's operation. Many members of the German medical community lent themselves to Nazi racist theories. Mengele described Auschwitz-Birkenau as "applied biology." He believed that, by murdering the Jews, he was saving the German people from 'infection' and demise.

As Dora explains in the documentary, Mengele noticed rashes on her body and dispatched her to the so-called hospital at Birkenau. This place was not really a hospital but an ante-room to the gas chambers. Dora escaped from the 'hospital' and rejoined her friends in the barrack ('block'). That same night, her group was packed up and sent to Stutthof, a Nazi death camp on the Baltic Sea.

See: Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account, by Dr. Miklos Nyiszli.

RED CROSS VISIT

In the documentary, Dora describes Nazi preparations for a Red Cross 'inspection' at Stutthof. The Nazis tried to convince the Red Cross that reports of 'death camps' were not true. For example, a Red Cross delegation inspected the Jewish 'model ghetto' at Theresienstadt, near Prague, in June 1944 and (presumably) fell for the Nazi subterfuge.

KEY TEACHING POINT: Deception was a major part of the Nazi strategy and explained how the killers kept the Holocaust a secret for so long.

After arriving at Stutthof, Dora and her friends were sent to work on a German farm – to help with the harvest. The German farmer treated the girls humanely and nourished them. With the approach of the Red Army in late 1944, the SS returned the girls to *Stutthof*.

KEY TEACHING POINT: We must emphasize the behavior of individuals like the German farmer (and the Polish family below) who acted with humanity and courage.

Stutthof was ‘evacuated’ by the Nazis in January 1945. Many Jews were shot on the shores of the Baltic. Others were forced on a ‘death march’ in the direction of Germany. Dora and the girls escaped and found refuge with a Polish family. The girls spoke Ukrainian and pretended to be Ukrainians, but the Polish farmer knew they were Jewish. He hid them in the attic – first from the Nazis and then from the Soviets.

Dora and her friends were ‘liberated’ by the Red Army - a painful chapter in itself. One nightmare replaced another. Red Army soldiers raped many women – of all nationalities. Five hundred and sixty five thousand Hungarian and Romanian Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.

POST-WAR

Dora took a train to Budapest. As she tells us in the documentary, Dora passed her step-brother on the street and neither recognized the other. Dora traveled (illegally) from Hungary to a ‘Displaced Persons’ camp at Santa Maria del Lauca, Italy.

There she met Isaac Niederman, a Holocaust survivor from Romania. Isaac's experiences are recounted in a separate video in this documentary series. He and Dora married in 1948.

BERIHAH ('ESCAPE')

Berihah means 'escape' in Hebrew. In 1944-'45, Jewish survivors met in Lublin, Poland, and began organizing an escape route from Central and Eastern Europe to Palestine. The first leader was Abba Kovner (of the Vilna ghetto). The Berihah group established a network that smuggled 250,000 Jewish survivors to British controlled Palestine. The British attempted to prevent Jewish emigration to Palestine.

Dora and Isaac attempted several times to travel illegally to Palestine but were turned back by British troops. The state of Israel was established in May 1948. By that time Dora and Isaac had obtained U. S. visas. In 1950, they arrived in New Orleans. For fifty years Isaac worked as a silver polisher in a jewelry store; Dora operated a dry cleaning business. They have no children.

DAVID DUKE

Dora began speaking about the Holocaust in 1989, when David Duke, neo-Nazi, Holocaust-denier, and former Klansman, was elected to the Louisiana legislature. He subsequently ran for governor (lost) and U. S. senator (dropped out). Dora's region was annexed by the Soviet Union after the war and is today in Ukraine.

DORA NIEDERMAN: GLOSSARY

NAME _____

Define the following glossary terms and explain their relevance to Dora's story:

1. Czechoslovak Republic –

2. Gestapo –

3. SS –

4. Collaborators –

5. Peahots –

6. Nazi 'ghetto' –

7. Adolf Eichmann –

8. Passover –

9. 'Work Makes You Free' –

10. Auschwitz-Birkenau –

11. 'Ramp' –

12. 'Selection' –

13. Dr. Mengele –

14. Appell –

15. 'Hospital' at Birkenau –

16. Stutthof –

17. Red Cross –

18. Red Army –

19. Berihah –

20. Palestine –

21. ‘Displaced Persons’ Camp –

DORA NIEDERMAN: KEY QUESTIONS

NAME _____

Answer the following questions using information and quotes taken from the documentary and study guide:

1. What happened to Dora’s step-father when he was seized by Hungarian policemen?

2. What examples of Hungarian and German terror are found in Dora’s experience *before* she was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau? What was the purpose of terror?

3. When did the Germans occupy Dora's town? Describe her experience in the Nazi ghetto.

4. What examples of Nazi deception are evident in Dora's experience?

5. Describe Dora's 'journey' to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

6. Describe the Nazi 'selection' at Auschwitz-Birkenau when Dora was separated from her family. What did her aunt say?

7. Describe Dora's experiences at Auschwitz-Birkenau after the 'selection.'

8. Who was Dr. Mengele? What role did he play in Dora's

experience? How did she escape the “hospital”? Why was her escape timely?

9. What was Dora’s reaction when Allied bombers flew over Auschwitz-Birkenau en route to bomb nearby German factories?

10. What was Stutthof? How did the Nazis ‘prepare’ for the Red Cross visit to Stutthof? What was Nazis’ purpose?

11. Describe Dora’s experience with the ‘German farmer.’

12. Describe Dora’s last months of the war, including her experience ‘passing’ as a Ukrainian girl with the Polish farmer and his family, and her ‘liberation’ by the Red Army.

13. Describe Dora's experience with her brother in Budapest after the war.

14. What examples of non-Jewish courage and helpfulness towards Jews are evident in Dora's experience? What were the risks to non-Jews?

15. When did Dora begin talking about her experiences during the war? What is her message to young people?

