

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Archives

Oral History Interviews of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center

**Interview with Abraham Zuckerman
1982
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PREFACE

In 1982, Abraham Zuckerman was interviewed on videotape by Sidney Langer on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

Summary of the
Interview with Abraham Zuckerman
1982

Abraham Zuckerman was born in Kraków, Poland in 1925. His family lived in the center of the Jewish community. Abraham recalls that business and industry in Kraków were dominated by Jews. He also recalls that relations between Jews and Gentiles were, largely, good.

After Hitler came to power, many Jews fled, but Abraham's father decided to remain in Kraków since few had any sense of what was to come. The Jews had to labor for the Nazis in Kraków and give up gold and furs. When the Kraków ghetto was formed, Abraham's father decided to move to Dukla, Poland from where they were deported to Biala Podlaska, Poland. In Biala Podlaska, they were forced to labor on a military base. The family returned to Dukla, from where Abraham's family was transported, never to be seen again, and Abraham was moved to the Rzeszów ghetto in Poland. From Rzeszów, Abraham was moved to Plaszów, Poland and then to Julag concentration camp in Plaszów, Poland. In Julag, Abraham developed typhus. While in Julag, Abraham was selected to work in Oskar Schindler's enamel factory by the Jewish police. Abraham describes his year-long experience in Schindler's factory. In August, 1944, Abraham was shipped from Schindler's factory to Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria. Abraham was in Gusen, a concentration camp in Austria, when he was liberated by American soldiers on May 5, 1945.

After liberation, Abraham was relocated to Linz, Austria and then to Bindermichl, a displaced persons camp in Germany, where he lived from May 1945 until May 1949, during which time he met and married his wife, Mina. Abraham arrived in the United States on May 29, 1949 with his wife and the first of their three children. They moved directly to New Jersey because Abraham's wife had relatives in the state. Abraham eventually became successful in construction and named streets after Schindler. Despite feelings of "culture shock" when he first arrived in the United States, Abraham remembers feeling well-received by the Jewish community in New Jersey.

**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Abraham Zuckerman
1982**

01:00:00

Abraham Zuckerman discusses the town where he was born, Kraków, Poland, which had approximately 70,000 Jews. Abraham lived in the center of the Jewish population, amid flourishing Jewish life which was largely Orthodox. The Kehilla, the Jewish self-help organization, organized every aspect of Jewish life. Abraham was too young to belong to Jewish organizations himself. He was preoccupied with his religious and secular studies. Abraham's family consisted of his parents and two sisters. The businesses and industries in Kraków were dominated by the Jews. Abraham's father was a hat-maker.

01:06:00

The relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Kraków was, largely, good. However, one could always feel anti-Semitism. Jews held influential political, military, and social positions. When Hitler came to power, all education ceased. Everything had to be done secretly. Many people fled. But Abraham's father, remembering World War I, decided to stay. Initially, Abraham and his family hid in an attic, but things calmed down. They had no sense, nor did most others, of what would happen to Kraków's Jews. They did know, however, that German Jews of Polish origin were being deported east; but that was happening somewhere else. No one comprehended the scope of what was happening. They made no preparations for violence and murder.

01:11:00

The lack of expectation helped lead to consequences. When the Nazis entered Kraków, they grabbed people off the streets, but no one knew where they were being taken. Food was rationed. Everyone had to wear arm bands, signifying that they were Jewish. The Jews had to clear snow. Cards were issued. One day, the Jews had to give up gold, another day they had to give up furs. Finally, a ghetto was established in Kraków. Abraham's father decided to go to his father's town, Dukla, Poland. One day, they were deported to a town named Biala Podlaska, Poland near the Russian border. They performed forced labor at the military base in Biala Podlaska.

01:16:00

Abraham's father didn't look Jewish, so he went back to Dukla. The family soon followed, despite the risk to themselves. Abraham worked in a quarry, but soon got a job as an electrician. He held this position for six months. Then, the Jews were taken, one day, into the plaza. The young people were separated from the others. The others, including his immediate family, were taken away on trucks. Abraham never saw them again. Abraham remained in the town with the others who worked in the quarry. Shortly after the transport, the town was liquidated. Abraham and others were sent to the Rzeszów ghetto in Poland. The Rzeszów ghetto was soon liquidated. Abraham hid under a blanket during the Rzeszów round-up.

01:21:00

Many people died from heartbreak. The Nazis took Abraham to Plaszków, Poland and then he was moved to Julag, a concentration camp in Plaszków, Poland, where he worked on trucks. In Julag, Abraham developed typhus, but he pretended to be fit because being sent to

the infirmary meant certain death. His friends helped prop him up. He was returned to Plaszów, where he worked in a coal yard. There was an escape. As a result, a group of prisoners were taken up to the top of a mountain and shot. Abraham was taken up to the top of the mountain with the other prisoners, but was sent back down to work by the Jewish police. At this time, Oskar Schindler was looking for people to work in his "factory." Abraham was selected to work in Schindler's "factory" by the Jewish police.

01:26:00

Abraham describes the contrast between Schindler's factory and the brutality of Julag; "from hell to heaven." Schindler protected his charges from cruel treatment. He warned the Jewish police that they would be sent back to Plaszów if they harmed the "prisoners." Schindler was a "Treuhandler," a trustee or partner, in "Amalia," an enamel factory which once belonged to Jews. The factory made pots, pans, and enamel works. Schindler sold pots and pans to farmers and bought food for the Jews with the money that he made. Schindler never permitted German inspectors into Amalia.

01:31:00

Abraham was there for a year and "became human again." Soon, an order came to split off the camp. Abraham was sent in the group of people who were to be shipped out. No one knew where they were going. Schindler saved some of these people. The cars were steaming with heat, due to the overcrowding and summer weather. This was August 1944. The trains eventually started off. They were given no food nor water en route. Some people actually drank urine. Many people died on this journey. Those that survived the journey eventually ended up in Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria. When they arrived in Mauthausen, they were stripped, shaved, searched, and given striped uniforms. Mauthausen

had a quarry of 187 steps. They had to descend the quarry, pick up rocks, and return to the top. They followed this same routine for several weeks.

01:36:00

Abraham eventually went to Gusen, a concentration camp in Austria, not far from Mauthausen. In Gusen, Abraham worked in the tunnels as an electrician on an assembly line. He worked on assembling the cockpits of planes. The foreman was a German who was not a Nazi. The Kapos in Gusen treated the inmates brutally. Every morning, Abraham saw mountains of corpses as he went to work. By the evening, these corpses were gone; they had been cremated. Abraham remembers the delousing process wherein people were examined for sores, wounds, and deformities. If any of these were present, they were hit over the head and killed.

01:41:00

In January 1945, they were given cold showers. When they were still wet, they had to run back to their barracks. There was not enough food. One loaf of bread had to be divided among 24 people. Once, scrambling with others for food, Abraham was hit over the head with a truncheon. Abraham decided never again to attempt to get extra food. He always tried to remain inconspicuous. Abraham went hungry in order to stay alive. The German foreman sometimes helped him to get a piece of bread. "Work" continued, even though it no longer served a purpose. At the end, prisoners no longer pretended to go to work. No more food was available.

01:46:00

The Russian prisoners at Gusen were stronger than the others. They "took care" of the Kapos. Americans came in on May 5, 1945. The Jews and the French were the physically weakest of the prisoners. Liberation brought the prisoners to the kitchen looking for food. They drank coffee and ate flour; that's what they found. They realized that there was nowhere to go. Directed by the American liberators, they walked 15 kilometers. In a combination of walking and stopping, they went to Linz, Austria. They wound up in a bunker, where they stayed for a few nights. More and more, former prisoners were coming into Linz. The Americans transferred Abraham and others to an estate near Linz.

01:51:00

The American soldiers were bitter at what they had seen, so they were very helpful. Nobody stayed too long because more and more people were arriving. Abraham transferred to Bindermichl, a displaced persons camp in Austria, with others. He was placed in an apartment with three bedrooms, two people in each room. The kitchen facilities were built. They lived "like 5-year-olds." Abraham describes the feelings of dependency. It was like being a child again. Yet, a sense of mystery about what happened to his family haunted him. He went to Poland with a friend.

01:56:00

Abraham went back to Kraków. There was nobody left. Abraham returned to his friends in Bindermichl. One day, Abraham registered to come to the United States. In Bindermichl, Abraham and his friends met young women. Abraham met his future wife there. She and her family were hidden by a Polish family. Abraham and his wife were married in the displaced persons camp.

02:01:00

Abraham didn't really comprehend during the Holocaust that anyone would be expected to rescue them. He didn't think that anyone could put an end to their suffering. Abraham was in the displaced persons camp from May 1945 until May 1949. He never talked, although there was an annual commemoration by the displaced persons camp group. Commemoration was not emotional; the hurt wasn't so great then. As Abraham got older, the hurt came. In Bindermichl, there were religious services. An Orthodox rabbi married young couples. The rabbi understood why people weren't as observant as they should have been.

02:06:00

They were never asked nor questioned about their experiences. Memorials and anniversaries were low-key. Abraham applied to come to the United States. His mother had three sisters in the United States who sent affidavits. Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) helped. Abraham had no thoughts of going to Palestine. Abraham and his wife arrived in the United States on May 29, 1949. They went directly to New Jersey because his wife's aunt lived in Passaic. They then moved to Newark, New Jersey. Abraham first worked in a cloak factory. But, through displaced persons contacts, the decision was made to go into the construction business. Through perseverance, Abraham and his partners became successful. They were awarded subdivisions to build streets and houses. He named the streets after Schindler. When Schindler came to the United States, he was gratified. Schindler devoted his life to humanity. He believed these were his "children."

02:11:00

Abraham helped arrange for a scholarship in Schindler's name at Hebrew University. Schindler loved Israel and went there each year. In the United States, Abraham was proud; he didn't seek charity. He was taught to do things on his own. Abraham feels God and his hard work helped him. Abraham never talked about the Holocaust until his children were older, and then he spoke of it only in bits and pieces. Abraham's hurt is greater now than it was when he was young. He feels that it is important to talk about this because "it happened in our lifetime." Abraham feels that people should cherish freedom, but be vigilant about anyone preaching bigotry.

02:16:00

Abraham feels that people are finally talking. He realizes that the Holocaust is going to be with them forever because of the "mystery." This is "a story without an end." Abraham speaks of the meeting of survivors in Washington, DC, where people got together to commemorate the Holocaust. At the meeting, Abraham met some friends from the displaced persons camp. Abraham speaks of his plan to go to Poland because his wife and family were saved by a Polish widow. Abraham wants to show his son where his mother was hiding and where he himself was born. Abraham said that he was well-received by the Jewish community in New Jersey.

02:21:00

Abraham felt "culture shock" when he came to New Jersey. He had seen little of Kraków when he was a boy because he was living inside the Jewish community. Now, he was in a large metropolis. Abraham raised a family. He has two daughters, Anne (who was born in the displaced persons camp), Ruth, and a son. Abraham also has four grandchildren at the time of the interview.