

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Archives

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

**Interview with Paul Monka
May 17 and June 9, 1989
RG-50.002*0042**

PREFACE

On May 17 and June 9, 1989, Paul Monka was interviewed on videotape by Bernard Weinstein 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.

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**Summary of the
Interview with Paul Monka
May 17 and June 9, 1989**

Paul Monka was born in 1920 in Bedzin, Poland. His parents worked in the wholesale textile business. Paul was the middle child in a family of 6 children. Paul dreamed of going to Palestine; his family were ardent Zionists. Eventually, their business was confiscated and the synagogue was burned down. Jews were restricted in coming and going. Young people were taken to labor camps from which they didn't return. Paul's brother was taken. The German who took over Paul's father's business let the family work there.

Paul was arrested and sent to Katowice, Poland. He survived solitary confinement in Katowice. Paul then joined the Armia Ludowa, an underground group which accepted Jews. Paul did what he could to recruit Jews. Paul had his family with him in the woods. Paul's father died there. Paul had to move East, toward the Russians, since the Germans were getting closer. Paul was liberated by the Russians and became the Security Chief of Silesia.

Paul went to Auschwitz after liberation and saw the destruction. Paul helped several people whom he knew who had survived the camps. One of Paul's sisters died after liberation. Paul wanted to go to Israel. Paul's mother got a visa to go to the United States. Paul couldn't get into Israel. Paul came to the United States in November 1949. When he came to the United States, Paul was reunited with a sister whom he hadn't seen in many years. Paul was married and had three children. At the time of the interview, Paul was a factory owner living in Montville, New Jersey.

**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Paul Monka
May 17 and June 9, 1989**

01:00:00

Paul Monka was born in 1920 in Bendzin (Bedzin), Poland, about 12 kilometers away from the German border. About 45,000 Jews lived in the town of about 60,000 people. Jews lived well in Bendzin until Hitler. Paul's father was in textiles. He had customers in Silesia (Poland and Czech republics) and Germany. Paul was 18 when Hitler invaded Poland. When Paul was a child, he attended a kindergarten-type Hebrew School. On the Sabbath, the town was completely empty as people made their preparations.

01:04:00

Those who had food and other essentials took care of those in need. Paul went to Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland to get a technical education. Once, when Paul raised his hand to answer a professor's question, the professor responded by saying, "We don't need 'Jewish' answers." This showed Paul how cast an influence had. Between 1933 and 1939, Jews were discriminated against in Poland by economic rules.

01:07:00

The Endejca Party, however, wished to take things further than economic restrictions. The Party wanted violence against the Jews. Despite government opposition to this practice, Jews were

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isolated in the classroom. Paul asked his teacher why he was using a book in their class by a Jewish author. The teacher verbally attacked Paul and the other students physically attacked him. When a policeman asked Paul if he needed help, he said no. At the time, Paul was living with an aunt and uncle.

01:10:00

Paul had always been patriotic. Now, he was humiliated. A doctor examined him and offered to put him in a hospital. The next day, Paul's parents came and took him out of the hospital. Paul took a crash course in French so that he could enter into Montifiore University in Belgium. Paul was unable to enter this university because the war broke out.

01:13:00

Just before the war, Paul's family went to the mountains. Because they lived close to the Germany-Poland border, they experienced the full impact of the invasion. Paul was stopped at the Bendzin and turned back. The Germans came into Bendzin on September 3, 1939. The townspeople were used to occupations so no one believed this occupation would be so catastrophic, particularly to the Jews. Paul dreamt of going to Palestine. Paul's family and friends were strong Zionists.

01:16:00

Silesia was an industrial center. Life had been good. Now, the Germans established a 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. curfew. Jews had to walk on the streets and could not walk on the sidewalks. The Jews were treated as inferiors, without freedom, they were demoralized. Jews had to do demeaning, forced

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labor. Once, Paul's father was beaten by a German guard. Paul wanted to take revenge, but friends would not let him. Eight days later, on the Sabbath, a cordon was thrown three blocks around the synagogue, which was set on fire. A man was shot for trying to rescue a torah.

01:19:00

Paul's family planned to hide in case the fire spread to their building. This was their first encounter with violence. The excitement of the fire subsided as night fell. The next day, a friend of Paul's named Vovek Strier was killed. Strier was buried in a mass grave along with 800 other people who had been burned to death the previous day. Strier's whole family was killed. Strier climbed a church to escape fire and was shot.

01:22:00

Paul felt that his family was in imminent danger. All businesses were confiscated. The Monkas lived in a mediocre neighborhood. Two families lived with them. Their town was, at this point, an open ghetto, with approximately 45,000 Jews. Gentiles could come in, but Jews were restricted in their coming and going.

01:25:00

Bread-lines were getting bigger and one had to get food. Paul remembers that children couldn't understand the restrictions. People were hanged publicly if food was brought into the ghetto and sold. The German man who took over Paul's father's textile business took in Paul's father and younger brother. A friend suggested to Paul that they form a workshop and take a Pole in with them. This way they could at least avoid forced labor.

01:28:00

They started a business. Their business had 10 workers. All of them got green cards. The Germans made young Jewish people think that they were giving them vocational training. They were taken to Silesian labor camps and never came back. Jews had to form police and incarcerate their young co-religionists in Gulags. The Jewish police had no guns, only rubber sticks.

01:31:00

Jews were afraid, therefore, to walk on the streets, lest they be taken. Paul and his brothers had green cards. But, the police were desperate for workers. One day, Paul, thinking he wasn't in danger, went to the Jewish police head. The head of the Jewish police told Paul that he was being arrested and sent to labor camp. Paul resisted. They got into a fight. This Jewish policeman survived the war.

01:34:00

After the fight, Paul returned home wounded and tattered. His brothers beat up the Jewish policemen, who acted like oppressors. The Jewish police ran to the Polish police headquarters. Later, Paul and his friend Ludwig Ehrlich were arrested. Paul's Polish boss defended them and the police let them go.

01:37:00

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They knew now that the Jewish police had Paul and his brother as targets. Later, the situation became worse. More and more, young people were taken for forced labor, in order to ensure them and to keep older people and children concentrated for decimation. Paul's brother was taken to Germany in forced labor and that signalled the tragic separation of their family.

01:40:00

But, they had to go on with their lives. There was talk of a closed ghetto. There were rumors that there would be a shop in the ghetto for making uniforms. Hunger was getting worse. Paul had to get another job because he had to get a card. His boss had been taken to the Russian front and the shop where Paul worked was dissolved.

01:43:00

A friend of Paul's had parents who'd owned a factory that made nuts and bolts, etc. The German who'd taken over that factory allowed Paul to work there. There were about 800 people working there, few of them Jewish. Paul worked there for a few months. Two German engineers, Dietrich and Khol, came from Bavaria, Germany. They called Paul a "dirty Jew" when he tried to shake hands with them.

01:46:00

Once, the machine broke down and Paul was blamed even though the Germans caused the breakdown. Paul fixed the machines, but the Germans still blamed him. Paul was told to run away, but he didn't. The Gestapo started beating him. Later, they took him to Katowicze, a major city of

Silesia (Katowice, Poland).

01:49:00

Paul was beaten with sticks and clubs and accused of sabotage, which he denied. They wanted Paul to sign a confession. Paul was put into isolation. He was numb and swollen. Seven days later, fatigued and starving, Paul signed a confession of sabotage. Paul resigned himself to his fate. Instead of taking Paul to be shot, he was put in a hospital.

01:52:00

Paul was in the hospital for three weeks. The entire time he couldn't believe that he was there. A doctor told Paul that he'd be alright. Paul was there for a short time when someone named Yanek came over and marveled that he'd survived solitary confinement.

01:55:00

Yanek interrogated Paul and then accepted him as part of the Arma Ledowa (Armia Ludowa) underground. Yanek told Paul that the underground would accept him, but Paul was suspicious that Yanek might be a spy for the Gestapo. Yanek was compassionate and concerned.

01:58:00

Before Paul left the hospital, he was interrogated by the Gestapo chief who told him to say nothing of the beating. If Paul or his family wanted to live he had to keep it a secret. The German boss took

Paul back to the factory, was happy to see him, and promised Paul that he'd be safe. The boss warned Paul, however, not to run away.

02:01:00

Paul was one of the fortunate few to get out of Gestapo prison. The young people were all gone. The population went from 95,000 to 25,000. Later, Paul was separated from his parents but was still with his younger brother. Paul saw German police surrounding the place.

02:04:00

People were pushed, herded, and selected for death or labor. They were divided into four groups. Parts of the groups returned home. The remaining group stayed the night and went to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Paul and his brother and mother and sister went home. Paul's father was pushed into the Auschwitz group.

02:07:00

Paul loved his father and wanted to do something for him. That night it rained heavily. Those who didn't lie down, as the Germans insisted, were shot. Paul tried to save his father. A nurse that Paul knew, helped him. Paul had the arm-band of a male nurse. Paul bluffed to the Jewish committee, when they tried to interfere, that he had a gun.

02:10:00

Paul approached a Gestapo man and told him that his father was there by mistake. Grudgingly, the Gestapo man allowed Paul to take his father. Paul decided, at that point, that he was going to run away into the fields to the Armia Ludowa headquarters. When Paul got to the headquarters, he saw Yanek who embraced him.

02:13:00

Paul agreed to join the underground provided that they would protect his family. He was accepted, but not for military assignment. Instead, Paul was accepted for a recruiting assignment. Paul went home and told his family that they wouldn't have to go into a closed ghetto.

02:16:00

Paul's father was practically immobile. Paul, his brother, and four people from the Polish underground walked with him through the fields, taking turns carrying him. When they arrived in the forest, about 50 kilometers from their town, they built an underground bunker. One could see far enough away in the house above the bunker to know whether Germans were around.

02:19:00

It wasn't easy for Paul to recruit Jews. He worked in the factory in Silesia for a few months. He recruited Poles disgusted with the German occupation who sensed they would be killed after the Jews. Paul went back to the ghetto to get a few more people, including his grandmother, who had broken her hip. Paul's niece didn't want to go with him without her mother. Paul's aunt was there and he planned on taking her too.

02:22:00

Paul also had a girlfriend in the closed ghetto and wanted to give her a chance to survive. Paul begged her to go too. But, that night, the ghetto was surrounded and all houses were broken open. Paul and the others hid in a bunker which was ripped open. Paul ran to find a baby who was crying.

02:25:00

Paul thought that it was all over. He jumped into a commode and covered himself with pillows. He was discovered. Afterwards, he came out. Paul saw a line of people and pushed himself into this line. Paul saw his girlfriend and tried to convince her to escape with him. Paul's aunt and grandmother survived the selection. Many others were taken.

02:28:00

A polish woman who had helped Paul, took his niece to her mother. Meanwhile, things were getting worse. The ghetto was becoming Judenrein. This ghetto was always surrounded at night. Paul was able to transfer to night work. He stole 500 documents, which translated into 500 lives. Paul gave the stolen documents to the Polish woman. Paul had a German Mauser with 50 bullets. He was able to defend himself.

02:31:00

Paul tried to get his aunt to escape. His aunt didn't want to go. Paul begged his girlfriend to

escape. She told him to leave. Paul expressed that he feel certain that they were taken to Auschwitz. Paul was never able to find out what happened to his girlfriend.

02:34:00

Paul tried to do what he could in the underground. But, he felt defeated. Paul did sabotage on an air-force base. His sister, Rozka, went with them. Rozka was caught and beaten and got Tuberculosis. Later, she died of Tuberculosis in Italy. Paul's father was sick. Paul's brother, Alexander, was smuggled out of a labor camp. A few day's later, Paul's father died in his arms. Paul buried him late at night so that no one could see.

02:37:00

Paul's father's death was a bitter pill. The Germans were digging trenches and Paul feared that they'd find his father's grave. Paul moved east toward the Russians. He had to leave his family. They were told to move toward the city of Dabrowa Gornicza, Poland. They knew that liberation was coming.

02:40:00

Paul wound up near Lublin, Poland where the Polish government was. The government was later moved to Warsaw, Poland. Paul was liberated by the Russians near Lublin. Paul met a general named Zavatsky, whose wife was from Bendzin. Paul got a job in the security office. Once Russians broke through to the German-occupied area, Paul returned to Bendzin. When he got to Bendzin, he found out that his family was in Dabrowa Gornicza and doing well. Paul was happy.

02:43:00

The reunion was emotional. Paul couldn't recognize Bendzin. The streets were empty. Businesses were closed. There were no Jews. Paul found one family he knew who survived sheltered by Poles. Some Poles were happy to see him, some said, "do you still live?"

02:46:00

Their apartment was no longer available. But, they found new lodgings. Paul waited for new instructions. For a long while, he'd known only fighting and war. Paul went to the city hall to find out about the day when the synagogue was burned in Bendzin. He discovered it was done by Polish conspirators of German descent.

02:49:00

When Paul became Security Chief of Silesia, he brought conspirators to trial. They got the death penalty. They were executed where the burnings occurred. The Russians had strict order to execute collaborators and S.S. Paul went to Katowicze, the capital of Silesia, three days after the liberation of Auschwitz, in January 1945. Paul became very proficient in his job.

02:52:00

Many Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans) lived in Silesia. One had to know who was and who was not pro-Nazi. Paul saw many German soldiers' corpses on the streets of Katowicze, also many damaged

vehicles. Cooperation, at that time, between the Russian and the Polish troops, was very high.

02:55:00

Paul went to Auschwitz. He saw with his own eyes the destruction. He saw bones and ashes. Paul wept. The Germans had dynamited the Crematoria, and burned the living quarters. Some Jews survived Auschwitz after January 23, 1945. These were Musselmen (walking dead). Paul understood that a death march had occurred.

02:58:00

Paul helped several people whom he knew, who had survived the camps, to get jobs. One woman with 11 siblings came back from a death march. She wanted revenge. Paul made her a prison warden. Paul felt little concern for the lives of Germans. He thought that they were treated much better than the Jews had been treated.

03:01:00

Paul tried to straighten out his life. He was bothered by his father's burial in the woods. Paul wanted to move his father's body to a Jewish cemetery in Bendzin. Paul took a patrol to the woods. A rumor spread through the village that Jews were coming for gold.

03:04:00

Suddenly, as they were removing Paul's father's coffin, peasants appeared. Paul, his brothers, and

the others tried to ward them off. Paul gave an order to shoot in the air. Paul feels that Hitler's influence was so pervasive that, even though so many Jews died, the anti-Semitism still prevailed.

03:07:00

Paul was happy that his father could be reburied according to Jewish law. Paul was unhappy with the Silesian politics and still prevailing anti-Semitism. Paul suggested that General Zavatsky be brought to Silesia as governor. Paul is proud that he was instrumental in Zavatsky's acceptance. Zavatsky made Paul an advisor. Paul requisitioned the S.S. head's mansion for Zavatsky.

03:10:00

Paul saw to it that everything was in order. Paul got involved with the head of the group handling war criminals. Paul continued to give survivors positions in government. Paul's sister was ill from beatings and suffering. Paul didn't know what to do for her. He blamed himself for her illness from his underground work.

03:13:00

The Gestapo had punctured her lungs with the beatings and she had Tuberculosis. She was bedridden most of the time. Switzerland wouldn't accept her visa. Paul didn't want to work for Russians. He went to the American embassy to try to let her to the United States to get medical aid. Another of Paul's sisters already lived in the United States.

03:19:00

The United States wouldn't accept Paul's sister Rozka. Paul was hurt in an accident, a collision with a truck. Gradually, he recovered. Paul marvels that he could have been killed in an accident after all he'd been through. Paul wanted, now, to devote more time to his family.

03:22:00

Paul got permission to leave Poland. In December 1945, Paul got permission to go to Italy. Paul went by train with his family through the various zones. Paul had a diplomatic permit. They left Katowicze for Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. In Bratislava, Paul was able to go, by truck, to Vienna, Austria after bribing some Russians with Vodka. Paul drove toward Vienna in one truck, his sister in another.

03:25:00

Suddenly, Paul saw his sister walking and he heard shouting. They were stopped by Russian officers in a car. Russian soldiers were robbing and killing people between Bratislava and Vienna. The officers they were with protected them, and brought them to the American zone in Vienna.

03:28:00

Paul traveled from Vienna to Innsbruck, Austria. They went toward the Brenner Pass. Paul put his sister on a sleigh that was pulled by a horse. They pushed the sleigh through Brenner Pass. On the other side, they found Poles who'd served in England during the war.

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03:31:00

Paul urged the officers to let him go through. The Poles were impressed with the Polish diplomatic passports, even though they didn't recognize the existing Polish government. For the first time, Paul saw American officers. Americans were bemused as to why the Poles didn't let him through. Finally, the Poles relented.

03:34:00

Paul traveled by train to Muran, Czechoslovakia. Paul's brother decided to return to Poland. Suddenly, Paul saw a freer country where people were much better. Paul stayed over New Year's. Doctors were hopeful. Paul then returned to Poland. Poland gave Paul money to relocate his sister.

03:37:00

After the war, Paul was treated well by Poles. Paul was always assigned to go to Germany, Hungary, and France to ferret out S.S. officers. Paul went back to Italy. His sister wasn't improving, but the doctor gave Paul hope. Paul returned to Poland, and transferred to a higher post in Warsaw. Paul really wanted his education. Paul was about to enter the foreign ministry, when his mother telegraphed that his sister was sinking.

03:40:00

Paul didn't want to work for the communists. He was only 24 years old. In Italy, Paul thought continuously about this. Paul's sister improved slightly. Paul returned in September 1946. His

sister got worse. Paul arrived just before the High Holidays. Paul didn't believe that his sister would die. Paul prayed. At that time, the Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) had opened a sanitarium. On his way home, the nurse met him and told him that his sister was dead.

03:43:00

The death of his sister changed the character of Paul's life. Paul decided to go back and resign from his functions. Paul was offered a consul-generalship, but he refused it and he discussed things with his brothers. They all decided that they should leave. Paul's mother took his sister's death hard. The entire family was bitter that the United States, which would have helped her, refused to take her, especially after surviving the ordeal of the war.

03:46:00

The Polish government would have taken Paul back, but he refused. Paul wanted to break with his past. He wanted to help Jewish survivors. Paul went to work for the Joint Distribution Committee (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) and UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration). Paul wanted to go to Israel, but wouldn't get in. He wanted to do something for his mother. Paul's older sister had been in the United States since 1941.

03:49:00

Many Jews tried to get through to Italy through the Alps. This was dangerous. Paul set up convoys. England didn't want to let the Jews through to Italy to go to Israel. They went from Muran to Milan, Italy. Paul helped to organize this. Paul forgot about Poland. Paul enrolled in the University of

Padua in Italy. Paul thinks that they passed him through out of sympathy.

03:52:00

Paul studied and slept infrequently. Paul's mother got a visa to go the United States. Paul remained alone in Italy. Paul chose to go to Israel, whatever the cost. Paul tried to speak to Jewish leaders. Officials didn't let him go to Israel. Paul had mixed memories about Italy. Italy gave Paul his first taste of freedom.

03:55:00

Paul came to the United States on November 21, 1949. Paul wanted to see his sister, whom he hadn't seen in ten years. Paul met his wife in the United States. Paul loves this country, but resents that they didn't help Jews. Paul is not clear as to the reason, but feels that the United States could have done more. Paul feels that things have been better in the last 30 years.

03:58:00

In the United States, you have both freedom of opportunity and expression. Paul has three children who have supported himself and his wife in their efforts to express their experiences in the Holocaust. Paul hopes his children will remain good human beings.