

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

Interview with Aaron Schwarz
March 28, and April 5, 1989
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PREFACE

On March 25, 1987, Aaron Schwarz was interviewed on videotape by Susanna Rich and 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 Aaron Schwarz
March 28, and April 5, 1989

Aaron Schwarz was born on February 22, 1909 in Zarowka, Poland. Aaron was serving in the Polish Army when World War II broke out in September 1939. He was wounded in the leg, but escaped German captivity by jumping off a train. He returned home to Zarowka. On a trip to Tarnów, Poland, he was captured by the Germans and sent to the Pustków forced labor camp in 1940. He was then deported, along with his family, to the Radomysl Wielki ghetto in Poland. The Schwarz family escaped from Radomysl Wielki and hid in a forest before secretly entering the Debica ghetto (forced labor camp) in Poland. Aaron was sent to the Kraków ghetto to perform forced labor. The Germans transferred him to the Rymanów, Poland, forced-labor camp. From there, Aaron was moved to the Szebnie forced-labor camp and then to Plaszków concentration camp where he stayed from 1942-1943. The Germans then moved him to Mielec forced labor camp. While being transferred to Treblinka, in 1944, he jumped from a train and fled to the Russian lines. Post liberation Aaron moved to Rzeszów, Poland and Kraków. He spent time in Heidelberg and Bremerhaven before emigrating to the United States in 1949.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Aaron Schwartz
March 28, and April 5, 1989**

01:00:00

Aaron comments on how the Germans systematically found every Jew in order to kill them. He wonders how a country as cultivated as Germany could have done what they did. Aaron was in the ghetto of Debica, Poland. He and about 200 other young men were working as transports to death camps were passing through. Some of the young men were cleaning tracks, others were unloading or loading tracks while still others did masonry work. Aaron understood that the trains were unbearably hot. The people were begging for water.

01:04:00

Aaron grabbed a pitcher. Someone inside the train held out their hand to him. Aaron ran to a hydrant. A German SS man caught him and was about to shoot him. Realizing that orders were "sacred" to the Germans, he yelled out to the SS man that he had an order from the train commandant. Finally the German let him go as the train moved away.

01:07:00

Aaron planned to escape with his brother. He realized that prisoners were being shot after completing their tasks. Several

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prisoners had escaped the morning before. Aaron had a revolver. He feared he would be robbed by Poles in the forest.

01:10:00

Aaron kept the revolver in a hole he had made in a loaf of bread. When he was arrested he had the revolver. His cousin went with them. An escape meant that 15 others would be shot. Thus, everyone was very careful not to allow escapes. A revolver meant one planned to escape.

01:13:00

Aaron had to strip for a search. When they found the revolver he explained that the revolver was protection against robbery. It finally got dark and all of them were told that they were free to go in exchange for bribes of gold and silver. He threw the revolver into a bucket. Aaron fished it out later, but was noticed carrying it.

01:16:00

Aaron had to hand the revolver over to the leader of the Jews. He was later let out, but was put under constant surveillance. Prisoners were shot to prevent contact with the underground. They desperately wanted to live. Life was precious. Aaron can't understand why people committed suicide.

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01:19:00

Being alive was itself illegal, but people tried to live. The ones who broke down were students, unused to hard labor. Aaron was not in that category. He had to hammer piles into the ground and use a shovel. He was taught to build bridges and to explode them.

01:22:00

At the onset of the war, Aaron was in the Polish Army. He was wounded in the leg and was put on a train for Germany. He managed to escape from the train while still in the Ukraine. Aaron got to a house where he managed to get hold of some clothes. He returned to his home and family, which included five siblings and two parents. Not long after he returned, they were all thrown out and forced into the ghetto--all eight of them. They were sent to Radomysl Wielki near Tarnów, Poland.

01:25:00

There were three or four families, (around 20 people) in one room. There was fighting for space. One slept wherever one could. One day everyone was picked up and taken to a larger town where the railroad was. The night before, Aaron and his family escaped into the forest.

01:28:00

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The family stayed in the forest for two days. They went to Debica, another ghetto. To stay there illegally, Aaron needed ID cards. He sold his parent's gold watch for an ID. At this time his family was still intact. Aaron thought they should separate. His youngest brother came with him to Plaszów.

01:31:00

Aaron's brother wanted to escape. Aaron warned him not to. He managed to get away but was shot later on. His older brother hid in a barn. He was also shot--just six months before the end of the war. Aaron returns to the story of Debica. The refugees tried to hid there, after hiding in the forest. Once, 60 or so people were shot. A dying man gave him several hundred zlotys, which the man had been carrying with him.

01:34:00

Aaron recalls a little girl who was shot while trying to comfort her mother with the words "Don't cry. This is our destination." The little girl was blonde and beautiful, shivering in the December cold. He has grandchildren who remind him of her. The SS always told victims to turn around before they shot them so that the victim's blood would not be splattered on them.

01:31:00

That expression, "turn around," is never uttered in his house

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because it brings back terrible memories. The little girl's mother refused to turn around.

01:40:00

A group went out for work every morning. The Arbeitsleiter (foreman) loaded about 30 men on top of the roof of a covered truck. He made a sharp turn, the roof of the truck turned over, and the men's bodies were mangled. "Oh what a pile of garbage!" was the foreman's response.

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01:43:00

At Passover in Debica, people exchanged possessions for flour. The SS and Ukrainians surrounded the ghetto. Aaron was loaded on a truck with other workers and sent to Kraków. At the site of a Jewish cemetery there were hundreds of girls pounding rocks into gravel. Aaron and the other men were breaking open tombstones, and giving stones to the girls to pound.

01:46:00

The Germans wanted to extract the gold from the jaws of the corpses. They knew everyone had gold teeth in Europe.

01:49:00

Skulls were rolling down the hills, as were the finger bones and other bones. One was so hardened, one had no feeling for anything. At this time the Kraków ghetto was cleared.

01:52:00

Aaron and his brother went to Plaszów. Some people smuggled children into Plaszów. One child was smuggled in a milk can. The child survived and later became a great surgeon in a New York hospital. The children who were discovered were loaded onto trucks. There were cries of children and parents who could not reach each other. The children were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

01:55:00

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The Nazis took land away from Polish farmers to build Plaszów. This is where Aaron was taken from Debica. When they arrived, they were divided into groups. In a heavy Bavarian accent the foreman told each prisoner the name of his or her group. If the prisoner did not repeat it fast enough, he or she was beaten over the head with a whip that had a wire enclosed that cut the victim's eyes.

01:58:00

Aaron was assigned to a barracks building group. He was assigned to work outside. When he laid down on his bunk he felt it was a bad dream. The group that was working outside consisted of prisoners who were most fit. It was feared that they were with the underground. They were to be shot. Aaron and his co-workers had to tie up their shoes and trousers before they were to be shot.

02:01:00

The sister of one of the men who had been shot worked for Amon Goeth, the commandant of Plaszów. When she revealed this, she was shot. Every few weeks a group from Plaszów was selected to go to Birkenau. Anyone who looked pale and unhealthy was selected.

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02:04:00

One of the men selected had hidden a child. He was crying, not because he was going to be shot but because he was no longer going to be able to see his little girl. They took him. Aaron does not know what happened to the girl.

02:07:00

In Plaszów 15 people were picked up to be shot because someone had escaped. The escapee was a Jew who had converted to Catholicism. Aaron was one of those selected. He knew someone in the SS. When at a New Year's party the lights went out, Aaron rewired the system and managed to restore the lights on.

02:10:00

The SS man liked Aaron for what he had done and saved him from being shot. Aaron still dreams about being shot. He also dreams about children being shot. The children were very conscious of what was happening to them.

02:13:00

Everyone had to pay "slaughter money." People were told that they would be spared if they gave up gold and valuables. Everyone was anxious to live, however terrible their conditions. The barracks were terrible, but Aaron was a good worker. The barracks foreman arbitrarily gave out 25 lashes with a whip, even to Aaron,

who was a good worker.

02:16:00

When Aaron pleaded that he couldn't work if he were beaten, the foreman, Willi Stieb, threatened to shoot him. The Jewish girls were making themselves look blond so as to be taken for Aryans. Once two beautiful blond girls were brought into the camp.

02:19:00

They had to undress and wait an hour to be shot. A truck load of people with papers for the United States were tricked into coming into Plaszów. They were gunned down immediately. Aaron had papers from before the war.

02:22:00

Aaron was in Plaszów from 1942 to 1943. Before the war he had been drafted twice, once as a young man, and then before the war. In 1943, the Germans were looking for people to go to Mielec, a forced-labor camp, to build an aircraft factory. It was near his home. Aaron went there. The conditions were terrible. It was fall and quite cold. He had no clothes to cover himself.

02:25:00

He asked for a cover and was sent over to sick bay. A man

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was dying and there was a blanket covering him. Before he died, someone had stolen the blanket. The lice were eating him. One day Aaron went behind the barracks and took off his clothes and started to boil them. Someone in the tower saw the fire. The head of the camp ran over with a revolver. Aaron explained in German that he wanted to stay clean. The head of the camp let him alone. Although Aaron had a day without lice, the bedbugs made up for it.

02:28:00

Aaron's assignment was to erect a platform for boarding planes. He did it wrong and was continuously beaten. He finally spoke up and asked the Germans to show him how to erect the platform. After that, he was proficient at it.

02:31:00

Aaron constantly heard planes overhead. They were told to evacuate camp. His plan was to jump out of the train and get away. Aaron was with a friend. He stood inside the car near a window and had pliers with him. They planned to jump out in the middle of the night.

02:34:00

Aaron and his friend both fell asleep and lost the opportunity. He believes that they lost a chance. Aaron went to

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a salt mining town called Velitschka (Wieliczka), Poland. There, they were told that they were going to Germany. Aaron found out by accident that the Russians were already in Melitz. He was mortified because rescue was so close.

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02:37:00

Aaron found a pair of phylacteries which he kept with him at all times. In lines of five they boarded the train taking people to Treblinka concentration camp. The train reeked of heat and chlorine powder. Aaron took off his jacket and striped pants and used his pliers to cut the wires.

02:40:00

As the SS boarded the train, Aaron jumped out and picked up a railway tie. He ran to the left as the train went right. He still had his phylacteries with him. He decided to keep these with him since the Nazis had another way of finding out that he was Jewish. The Russian front was 60 miles away.

02:43:00

Aaron was hungry. He found a house. After telling a woman a fabricated story, she gave him bread and milk. Aaron continued on his way. He came to an area where there were three bridges, all guarded by the SS. Aaron wondered how he would get ahead. He saw an old woman with a cow and a goat. He offered to help her by carrying the goat and got through the bridge.

02:46:00

Aaron could not walk anymore. In a wheat or cornfield he fell asleep and slept all night.

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02:49:00

It was decreed that children of Jews were not allowed to live. In Plaszów, they were digging graves. Children were brought in trucks, (this was his first day in the camp). They were shot and put into the graves. A little girl sat down in the grave in an Eskimo white coat and asked for water. The child was shot in the neck and swallowed blood. She said to her mother who was not there, "Turn me around, turn me around."

02:52:00

Aaron does not know what happened to the little girl. He says these things get imbedded in the mind. They cannot be forgotten. This highly educated nation allowed itself to reach a level of incomprehensible callousness. Aaron never saw compassion from the Germans. A German once told him that if he got an order to shoot his mother, he would do it.

02:55:00

Aaron says that he too became callous. When an elderly man was beaten, his son protested and was hanged for a whole day because he stood up to the SS man. There was no human feeling. A

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woman was brought in who claimed she wasn't Jewish. Her little girl was with her. Both were shot.

02:58:00

People outside the camp were shot before people inside the camp, because the Germans thought the outsiders had contact with the underground. Aaron was the only one of 46 family members to survive. This happened only because he jumped out of the train.

03:01:00

Before the war, Aaron went away to Kraków. He was raised in a small town called Zanolka, 60 miles away from Kraków. Aaron was looking for work. He was a shirtmaker, but could not get a job. This was in 1939. He found no openings in Kraków. He met a girl who wanted to quit the factory and she agreed she would supply him with material to make shirts. He bought machinery and started a factory, but that ended with the outbreak of World War II. Aaron was drafted into the army.

03:04:00

On the first day of the war, his factory was bombed. His father was a dealer in meadowlands which he rented or sold to farmers. It was a good business. They had a dairy and also sold hay. They were selling hay to the army. There was much Antisemitism.

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03:07:00

Most businesses owned by Jews entrusted a gentile with the goods. Later the gentile who held goods for Aaron and his family refused his brother bread and threatened to turn him over to the SS. Those who held Jewish property did not want Jews to survive to reappropriate it. Aaron's youngest sister was 18. He was trying to get his sister a Polish birth certificate, but it was all in vain. Even the priests were not neutral.

03:10:00

It was impossible to survive in Poland for five years under Nazi rule. Many people escaped into the forest. They needed farmers to give them food. The farmers were poor and immediately reported the Jews to the police. Before the war, Aaron had dreams. With Antisemitism and the onset of war, Jewish industry was boycotted.

03:13:00

In Poland, children moved away from their parents very, very rarely. The tendency was to stay close to home. Aaron's youngest sister could have gotten away, but did not. His wife did get away. That is why whole families perished. Aaron's parents were taken in late 1942 from the Tarnów ghetto. They went straight to Birkenau because his sister didn't want to go to an area with

workers.

03:16:00

Everyone was looking for a hiding place. The problem was that most feasible hiding places were well-known. Aaron had a hiding place under the barracks. During an aktion, 25 people hid there. The children were given Luminal, a drug to make children sleep. A grandmother choked her grandchild to death. This went on in Tarnów and Debica ghettos.

03:19:00

Hiding was only a temporary solution. The person who had a place to hide had a temporary respite. Today's idea of a "ghetto" is very different from what it was then. In the ghetto there was no egress or access to the outside world. Those inside had virtually no right to live.

03:22:00

Going back home, Aaron found it had changed into a prison where people were constantly being beaten and spied on. People made up stories to cover themselves if interrogated. Jews were forbidden anywhere and they had to identify themselves by wearing the Jewish star.

03:25:00

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Aaron went to Tarnów before he went to the ghetto. Money could be made by those bringing something to the large city. Once, Aaron was put in jail in Tarnów. He was sent to an Arbeitslager (Zwangsarbeitslager für Juden--a forced labor camp).

They took away his bicycle and he was beaten. Aaron had with him a bottle of vinegar and some onions. He applied the vinegar to the wounds and went back to where he was in the forest.

03:28:00

A farmer he knew fed him. The Germans came the next day. The farmer begged him to go. Aaron jumped out and went into the forest. He looked for the most covered area. Aaron was plagued by horseflies, ants, and boredom. There was no water. Aaron sat there for a day. He found some blackberries and gorged himself.

03:31:00

Aaron saw someone he knew and called to him. He was able to get bread. This person knew him before the war. Aaron returns to discussing the story of trying to get his sister a certificate. When a shooting or a roundup took place people had to hide. The Germans knew that there were areas where one could hide. Aaron had an 80-year old grandmother. He tried to find a place for her. The Germans threatened to kill anyone who hid Jews. Aaron's grandmother dressed herself in shrouds and went to the police, begging to be killed.

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03:34:00

The police told her to go to a cemetery, which she did. The police came when it got dark and shot her. The richest man in town also asked for this. They killed him too. There was no place one could go to survive. Aaron paid a young man on a bicycle to find out if there was a ghetto left.

03:37:00

Aaron went to Debica ghetto. If a person was not "legally alive" they were not alive. He found some pieces of gold. Aaron went to the Judenrat and traded the gold for a ration card, which attested to the fact that he was "legal." He was assigned a barracks to stay in. The card was his key to life.

03:40:00

Six months later, the ghetto was cleaned out, except for workers. He was sent to Rymanów where he worked for six months dismantling the concentration camp for Russian POWs. Everything that was taken out was sent by railroad to Plaszów. From Rymanów there was no place one could escape to. The hunger was terrible.

The dogs were given meat. Aaron managed to procure a piece of meat with a wire through a fence.

03:43:00

Aaron was taken from there to Szebnie, about 30 miles away. There were hangars where they kept tanks and machinery. The Germans stored silver spoons and knives, Torah scrolls, phylacteries, and prayer shawls. Aaron was in a group selecting these items.

03:46:00

The Torahs were cut up by the Germans for use as lining in shoes at a shoe factory. The prisoners did this work numbly. They were there for six months and then they were sent to Plaszów. Four thousand people from Szebine were later shot to death.

03:49:00

Aaron jumped out of the train after being transported from Melitz (Mielec). He made his escape across three rivers. He traveled during the day because he could always get lost in a group of laborers. Aaron had to cross a main road and found a loaf of bread. He knew from his army experience that bread left after an evacuation might be poisoned. Biting off a small piece, he found that the bread was fine. Aaron saw it as a sign that he would come through.

03:52:00

Aaron went back into the forest. He usually cooked potatoes. Most of the people he encountered looked dirty and blackened.

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Aaron was with a group of fugitives for about four weeks. He heard that the Russians were already on the other side of the Vistula river in Poland.

03:55:00

The group heard noises of bombing and troop movements. One morning the sky was burning. They knew about "scorched earth." Aaron told the friend he was with that they should move out. The Poles hiding in the forest decided to go too.

03:58:00

Suddenly, they were stopped by the Russians. The Russians sent the group into town. They heard that a week earlier several Jews were killed by members of the Polish underground.¹

04:01:00

The Jews were not safe, even after liberation. Six months later, Aaron went from Rzeszów to Kraków. He worked for the Russians making shirts and got food in exchange. One could sell things in exchange for necessities. He and his friend rented a large room in a house on the main square, where there was always a bazaar. Aaron sold leather and other such things on consignment.

¹ At this point, through an unintentional slip of the tongue, Aaron made an erroneous reference to Kielce, Poland and the massacre of survivors there. This event actually took place on July 9, 1946.

04:04:00

A rich Jew who had survived had a fur coat which he had sold in the bazaar for food. The buyer accused him of stealing the coat from him. The police arrested the old man who had sold the coat for 24 hours until he was able to prove that it had been his coat.

04:07:00

One morning in Kraków, while Aaron was away, the A.K. (Polish Home Army) lined Jewish refugees against a wall and took all of their goods away including Aaron's. Aaron gave up the business.

04:10:00

Aaron met his wife. He was not eager to get married; he wanted to go to the United States. He later got an affidavit from his uncles in Plainfield, New Jersey. Aaron went to Heidelberg, Germany, to cure a lung ailment.

04:13:00

Aaron always dreams about hiding and running. He came to the United States in 1949. The organization that sponsored him had a leader who was a Communist. This made entry into the United States difficult. Aaron spent five weeks in Bremerhaven, Germany, living in barracks. He faced many difficulties until he got here.

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04:16:00

Aaron couldn't get an apartment and worked two jobs. Aaron went into the building trades for eleven years and partially retired. His children are starting to be interested in his experiences. He has six grandchildren. One, who is Orthodox, lives in Muncie, New York. Another, who works in computers, lives in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. A third grandchild is a lawyer who lives in Livingston, New Jersey. Aaron feels he has accomplished something in his life.