

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

**Interview with Aba Praver
March 19, 1987
RG-50.002*0063**

PREFACE

On March 19, 1987, Aba Prawer was interviewed by Frances Farber, Phyllis Tobin, 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 Aba Praver
March 19, 1987**

Aba Praver was born in Miechow, Poland on January 1, 1922 to a religious family. Soon after the German occupation, Aba was conscripted into forced labor for the Germans because he was the oldest son in his family. Aba also sold "essentials" to make money in order to get food for his family.

Aba went to a work camp in Kraków, Poland on the advice of a Volksdeutsche friend. Because Aba was a "good worker," he received special privileges from his S.S. captors. Aba was then sent to Rabka, Poland to work. Occasionally, he was given leave to visit his parents and siblings who had since moved from Miechow to the Kraków ghetto. Many of his relatives vanished between one visit and the next. The last time that Aba returned to the Kraków ghetto, in 1943, it was being liquidated. After spending time in Rabka, Aba had numerous forced labor assignments in Kraków. Aba was briefly reunited with his father and brothers in Pionki, Poland, a forced labor camp. This was around 1943 or 1944. After this, Aba and his brother Pinchas were then sent to Leipzig, Germany, and then to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, and finally to forced labor in the Buna factory in Auschwitz III concentration camp (Monowitz concentration camp in Poland). Aba was evacuated from Buna after a British bombing run and was then sent to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany, where he contracted typhus. Aba discusses his memories of Ilse Koch, the wife of Karl Koch, the

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Commandant of Buchenwald. While at Buchenwald, Aba also worked in the Crawinkel subcamp of Ohrdruf.

Aba was liberated from Buchenwald by American troops. Aba discusses his life after the war, his move to the United States in 1951, and his life in New Jersey after 1956.

**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Aba Prawer
March 19, 1987**

1:00:00

Aba was born in Miechow, Poland, near Kraków, on January 1, 1922. He lived in a religiously observant family. Aba's father and uncles jointly owned a wheat business. Aba was the oldest of four siblings, all of whom died, as well as his parents. Aba's youngest brother died in 1945, after the war, in Garmisch (Garmisch Partenkirchen), Germany. Aba learned of his brother's whereabouts while he was in Landsberg (Landsberg am Lech) displaced persons camp in Germany. When Aba finally got to Garmisch Partenkirchen, he learned that his brother had died of a heart attack. Aba knew instinctively that something had happened. His brother had died only a few days before.

01:06:00

A few days later, Aba went to Feldafing displaced persons camp in Germany. In Feldafing, Aba spoke to the Rabbi about a Jewish burial for his brother. Previously, Aba learned that his father had died in Austria in 1945. Aba's father and an uncle had been prisoners in Skarzysko (Skarzysko-Kamienna concentration camp in Poland), where they contracted

yellow fever. Aba was still a teenager when he realized that his family was in danger. He understood that the Germans were coming.

01:11:00

Aba didn't leave Miechow because he didn't want to separate from his family. When the Germans came, Aba recalls that they didn't seem to discriminate at first. However, this changed virtually overnight. The Germans needed workers. Aba helped his father and uncles. As the Germans began to push toward Warsaw, Poland, circumstances became progressively worse. Aba became frightened. Friends turned on them, and curfews were imposed.

01:16:00

Because Aba was the oldest son in his family, he was taken to perform forced labor. Aba remembers that he did not know the difference between the army and the S.S. The main man at the labor camp was an S.S. officer. Circumstances grew progressively worse as time passed. There was great hunger. Aba worked on a railroad, unloading cars. Aba's father tried to deal in wheat, but was caught by the German police. From that point on, Aba hated Germans. Aba was also aware of killings. Aba's cousin was killed for helping his family.

Aba's father was released because their family had the money to pay his ransom.

01:21:00

Aba remembers that he "wheeled and dealed" in order to survive. He bought and sold "essentials" to make some money. Aba knew a Volksdeutsche (an ethnic German) who had been friendly to Aba's family. This man helped keep Aba's clothing from turning to rags. Aba worked on the roads, but secretly bought and sold "essentials." At this time, people were being rounded-up. Aba was able to avoid this because the Volksdeutsche helped him.

01:26:00

The Volksdeutsche advised Aba to go to the Arbeitslager (work camp) in Kraków. Aba went to Kraków, leaving his family behind in Miechow. 150 men from Aba's town were at the work camp in Kraków. Aba didn't recognize how cleverly the Germans were working and exhausting the Jews. When Aba worked on the roads, the faster they worked, the more was expected of them. Aba remembers a hairy, brutal Tyrolean foreman named Willi.

01:31:00

Willi was a total sadist. However, he liked Aba, who was a good worker. Aba cleaned diesel steamers. Aba took some extra diesel oil, which he then sold to farmers in exchange for food, such as butter, eggs, or cheese. Willi was pleased with this. Aba worked faster than anyone else. Willi gave him food, although Aba would not eat non-Kosher food.

01:36:00

Earlier in his life, Aba was not terribly observant. He was more attracted to the young Zionist movement. Willi also taught Aba about road building. Aba worked so fast that he completed the work before each day's deadline. Braun, the commandant, let Aba stall and pretend to be busy after he had completed his work. This was so that Braun wouldn't get in trouble. Aba was proud to show that Jews could perform manual labor. However, he hated the Germans for what was happening to the "non productive" people. As a worker, Aba received special privileges.

01:41:00

Aba was sent to a place called Rabka, Poland, to work. He found out that all the Jews were being killed. Aba didn't know if others knew that he was Jewish. Willi knew. Aba realized that he may eventually be taken away. Aba's trading enabled him to get benefits. He couldn't complain too much.

Aba felt compelled to go home because he wanted to see his family. Aba tried to get his family to come work with him, but the Nazis denied his request. Aba, then, decided to go home. At this time, the ghetto was being liquidated.

01:46:00

Aba went with about 100 others to Kraków as the Kraków ghetto was being liquidated in 1943. Aba worked in an airfield, and also in a kitchen for a while. Aba hoped to be able to bring his family to him. Aba also worked leveling out dirt roads. Aba's family was in another ghetto in Kraków.

01:51:00

Everyone who worked for the air force survived. They worked on planes. They worked hard and enjoyed it. Once, a select group was allowed to go home to their families, including Aba. Aba's parents were still alive at the time. On his second visit home, they were no longer there. An evacuation occurred between his two visits home. Aba was never hungry while he lived in Kraków. However, he saw hunger and poverty and misery every time he visited his parents in the ghetto.

01:56:00

On his second visit home, Aba's parents, brothers and sisters were no longer there. His mother and older sister were sent to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, where they died. Aba's father, brothers, and uncles were sent to a slave labor camp where they made bricks. One sister ran away, but didn't survive. Aba didn't know all of these details at the time.

02:01:00

Aba felt lucky that he was chosen as a cook. He worked in the kitchen for a while. Then, someone took over his position. Aba went to work in a field building barracks. Aba also performed agricultural labor. At this time, Aba's younger brother, Pinchas, was with him. Together, Aba and Pinchas learned about their younger sister who was killed in a forest along with hundreds of other people. After they were all shot, the ground was heaving. After a few weeks, prisoners, including Aba, were detailed to hard labor.

02:06:00

Aba's father and uncles were sent to Skarzysko-Kamienna concentration camp in Poland.. He was sent to a quarry. Aba remembers one S.S. man in particular who hit prisoners so hard with his whip. Their heads swelled up like pumpkins.

02:11:00

Aba remembers withstanding sadistic treatment in the quarry. Aba knew, at this point, what "concentration camp" meant. Killing went on all the time. Even the toughest prisoners were killed. Aba was lucky; he wasn't killed. Aba was then taken to Pionke forced labor camp in Poland by train. In Pionki, Aba met his father and brothers. This was in 1943 or 1944. There was a munitions factory in Pionki.

02:16:00

The reunion in Pionki was a tearful one. However, they were still alive. They were soon separated again. Aba exchanged cigarettes for alcohol and then alcohol for bread. Aba remembers that having his family still alive kept him going. Aba and his brother Pinchas were sent, by train, to Leipzig, Germany. From Leipzig, they were sent to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. From Auschwitz they were sent to the Buna factory in Auschwitz III concentration camp (Monowitz concentration camp in Poland), which was 20 or 30 kilometers from Auschwitz.

02:21:00

In Auschwitz, Aba could smell the smoke from the ovens. Everyone had to strip naked. Once everyone's facial and body hair was shaved, no one was able to recognize each other.

Aba remembers that naked people all looked alike. The naked women didn't arouse him. Peoples' bones rattled as they walked. People were needed for labor in Buna. Aba and Pinchas were placed in the same factory.

02:26:00

Aba's brother was with him in Buna. They lived in the same barracks and worked together, making electricity with a chisel and hammer. Buna was a munitions factory in which everything was made from coal. Aba was standing on a tall ladder, working with pipes, when the British bombed the area. Aba remembers feeling happy to see them. At this time, he also remembers that his body ached so much that he could not even isolate pain. Aba and his brother were evacuated from the camp. Aba looked out for his brother. They walked for miles. Once, Aba was able to grab a knapsack and share its contents with his brother. When he did this, he first made certain that the German guards looked the other way.

02:31:00

They were marched to trains, which took them to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. Aba didn't like Buchenwald. The camp was populated by murderers, intellectuals, and political prisoners of all nationalities, including Jews. On the train going through Czechoslovakia, people threw food to

them. In Buchenwald, there was no water, nor food, and the surroundings were dirty and malodorous. Prisoners in Buchenwald developed typhus.

02:36:00

Aba refers to Ilse Koch (1906-1967), the wife of Karl Koch, the Commandant of Buchenwald, who made lamp-shades and other artifacts from the human skin of prisoners. From Buchenwald, Aba and his brother were sent to Crawinkel, a subcamp of Ohrdruf in Germany. Aba shows the scar from the cut he received from an electric saw while in Crawinkel. Aba had a good job in Crawinkel. However, he developed dysentery. In Crawinkel, the German supervisor was "human." Aba traded a gold piece for bread. His supervisor liked him because he worked.

02:41:00

Aba was never hungry. He shared with his brother Pinchas. After Aba returned to work, following his bout with dysentery, his brother was no longer there. Pinchas had been taken away to die. Aba blames the Lagerfuehrer (S.S. officer in charge of the camp) for having Pinchas taken away rather than trying to hide him.

02:46:00

The following night, Aba went to the kitchen where he got a pail of soup and a loaf of bread from the cook. He ate it all, got sick, and was taken to the infirmary. In the infirmary, Aba started to vomit. He remembers being told, "you threw up more than the whole barracks ate in a week." To this, Aba remembers responding, "I knew I was like an animal." They were evacuated again to Buchenwald. Six weeks to three months later there was another evacuation. 90 percent of those who went out of Buchenwald died or were killed. The next day, people ran. Aba found two cousins and an uncle. They all refused to leave Buchenwald. The Americans came in.

02:51:00

Aba went to the warehouse and took underwear, a shirt, a jacket, and Hungarian boots. Aba wanted to stay with his uncle and cousins. Aba got some meat to eat. He doesn't know what kind of meat it was and wonders if it was possibly human flesh. He recalls that it tasted good, but "it still bothers me." On the third day, Aba went to Weimar, Germany. He recalls that it felt good, but that he was still indifferent to life without a family. Aba's primary goal in surviving was to see the defeat of the Germans.

02:56:00

What made him decide to live? "Good American people." Aba mentions Eisenhower, chaplains, and the HIAS (Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society). Aba remembers wanting chocolate; he was greedy for whatever he could get, including chewing tobacco. The chewing tobacco made him vomit. Aba wanted to find his family. He has been, he says, "mentally affected." Aba's wife has been a key reason for his survival and his return to life.