

BEN KAM
RG-50.005.0030 (recorded 1983)

Ben Kam was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1921, the oldest of five brothers. They had a large extended family that lived in one building, and they thought of themselves as Modern Jewish. In 1939 he joined the Polish army, but that ended when they capitulated to the Germans one month later. He worked at the airport where they were sending the dismantled steel to Germany. At first, he had no idea what the Germans were doing with the walls they were building in a part of Warsaw, but it soon became the ghetto. He describes the conditions in the ghetto. His family lived with another 3-4 families in one room.

Ben got acquainted with the Polish underground through his aunt, who had previously converted. He smuggled meat into the ghetto and did well. He described Poles coming into the ghetto and randomly killing Jews. He left with 5 other boys to join the Polish Partisans near Lublin, led by a colonel who had experience in the Polish Battalion fighting in Spain against Franco. They worked hard to secure arms.

When the war started in 1941 Russian POWs ran to the forest to join the partisans and joined by some survivors from Majdanek, but the latter were killed by Ukrainian partisans. Eventually there was a very large group of approximately 19,000 partisans, with about 50% of them Jews. He describes the partisan's activities. Once they liberated a camp of 600 Jews from a camp near the Vistula River; in 1943 they demolished 541 trains going to the Eastern front. He said there was a separate camp for women, children and older people of about 3000 people. He said they had amazing resources, even a radio station, all behind German lines. At one-point Ben went back to the Warsaw ghetto to leave food for his parents, and then he returned to the partisans. He describes bombing, fights with Germans, ambushes, etc. He said there were many Jewish heroes during that time, and that if it hadn't been for the real antisemitism of the Polish people, half the Jews in Poland would still be alive. He mentions a Dr. Gross who ran away from the partisans and became a doctor in Plaszow experimenting on Jews, and who was hung after the war.

After liberation, Ben ran away from the Polish army and went to Danzig, where he met a girl, Elly, who was running a restaurant with her friends who had all been liberated from Stutthof. They married and had wanted to go to Palestine, but Elly was pregnant and so they went with her brother Freddy to a kibbutz near Stuttgart. He and Elly stayed there for about 1 1/2 years, and their first daughter was born there. Through the kindness of an American soldier who carried a letter from Ben to his relatives in the United States, the relatives sponsored them and they went to Brooklyn, where Elly's older brother helped them find an apartment. Ben describes his slow move up the ladder in the garment industry. He also went to school for design. He worked for 4 years for his uncle who manufactured pocketbooks, but said this was a bad experience. He and his family eventually moved to Los Angeles, where he became successful in the garment industry.

He found out after the war that all his extended family was killed in Treblinka. He still has a hatred of the Poles.