

Document: Henryk Dornik Interview – Translation  
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Additional information:

This is a translation of a videotaped interview with Henryk Dornik conducted on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies (link: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508831>.)

Translation:

ROBERT BUCKLEY: We're in Poland and we're doing an interview of one of Jehovah's Witnesses and a survivor of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. ...

INT: Yes. We are going to listen to the story of Mr. Henryk Dornik. Maybe first, you could tell us something about your earliest history.

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, yes. I was born on December 25, 1926 in Ruda Śląska, in the Coal Basin of Upper Silesia. My father was a coal miner at *Wawel* coal mine. Well, I wanted to say that our family was very religious, very Catholic. My father liked going to church very much, my mother... My grandma was actually a housekeeper at the local church, so we truly valued these bonds with the Church. But my father very quickly learned that it had nothing to do with the truth that Jesus preached. During one winter evening, in 1937, my father returned home unusually happy. At the very threshold, holding something under his arm, he joyfully exclaimed: "Children! Look what I brought! The Holy Scriptures!" It was the beginning. My father's words electrified me because I had never seen the Holy Scriptures before. Although my Catholic family was very religious, I didn't know the meaning of this book. I always thought that the Bible and the Holy Scriptures were two different books. That's why I took the Bible into my hands with deep respect and began reading it and reading it. I was so absorbed by its content and the power of its expression that only in the early morning of the next day, when my father was waking up to go to work at the coal mine, astounded he took me away from reading (saying), "Boy, you've been reading this book since yesterday!" Exactly. My father was very much worried that I hadn't slept, but he was very happy that the Bible fascinated me to such an extent. I also had siblings, one year older brother Bernard, sister Różia, who was six years younger than me, and the youngest, Edyta, who was recently also present at these meetings with us. Edyta, was nine years younger than me. In reality, from now on, I took delight in this book, although as a 11 years old boy, I didn't yet realize, how great impact this book, the Bible, would have on my life.

**3:02**

The news that the truth reached our family was not liked by our relatives. My mother opposed the truth – it was so at the beginning – but especially irritated were the local clerics of the local church, so they immediately began to interfere and counteract. That very winter, one evening, the priest along with the church’s organist visited our house. My father with the Bible in his hand exposed further lies preached by the Catholic Church, while the priest, in anger and without the Bible, talked to my father and began to threaten and warn him about the consequences. So I wanted to say what was ...

**4:46**

ROBERT BUCKLEY: ... Can we take a break? ... We resume.

INT: Maybe a little more about the reaction of the Church.

HENRYK DORNIK: Oh yes. Exactly. I wanted to say that before World War II, the Roman Catholic Church in Poland had a great power. This became very clear during that conversation with the priest in our home. As my father rejected all the accusations and lies preached by the Church are false, the priest said with indignation these words: "Do you know that by becoming a Jehovah's Witness you can lose your job?" My father replied to this: "Do you envy me for my hard work underground, in a coalmine? Would you like to take my pickaxe and shovel?" Then, turning towards to my mother, that is to his wife, and to us, children, he said: "Remember this, my wife and children, if your father ever loses his job, now you know who is in power and who assigns work (to people.)"

INT: Would this possibly happened to other people as well?

HENRYK DORNIK: Yes, yes. Well, it happened at times that the priest would not be pleased with someone not attending the church regularly. The priest could call the owner of a mine, a *Ballestrem* – it was a big family of coal mining magnates – and that owner would automatically fire that employee because he was requested and ordered by the priest to do so. That is how it was. Well, and just this was very typical. And such a pressure the Church was putting on the people in those years...There were many instances when someone wouldn't attend the church or just joined some other religion, and he was definitely fired from work. This didn't happen (to Henryk's family) because these were the years shortly before the World War II and they didn't make it in time, we could say, eh?

**7:08**

My father got a firm hold on the truth and was baptized in 1938, but yes... I however, despite my desires, was not allowed to get baptized, until two years later when I was 14 years old. It wasn't that easy back then.

INT: You mean in 1940?

HENRYK DORNIK: In 1940, I was baptized and my older brother. But then, as we all remember, World War II began to rage. For Jehovah's people this was a time of severe trials, suffering and persecution. And one winter evening, on December 10, 1940, in a tiny apartment of one sister living in *Bobrek*, a district of Bytom, before immersing me as a symbol of a baptism, as a symbol of dedication, brother Konrad Grabowy, who was

immersing me, before the baptism he asked me: "Do you know what the baptism means? Do you know that the war is raging and very soon you too will have to decide whether to take part in it or not? Do you know that you can be shot to death if you refuse to serve in the Hitler's army? Are you ready to sacrifice your life to remain faithful to Jehovah? My son, this is not just a bath. Remember". I wanted to say that this brother, Konrad Grabowy, was German because he came from Bytom, and three months earlier he had returned from Auschwitz. It was something extraordinary that someone was released from Auschwitz. But brother Konrad Grabowy was sick, terminally ill with disseminated tuberculosis, and his two brothers were generals of the *Wehrmacht* and the SS. And they made a petition to Hitler, to allow their brother to die at home.

### 9:34

INT: ... His work as a baptized publisher of the good news as one of Jehovah's Witnesses ...

INT: Maybe we could ...

HENRYK DORNIK: ... go back to this moment to this brother who was released from Auschwitz?

INT: This... this has already been recorded.

HENRYK DORNIK: But what happened to him?

INT: If there is a continuation...

HENRYK DORNIK: He was conditionally released from Auschwitz. Well, they hoped he would die very soon, but he became very active and the best proof of that is that he visited our family and baptized me and my brother. And a few days later, he was given a tin to which voluntary donations were collected to help the soldiers at the front. This way they provoked him whether he was ready to give up his loyalty to Jehovah. Naturally, he refused. They saw that he was still active, riding his bicycle... And they arrested him again and after a few days or weeks he was murdered in Auschwitz.

### 11:00

INT: Since we are talking about it, about the war, was there any information about the growing of the war psychosis, armament of Hitler's... creation of this war imperium.

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, this could be felt because I lived very close to the border, from the window the Polish-German border could be seen. So already in years 1937-38, this war psychosis was growing. And Hitler-Jugend, entire schools of young ones would come to the border and shout against Poland. And Polish children from the school also came there and shouted, "We won't give a single penny" or "Our leader is Rydz-Śmigły", and so on. Such psychosis was felt especially later in 1938 and 1939. But, as it turned out, Germans without any resistance entered Poland in 1939. For us, Jehovah's Witnesses, it was a really a difficult time, difficult ...

### 12:15

I would still like to go back to the clergy, the Church's great influence. When my father had his first meetings there with the Bible Students, with Jehovah's Witnesses, in that very town, then the priest ordered to spy out where their meetings were taking place. And he was able to track down the place where the brothers would gather. And he called the police station and said that a cell of a communist movement was meeting there. So the police came and arrested everybody. Naturally, it lasted maybe some 48 hours and the chief of the police station himself said, "We got this order from the priest." The police realized it was a provocation of the priest, that's how the Church was putting pressure.

INT: Would that happen also during the war?

HENRYK DORNIK: No, that was before 1939.

INT: And it wouldn't take place during the war?

HENRYK DORNIK: During the war it was Hitler, the ban he issued against Jehovah's Witnesses was in force and mass imprisonments were happening. I wanted to say that already at the beginning of 1943, my father was arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp, in Oświęcim, Auschwitz. And the same year, 1943, I was taken to Hannover, where I did forced labor for a farmer (*Bauer*) by the name of Wilhelm Ilers.

**14:01**

INT: Could you please give some more details, because you mentioned so briefly, 'arrested, taken.' Maybe...

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, I wanted to say that the Nazi officials thought it were our parents who imposed that religion on us, right? And the best proof of that was when an SS officer personally came to me on a motorbike to recruit me as a volunteer for the military service, since I was not officially enlisted in the army yet, as a volunteer for the military service. Naturally, I explained to them my point of view in that matter and this apparently contributed to what happened in February 1944, by the sentence of the court the Nazi officials, Gestapo sent me and my older brother Bernard, my sister Rózia ... just me and my older brother to the Nazi camp for young German, not Poles, because Poles were transported to a camp in Łódź. This was a camp for Polish children. But we were treated as Silesians, as those who were supposed to have German blood in their veins.

**15:33**

INT: Would this involve some kind of better treatment, or...?

HENRYK DORNIK: It means that they hoped to sway these children, whose parents were Jehovah's Witnesses, to take the side of Hitler. So they interviewed us in a special way. There were psychologists. A doctor of psychology was involved in it. It was a team: a doctor of psychology and another lady doctor who examined us. They measured us, the skulls and skeletons, right, to find out whether we represent the pure German race. And they tried to put us under pressure, so that we would give in. And every day we had to stand in front of the Nazi flag and there was so-called *Fahnengruß* [flag salute.] From the very first day we refused to do it, we would not salute the flag nor did the Nazi salute *Heil Hitler*, right, as it

was common. But it brought no results. We were called to the office of the SS camp commandant von Ratschewski, that was his surname, and he made a mockery of us that our young German brothers are shedding blood, and "you are resisting." Then we said that it was Jesus Christ who shed his blood for us and we want to follow his footsteps. And this is how Gestapo decided as ...

INT: How long did it last? For how long were you in this camp?

**17:32**

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, it lasted for several months and we were sent to a concentration camp. My younger sisters were placed in a Catholic convent under the supervision of the nuns and there they forced my young sisters to engage in the rituals of the Catholic Church. This was done also to other children of our brothers. For example, the younger siblings of the famous Kusserow family were also put in such a Nazi youth camp. This brother, probably Paul Ginter [correctly: Paul Gerhard] or the younger one, Werner [correctly: Hans Werner] was also placed there.

INT: So you were separated. For how long?

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, right up to the end of the war. Simply, when I learned that I am to go to a concentration camp, I was very happy about it, because I wanted to go to a concentration camp, where my father was, where many of my spiritual brothers were who had been fighting for the truth for many years. It was my desire to be there. And here I was daily exposed to that Nazi flag salute ... It was disgusting to me.

**18:58**

And so, by the way of the prison (*Zuchthaus*) in Schweidnitz [today Świdnica], I was imprisoned in a newly established, modern, huge extermination camp, in the concentration camp in Gross-Rosen, here in Lower Silesia in Rogoźnica, where instead of my name, I was given a number 96088.

INT: Could you tell us some details about the transport and the dealings with the SS?

HENRYK DORNIK: Yes.

HENRYK DORNIK: Right. Maybe I'd just mention that in February 1945, with a massive death transport, I was transferred to the concentration camp in Buchenwald. The transport lasted one week in open freight cars and from the entire transport only few of us survived. My body swollen entirely...

INT: Could you tell us a few details? For a week, was it a long journey?

**20:02**

HENRYK DORNIK: One week we were being transported in freight cars, open [freight cars] without food and water. At each station, from each car, ten to twenty prisoners were thrown out ... Ten to twenty prisoners. I knew that if I did not stand on my feet, I would end up being either thrown out to be burned or just thrown out during the transport. Although my whole body was swollen and there was water in my legs and everywhere, the older people – not our brothers, for there was not even a single brother in my railcar – the older

Germans told me that I had to get out of the car, even fall out of the car, as long as I get out, otherwise I would be killed or burned.

INT: Were there perhaps any attempts to escape?

HENRYK DORNIK: Rather not, because nobody had ... I did hear shots in other railcars, since in each one there were two SS-men with a machine gun... Aha, exactly.

### 21:16

INT: Some details...from that one week transport ...

HENRYK DORNIK: During that week we received nothing to drink or to eat. But the worst thing was thirst. We were just consumed by fever and in our freight car a SS-man took pity on us and allowed one of the prisoners to get down from the car to the ground, which was covered by a layer of dirty snow and into a rusty can he allowed to gather a little bit of snow. And each of us got a teaspoon of this dirty liquid from that snow... But it was so delightful and wonderful to have on the lips a little bit of that moisture ...

INT: And during that week of the transport were you allowed, for instance, to go out to relieve yourselves?

HENRYK DORNIK: No, we were not allowed at all, because everybody relieved themselves on the spot. And one on top of the other, the corpses were under our feet, only later, somewhere in the fields we were allowed to throw the dead bodies out of the freight car. But usually one on top of the other laid ... stood or laid. If someone had no more strength, he had to lay there in these impurities in the freight car till the end. And that was the way we were brought, in such condition. In the freight car where I happened to be, maybe some 15 percent were still alive at the end of the transport. I was in this transport together with brother Wiktor Schnell, with brother Gustaw Baumert (I brought their photos from Oświęcim, they are in the files) and with brother Jerzy Pilch. These two brothers, Wiktor Schnell and Jerzy Pilch, are still alive, and brother Gustaw Baumert died during the bombing. Americans were bombing, April 1 and 2, our camp in Buchenwald, Dora, Nordhausen and 90 percent of the prisoners were killed during the bombings. Brother Baumert was thrown into a tree and he lost his life. I was thrown into the sky and then I was buried under the rubble ... I lost consciousness. Just after some time a brother, who was lying behind, dug me up.

### 23:54

I would like perhaps to tell one episode from the Gross-Rosen concentration camp, where I was faced with the greatest test of loyalty to Jehovah. Well, Satan prepared a cunning plan for me to tempt me to be unfaithful to Jehovah. I received a special privilege as the only one out of the whole transport of prisoners that came to the camp. I was called before a large commission consisting of SS officers, where I was informed: "You alone have the luck to be released today, as long as you sign the declaration that you renounce this hostile to the Nazi Reich mistaken idea of the Bible Students [*Bibelforscher*]." Each of the officers seemingly favourably praised me by saying, "You are such a handsome boy, you would make a fine officer." They encouraged me to join the ranks of the Nazi army and enthusiastically talked about how good it was in the army. If you don't sign, look at the chimney, the crematorium.

In a few days you will come out through that chimney and there will be nothing left after you. Maybe we would make a bar of soap out of you. That's all." In my heart there wasn't even a trace of a thought to accept such a detestable offer of the Devil. Rather, my face was smiling, because it was exactly what they pointed out, that 'I didn't know, what I was laughing about', but I simply smiled out of happiness which made my enemies as angry as roaring lions. I was happy, I felt joy because I could courageously take my stand on Jehovah's side in the ongoing issue of sovereignty.

## 26:02

INT: That was in Gross-Rosen?

HENRYK DORNIK: It was in Gross-Rosen and it was the SS commission who personally talked to me and they thought they would succeed. All around me I saw horrified prisoners, terrified by the specter of death, who were like abandoned sheep doomed to slaughter. But I put my trust in Jehovah and I had this unshakable faith that Jehovah was with me, that he would not forsake me. And I felt it. I felt it clearly that Jehovah was supporting me and leading me, as the psalmist said, 'In the valley of the shadow of death'.<sup>1</sup> There were days when it was very difficult for me. Later, when I was sent to a block, I was sad because I was alone and my desire was to be among the brothers. I didn't find them. I prayed to Jehovah fervently, supplicating and weeping, and asked him to help me find the brothers in this crowd, in this mass of sea of tormented prisoners. I asked for nothing more but to be among the brothers, for I felt like a child who had lost his mother and I was trying to find this mother. And my prayers were answered. One evening, after a roll call, a stranger approached me and said to me: "Come, I will take you to your brothers." It felt like a dream to me. And he took me to the brothers in a block, block 404. And there were brothers gathered on the floor ... they were sitting on the floor. And he said [to them]: "This is your brother." Then, he left. And to this day I don't know who he was. But I was happy. I cried, I sobbed out of joy and happiness ...

## 28:13

INT: Did the brothers try to share the good news with others, even in the prison, in the camp?

HENRYK DORNIK: Yes, exactly. That's how it was. A lot of people even joined us in the camp, because they saw there was love, unity among the brothers and all the others were deprived of any hope and joy.

INT: So this group stood out from the others?

HENRYK DORNIK: This group stood out. And I wanted nothing more than that. I said, "This is my paradise for today." I was very happy. Maybe the brothers experienced more because, like brother Baumert, they had families, for him it was more difficult to be in the camp. But Jehovah really turned out to be my helper and that's how it was until the end, that I felt this help and support.

INT: You say, 'Until the end'. Tell us...

1 Psalm 23:4, *American Standard Version*, 1901.

HENRYK DORNIK: So it was April of 1945. I also wanted to say that in March 1945 we were standing at a roll call in the Buchenwald camp, Dora-Nordhausen, and the *Rapportführer* came to us - while we, the brothers, were standing in one row - and he approached brother Gustaw Baumert, grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket, shook him, saying: "*Du, Bibelforscher* [You, Bible Student]. Are you still *Bibelforscher*?" And Brother Gustaw responded: "No". "Ah" - he said - "You are not? What are you now, then?" And he boldly stood up and said: "Now I am a Jehovah's Witness." The name of Jehovah for these enemies, for the Nazis, was like an electric jolt. As soon as he heard "Jehovah's Witness", he became enraged and began to shout: "Then let Jehovah help you! We'll see if he helps you." But a few days later they were all running away and we saw Jehovah's care, even though some did not survive, but they are in Jehovah's memory.

### 30:40

I would like to mention what a support it was for us the way Jehovah had prepared us for these trials and experiences. Just like today we attend conventions, meetings, we read the *Watchtower* and study, also at that time the congregations would receive portions of the handwritten *Watchtower*, confidential letter from the brothers who were sentenced to death and just before their death they would write last words to their families. Because they refused to serve in Hitler's army. Among others, we read a letter from brothers Kusserow: from brother Wilhelm, who at the age of 25 was shot to death, in 1940, and from brother Wolfgang Kusserow who at the age of 20 was beheaded in Brandenburg. The content of those letters fortified our faith and gave us strength. They would often repeat the words: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul"<sup>2</sup> and from Revelation 2:10: "Be faithful even to death." [*The Bible in Living English*, 1972] It was food at the proper time and it strengthened us. And always ... we could always count on Jehovah's support. Jehovah gave strength to those brothers who were shot to death, but he also gave them "peace beyond the highest reach of any mind."<sup>3</sup> Our enemies were puzzled by our peace and even, at times, a smile on our faces.

### 32:23

While the Gestapo was driving me to the camp, I kept on smiling. One of them said: "Boy, you must be stupid or silly if you are smiling, for you don't know where you are going." But I was simply happy that I would see my brothers, and they just didn't get it. And in such an atmosphere I matured, that's why those short moments of suffering and trials were not too difficult for me. It was possible to bear them. Bearable were also the moments of dying because I can say that I was dying several times. After all, I went through different kind of trials. I wanted to say that during the bombings I was injured and later we laid in that rubble for about a week. A typhus epidemic broke out and the Allied army that entered the camp took me in a state of agony, with typhoid fever, wounded, to an infectious disease hospital.

INT: It was liberation from the camp, what you are talking about right now.

2 Quoted after: Matthew 10:28, *The Bible in Living English*, 1972. These words are repeated also in Luke 12:4.

3 Phillipians 4:7, *The Bible in Living English*, 1972.



HENRYK DORNIK: This was the liberation, as well as this sending me to a military hospital for infectious disease, where I was treated. I was among the few who recovered from typhus, because our bodies were exhausted. I survived. Only three of us – out of all these sick prisoners – recovered: one Dutch Jew, one Romanian Jew and me, in this hospital, we were the only ones to survive, we didn't have a fever up to 42°C. So thanks to Jehovah we survived, I survived and, I can say that Jehovah has always been my helper, and I thank him for that.

### 34:17

INT: So we have arrived to the time of liberation, the bombing of the concentration camp and taking the brother with typhoid to the hospital. So here we are, the end of the war and the appreciation of those persons, of Jehovah's Witnesses, for the assistance of the Creator.

ROBERT BUCKLEY: Can we go back a little bit and ask him if he saw the persecution of the other groups of people in camps.

INT: Could we go back to the time you were in the camp? Did you witness the persecution of other groups in the camp?

HENRYK DORNIK: Especially severe persecution was experienced by the Jews. They were stigmatized at every step. During the admission to Gross-Rosen, we were sent to a bathhouse, there were those cold showers, and one Jew came with us. He was actually in the same cell with me. He escaped from the Gross-Rosen camp. He succeeded, because he was working in a commando somewhere in the town and he run away, because he didn't wear a striped uniform. Some Jews were given civilian clothing with yellow stars painted with oil paint, painted everywhere ... All the clothes were in those pastel colors, yellow stars and different signs, crosses ... Jews were marked like that. He was a doctor. And I don't know what kind of job he had that he managed to run away from that commando. He escaped to Nysa. He escaped all the way to Nysa and at the train station in Nysa he went into the waiting room. It was thoughtless of him, so he was caught. And when they brought him back, we were in the showers and a group of prisoners came – kapos, block supervisors – and they started to massacre him right there in that shower... I saw that Jews especially, Jews especially were persecuted. They suffered greatly, the Jews. But it can be said that they lived in solidarity with each other, the Jews. They helped each other, unlike other nationalities or ethnic groups. However, the Jews helped each other the most. Well, not to mention us, the brothers, because we made up one family.

### 37:29

INT: Special persecution of the Jews and one instance of this was quoted.

HENRYK DORNIK: I wanted to say how we were abused. We left that bathhouse and went into a room. The block supervisors and kapos were standing with these bullwhips and fast, fast, fast. And there were these nails. On each nail there were clothes for every new prisoner and shoes, but they didn't match and it was sort of a play for the camp authorities, 'how will they behave when it doesn't fit them.' Everything fitted me well, because I was small, thin, so my clothes were too big, often my sleeves hung down, my shoes were always too big. But there was a Ukrainian next to me, and neither his jacket nor his shoes fitted him so he said it

didn't fit him. "It doesn't fit? We'll adjust it right away." And they started to beat him and asked if it fitted. "Now it fits." They made fun like that.

**38:46**

INT: You're talking about kapos here. What kind of people were they? What kind of people were they?

HENRYK DORNIK: They were prisoners. Because the concentration camp was organized in such a way that it was guarded by the troops from the SS guard on the outside, and inside the camp there was a prisoner, the head of the camp was the *Lagerältester*. He was the lord and master. He had a camp police made up of prisoners, and he had block leaders over each block called *Lagerblockältester*; had individual kapos at his disposal, who would take work teams to work. So the camp was organized by the prisoners and the prisoners held the power in the camp.

INT: Where did the kapos come from?

HENRYK DORNIK: Mostly they came from criminals, because the political ones rarely came to power. There always was competition between the groups. If it was a green one, a criminal, *Berufsverbrecher* – that is the one who wore a green triangle, who was a professional criminal, recidivist – he would pick only the green ones for all positions in the camp. And they oppressed and fought rivals, meaning the red ones, the political ones, since others never came to power there. So there were either the red ones, that is political ones, or the green ones. And they fought each other, filled positions with those from the same group. So this political fight also took place in the camp. In that way they would finish off, kill their opponents. Well, Jehovah's Witnesses were always neutral, they never gave in to the temptation to accept the position of kapo, the block leader, even though some would ask for Jehovah's Witnesses to take over this function, because they knew they would be treated well. But the brothers would refuse.

**40:57**

ROBERT BUCKLEY: Was he describing what prisoners did to the.....

INT: Kapo, yes, they are....the organization of the camp, various functions....yeah, by prisoners who were the kapos....a group of prisoners that was....

ROBERT BUCKLEY: And how did the prisoners treat the kapos after the release and the other guards?

INT: And because of what capos did how were they treated after the liberation or...

HENRYK DORNIK: Exactly. I witnessed such scenes after the liberation, especially Serbs were taking a severe revenge. They were specialists in inflicting terrible tortures. When they caught a kapo, a block leader, they would tear him to pieces alive. Even in one instance, they even salted him alive, they inflict wounds on him and salted him alive. Serbs ... yes.

**42:08**

Well, what they did in the camp ... I can only say how it was in Gross-Rosen. I had severe tonsillitis, but I knew that if I went to the camp infirmary they would finish me off right away,

so I had such a *Bauchbinde* [abdominal bandage] which they would give us. Everything was too short, the shirt ... cold, tonsillitis, fever, so I wrapped my neck with this *Bauchbinde*. I must have had fever 41°C, I couldn't speak, swallow and I didn't go anywhere. And Jehovah gave me strength, so that I recovered from that tonsillitis without any treatment, in the cold and the frost. Those who lay down along to the wall, in the evening a kapo came and said: "Take off their clothes. Take off their clothes". And they were yelling , begging, but into the freezing cold, into the freezing cold, they were thrown out. And there, they waved their hands and in the morning a cart drove by, a number was painted on their chests, and they were taken to the crematorium to be burned. That's how they were abused ... One time, some kind of a sanitary inspection came, I saw it once. They came and we had nothing, we were lying on the ground. It was impossible to lie down, you could only crouch like this. And they said: "Straw should be given here." So they threw to us two bundles of straw. We all threw ourselves on that straw, everyone took some of the straw stalks in their pockets so we could put that under ourselves during the night, for we didn't know in what position we would spend that night. It was so ... And dinner ... we had at 1:00 AM because they couldn't keep up with making enough soup for 200.000 because it was a huge camp, Gross-Rosen, they just couldn't keep up.

#### 44:16

And a rusty can would be given to one [prisoner] and three others behind him, and for four people this water had to be enough. At times, the can happen to be given to me, and as soon as I put it to my lips, it was snatched by the second guy, saying, "Too much" when I didn't even wet my lips yet, but I couldn't fight back to get a share of my portion. Sometimes the lips would get cut, because it was sharp, an empty rusted food can served us as dishes. Yes .. So there was a fight for life inside the camp. The prisoners treated each other like animals and the SS-men laughed, rejoiced that they had so degraded, so humiliated this people, that they were fighting for life in such an inhuman way ... Only Jehovah's people who had godly fear, who knew his moral standards, maintained their dignity and respect for each other and for Creator and for their fellow men. It was a great witness to the glory of Jehovah.

ROBERT BUCKLEY: Did he describe the toilet facilities that they had for the prisoners? What kind of facilities did they have for the prisoners? How was he able to exist ... and food. How much food did they give them?

INT: Yes, there was information there ... Maybe some more details of the camp's life for example the sanitary conditions ...

HENRYK DORNIK: Sanitary conditions ...

INT: Food ...

#### 46:03

HENRYK DORNIK: In Buchenwald epidemic of dysentery broke out, which was called *Ruhr*, dysentery. It was an intestinal ulceration and several of us, brothers, got sick with this dysentery. I, amongst the others, got sick. Everything run through us with blood from our digestive track. We couldn't go to a doctor, because if anyone went, they would immediately

eliminate him as a threat to the others. So the brothers, the elders advised us: "Don't eat any food." Starvation and burning bread portions – for we would receive bread portions – whenever a possibility arose, to burn it so it became charcoal. And to eat this bread, this charcoal. I did this, it lasted for over one week, I ate only that charcoal, but my brother [fellow Jehovah's Witness] from Olkusz couldn't stand it and ate also those soups. Every day he felt worse and worse. He went to the camp infirmary for help and already on the third day they put him on the concrete floor. Brother Wiktor Schnell, who was a *Lagerschreiber* [a camp official], it was a high position, he had some influence. When he found out where our brother was, he ran there to the camp hospital and he (this brother) was dead already. Such was this epidemic. And these ... these excrements ... in Gross-Rosen, there was a hole dug like this room, deep, with a thick log in the middle and we would get on that log and all the excrements would fall down there. And the prisoners would fall in there, because it was icy in the winter and we would fall into it ... Yes ... this dysentery epidemic was spreading at a tremendous pace. I don't know, again I survived this disease and it was an introduction to typhus, for later, in April, I got sick with typhus. Again, it was a digestive tract disease.

#### 48:29

ROBERT BUCKLEY: Because of the unclean conditions did they have bugs and lice?

INT: Because of the unclean conditions did the prisoners have for example lice?

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, there were lice and from time to time we would undergo a so-called 'delousing.' A big truck would come with kind of a tank where we all would throw our bundled up clothes into. There, under steam, under great steam pressure, the lice were supposed to be killed, but some of them were still there .... It was an *Entläusung*, *Entläusung* (delousing), that's what they called it. Or they would immerse us into some kind of an acid liquid, into the barrels, where everybody had to disinfect their bodies. I remember, when I was lying with Gustaw Baumert on the third tier of a bunk bed and he would always say in the evening, "Take off your shirt, we are looking for ... " lice, right? We usually found lice between the cloth folds and one louse could mean typhus, because if it bit someone, it would transmit typhus, and that's how this epidemic would spread.

#### 49:58

HENRYK DORNIK: I will tell you how I was treated. Shoes. I got in Buchenwald shoes, and [before that] I had clogs. I was happy that I had shoes. I put them under my head on my bunk bed, the three tier bunk bed. And I put them under my head, but I forgot that people were dishonest. And the next morning the one sleeping below me saw those shoes and took them, a prisoner, he stole my shoes. I, in the morning, to the roll-call, quickly under the whip, we had to wash up. I went to the block leader: "*Blockführer*", I said, "They stole my shoes." And he, like a roaring lion: "What?", he said, "You coming to me?" And he beat me, kicked me, trampled me down because I reported that someone had stolen my shoes. And now we had to hurry to go out into the freezing cold to the roll call, without, without... for there were no socks, we only had rags. What to do? The brothers said, "Listen, take a plank of wood ..." and in our beds we found some small piece of wood. I broke it [in half] and I tied these planks [to my feet]. On these planks I came out to the roll call in the winter, but in the afternoon one brother brought me one clog, so I had one plank and one clog. And the next

day another brother brought me another clog, and now I had two left clogs. But I already had a protection. And that's how we would support each other.

**51:31**

INT: And could you repeat that about the camp's organization ... great persecution of the prisoners caused by other prisoners.

HENRYK DORNIK: By prisoners themselves who were degenerated, because they were mostly criminals, dangerous to those around them, and Hitler would send them to the camp and even orders were given to them, "You will have everything, you will lack nothing, just remember this: you must eliminate such and such groups", eh? And they created such system of power. *Lagerältester* was the ruler of the camp and he would surround, surround himself by power, because there even was camp police made up of the well-fed prisoners. Once I was selected for the *Essentragenkolonie*, that was a commando that carried food. We walked for three hours to the kitchen, in the mountains, because Gross-Rosen was in the quarries, so we would walk for so long and stood there in front of that kitchen at night, and then we would carry that soup, spilling everywhere on our pants, and this is what we wanted, to lick it off our pants, eh? And this police would sometimes beat us with truncheons while we were walking. They sometimes made fun of us when we were standing there in front of the kitchen. The SS-men on the watchtowers turned the searchlights on us, and the police were beating us. That's how they had fun ... together. The SS and the police together against the prisoners. It was abuse. Some couldn't take it anymore. Every day we would see someone on the barbwire who couldn't take it any longer and would throw himself onto the barbwire that were electrically charged. And that was his liberation. That was his liberation ...

**53:38**

INT: So you and the others found yourselves in a state of a total exhaustion ...

HENRYK DORNIK: Yes.

INT: How did you recover your health after the war?

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, I have to say, as my father would always say to me, "Remember, we come from a resilient family." After I was lying in agony the liberation, I had inflammation in my joints, kidneys, lungs and endocardium [the inner layer of heart tissue.] The doctors had already given up, because the antibiotics weren't working, but I remember, my father told me, "Remember, we come from a resilient family. Just eat and Jehovah will help us, the body will produce much strength." So I overcame it somehow. Well, I must say that although I was very frail, I had [good] immunity. Since dysentery, typhoid fever, typhus, I was buried under rubble, I was thrown maybe about 50 meters up into the air, then I fell down with a huge amount of soil like... maybe like this building. All of this covered me and I was gone. One brother who was lying behind me, dug me out. I was... my ribs were already broken here... and two times I had been attacked by a kapo. My ribs were broken, because sometimes there was a need to support someone and then we would be punished, eh. Whenever we, the brothers, supported each other, they would take revenge. We had such a revengeful *Vorarbeiter* [brigadier] who was a fanatic Catholic. As soon as the war ended, I came out of

the hospital after recovering from a typhoid fever. I was beaten, badly mashed up by the Catholic Action. They hated us terribly. When I showed up at the camp, the Catholic Action just called me, "kapo". And the prisoners ran out from the barracks - was already after the liberation - and they threw themselves on me, they trampled me down, broke my ribs, so that I barely escaped. Someone in the crowd said, "Leave this boy alone. I know him personally." He took me out of the camp, again, like an angel, and said, "Don't show up here any more."

**56:05**

INT: What kind of work you did after the war?

HENRYK DORNIK: I just was lucky, because one time at the roll call... they ordered me ...

HENRYK DORNIK: In 1945, well, Jehovah's Witnesses had very good circumstances, although maybe at first the clergy still tried to use their influence, but we had support from the post-war government ...

INT: But only for a short period of time.

HENRYK DORNIK: ... of Poland... only for a short period of time. But we could organize [meetings]. I remember that I travelled with public talks in Lower Silesia, and the mayor of Prudnik and other cities supported us, they would rent to us community centers and we could give public talks and gather together. We didn't have any particular difficulties. These difficulties began already in 1948-49, the difficulties already began.

INT: What happened in 1950 and later?

HENRYK DORNIK: Yes, later the repressions came as a result of false accusations, eh. They accused us of 'collaboration with the imperialist' they used to say that we were American spies. Then they started to oppress us. The arrests came, houses were searched, literature confiscated, persecutions.

INT: What kind of...is it somehow comparable to the time in the camps?

**57:43**

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, it can't be compared to the occupation time, but those brothers who were sentenced for the [religious] activity were sometimes horribly beaten, tortured. For example one brother Moses from Rybnik was murdered by the communists in a prison cell and they said that he committed suicide by hanging. But they didn't let the family look into the coffin ... Such things would happen ...

INT: This lasted for several years?

HENRYK DORNIK: And it lasted until 1956, then a bit of a thaw followed.

INT: And now we may come for a short time to the present. Could you say what you are currently doing?

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, at the moment I'm working here in the account department, at Bethel, for six years I have been able to enjoy this wonderful work. Even though my age and health condition don't correspond with the principles, the principles that apply to the

volunteers at Bethel homes, but I'm just someone outside the border line, eh, [good] health, 35 years old [these were the requirements to work in Bethel] I have managed with Jehovah's help for so many years to enjoy such work, being a part of such organization in this best home in the world.

INT: Just one other question about the political situation in which you were. Could you say a few words about the political situation in which Jehovah's Witnesses are now doing their work in Poland?

HENRYK DORNIK: Well, the political situation right now is really... it's hard to discern in this fight. In any case, the clergy are trying to regain their full influence again and is pursuing their political privileges ... And they are putting pressure on the mass media.

INT: What about the authorities? The political ones?

HENRYK DORNIK: Well... yeah, we can just say that at the moment we have no obstacles from the authorities. We enjoy religious tolerance and the evidence of which are the annual the district conventions. We easily obtain permissions to organize such conventions. They even by themselves offer us stadiums, because they know that these stadiums are well taken care of by us and then well prepared later for sports events, proof of which was recently the Legia Stadium. It was devastated by vandals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, while preparing their district convention, brought the Legia Stadium back to the condition approved and attested by the FIFA football federation.

**[1:01:19]**

INT: Yes, time for your comment.

ROBERT BUCKLEY: We would like to thank you very much on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for sharing your experience with us. It is very much appreciated.

HENRYK DORNIK: I thank you very much.

ROBERT BUCKLEY: Thank you very kindly.