

Henryk Dornik RG-50.028.0091

Summary of Interview

Henryk Dornik was born on December 25, 1926 in Ruda Śląska, Upper Silesia, Poland. Father was a coal miner. Siblings: Older brother Bernard, younger sisters Różia and Edyta.

Henryk's family had been devout Catholics when, in 1937, his father brought home a Bible he had obtained from Jehovah's Witnesses. This was the first Bible Henryk had ever seen and he immediately began reading it. Henryk's mother was not happy with his father's newfound faith and opposed him for a time. Because the local Catholic church exerted great power and influence on the local people, the priest went to the house to threaten that Henryk's father could lose his job at the local coal mine if he became one of Jehovah's Witnesses. When the priest discovered where Jehovah's Witnesses were holding their meetings, he informed the police, accusing the Witnesses of holding Communist meetings, so that they would be arrested. Nevertheless, Henryk's father was baptized as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1938.

After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned and many Witnesses were imprisoned. Henryk felt he had been preparing for tests of his faith when at meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses, he had read portions of handwritten *Watchtower* magazines and also copies of letters written to their families from Witnesses who had been sentenced to death for not compromising their faith. He could see how God gave those Witnesses peace of mind and strength to maintain their faith. Henryk and his brother Bernard were both baptized in 1940. Henryk was baptized by Konrad Grabowy, a German Witness who later died in Auschwitz.

In 1943, Henryk's father was arrested and transported to Auschwitz. Henryk was arrested and sent to do forced labor in Hannover. In February 1944, the SS tried to enlist Henryk in the military as a volunteer, but since he and his siblings refused to support the military, Henryk and Bernard were sent to a Nazi youth camp where they, along with other Witness youths, refused to salute the Nazi flag or do the *Heil Hitler* salute. Różia and Edyta were sent to a Catholic convent in an attempt to get them to return to Catholicism.

Henryk felt he faced his greatest test of loyalty to God when he was sent to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. SS officers told him he was being given a special privilege; that of having an opportunity to be released on the condition that he signed a document renouncing his faith. They said that if he did sign the document, he could join the Nazi army and become an SS officer, but if he didn't, he would be killed and sent to the crematorium and his remains would be made into a bar of soap. Henryk refused to sign the declaration, choosing instead to courageously take his stand for Jehovah God. Later, Henryk's fervent prayers were answered when he was taken to a block where he could associate with another Witness.

In the concentration camps, SS guards guarded the outside of the prison blocks, but inside, certain prisoners were assigned as *kapos* and block leaders to organize the prisoners of each block. Many of the *kapos* were criminal prisoners, and there was often rivalry and violence between them. Henryk witnessed prisoners being sadistically abused and beaten in the camps by those in authority and he also saw that prisoners treated one another harshly. Prisoners had only rusty cans to drink and eat out of and often had to share one can between several people. The toilet consisted of a pit with a thick log across it, and in wintertime, prisoners would fall into the pit of excrement because it was very slippery. Henryk noticed that Jehovah's Witnesses managed to maintain their dignity and respect for

others in spite of the harsh conditions and treatment. The Witnesses continued to share their faith with others in the concentration camps, and some prisoners became Jehovah's Witnesses after witnessing the love and unity among them.

In 1945, Henryk was put on a transport to Dora-Nordhausen, a Buchenwald subcamp. The transport was in open rail cars without food, water, or toilets. When the train would stop, prisoners who had succumbed to death were thrown out of the railway cars. At Buchenwald, many prisoners became severely ill and died in an outbreak of dysentery. When Henryk became sick with dysentery, he was advised by other Witnesses to stop eating the food they were being given and, for a week, to eat only bread burned into charcoal in order to stop the dysentery. From time to time, prisoners would have to put their clothes into a tank to kill lice infesting their clothes with steam. At other times, prisoners had to dunk themselves in a barrel filled with a disinfectant to get rid of pests. Once, when Henryk's shoes had been stolen, he was grateful that Witness prisoners were able to help him by finding two left clogs for him to use. Sometimes, Henryk would see prisoners who had lost hope commit suicide by throwing themselves onto the electrified wire fences.

As the war drew to an end, many prisoners died during heavy bombing. Henryk broke several ribs when he was thrown many meters up into the air during a bomb strike and then buried under debris. In addition, he contracted typhus due to the unsanitary conditions in the camp. When the camp was liberated, Henryk witnessed prisoners taking revenge on *kapos*, torturing them and tearing others to pieces. He himself was badly beaten up by former prisoners who were members of Catholic Action, a group who hated Jehovah's Witnesses.

After the war, Jehovah's Witnesses reorganized and started holding meetings again. Henryk gave public discourses at these meetings in Lower Silesia. By 1950, Jehovah's Witnesses were being accused of being American spies and started to be persecuted again. Witnesses were arrested, tortured, beaten, and killed because of their religious activities.

At the time of the interview, Henryk said that Jehovah's Witnesses were enjoying religious freedom and that he enjoyed his work as a volunteer in Poland Bethel (branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses).

Keywords

Auschwitz (Concentration camp) [Oswiecim (Poland)]
Buchenwald (Concentration camp) [Thuringia (Germany)]
Dora-Nordhausen (Concentration camp)
Gross-Rosen (Concentration camp)
Jehovah's Witnesses—Declaration of renunciation of faith
Jehovah's Witnesses--Literature