

Brauner, Henry
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One Video Tape
In English

Abstract

Henry Brauner was born in Krakow, Poland, on May 24, 1921. Two years later his family moved to Breslau, Germany. They lived in an Orthodox community and were financially well off. In 1938, Polish citizens suddenly evacuated to the Polish border. Henry's family lived in the Krakow ghetto. His entire family, except Henry, was deported to a concentration camp. Henry worked for the Germans as a painter and lived in a forced labor camp. He was eventually sent to Auschwitz, but was able to survive there as a painter. After liberation he ended up in a DP camp in Stuttgart. He worked for the U.S. Army in a motor pool. He and his wife eventually came to America, where he ultimately owned a successful service station.

Oral History

- 00:00:05** Henry Brauner was born on May 24, 1921 in Krakow, Poland. When he was two years old, the family moved to Breslau, Germany, where his father had a shirt factory. Henry had a twin sister, an older sister, and a younger brother. Henry's family lived in a very Orthodox Jewish community.
- Henry went to grammar school, high school, and a gymnasium before being sent to Poland.
- 00:00:31** Henry had his Bar Mitzvah in Breslau.
- 00:01:12** With very little warning, the Germans evacuated all Polish citizens from Breslau overnight. They were first taken to prison and then placed on the Polish border. The Poles would not let them enter Poland, and the Germans would not let them return to Germany. After waiting for 48 hours in the cold rain, Henry's family went to Krakow.
- The family was separated. Henry's older sister was married to a German Jew and lived in Berlin.
- 00:03:24** The Nuremberg Laws gradually went into effect. Signs went up in cafés and sports facilities, and Jews had to wear the yellow Star of David on their clothes. All Jewish stores were boycotted. The SS stood in front of all large department stores. Things became increasingly worse.

- 00:04:45** Everyone was given a few minutes to prepare for departure to Poland. Henry's family left everything behind, including their money. They took only the clothes which they were wearing.
- 00:05:02** In Poland, the Brauners finally got a one-bedroom apartment and were reunited. Henry worked for a painting company, and his father made shirts. It was very difficult to earn a living.
- 00:06:11** In 1939, the Nazis launched a "blitzkrieg," and within one day they were able to take over the city of Krakow. The first few months were not too bad, but then the Nazis started taking young boys and girls to clean stables. Food was becoming more scarce.
- One day all the Jews had to wear Stars of David. Jews were beaten; older men had their beards shaved off. Even some Jewish policemen were difficult to get along with.
- 00:08:58** A year later, a twelve block area was turned into a ghetto which was very crowded. Early every morning, Germans came into the ghetto to take people to work. It was very cold and the roads were icy. It snowed from October to May. People worked from 7am to 7pm chipping ice.
- 00:10:25** The apartments had no running water and no toilet facilities.
- People were taken out of their apartments and told they were going to work camps. They soon realized that they were going to concentration camps, but even then nobody could believe what was happening. In the mornings, people were separated into two rows. People in one row were deported.
- 00:11:48** One day in 1942, Henry went to work. When he came back, his entire family was gone. The ghetto was closed, and Henry was sent to live in a barrack.
- Henry worked everyday painting canons for the Germans. Later, he worked inside a camp where he made snow shovels. In the camp there were many hangings and shootings.
- 00:13:09** One day the commander came into barracks, lined everyone up, and shot one man for no reason.
- 00:14:27** Henry had a very good voice. The Germans would invite him to sing at their parties. He knew all the German songs. His talent enabled him to receive better food.

Six months later, he was sent to Ostrowiec where they made railroad cars. It was a very small camp with only a few barracks. He worked the night shift all week.

00:16:46 The Russians began to advance. Henry, along with three boys and two girls, did not go back to the camp. They hid in an attic for five days with no food. They eventually went back to the camp. The following day the camp was evacuated. If they had stayed one more day in the attic, they would have been liberated two years earlier.

00:18:53 When they were evacuated, they were sent by railroad to Auschwitz. Many died from the cold. Jews who greeted them told them what was happening.

00:19:34 Henry was given a blue and grey striped uniform. He lived in a barrack that had once been a stable. Twelve people lay on top of one another in a 6' x 8' area. One morning when Henry woke up he found that the man next to him was dead.

00:20:59 Everyone's arms were tattooed and it was impossible to get rid of the marks.

It was very cold. There was one stove in the middle of each barrack. They had no blankets and had to keep warm by staying close to each other.

00:22:04 The Nazis asked who among the prisoners had professions. Henry said he was a painter and was taken to Buna, a factory in Auschwitz. He was placed on top of a 100-foot crane, where the cold was unbearable.

In the evenings he went back to the camp. He was in a barrack that had single bunks. They were given one helping of soup at night. They took showers every night. First the water was hot, then suddenly it was freezing. They had no towels and had to run 4-5 blocks to get to their barracks.

He remembers children being burned alive in big pits. He knew he would not survive. However, the Nazis happened to need painters, so he was taken to a factory in Auschwitz. He was put on a big crane to paint it.

00:26:41 An orchestra played when the workers went out and when they came back. Henry was able to live in the orchestra's barracks.

00:27:36 In Auschwitz, Jews were selected to burn the people. Later those Jews were killed and replaced.

- 00:28:12** Life in the camp consisted of being woken at 5 a.m., given a slice of bread, and being marched out to the factory. Every day at exactly 12 noon, for 4-5 weeks, U.S. bombers flew over and bombed the factories. Everyone prayed that bombers would destroy the camps, but they only bombed the factories.
- 00:31:14** The Kapo who was assigned to Henry was very nice. He looked like Mario Cuomo. He was not a collaborator. He did only what he had to do. Not every Kapo was like him.
- 00:32:09** There were many hangings and everyone was forced to witness the executions.
- The camp was different from the main Auschwitz camp.
- In 1944, the Germans started burning all documents and papers. One night Henry and the others were taken out of the camp and forced to walk in a foot of snow. They walked between 30-40 kms, and anyone who fell was shot. All the people who remained in the hospital were killed.
- A German soldier ordered Henry to carry a big bag of cigarettes.
- 00:35:18** When they arrived at the camp, the German soldier came into the barracks looking for “the Jew Boy.” Henry did not give the cigarettes back. Instead, he used the cigarettes to buy bread.
- In January, the prisoners were put on an open train. Henry fell asleep and when he woke up his hands were frozen. He still cannot move his hands.
- The train went to Czechoslovakia. When it went under bridges, people on the bridges tried to throw food to the prisoners.
- By the time they arrived in Buchenwald, half of the people were frozen to death. Henry still had the cigarettes, but when he was deloused he lost them.
- 00:39:18** The Germans lived in big houses while the prisoners were put in stables. Buchenwald was a working camp with prisoners of every nationality. Every day prisoners went to work for the farmers.
- The Americans started bombing the camp. A friend was killed right next to him.
- Henry managed to get a few things from the farms either by stealing or by receiving items from the farmers themselves.

00:43:28 The prisoners could hear the Allied cannons and they knew the Americans were getting closer. Suddenly, all 5,000 Jews were ordered out of barracks and put into one barrack. They were not fed.

Then the Germans ordered one hundred people at a time out of the gate and shot them. Henry knew that if he went through the gate he would be killed. He ran back into the French prisoners' barracks and hid there.

Two days later all the Germans were gone.

In April of 1945 the Americans liberated the camp. The prisoners were given food, but many could not digest the food fast enough and died.

00:46:21 Henry describes the Buchenwald Commander's sweetheart, Ilse, who killed people who had tattoos and made lampshades out of their skin.

00:47:40 The only sabotage he was able to do was to change the numbering on the cranes he was painting. He knew there were partisan groups that sabotaged trains, etc.

00:49:02 Two weeks after liberation the Americans selected eight people who spoke some English and assigned them to the army as cooks.

Henry worked with cooks and also learned how to drive. In 1945 he volunteered to go to Japan because he thought it might be a good way to become a U.S. citizen when the war was over.

00:51:25 He spent Rosh Hashanah at the DP camp in Stuttgart where he met his wife.

00:52:22 Eisenhower ordered the Germans to abandon the apartments for DPs. Henry became a driver. He ran the motor pool and wore an American uniform with the UNRRA insignia. He was paid in American money and was treated like a soldier.

Henry married in 1946 and honeymooned in Berchtesgaden. Then he and his wife immigrated to United States. (He shows pictures.)

In America he started working in an auto dealership and became an auto mechanic. Then he worked for a Plymouth dealer and earned \$35.00 a week. He eventually opened his own service station and was very successful.

"My job is to tell people what happened so that we will never have another Holocaust."