

Oral history interview with Sam Schleider

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Summary

Early Life

- Born 1937 in Stanislaw, Poland (now Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine)
- Name at birth was Zigo Bernstein
 - Never knew that this was his given name until the archives opened up
- Father owned a scrap iron business that was adjacent to where the Stanislaw ghetto would eventually be
- Does not remember any of his early childhood before the war broke out

Stanislaw Ghetto

- Earliest memory was when all Jews were marched in the middle of the night into the ghetto
 - It was a cold night and the moon was visible
 - The Jews were making too much noise so the soldiers shot their rifles into the air
 - He was 4 years old and accompanied by his mother. His father was at his business that night.
- The Germans allowed his father to continue working outside of the ghetto at his scrap metal factory because it was supporting the war effort
- In the ghetto, he was carefree. He was able to leave the building and walk into the street. He was able to roam the streets and play ball with a boy around his same age.
- He lived in the apartment with his mother and a number of other people. He does not know the others. His father lived outside the ghetto at his business.
- In the ghetto, his mother made sure he had enough to eat.

On Aktions

- The Germans used to come around and take people out of the ghetto, claiming that they needed them for work. The people never came back.
- Everyone realized that something was not right, so they created hiding spaces.
- When the cry came out "Aktion" he went to his hiding space in the wall of the apartment where he stayed.
- One day, he was playing with a younger boy when "Aktion" was yelled out. Sam ran to his hiding place, but the other boy was too slow. When Sam emerged from the hiding place, the boy lay dead outside.
- It was not the first person he saw dead, so he took it for granted. Many people were dead in the streets. But what could you do other than step over them and continue walking?
- There was no such thing as a normal life. His mother tried to reinforce what was happening so he would remember.

- He remembers that his mother took him outside to see Kapos (Jewish policemen who ran the ghetto) who were strung up on lamp polls. The incident he refers to happened during an Aktion that took place on August 22, 1942. More than 1,000 Jews were shot, Jewish women were raped, and 20 Kapos were killed and their bodies were left to hang on lamp for 2 days.

Escape from the Ghetto

- He was living in the ghetto for roughly a year before they made their escape.
- A few weeks or months later, Sam and his mother escaped from the ghetto. They dressed warmly and walked to one the walls of the ghetto. They moved right through the walls directly to his father's business, and then to the hiding place.
- At the time, he did not know that he was escaping.
- His father had organized their escape and that of a number of other Jews.

On Hiding

- His father had made arrangements to hide Jews in the sub-basement of a Christian Polish woman's home.
- The woman entertained Nazis at her home in exchange for bread or salami that she shared with the hidden Jews. Presumably she exchanged sexual favors for food.
- She was a single woman in her 30s or 40s.
- Sam, his aunt (mother's sister), his mother, and his cousin (aunt's son) were in the hiding space, along with a few other Jews.
- The people chosen for hiding had jewelry or other possessions to give to the woman so she could sell them for food
- Every few days or weeks, the Polish woman came into the sub-basement and the hidden Jews gave her a ring or other items to buy food on the black market
- The sub-basement was covered with straw with a blanket on top of it to lay on. There was a hole in the back covered with sheets to go to the bathroom. There was no way to take baths, only to sponge oneself down. There was no sanitation.
- All he did was lay, sleep, and dream of the day when the madness was finished.
- Whenever the Germans came to visit the woman, the Jews had to be dead quiet. As a child, he struggled with remaining quiet. He wanted to run and talk loud. But he had no normal childhood.
- There was one high window in the sub-basement and you could stand on a chair to see out outside.
- During his time in hiding, Sam did not know what was happening outside of the walls.
- He was in hiding for 15-18 months, and was liberated in the summer of 1944 by the Russians.
- At liberation, the Polish woman was denounced as a collaborator by the Russians. Sam's mother went to see the Russian Commandant to explain that the woman actually had saved Jews. The Russian officer was annoyed and said "Did the Germans run out of bullets for you?" Sam does not know what came of the woman who hid him.

On His Father's Death

- His father did not join the hiding space. Instead he remained at his business and continued to try to rescue other Jews from the ghetto.
- At one point, his father found another Polish man to take hide Jews. The man called the Gestapo and turned the Jews in when they arrived at his home. All of the Jews were killed.
- The man turned his father in, and he was also killed.
- It is possible that his father rescued other people before he was turned in and murdered.

Liberation and Stay in Krakow

- The night of their liberation, Sam and his mother hitchhiked towards Krakow.
- Once in Krakow, they stayed in an apartment with other Jewish survivors.
- His mother met a man named Markus Schleider, who had lost his family. They married.
- After the war, Sam's cousin went to Australia. He does not know what happened to the others who hid with him.
- Although he was skinny after the war, he considered himself normal.
 - "If you don't have steak, and you've never eaten steak, you don't know what you're missing." All he had ever eaten was bread, water and soup.
- He did not consider Russians to be that different from Germans, but at least they didn't kill Jews. They took away their possessions, but didn't kill them.
- He and his mother did not reunite with any other family in Krakow, as far as he knows.

Krakow → Prague → Italy

- Soon after liberation, Sam, his mother, and Marcus left Poland and went south to Prague.
- In Prague, his father (Markus) met Jewish soldiers from Palestine who urged surviving Jews to go to Bari, Italy and then take a boat to Palestine. Sam's family planned to reach Palestine this way.
- He and his family hitchhiked to Italy and reached Bologna where they planned to take a train from Bologna to Bari.
 - Thousands of Jewish survivors were trying to fit on the train.
 - Sam remembers that there were people on the roof, people in between the cars, and that people even placed planks underneath the train to lay upon.
- His mother knew she couldn't take that train because she was pregnant with Sam's sister, so the family stayed in Italy.

Life in Italy

- His moved to the city of Florence, where Sam's sister was born.
- There was no more hope to go to Palestine because the war/unrest had started there.
- They lived in Florence from 1946 until November 1949
- His parents needed to recuperate from the Holocaust.

- As a young boy, Sam noticed the effect that the Holocaust had on his parents.
- His parents watched closely over him until his sister was born, and then their resources and attention went towards her.
- Life in Florence was easy. Sam roamed from one end of the city to the other. He ate food from people's gardens. He made a lot of friends and played in the Church-sponsored soccer league. He "never had a better time."
- All of Sam's friends were Italian and non-Jews. Sam still speaks fluent Italian.
- Sam and his family attended a synagogue in Florence, and Sam attended the synagogue's school.
 - However, the school did not teach about Judaism, so his knowledge of Judaism was very limited until he came to the USA.
- Sam did not sense any antisemitism in Italy.
- In Italy, to get formal employment one had to be an Italian citizen. For work, Markus (Sam's stepfather) bought gold for cheap in South Italy and peddled it at the Ponte Vecchio in Florence.
 - The other Jewish survivors in Florence also made a living this way. There were roughly 20 Jewish families in Florence according to Sam.
 - But this type of employment wasn't sustainable because of citizenship issues.
- Markus' relative in NYC agreed to sponsor the Schleiders to immigrate to the USA.
- First they went to a camp outside of Naples, Italy where they received inoculation shots, etc.
- Sam loved Italy. It was a carefree life and he had everything he wanted. He hadn't wanted to leave.

Life in the USA

- His family moved to a "railroad apartment" in the Lower East Side of Manhattan.
- Sam's stepfather sent him to school at a Yeshiva
 - His father told the rabbi that if Sam didn't attend, he would grow up as a gentile
 - Sam thinks that his Jewish education did not begin in Europe because his parents were trying to protect him from antisemitism
- At 13 years old, he was put in the 1st grade of Judaism.
- It initially was difficult for Sam to assimilate to American society because his mind thought in Italian.
 - At the Yeshiva he spoke Italian and Yiddish, not English. He was lucky that all of the teachers at the Yeshiva spoke Yiddish.
- The Jewish community in NYC initially put up his family in a hotel but soon they became self-sufficient.
- For work, Markus peddled consignment goods at the farmer's market
 - Markus procured third rate Nylon stockings from Europe.
 - Sam remembers that the family erased the word "irregular" from the stockings and put a first quality stamp on them for which they received 10 stamps/ dozen stockings. In that way they made a living.
- In 1959 Sam went into business with his father.

- That year, he also received 5,000 dollars in compensation from the German government
 - Initially he did not want to take it, considering it “blood money, but his parents urged him to take it. They used the money to start a business.
- Sam initially had trained to be an American officer in the ROTC.
 - But he was married beforehand. At his physical examination in 1960, he told the captain that his wife was expecting a child. In January 1961, he sent his son’s birth certificate to the army and as a result his status was changed and he did not join the army.
- He had wanted to be an officer in the American army so that he could go to Israel and fight for the Israeli cause.
 - As an American, he donated to the Israeli cause and gave voting support to Israel.
- Sam met his wife at a 1-week YMCA camp for 18-25 years olds
 - His wife is a New York Jew but not a survivor.
 - If he didn’t marry a Jewish girl, his parents “would have killed him”

Reflections on the Holocaust

- Throughout his adolescence, he and his parents did not discuss the Holocaust. His mother only told him a little bit about his birth father.
- Sam thinks that the US government did not publicize the Holocaust until after the Cold War ended in 1989, because they wanted to stay on good terms with Germans.
- Sometimes Sam wonders why he survived the Holocaust. There must be a reason why.
 - In the community he lives now, he helps other people who cannot help themselves.
 - He is part of a group of 130 survivors in South Florida. He speaks at schools about the Holocaust. He tells them that this was not the first Holocaust and it will not be the last. He mentioned the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, what happened to the Native Americans, and the Armenian genocide.
- Sometimes he thinks about the various Einsteins and Da Vincis who were killed in the Holocaust, their genius never to be realized.
- If there was no such thing as the Holocaust, he probably would still be in Poland and would have married a local girl. His future probably wouldn’t have been so bright. It turned out well for him, but not for so many others.
- As a hobby, he practices “European marquetry”, or wood inlay. The pictures he makes are Jewish and American themes.
- He is critical of Poland’s new policy on concentration camps
- He speaks about the old days of Poland’s vibrant Jewish society and how Poland is changing for the worse.
- In 2017, Sam attended the March of the Living in Poland where he visited Krakow and marched between Birkenau and Auschwitz
 - He felt very down during his visit to Poland
- But Sam is positive about the new generation. He honestly believes that the world will be a better place in the future.