

RG-50.031.0097

Summary

Mr. Aaron Elster, b. 2/4/1933 Sokolow-Podlaski, Poland town of 12-14K (6-7K Jewish), 2 synagogues; parents owned butcher shop (mostly non-kosher); earliest memory of a bombing; 2 sisters, extended family; in ghetto, paying off Germans to stay in business; discussion on selections to build Treblinka, "No one came back."; meetings in home "to talk about bad times coming up. At 9, I felt I had the maturity of a 25 yr. old."; Jews forced on trains, recall hearing, "God will help us."; Aaron's questioning "God's designs"; commerce in Sokolow ghetto - father's injuries from mafia-beating from not "paying off on time"; with father's connections, some allowed (including Aaron's family) on farm forced labor; Aaron & sister return to ghetto, hide in wall, hearing screaming, bullets flying, witnessing "child smothered by parents so others would not be found out." & Aaron struck with flying wood from bullet into wall, their secret door opens and they are dragged out by "Ukrainians doing dirty work for Germans."; taken to marketplace, mother pulled away, an elderly kicked to death, father (having heard about crematoriums) told Aaron "to run," escaping to aunt's house in ghetto, hid in basement; escape to farm, reunited with father who had escaped; mother had been put to work at train station gathering Jewish belongings - her pocketing bartering items; sister (5 yrs.) sent to Treblinka; reuniting with mother who walked Aaron & pointed to Gursky house where she had placed Adam's sister in hiding; having received jewelry from mother, sister had bartered a hiding place with another Polish family but was ousted because family feared being caught housing a Jew; having received jewelry back, sister fled to Gursky Family they presented her as their (Christian) daughter; when Adam sought shelter in Gursky home, huge resistance from Mrs. Gursky not wanting to hide a boy (being Jewish male, threat to Gursky's safety, "Circumcision was a dead giveaway"); having been in same clothes 6 mo., full of lice, Adam is allowed in Gursky attic; with nothing to do, "I played with lice."; sister brought food 1x day; Adam received no baths, no human contact besides his sister's visits for 2 years - he never met Mr. Gursky; Russian bombings; at liberation, Mrs. Gursky was afraid to release Aaron & sister go because Poles were killing others Poles who had hidden Jews; when release, Adam weighed 50-60 lbs., "couldn't walk."; Russian soldier took Aaron under his wing, fed him; diarrhea for 2 weeks; mother had survived until 3 mos. before liberation, she was shot in marketplace - the Pole who turned her in, rewarded "couple of bushels of coal"-Aaron took him to trial & he received 5 yrs.; father had been killed at Treblinka; joyful reunification with uncle who then smuggled them into Prague, next into Germany, caught by Americans, returned to Czechoslovakia; Nuremberg DP camp; seeing a Nuremberg trial; Jewish Children's Bureau brought Aaron/sister to Chicago; foster home with Mr. & Mrs. Brooks 1948-1952; ongoing fears/nightmares/survivor guilt; schooling; marriage; becoming grandfather; descendants "should know to appreciate their lives."; 2nd recording of Aaron Elster follows with further oral testimony

Tape 2:

Aaron revises his Tape 1 birthday-niece discovered documentation from Poland that Aaron's actual birthday might be 9/15/1932; Aaron revises Tape 1, cites his hometown (Sokolow-Podlaski) as having 5K Jews; Aaron discusses his book "Her Haunting Eyes," referencing the look in his sister's eyes when she was captured, died at Treblinka, 15-20 miles from Sokolow-

Podlaski where most Jews were “either shot, buried in their backyards, or they died at Treblinka”; according to Aaron “only 29 Jews of Sokolow-Podlaski survived”; Aaron discusses his volunteer work speaking to “thousands & thousands of kids” about the Holocaust; discussion on current genocide in the world; returning home, “neighbors were not nice, wondering why we survived”; his greatly admired uncle helped Aaron/sister smuggle into Czechoslovakia, then into Germany, caught, tried again, successfully smuggled into Germany, DP camps; 6/7/1947 arriving in US (Chicago); hugely touched by kindness received from social worker, Mrs. Zucker “I never had that before.”; in spite of being locked in attic for 2yrs., cold, fleas, lice, Aaron expresses appreciation for woman who hid Aaron, “You don’t know how strong you are until strength is the only thing you have left”; prior to attic, tried to survive in forest, knocking on door of farmer, receiving hot soup but then told “People like you have no future,” ousted; Aaron returns to discussing US; marriage before being shipped to Korea 18 mo., became US citizen while in Korea; returned to US, “had no confidence of succeeding in business but succeeded beyond...couldn’t enjoy it because I believed it would be taken away”; seeking a wife (Jackie Kozin) who was not a survivor, “wanted normalcy, didn’t speak to my children about my background” (while they were young); 2 sons, grandchildren; entered insurance business DePaul University, became certified underwriter, joining MetLife; age 47 heart attack, 3 packs cigarettes, “worked very hard”; Remainder of tape, Aaron provides an in-depth history (founders, board, politics, donors) on the earliest days of Illinois Holocaust Museum.