

Summary of Oral History Interview with Joseph Bolinsky July 1990

Professor Bolinsky is a sculptor at the State University College in Buffalo and a World War Two veteran. He served in the army from 1943 to 1946 and was in France, Germany and Czechoslovakia for about 1 1/2 years. Wherever he went he tried to meet Jews. The first group was in Pilsen, where he met a woman with two girls who were hiding from the Germans. It was near the end of the war, but there was still fighting. He gave them food but does not know what happened to them later.

He was a combat engineer in the Army and his duties included building or destroying bridges or digging up mine fields. He knew of the concentration camps but was not involved in liberating any. In one of the camps, he found the cousin of his mother and also a niece. He met the first refugees when he was stationed in Ansbach in the Fall of 1945, when he helped in a nearby camp operated by UNRRA. The camp provided medical and psychiatric help, food and education for young Jews 2 to 4 years old. There was one boy, about 14 or 15, who had been a partisan with his father; when captured by the Germans, they were shot and buried, but he was not dead and managed to scramble out. Various competing Zionist groups and other volunteers helped the children to prepare for and look forward to a better future. Many of them later went to Palestine, often illegally, and some of these were on the ship Exodus. Many also came to the United States. He shows a number of photographs of the children and also of a synagogue in Ansbach that had been closed and where he helped with the restoration.

He remembers a trip to Nuremberg and a session of the trials when Goering was on the stand. On another trip, he went to Munich where he tried to help people by directing them to appropriate assistance organizations. He was extremely shocked when he saw the beautiful cities and country side in Germany almost untouched and could not understand how those people could do what they did. People generally claimed they did not know. He met a girl who complained that her soldier friend did not bring her silk stockings from Paris, but she did not want to hear where those stockings came from.

But he also met a German painter whose friend had been shot by the Nazis as a suspected Anti-Nazi. In Czechoslovakia the partisans rounded up many Germans; some were shot but, generally, their fate is not known.

He remembers an incident at the UNRRA camp when one night a group of perhaps 50 refugee children who had heard about the camp, wanted to be admitted. The camp was locked and the supervisors refused to let them in, but the staff and soldiers wrested the key from her and opened the gate. Their action was approved by the General the following day. He believes that children in the liberated concentration camp received the same help.

After three months, his term there was over. He returned to the United States where he got married and had four children. Later he lived in Rome for two years (1962-1964) and there he met Israelis who knew about the children from the UNRRA camp. He visited Israel several times and once came to a meeting of people from his mothers village in Poland and also met an uncle who had gone there as a young man many years before and told him about the difficulties

in early Palestine. He also found a cousin who had been a member of the Jewish brigade. People who had gone to Palestine from Poland that early survived although their emigration was considered stupid by those who stayed behind. He feels that in situations like that only history will decide whether an earlier decision was correct. He still thinks that he had not done enough and that perhaps he could have done more.