

Summary of Oral History Interview with William Eisen July 1990

William (Bill) Eisen was born in 1920 in Miechow, Poland, a small town near Cracow, of about 13,000 inhabitants with 2,000 Jews. He survived the war after being in camps in Cracow, Plaszow, Skarzysko, Czestochowa and Buchenwald. His father made a very modest living by buying and selling in the surrounding villages. The six children, five boys and one girl, lived in one small room. There was no electricity until 1933 and no plumbing. Even before the war the Jewish children were considered to be different from the others and always were persecuted, but he felt he had a good normal life for a Jewish boy at that time. The youngsters were busy with many activities such as scouts, Zionist organizations and sports. He shows a photograph of himself and his mother. After finishing Public School he went to a trade school to learn tailoring.

In 1934-1935, with Hitler coming to power in Germany, the Polish antisemitic parties became very strong. Although the family thought about leaving, they never did. After the German invasion, many Polish neighbors collaborated with the Nazis by identifying Jews and Jewish stores. They received Jewish businesses as a reward. In 1940, a ghetto was formed where people had to live 15 to 20 in a room.

One brother was in the Polish Army and did not return. The others were killed by the Germans at various locations. Life in the ghetto was relatively tolerable. They had a synagogue and worked outside on highways. Then, he was taken to the camp Cracow - Plaszow from where he twice tried to escape but was recaptured. In 1942, the ghetto was liquidated. His father tried to hide in the attic but was discovered and taken to Belsen where he was killed. Most of the people were shot but some were taken in cattle cars to a labor camp. The 40 km (25 miles) trip took three days. He stayed there with 3000 young men until 1943 and worked in a tailor shop. During a typhus epidemic the Nazis killed those who were sick. He was sick too but was saved when the supervisor pointed out that he was a good tailor. People did not think about tomorrow but lived only from day to day. In the camp they received no food or water for two days but had to work carrying rocks around.

Most inmates were shot, but he somehow survived. One of his brothers also was in this camp and was shot. For food they received 1/4 pound loaf of bread and some soup.

From there he was taken to Skarzysko. This camp was a former munitions factory. They had to stuff explosive shells and take them to a transport. People were seriously affected by the chemicals but those who could not work were shot. He became ill and could not eat bread. A friend got him some extra soup. He was supposed to be shot but because he was slow to respond to the call for him, he escaped this fate. He also was lucky to miss an accidental explosion that killed many people. At that time, the Russians were already in Warsaw and many escaped into the woods to go there. He did not flee and was taken to Czestochowa. In that camp there was enough food, and he worked in a tailor shop. Finally, in January 1945 he was taken to Buchenwald. At first, the Nazis searched everyone for valuables and one-half of the people were sent to the crematoria. In this camp they could use showers and were given soap marked R.J.F. (for pure Jewish fat). He also was given a pair of leather shoes which probably saved his

life later. He worked in a coal mine with prisoners from other countries from January until April 1945. Then 700 men were supposed to go to Theresienstadt. They had to march 30 to 40 km (about 20 to 25 miles) per day. Those who could not keep up were killed and his shoes saved him. They had little food and ate grass. Many got sick and died. Only 180 survived. Eventually, the Russians liberated them and an American group came a few days later. The Red Cross also helped. After four weeks he returned to his hometown where he did not find anybody. His weight then was down to 75 lb. He feels this interview is important as a legacy for future generations.