

HENRY JOSEPH
BORN 1925
LAUFERSWEILER, GERMANY

Henry Joseph was born in 1925 in Laufersweiler Germany, about 30 miles South of Coblenz. The small farming village had a population of about 800 including 25 Jewish families. He lived with his grandparents, parents and one sister. The family and three of his father's brothers, one of whom was severely wounded in World War I, operated a Matzohs factory for six months during the year. They also sold feed, coal and flour and had a small farm. His sister later fled to Holland but in April 1942 at age 21, was deported to Auschwitz in a group of 1100 people none of whom returned.

He shows photographs of his sister and of a group of children from his community (only one-half survived and went to Israel, United States and Argentina. They all met in Israel during a visit in 1956); he also shows pictures of his grandfather, of his mother and himself (his mother was sent East in early 1942 and nobody of that transport returned), of a family group and of the factory staff including his father. When his father died in 1934, his mother took over, but the business gradually declined particularly after 1935, when the Nuremberg laws against Jews were introduced. He attended a Catholic school where one teacher objected to the antisemitism and resigned. There were others who also were sympathetic but could not do anything. The bakery operated until Kristallnacht in October 1938, exactly 37 years before this interview.

In November 1938, all males between 17 and 70 were arrested and the interior of the synagogue was burned. The Nazis entered their home and chased everybody up and down the stairs. His grandfather tried to defend himself but was severely beaten and thrown for dead into the yard. Their belongings were thrown out of the windows into the street. A Catholic priest took them into his house and managed to hide them in his attic. He lost all but two of his bar mitzvah presents which later were found again by friends. He does not know the fate of other local Jewish families. The Jews then were assessed about 1/3 to 1/4 of what they owned for the murder of the German consular official in Paris which led to the Kristallnacht. His sister went to Holland and he went to Luxemburg where they had relatives.

They had tickets for the United States and had requested visas which were delayed by the authorities because of various technicalities and, in the end, they could not get out. He worked illegally in a blacksmith shop. Once, in 1941 he went home when his grandmother died but had to go back to Luxemburg.

In October 1941, he and 13 relatives from the vicinity of his hometown were sent to the ghetto in Lodz, while his mother stayed home and later sold her property. Her last letter to him is from December 1941, and he shows a photograph of it. Between March and May 1942, all Jews from his village were killed in some concentration camp (not Auschwitz).

In the Lodz ghetto he worked in a metal factory until near the end of 1944. He and several relatives all lived in one room. One uncle died of malnutrition, He often saw dead people in the streets being taken away. Once, all children were taken away. One of them was a 7 year old cousin. Her mother did not want to give her up but was beaten by the Germans. The very next day, his aunt was sure she saw someone wearing the coat of the girl. It was one his worst experiences of the Holocaust. None of the children survived. He was old enough to be considered a worker and thus escaped his fate.

When the Russians approached at the end of 1944, the ghetto was liquidated. He was on one of the last trains to Auschwitz. There, everything they had, including gold teeth, was taken away from them and many were sent to the "showers" to be gassed. Of his relatives, all but one cousin died. He remembers that on Yom Kippur they were given better than average soup, which however they did not eat. He was there two or three weeks.

Then about 1000 able-bodied men were sent to Hannover where they were political prisoners in a small camp and where the guards were non-Jewish criminal prisoners who spoke no German; they were from somewhere in the East and were particularly brutal. For several months they were marched every day to a tire factory for work and back. After returning to camp they had to stand for roll call and often were beaten up. Some sons were forced to beat their fathers. Once, they were taken to showers where there was only icy water - it was Winter - and some froze to death. His supervisors in the factory had pity on him and gave him food.

After several months, Allied bombing increased, and they were taken to bunkers and worked hard to put the factory underground. Once he had to clean 55 barracks where one elderly SS man often left some food for him. When the British came near, they were marched three or four days to Bergen-Belsen and some died on the way. There were no more ovens in Bergen-Belsen, but there were buildings full of corpses which they had to take to mass graves. Some men were too weak and were thrown alive into the graves. They were liberated by the British who distributed cans of meat and many died from eating too much.

He hopes that his and similar experience by others will be a lesson to the world. People are too passive, but he hopes that such events will never happen again. He has only lately been able to talk to his sons about his life.