

PETER TRAUB
BORN: CRACOW, POLAND
SEPTEMBER 1927

Peter Traub was born in Cracow, Poland in September 1927. His father was one of very few Jewish officers in the Polish air force after having been a pilot during World War I. He saw no conflict in being a Polish patriot and a good Jew but felt that Jews should be more combative.

Peter outlines the tragedy of antisemitism which developed in Poland and other countries during the second half of the 19th century. Most of his friends were gentiles. His first encounter with antisemitism occurred when he was 5 or 6 years old, and the mother of a friend said that no Jew can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This was based on the prevailing education in Poland, where antisemitism was equated with patriotism.

He lived in Cracow, a famous old city, where Jews had lived for about 700 years and generally had good relations with the rest of the population. However, the Jews tended to live among themselves and had become physically and in mannerisms different from others. Also their Polish language was different, and all that made it difficult to survive in the Polish population. He attended Public School and the Jewish boys often were attacked by the other students, but otherwise, he had a normal childhood. He credits his survival later on to the ability to withstand physical abuse which he was taught by his father.

About 1936 he encountered the first expulsion of Polish born Jews from Germany and realized the danger to the Jewish population. He begged his parents to leave but nobody wanted to take him seriously. In any case, one could not just leave. Most borders were closed and there were the problems with visas, the U. S. quota, etc.

A real change came with the start of the war and the Germans confiscated everything. His father was an architect and could make a living but was poorly paid. Once he produced an outstanding piece of work for a Nazi official who offered him a reward. He did not want a reward but asked about the outlook for the Jewish community. The official told him (in the Winter of 1940) that the Jews had no future and that all would be exterminated. His father was offered a passage to England by the Polish underground to become a pilot there but refused to leave his family.

They had to move and for a while lived on a farm that belonged to relatives until the farm was confiscated. He then volunteered for a forced-labor camp and worked in a Messerschmitt factory when he was 14 or 15 years old. They had little food there but a chance for survival. Later on, he was sent to Auschwitz where he was selected to work again in a forced-labor camp. He volunteered to work in a coal mine because of some stories about miners he had read as a boy and also because there were no guards underground. The miners were antisemitic but did accept him. Because of the heavy work they received special rations and he worked there for about one year until the end of 1944. When the Russian front came close, he was moved to several other camps and finally, in April 1945, ended up in Bergen-Belsen. Many people there died of starvation, and he was comatose when the camp was liberated by the British on April 18, 1945. Some Jews survived because the Nazis run out of time and also because they needed forced labor.

After Liberation he was in a hospital for several weeks and then joined a transport to Italy where he first stayed in a refugee camp and then worked in Rome. During the Summer of 1945, he visited Cracow but did not find any friends or relatives.

Many had hoped that after the war the United States, Canada or Australia could accept the refugees but he had to wait for several years in refugee camps. In 1949 he came to the United States with one of the first transports and was assigned to Buffalo.

He points out that all survivors share the secret knowledge of knowing the inhumanity of man to man and emphasizes that one must watch the direction of history.