

Izkowitz

SAM ~~HERSKOWITZ~~

Place interviewed: JEWISH COMMUNITY FEDERATION OF RICHMOND

Date: March 3, 1991

Transcriber of tapes: Jan Masal

Life in Mako (ph), Poland before the Mako Ghetto

Tape 1 1:00, 8:00

Tape 11 6:00, 7:00

The Transport to Auschwitz

Tape 1 9:00

Tape 11 8:00

Living conditions and work in Auschwitz-Birkenau

Tape 1 9:00 - 20:00

Description of work in the crematoria

Tape 11 9:00 - 13:00

Blowing up of crematorium 2

Tape 11 17:00

Attempted escape from Auschwitz

Tape 11 19:00

Mengele

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Tape 11 14:00 - 16:00

The Death March and liberation

Tape 11 3:00 - 5:00

November 5, 1991

JEWISH COMMUNITY FEDERATION OF RICHMOND

Name: Sam Herskowitz

Date of interview: March 3, 1991

Summary: Sam tells of the misery of life in the ghetto and the inhumane treatment of the Jews by both the Germans and the Poles. He details his agonizing experiences of working in the crematoria in Auschwitz.

Sam Herskowitz was born in Mako (ph), Poland in 1925.

1:00 Sam explains that Mako is on the way to Warsaw. On September 1st, 1939, Sam felt a tug on his shoulder. It was his father saying the Germans had invaded Poland. He had heard of Hitler's atrocities in Czechoslovakia and Austria and now it had reached them. Sam had been a student in a public school. The city was 60% Jewish, 40% Gentile. There was the Depression, but they were surviving. His father had a shoe store.

(2:50)
2:00 Anti-semitism in Poland was rampant. There were many German nationals living among the Poles and they agitated the "stupid" Poles. The Poles didn't question any blame put on the Jews. The Jews never fought back. This was before the War. Agitators were set up in front of the Jewish stores and if Gentiles tried to go in, they committed violence against their own people. They were called "Jew lovers."

(5:30)
3:00 The Polish government was tolerant to all the boycotts. The Nazis occupied Mako on September 4. There was chaos. His family expected the worst and got it. They didn't expect to pay with their lives, though. He and his brother survived. His two sisters didn't. After the occupation, there was a new rule against the Jews. All Jewish stores were sealed. If a Jew broke a seal to go into his own store, he was shot on the spot.

- (7:45)
- 4:00 All possessions in the Jewish stores were loaded on trucks and taken away. On top of that the Jews had to pay for the gas and labor of the Germans. No Jew was safe. The Germans needed slave labor. They dug ditches, widened roads for German tanks and hauled and cracked rocks for the roads. Everyone from ten years and up worked. There were about 8,000 Jews in Mako and 6,000 Gentiles. Before all this, there was a strict, Orthodox Jewish life. The Nazis destroyed the temples as soon as they came.
- (10:20)
- 5:00 They used the carpets from the temples on the sidewalks. The Nazis cut off Jewish beards. Sam's two sisters and their husbands fled to the Russian side. Sam followed them. Conditions were much better. The Russians devalued Polish money, though, and they needed food. Sam said he'd go back to Poland as he knew his mother still had some. It was about 50 kilometers. He got home and when he started back, the Germans had tightened the border.
- (13:36)
- 6:00 When the Germans invaded Russia, his sisters were stuck. The Einsatzgruppen (ph) came in and wiped out the Jews. Sam went back to his home and ended up in occupied Poland with his parents and brother. Now they had to wear the Star of David. The Nazis called it the "symbol of shame." They couldn't walk on the sidewalk, but had to walk in the gutter. Forced labor.
- (15:40)
- 7:00 There was some food. They traded with the Poles for shoes and other things. The Germans didn't like that, so they decided to build a ghetto. All Jews were rounded up and put in the Mako Ghetto. Food was not allowed to be brought in. This was 1940-1942. Everyday Jews had to line up in groups of 100, leave the ghetto and do work for the Germans. The Germans found work that wasn't even suited for human beings. The Jews lasted longer than the Germans thought they could so Hitler decided to cleanse Poland of Jews. 1942 was the "cleansing" year. Suddenly, they couldn't leave the ghetto. There was no resistance.
- (18:00)
- 8:00 They were too weak, too hungry and there was no organization. If the Germans thought anyone tried to resist, they took 20, 50, 100 people and shot them on the spot. In the fall of 1942, orders came to transport them to Auschwitz. Sam had had a cousin, Israel, who was an excellent tailor in the Russian Zone where Sam's sisters were. He was so good, while other Jews were being told to take their clothes off before being shot, Sam was told to put his back on and was saved. He escaped and made it back to Sam's and told him what had happened. The White Russians and Germans took all the Jews to the ditches and shot and buried them. Israel saw Sam's sisters and even his own wife and baby murdered.

- (20:50)
- 9:00 Sam went on the second transport to Auschwitz. Some French Jews, who had been working in the crematoria, rebelled because they couldn't take it anymore. They were all shot. Sam's cousin, Israel, had been on the first transport and was selected to work in the crematorium after this happened. Sam had five cousins in that transport. Sam's transport got to Auschwitz at night. They lined up in fives on the platform to be counted. The Germans had dogs on them and beat them with pickax handles. There was confusion. Sam grabbed his little brother and walked up to a good-looking, dark-skinned SS man. It was Mengele. He was pointing left and right.
- (23:40)
- 10:00 Since Sam had his brother, he was pointed right. Sam said the other side looked better. He ran to the other side and while a German was looking for him, his brother did the same thing. They marched and saw wires all around and big lights and building tools lying on the ground. They went into a barracks. An SS man had a three foot long whip with a piece of lead on the end of it. Sam was 17 at the time. The SS man hit anyone in his way and told the "dirty Jews" to put out any gold or valuables.
- (26:50)
- 11:00 Ten people were killed right then. The barracks had two doors, front and back. A German prisoner came in and cussed the Jews. He opened the back door and they saw flames and smoke. He told the men that that was their brothers and sisters and mothers being burned. He said no one survives there more than ten days. Then they were deloused and shaved. They were put in something like "Lysol" that smelled terrible and was extremely painful. It was cold out since it was December.
- (28:50)
- 12:00 They were then tattooed. At that moment, he existed not as a human being, but as a number. The same needle was used on everyone and his arm got infected for a week. They then got clothes from dead prisoners that were full of lice. They had had no food or water. They were beaten on going into the barracks. The beatings were done by prisoners themselves.
- (32:10)
- 13:00 They got a piece of bread worth two bites and that was their meal. The next day they got a bowl. They got terrible coffee in it. He saw his cousins and tried to talk to them, but he wasn't supposed to and got hit over the head so badly he had a headache for a week. The cousins were the ones working in the crematorium. They couldn't talk either because no one should know what they were doing. Sam then saw a big wagon loaded with bodies on the way to the crematorium.

- (34:50)
- 14:00 Sam worked shoveling out a gravel pit. The shovel alone was heavy but loaded with gravel it was awful. Sam's brother said maybe he shouldn't have saved himself and Sam agreed. He worked in the gravel pits ten days and if he had gone longer, he wouldn't have lasted. He had wooden clogs and they got soaked. One night he heard someone yell, "Woodworkers line-up!" He did and got picked for this. They marched for two hours surrounded by guards and dogs.
- (37:50)
- 15:00 The dogs were trained to attack anything that smelled like a prisoner. They came to another concentration camp and it was Auschwitz proper. Sam was now in Birkenau. Elite prisoners took over. There was no water in Birkenau. Typhoid was rampant as they had to drink sewer water. He was in Birkenau for about two weeks. His brother, who was three years younger, stayed after he left. Sam was taken back to Auschwitz and into a bathhouse where he had hot water and could scrub for half an hour. This time he got a new uniform. He felt like a new person.
- (40:50)
- 16:00 He got a bunk for himself in the block. The buildings were brick. He even had a blanket. They didn't get better treatment, but it was clean. He could take a shower after work at night. Sam said being able to bathe everyday saved his life. His new job was working under a roof making little boxes. He loaded these boxes on a wagon and he and other prisoners pulled the wagon. It was to go to the crematorium which was in Auschwitz proper or Birkenau. They didn't gas people here; they burned the dead who died in the camps. Sam handed these boxes down to what happened to be two of his school friends.
- (43:45)
- 17:00 His friend was the Sondercommando. They got a few words in. He told Sam that these were the boxes for the Gentiles. If a Gentile dies, he gets burned and the ashes got put in a box and sent home to the family. There were just piles of ashes and he used a scoop. No ashes got sent to where they belonged. Sam brought a load of these boxes every week. All of a sudden there came an order for doors with four grooves that could be hermetically sealed. A Polish foreman told Sam that he would go through these doors and never come back. He was teased by the Pole to make sure the nails were tight because they didn't want him to get out. Sam had to go back to Birkenau to install these doors in the crematoria. He saw his cousins and his friend the Sondercommando who gave him food.

- (46:30)
- 18:00 He ate so much he got sick. He then returned to Auschwitz. The foreman never called him by name. He only called him "Jew" or "Dirty Jew". That one night Sam gave the foreman some sausage and bacon he had gotten and he was allowed to warm-up at the stove. Sam was told to go back with that group because he could get the foreman more food. He wasn't always so lucky. If a transport didn't come in, he couldn't get any food. This went on for six months and Sam worked in crematoria two and three. In 1943, typhoid fever broke out in Birkenau. He wasn't able to go back to Auschwitz anymore because they didn't want typhoid there.
- (49:50)
- 19:00 There was no more woodworking. He found a German foreman, an electrician. Sam asked if he could work for him. The work was to check the electric wire surrounding the camp. If you got within three feet of the wire, the current just sucked you in. Sam's job was to check the wire. It was easy. He could go into the crematorium because there were wires there, too. Here, from the transports, he could get a lot of food. His cousin, Israel, watched out for him. He even got him good shoes from a partisan who had just been killed.
- (53:20)
- 20:00 When Sam got back, the kapo tore off the shoes. He took those and gave Sam his. Every Sunday, Mengele made a selection. Anyone not fit to work was killed on Monday morning. The howling and crying were terrible. People said to tell the world. This was in 1943 and the beginning of 1944. Sam's friends gradually disappeared. One night he heard sounds of cannon far away and he said it must be the Russians. The next day they were on a transport.
- (56:00)
- 21:00 The doors were sealed on the train. They couldn't leave them in the camp because they'd tell what happened. There was no food for three days. The pain was unbearable because if there's no food, only bile and acid go through the intestine.

TAPE 2

- 1:00 No one knows where they're going. On the third day, they arrive in Oranenberg (ph). There was a factory outside of Berlin and they worked there three or four days assembling planes. The bombing was so bad, the Germans moved the factory to Landsberg, near Bavaria. They slept in small huts outside of Dachau. They worked on bunkers that Hitler was building. They were big hangers to put airplanes in.

- 2:00 (2:30) They were camouflaged from the outside by trees which were planted over the cement. The war was coming to an end. It was now the end of 1944. Some SS had let the prisoners know indirectly about the situation and it really kept them alive. The men worked on the bunkers until February 1945. The Americans had started an offensive against Germany and the prisoners were marched toward the Bavarian Mountains. It was the Death March which lasted ten days to two weeks. It was March and cold and snowing. They camped at night in open fields and saw Allied planes flying over them. Sam thinks the pilots knew they were prisoners by their striped uniforms and dropped bombs all around them but never on them.
- 3:00 (4:45) During the Death March, they walked in groups. Germans were in the front, back and sides. Sam was beginning to get sick and as a wagon passed by he grabbed onto it to be dragged along. Once in a while he was able to steal some bread from it. In May, the Americans bombed Munich. The SS got scared and ran and the prisoners also ran. After the bombing, the Germans yelled for them to get back in line, but Sam said he'd rather die in the woods where he had taken cover than do that. He stayed in the woods for three days when some tanks came by. He saw faces he'd never seen before; "Negroes" were driving the tanks.
- 4:00 He couldn't believe the Americans were there. The last tank stopped and a soldier gave him a bar of bittersweet chocolate. Then he was given K-Rations and cigarettes. Sam said he felt like a kid in a toy shop getting all of these things. This soldier got him medical help. He was taken to a field dispensary and a Jewish doctor worked on him. The doctor wouldn't give him much food at once, just Farina with skim milk and tea. Every two hours his food intake was increased.
- 5:00 (10:00) He ate for six days until he was full. Then he went to Munich. He was assigned to a room in a Nazi's house. During the week more prisoners came and the Red Cross gave them supplies. Sam stayed about two months and then went on his own. He applied to come to the United States but it would end up taking him five years to get there. He felt that the Americans didn't want him either; Nazis and Germans went before him. He finally got to Richmond, Virginia and started (12:00) life all over. Sam refers back to life in the ghetto. He said it was just as hard as life in a concentration camp. However, they still had some of their own things to trade off with the Gentiles through the fence.
- 6:00 (12:30) The new people arriving into the ghetto had nothing and they were starving to death. Everyday there were up to thirty funerals. If a Jew got out of the ghetto and got caught, the Germans took twenty "hostages" and hung them. It was like a holiday to the Germans. The gallows was where the temple once was and at least once a month twenty Jews were hung there.

(15:00)

7:00 The Jews had no rights at all. Any German or Pole could kill a Jew for no reason. Sam said he could name dozens of the Nazis and they were all vicious. Two names he mentions are Blatchko (ph), a German and a man named Linden (ph). If a Jew walked in the street and saw a German approaching, he did everything possible to disappear so as not to face him. Whenever the Germans came in, the Jews would hide in fear. Everyday more people were brought in. It was so crowded, people had to sleep in shifts.

(17:40)

8:00 Sam tells about his transport to Auschwitz. He said the train ride was "hell". The boxcars were jammed with standing room only. The peepholes were boarded up and wire put on them. People couldn't even turn around and all natural functions were done on the spot. There was no water and by the third day when the cars were unloaded many were dead.

(20:10)

9:00 Sam goes on to tell about his work in the crematoria. He says crematoria two and three had gas chambers underground and they could handle about 3,000 prisoners at once for gassing. Crematoria four and five had gas chambers above the ground and were smaller. They just looked like factories. Innocent prisoners came in through the backdoor. There was a white staircase about twelve feet wide to walk down into crematoria two and three. There were also slides for the bodies to go down. Some were still alive. When entering the chambers, the prisoners went into a room called an undressing room. They were told to put their clothes neatly on hooks. There were benches all around. They were then told they'd go into a room with showers. They were to shower, put their clothes back on and then they'd go to work in the camp. Most believed it. As soon as they took their clothes off, the sondercommando was ready to pick them up and put them outside on the truck to be recycled. The women went in first. There were two chutes, like chimneys, going all the way to the top of the crematoria. There was perforated metal around them.

(23:50)

10:00 When the bunkers were filled with women, they put a man in. Sometimes when they couldn't get anymore in, they made the children climb on the heads. A six inch door slammed behind them. Three iron bars were screwed tight. There was a man outside who had a Red Cross wagon with the gas cannisters in it. He put a mask on, tore off the lids of the cannisters and threw them down the chute, through the chimney, into the gas chamber. Crematoria two and three had two gas chutes. As soon as the gas was in the lid of the chute was slammed shut. All that could be heard was one loud sound from inside. The gassing took five to ten minutes. In the door there was a peephole made of glass with three or four layers of bars on it so it couldn't be broken. A light was turned on in the bunker to see if everyone was dead. When the gas hit them, blood squirted from every body cavity. The gas was so strong, very few people died without bleeding to death.

(20:00)
11:00 The agony was so bad, people clawed each other trying to get away from the chute where the gas was coming down. The bodies were piled so thick, it sometimes took the sondercommando a half-hour to untangle the mess. The backdoor of the gas chamber led to an elevator. The bodies were loaded like cordwood into the elevators and taken to the crematorium above. There were four rows of four ovens on each side. The sondercommando used belts to drag the bodies to the ovens. Before they reached the ovens, dentists were standing with buckets of water and tools to pull out any gold in the teeth. Anything artificial was pulled out. Another prisoner cut off hair if there was any. Another had a bucket and a glove to reach in rectums and vaginas to search for any valuables. Men, women and children were checked out. Then two men grabbed the corpse, laid it on a pan and shoved it into the oven.

(20:00)
12:00 Sam said looking in the oven and seeing the flames engulf a body was the most horrible sight you could ever see in your life. As the flame hits the body, the muscles relax and the victims limbs rise from the flames and you think they're coming back to life. The skin cracks and peels off. In five minutes the body is consumed. The skull and bones would fall through a grate. Another prisoner would take these and the ashes out. The bones would be mashed in a mortar and pestle to a powder. It was all loaded on trucks and taken out. Some was given to the Poles for fertilizer, but most was dumped into the Whistler (ph) River. Sam was a witness to all of this as he worked on the wiring in the crematoria. The prisoners from the sondercommando went home at night to sleep. However, when the transports were coming in so quickly, they didn't have time so they slept in the attic of the crematorium. One morning, Sam's cousin asked him to come up there for something and in that room were thousands and thousands of dentures. The smell was horrendous.

(31:40)
13:00 Next to the dentures were thousands of bundles of human hair. Next to that were thousands and thousands of artificial limbs. There was also a huge pile of glasses. Some were gold filled frames and the Germans used everything. When Sam saw all of this he couldn't handle it anymore. He ran out and never went up there again. There was also a French Jewish dentist who sat in a room taking all the gold from teeth to have it melted into nuggets for the German treasury. When Sam worked in the cabinet shop in Auschwitz, called DAV (German Supply Works), he was on Block 18. Block 20 was the infirmary.

- (34:00)
- 14:00 In 1943, Mengele tried to devise a way of castrating men and sterilizing women. He planned to get rid of the Jews and then wipe out all the Slavs of Poland. He first wanted to experiment on the Jews. He then would make slaves out of the Poles. He was trying to find a quick way to do it. He took about 300-400 Jewish boys, the strongest ones who were about Sam's age. He used cobalt on them. They had to sit in a little chair like a bicycle saddle and their genital parts were radiated. Mengele wanted to see what this would do to their sexual urges. The boys couldn't have an erection for a month, but their whole groin turned black and some of them got cancer of the testicles. It was decided to castrate them. Their testicles were pulled out and most did not survive. Those that did became very feminine. They had lost the will to go on. Block 12 was where experiments were done on women.
- (37:00)
- 15:00 Girls were brought in by the hundreds. Mengele performed many of the operations, but he supervised about 20 Polish doctors who sterilized the women quickly without any care. The doctors were all so cruel that if any boy or girl cried out they were beaten. It was like a slaughter house. They were treated worse than animals in slaughter houses though. This went on everyday. Mengele supervised all of this and sent reports to Berlin. For this he got a reward. Every Sunday morning Sam had to face Mengele. He was into every operation of disposal of prisoners. Sunday was his sport day to come in and look the prisoners over. All the prisoners had to undress and Mengele would come into the barracks with two or three Polish doctors.
- (39:50)
- 16:00 They had to walk in front of him, stand on their toes and raise their hands up to have their armpits checked. They had to stoop over to have their rectums checked. If any marks, scratches or bruises were found, the prisoner's number was written down and that was a death sentence without reprieve. The next day they would be loaded on trucks and taken to the crematoria. When the trucks passed the prisoners marching to work, the condemned would cry out to tell the world what happened. There were two Germans who stood on the tailgate with guns to make sure no one jumped off the truck. Sam tells about a skinny friend of his who begged Mengele to let him live. Mengele just kicked him in the face and then kicked him away like a dying animal. The kid cried all that night and there was nothing Sam could do. There was a revolt in crematoria two. Transports were slowing down because the trains were needed for troops.
- (40:30)

(43.20)

17:00

In the heydays of 1943-1944, the crematoria were working full blast at three shifts a day. When the transports slowed down, Mengele decided to call on a few thousand who worked in the crematoria. When you worked in the crematoria and you're told you're going on a transport, you know the next morning you'll be dead. In 1944 things started slowing down. Some of the sondercommando were idle in the crematoria with nothing to burn. In a nearby factory, there was a group of Jewish women were putting powder in bullets. They were stealing two or three grains a day and handing it over to the crematorium. One day Sam was told by a friend not to come to the crematoria the next day. He had been going there everyday to try and get some bread. The next day he was working on some wires on the outskirts and he heard a big explosion. Crematorium two had been blown up. The SS told everybody to line up for transport. The sondercommandos ran and cut through the electric wires. This was daytime and the voltage was only 200 and not 4200 as it was at night. They ran and some made it for two or three kilometers.

(46.15)

18:00

Sirens blew and every SS man in the camp chased and killed everyone who ran. In 1943, a transport came from Warsaw. There was a Jewish girl from Sam's city on this transport. She was undressing in the bunker and she recognized one of the sondercommandos who had been her close friend. She asked him what was going on and he told her in five minutes she'd be dead. The girl went crazy. A German full colonel was there and she cussed at him. She had her baby with her and she choked the baby in front of him and threw the baby at him. He got indignant and pistol whipped her. She threw her panties in his face. Then she grabbed a quart beer bottle, hit him in the head and knocked him out. When he fell, she grabbed his gun and pumped six bullets into him and killed him. A Jewish girl got revenge. Her name was Bessie Platka (ph), she was in her mid-thirties, she had been Sam's next door neighbor and she was a heroine.

(49:20)

19:00 Several men got together and picked a strong man. They were going to help him run away so he could tell the world what was going on at Auschwitz. They dug a bunker for him outside the camp in the fields where they were working. Chlorine was put around it so the dogs couldn't smell it. Supplies were put in for three or four days because that's how long the guards would be searching. The guy got to the Czechoslovakian border and he was caught and brought back alive-which was unusual as normally prisoners are killed on the spot. He was hung in front of Sam and the others at the camp. After the liberation no one wanted to have anything to do with the Germans. The ex-prisoners wanted to just go wherever they could. Sam had his heart set on the United States. He had some family here, but did not know their addresses. He went to the American Council every month hoping someone would be located. This went on from 1945 until finally he was called to the American Council in Munich. Sam said it was like another day of liberation.

20:00 Finally, in the spring of 1949, he went to Bremerhaven to get a ship to the U.S. For many years he went into a frenzy whenever he heard a German name. After 52 years, he became more tolerant.

21:00 Sam said he'll never forgive the Germans, but he has to leave the past behind because the hate would eat him up. He feels, however, that he wouldn't shed a tear if Germany was wiped out tomorrow. He said he'd probably get drunk which he hasn't done for a long time! Sam shared some pictures of the bunkers that he went back and took in 1946.