

TARANOWICZ, Walter
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ABSTRACT

Walter Taranowicz was born in Newark, New Jersey, of Polish descent. They moved to Poland and bought a ranch, where they lived comfortably.

When the Russians came, they arrested all Polish officers and landlords, including Walter, then 21 years old. Loaded onto a train's last boxcar, he jumped out and escaped into a forest.

He went to Brzesc, Poland, where he had friends. When he showed his U.S. passport to the German repatriation commissioner, he took Walter over the border to western Poland. Walter stayed in Miedzyrzec Podlaski with Aleks Daboracki, a doctor he knew.

The Gestapo surrounded the house and took all the men to Lvov, where they were interviewed, beaten, and tortured. Walter was arrested on January 13, 1941, accused of being a saboteur and a spy, but refused to sign a confession. He was sent to a Lublin jail, and again beaten and tortured.

On April 6, 1941, he was sent to Auschwitz. There, Commandant Ziegler addressed the new prisoners while an orchestra played.

Walter was assigned to learn cabinetry. He lived with Poles, Bulgarians, Czechs, and Germans. Capos were communist Germans. In 1942, Jewish men arrived. In January, 1943, 12,000 Russian war prisoners arrived, but due to freezing or starvation, "only 300 remained alive through the winter." He says he witnessed their cannibalism among "many, many horrible things" there.

He accepted an option to transfer, and on June 9, 1942, was transported to Mauthausen, and then to Gusen. At Gusen, he loaded stones onto wagons, and was getting very weak. A man started talking with Walter, and upon learning that he was American and knew cabinetry, got Walter transferred to the cabinet shop. Walter says the man, Lucjan Buchwald, saved his life.

On May 5, 1945, Americans liberated the camp. He became an interpreter for the U.S. Army in Milan. When the army left, he went with the Polish Army to Southampton, England, where the American consulate issued him a passport. Walter rejoined his father in New York. His sister and mother, who had spent the war in Poland, Siberia, Iran, Iraq, and South Africa, eventually joined them. Walter was living in Hempstead, Long Island, New York at the time of his interview.

Time Coded Notes

- 00:28 My name is Walter Taranowicz. I was born in Newark, New Jersey, of Polish descent. We left the USA before the war and lived comfortably on a ranch in Poland. We had some land and bought a ranch.
- 00:55 I started school in Poland. I finished grammar school in Poland and then high school. After high school, the war started in 1939. The first changes we noticed were when the Russians came in. It was not good from the beginning. The Russians started arresting immediately all the Polish officers and landlords.
- 01:38 My father was a landlord but he was in the USA, so they said that I was a landlord. I was about 21 years old. They took me to a railroad station. There was a train with cattle wagons and many people were already in it. I was lucky. I was in the last boxcar and when the guard walked away, a few of us jumped into the bushes in the forest, and ran away.
- 02:21 I went to Brzesc. I had some friends who told me what to do. I went to the German repatriation commissioner and showed him my American passport. He said, "I will take you over the border to the western part of Poland and you can stay there." I stayed in Miedzyrzec Podlaski, where there was a doctor, Aleks Daboracki. I knew him from Kobryn (Belarus, Taranowicz does not mention being in Belarus) and I lived with his family and his son and I went to a high school.
- 03:34 The Gestapo came one night and surrounded the house and took all the men on trucks to Lvov. We were interviewed, tortured, beaten up, and accused. I was accused of being a saboteur and a spy. I was tortured but I didn't sign the confession and after a few weeks I ended up in Lublin in a jail (*na zamku*).
- 04:36 It was very crowded in the jail; prisoners were executed every night. After a couple of months, we were transferred to Auschwitz and I was arrested on January 13, 1941. The next four months were terrible with torture and beating. On April 6, 1941, we were sent on a transport to Auschwitz.
- 05:50 When we arrived, we saw the sign on the gate "Arbeit Macht Frei." An orchestra was playing and greeting us the new prisoners and we were all lined up and the commandant, Ziegler, was speaking to the new prisoners, "You are no more Jo Shmo, you are a number. If you don't obey the rules, your freedom is through this big chimney."
- 06:40 Next day, we were segregated into buildings. Some groups went into the building and some into a field, and a Nazi doctor picked out young teenagers and young strong men for a trade or to be apprentices. I was lucky. I was picked up for a cabinet shop. The cabinet shop was good; we had more respect. It was warm and we were not pushed around. We had a good old cabinet maker who taught us the trade. We had to work and do what we were told. After working in the cabinet shop, we all marched back to the camp and to our barracks. We got a piece of bread and a cup of coffee and that was our

supper. We had an hour to wash, shower and do private things. Then the bell rang and everybody had to go to bed.

- 08:04 My number was 14,526. That was my number in Auschwitz and I experienced many, many horrible things that were going on in Auschwitz. We were Polish, Bulgarians, Czechs and Germans. There were communist Germans and they were all capos, some were good and some were very mean.
- 08:52 In 1942, they separated a couple of blocks and brought some strong young Jewish men as a labor force. They had their own capos, their own regulations and very little food. We couldn't communicate with them because of the barbed wire that separated us and the guard was watching so no one could come close and talk to them.
- 09:41 In January, it was very cold and it snowed. They brought 12,000 Russian war prisoners to the camp and they were separated from us by the barbed wire. There was very little food and many froze to death. Only 300 remained alive through the winter. They were so hungry they ate each other up.
- 10:28 I saw that with my own eyes. Things were bad. There were executions, there were hangings, there were the gas chambers, there were transports of people brought to the chambers every day. The smell of the burning bodies was always present in the air.
- 11:04 Things were horrible. I had an option in Auschwitz. Sometimes a big shot German would come from a different camp. I was picked with 200 strong men to go to a different camp. So I volunteered to go. I had a few good friends. Dr. Domoracki, his son Steven Domoracki from school, and Jurek Andrzejewski. They did not want to volunteer so they remained in Auschwitz. They didn't survive. I volunteered and on June 9th, 1942, I was transported to Mauthausen and then to Gusen. In Mauthausen, I received number the 10,038. I wasn't there very long. It was like a quarantine and they transported us to Gusen, five miles away from Mauthausen, a very large camp.
- 12:48 There I got number there, 48,606. This was my last number and with that number, I walked out from Camp Gusen. In Gusen, the work was with stones. There were stones, just stones, big and small stones and we carried them to the wagons. The stones were carried to the mill. The stones were sharp and some were very heavy. We had to work fast. My hands were bleeding and I was getting weaker and weaker.
- 13:38 One day, we were eating lunch and somebody tapped me on my shoulder and said "How are you, son?"
- I looked at the man. He said, "How are you feeling and how are you doing?"
- I said, "Not good. I came from Auschwitz but I think I will die over here."
- He said, "What is your name?"

“Walter, from the United States, from New York.”

“You are an American then.”

“Yes.”

He said, “So what are you doing here?”

14:06 “The Nazis caught me, arrested me, and here I am.”

“What were you doing in Auschwitz?”

“I was a cabinet maker’s apprentice.”

“Oh, so you know that.”

I said, “Yes.”

“All right, I might help you.”

14:21 He took my number and he knew the *arbeit gist*, the camp’s labor secretary who assigns jobs. I ended up in a cabinet shop, and thanks to the cabinet shop, and thanks to Lucjan Buchwald who helped me to get into the cabinet shop, I remained alive. Otherwise, I would have died.

15:02 The happiest day of my life was May 5th 1945 at 5:00 o’clock, when nine big American tanks broke into the camp and we were freed. The captain of the tank crew started calling “Who is an American citizen here and who is British or French?” There were three American citizens and two British. They took us over, put us on the tank and took us to the back of the front line. We drove in the tanks and the American doctors took care of us. A special strict diet, clean food, clean nice clothes. They washed us and in a week’s time, they put us to work, and I ended up working in the kitchen. It was nice and everything, but I had a friend from the concentration camp in the refugee camp and they talked me into going with them to Italy. There we ended up in the hands of the Polish army, Anders Army.

16:42 After an interview, they sent me to the American headquarters in Milan, and they said they needed me, especially since I knew Polish, Italian and English. I remained in Milan as an interpreter with the American Army, as a civilian employee. After six or seven months there, the American Army moved out of Italy and the captain told me that the best way for me was to go with the Polish Army to England.

17:30 I ended up a Polish family camp and with a Polish family we came to England. For six months, he was an interpreter with the Polish discharged soldiers rebuilding Southampton. Finally in Southampton, the American consulate called me and gave me an American passport and said I was ready to go home. My father sent me a ticket on the

Queen Mary but I couldn't wait that long so I got on an American military ship and got to New York, where my father met me in the port and finally I was home.

18:37 My mother and sister remained behind the Iron Curtain in Eastern Poland but not for long. The Russians arrested my mother and sister and deported them to Siberia. They were there for a year and a half. General Sikorski mobilized the army and took it to Iraq and Iran. My sister joined the army and took my mother with her. Because they were very young, they didn't need them, so they were sent to Karachi, India, and from there to South Africa and they remained there until the end of the war.

19:30 After the war, my father got papers for them and they came back to the United States and we were reunited. My father and mother passed away. My sister lives in Maine and I live in Hempstead, Long Island.