

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH DATTNER IN
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

DECEMBER 20, 1988

SUMMARY:

This two-hour interview concerns a Jewish couple and their baby's success in evading capture in Poland throughout World War II. They lived as Aryans using false papers but constantly feared being discovered and killed for being Jews. Joseph Dattner, the interviewee, describes incidents where his Jewish identity was learned by the authorities and how he escaped these crises with his life.

Joseph Dattner was a tailor born in a village outside Givitz (ph) in Austrian-occupied Poland in 1907.

When WWII broke out he went to Livov (ph) where he worked with his hands and slept in parks at night. He was later put to work for the German Army collecting papers and bottles for no pay. He left Livov when Ukrainian police came after him.

He fled to Warsaw where he and future wife Gerta purchased false Aryan identity papers. He bribed police in Warsaw with a piece of fabric after they discover they were Jewish.

Another time in Warsaw he was picked up by Gestapo officers but talked his designated murderer out of killing him.

Another close call with death was when he tried to enter the Livov ghetto through a hole in the wall, was caught and then bribed Gestapo officer with his rucksack.

Supports Gerta and baby, Barbara with various tailor jobs throughout the war. Once he worked right across the street from the ~krainian police.

Had a close call with his landlady once when one of his brothers arrived at their apartment.

A good story about his daughter's baptism attended by Jews pretending to be Aryans.

At end of tape he says that Gerta died in part from the stress of the war years when she was smoking 40-50 cigarettes a day. He also reveals that Gerta jeopardized their lives by reacting to Jews being **abused** publicly.

INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH DATTNER
PHOENIX, ARIZONA, DECEMBER 20, 1988

- 01:00 Born in occupied Poland, 1907. Family had 7 brothers and one sister. Father was a tailor.
- 02:00 Sister, Hilda, born 1912, killed by Germans 1942. A brother dies in Buffalo, NY, 1923.
- 03:00 Another brother dies at age 74, cancer. Brothers' names: Nathan, Jacob, Bruno, Joseph, David, Adolf and one is inaudible.
- 04:00 Family raised in a small town in the mountain near Givitz (ph), the main town in area. Jews were not allowed to live in Givitz. Tells story of a king who once traveled through Givitz where Jewish merchants sold their wares once a week.
- 05:00 The king issues a decree barring Jews from coming in to town to trade. His mother and father born near the town where they grew up. It was controlled by the Austrian government. They went to German and Jewish schools.
- 06:00 His school was named for a Baron Hersh (ph), philanthropist from Vienna. School taught in German language by Jewish teachers. Their life was good when their dad was alive.
- 07:00 War breaks out, 1914. Dad goes into Austrian Army.....He is killed 1916. Mom raises kids alone. She is 38 years old with 7 kids.
- 08:00 Two oldest brothers serve in Polish Army, 1916 and then after war move to Buffalo, NY, 1919 or 1920.
- 09:00 One of the brother dies at age 21. He does not know where they first arrived in America.
- 10:00 Mother support her family any way she can. Trades on the black market. She works in Czechoslovakia during week, **then smuggles** back cigarettes and liquor for re-sale at home.

- 11~00 **Mother** sells black market items to soldiers on the street. When town became part of Poland she got a concession to sell tobacco from the Polish government.
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- 12s00 He goes to Jewish school, a Polish gymnasium in Givitz, quit after 4 years.
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- . 13:00 Quite school in order to make a living. Learns to become a tailor, !
~- spends 3 years working with a tailor named Freedman (ph) who used to work with his dad- !
- 14:00 After 3 years starts own tailor shop in suburbs of Givitz, 3 to 4 Jal ~for him. His oldest brother, Jacob, a Polish officer.
- 15:00 Bruno, brother, a wine importer, David, machine engineering, younse~ brother a bookkeeper.
- 16:00 Sister, a bookkeeper, somehow managed to get by, on weekends they visited with their mother, he a go~ skier and soccer player.
- 17:00 1931, 3 brothers open 3 sporting goods stores in 3 towns. A good business, brothers are all skiers and skiing is popular.
- 18:00 They lived a very good life, lived in Catovista (ph), 10 km from the German border.
- 19:00 Had many friends in Czechoslovakia, visited them often, avid skiers kayakers. Many of his friends bought from his store.
- 20:00 He competed on a Czechoslovakian team in the relays and 80 km events, said they were the Maccabee games (?).
- 21:00 When friends visit Poland they visit him and sleep in his store going to England.
- 22:00 Describes how friends sang their national hymns on the railroad platform before heading to England. War breaks out, 1939. Had a cousin in Crakow.
- 23:00 Sent goods to cousin but everything got lost anyway. He was still single, dating Gerta Rrontz (sp). She was 14 years younger than him Gerta's father is a lawyer and 10 days before war breaks out takes entire family to Livov (ph).

24:00 War breaks out and so they sold out inventory of store. What to do next? He wanders streets in town. He sees artillery company going through town and at its head sees his brother Jacob.

25:00 Jacob demands what he is doing there. "Are you crazy?" So he goes train station empty handed and tries to get a train to take him to visit sister and mother who are 60km away. No trains going there so he takes a train to Auschwitz where town was empty.

26:00 Auschwitz had been a Jewish town but it is now deserted. His brothe are in Crakow (Bruno and David).

27:00 Confused, doesn't know what to do. Gets on a train heading east but very slow moving due to German bombing.

28:00 Meets brothers, then leaves them after borrowing bike and heads east Livov to be with Gerta and family who have been there 10 days.

29:00 Some relatives of Gerta arrive and they want to go back to Germany. tells them not to go back because they will be killed.

30:00 He finds work in Livov for a garment manufacturing concern. Works ~ until June 1941 when war breaks out between Russia and Germany.

31:00 Amazed at speed with which Germans are marching toward Russia. One day he sees Hitler on the street.

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32:00 Saw Hitler and thousands of German soldiers. Hitler being driven in a Mercedes convertible, the same one that is in Phoenix, Arizona.

33:00 He amazed at this car and had a photo made of him with car in Phoenix. German occupation begins in 1941.

34:00 Germans give free hand to Ukrainians to kill Jews. There were 150,000 Jews in Livov. He did not have many friends here. Working with his hands.

35:00 Hands are dirty, sleeps in parks at night, avoids apartment to evade Germans who have marched in and killed 50,000 Jews.

36:00 Ukrainians, kill and steal from the Jews, he is lucky to be alive. Brother Bruno in Crakow working for a German company.

37:00 Germans are getting organized and one day a German comes to Gerta's house and tells Bruno and him that they will now be working for a German-owned business.

38:00 The business involved collecting and sending back to Germany glass bottles, corks and paper. Sponsored by the Gestapo.

39:00 Jews worked for this business. Collected 12 magazines, had daily quotas to collect 80 much paper and bottles but never were paid for their work.

40:00 Germans bring in Jews from surrounding towns, swelling

the population from 150,000 to 350,000 Jews. Now it is hard to find a place to sleep or eat. Shootings are daily and some are on the spot.

41:00 Germans make a killing camp where thousands are killed. Meanwhile, he continues to work for German company for nothing with the rationale from the manager that this is the best pay you can get.

42:00 So, working for the Germans, they were Jews working for the German Army. His brother Bruno had a business

administration education. Jews not allowed to take streetcars
8C had to walk long distance daily. His brother arrested a few times.

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- 43:00 At one point his boss had to intervene with Ukrainian police in order to avoid being taken away 80, he decides he has to get away.
- 44:00 November 1942, 1943? for 2 1/2 months he with another man, Kajeck (ph)
- 45:00 Living on the run, like an animal, stealing food such as chicken~ and pigs at night, knew the pattern of all neighborhood bea~ts.
- 46:00 Knew rubbish collectors, when the church bells were ringing, heard dogs yelling miles off. January 1943 returned to the ghetto and bought Polish documents.
- 47:00 Gerta goes from Livov ghetto to father, who is working in Bochia (ph), Father finds her a job as housekeeper to a German lady. He goes to see what they can do together.
- 48:00 Gerta has fal~e papers also. They leave for Warsaw. Can~t go to Crakow because they would be recognized.
- 49:00 They both have false document~. They are not a married couple and 80 have different names In Warsaw they are at a hotel when the Gestapo comes into their room and asks what they are doing there.
- 50:00 German~ police interrogate him; Poli~h police question her. &e says she is Greek Catholic, not Roman Catholic as is indicated in her papers. She caught in a lie 80 he says, what do you want and the police say, what you got with you.
- 51:00 He has two pieces of fabric and he says for police to take one and to leave him the other as he will need it to bribe other police officers. His brother also in Warsaw. They find a room to rent.
- 52:00 Polish landlady rents 3 rooms total, all to Jews. He found a tailor ~ob.
- 53:00 Worked for a buttonhole maker for many months. Wears overalls.
- 54:00 Hands dirty, face dirty. One day on streets he could see 4 Gestapo men talking to some men, who were Jews. One of the **Jews points at him 80 Gestapo** a~ks him in German if he i8 Jewi~h.

55:00 He says yes and they say okay, you come with us and 80

the 4 officers lead the 4 Jews to a nearby cemetery.

56:00 The officers lead the Jews down different paths in the

cemetery, separately. Path is 200 meters long with big bomb craters. His officer says that he belong to a Gestapo officers group that --

57:00 -- must kill 1 Jewi~h man and apologizes for having to

~hoot him. So Joseph says don't apologize, it could have been you or anyone with this assignment. Then they have a conversation about their families, children, et cetera.

58:00 Joseph says he will lay down and why doesn't the officer shoot the gun in the air and he will then stay there until all is clear. That way, he tells the officer that he can sleep peacefully every night knowing he didn't murder anybody. So the officer shoots into the air. Joseph stays in crater overnight. Many times he was lucky like this. Once, he went to live in ghetto in Livov.

59:00 The ghetto was far from home and 80 he took his belongings to the ghetto, which was fenced all around. He approaches a hole in the fence to get into the ghetto when he stopped by Gestapo. They ask him what he wants and he tells them he's entering the ghetto.

1:00 He says he's come to live in the ghetto but Gestapo says he must go thorough the main gate or be shot. He had his belongings in his rucksack.

TAPE #2

1:01 The Gestapo officer liked what he had in rucksack 80 he gives it to him and avoids getting shot. Lucky again.

1:02 Living in a room in Warsaw. Gerta gets pregnant. He doesn't believe it. Two other Jews living in two other rooms in apartment. Poli~h police come to apartment many times and a~k if theY know if Jews are living here. He tells them to come in and look, while he slips out of there.

1:03 He scouts out a village outside Warsaw and finds a kitchen and a room in a farmstead. He likes the farmer very much.

1:04 There is a group of 10 houses. When war broke out the

owner~ return from Warsaw to go into hiding. One time a man, a blackmailer I believe, came to ask for money. But farmer didn't give it to him. So police come and take away his mother, daughter and granddaughter and shoot them. After that, the farmer didn't talk to him for months.

1:05 Gerta went to Warsaw and met him on the street, drinking in restaurant, stayed with him for 2 days and nights. He said he came to her room and there was a German newspaper there -- a mistake.

1:06 No one was reading German newspapers in Warsaw. Daughter born November 11 They had nothing.

1:07 Not prepared because were making ~ust enough to get by, food and shelter. He gets sick and needs a doctor.

1:08 How can he afford a doctor? A doctor comes in and gives him a prescription. Doctor says his wife is a doctor also and she will look after your baby.

1:09 Doctor's wife says you need financial help, tell me your real name and we will help you. She says she is Jewish, too.

1:10 2 days later, doctor returns with money from Polish underground which was supplied by the Joint. Many times he was lucky like this.

1:11 He goes to the forest because ghetto is too ~rim. Goes to a well-known Polish city.

1:12 He answers a classified ad for a tailor ~ob and he is invited to go. Sleeps where he works for 2 nights. His shop across street from Ukrainian police.

1:13 His customers are the Ukrainian police. He is in a well-known Polish city where orthodox Jews had been removed by the Germans. He answer~ all questions in Polish.

1:14 Finds a place to live with fellow workers. One day, a City Hall worker tells him that all those who came in past few months will be picked

1:14 (cont.) up so he goes into the forest.

1:15 stays in the forest 2 1/2 months, returns to Crackow and then meets with Gerta and goes to Warsaw. Barbara born.

1:16 Doctor's wife helped them financially but when uprising started everything broke up.

1:17 One day in Warsaw brother Adolf arrives. Landlady accompanies him to their door so they pretend they do not know him. Joseph pretends that his brother needs his clothes mended. Adolf needs a place to stay.

1:18 Joseph tells the landlady, who had been drinking, that he knows this man but does not want to have anything to do with him.

1:19 He tells her this stranger had been told by the underground that he could stay with him for a few days but we will all be in trouble if police come. Landlady insists that Adolf stays.

1:20 Landlady insists Adolf stay because he's fighting for liberation. Today, Adolf is in Toronto. Barbara is born Nov. 11, 1943. Landlady wants to know why they don't take the daughter to church. Joseph says he has no money for a party.

1:21 Christmas, 1943, they go to church and baptize Barbara. 12 people at party, 6 Jews among them.

1:22 A well-known pianist from Crakow is there and says a toast to the daughter in Polish and then whispers in his ear -- l'chaim.

1:23 Barbara is born. Waited until May 1944 to move to village here it is easier to live than in Warsaw. He knew everyone in the village. Worked in Warsaw during the week and was with Gerta on weekends until the Warsaw uprising began and then couldn't go to Warsaw anymore.

1:24 Joseph goes from house to house, working on ladies' coats and other garments. Worked for food, not money. Had no transportation when wanted to return to Warsaw.

1:25 Story about a sister-in-law who was seeing a German soldier whom she said she would marry. Joseph told her she was crazy.

1:26 German soldier knows she's Jewish. Eventually, he left her. A rich farmer lived next door to him in the village.

1:27 Every day he gets milk from the farmer for his baby. Gets his bread from a baker friend. One day he had 2 loaves under his arm.

1:28 2 police officers on motor bikes see him. He couldn't run and they tell him to halt. Ask him where he got bread. Then ask if he speaks German. They learn that he does and ask him to tell his next door farmer friend in German a message.

1:29 The message is that the Germans have confiscated the farmer's animals and that he'll get them back. He says it is hard to imagine that we are all the same human beings.

1:30 Joseph reflects that he doesn't think there will come a time when children will have to go through these kind of times -- never again.

1:31 After liberation can live like a Jew and don't have to be afraid anymore. Now, can do what one wants.

1:32 You can return home to an easier life. There are possibilities now. A future, will live like a human being.

1:33 Impossible to think about it now but he remembers when the Germans were rounded up in an open field by the Russians, Jan. 17, 1945, and shot like rabbits. Unbelievable that the situation had changed.

1:34 Gerta's mom lives with them now. Mom gets a housekeeping job. After liberation they all wind up in their original village.

1:35 He has brothers living in Florida and Israel.

1:36 Joseph recites the Polish names of his brothers, all of whom had Aryan papers.

1:37 June 22, 1950, begin a year living in Israel. July 4, 1951, arrive in Canada. Works in a sewing shop and then after 12 years opens own cleaning and pressing shop until he retired.

1.38 Barbara became a teacher, marries Jack, 1967, in Toronto. In 1978 Joseph and Gerta move to Phoenix.

1:39 Grandchildren born in Toronto.

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1:40 Gerta dies April 30, 1987; she is a victim of
Holocaust as she was very nervous during those
years and smoked 40-50 cigarettes a day.

1:41 Gerta couldn't take the tense life whereas Joseph had nerves of steel
and had no problem living in the forest or working very hard. Gerta dies of
cancer.

1:42 He misses Gerta. Joseph says he was not prepared for this interview
and is willing to have it written down.

1:43 Barbara is interersted in the Holocaust.

1:44 He thought she may have wanted to forget about this period. So much has
been written about it.

1:45 Many books about the Holocaust, talks of a book about the Jews left
in Poland.

1:46 Talks about a book that describes difficulty of getting a minyan
today in Poland, very depressing.

1:47 3,000 Jews are left in Poland, mostly old people
living only to die.

1:48 All desires in Polish Jews were killed; just want to die.

1:49 American Jews should help the Polish Jews. Remembers that he
got used to living under an assumed name.

1:50 You think you're one of them but Poles were always talking about Jews.
Gerta always reacted and he was afraid she would react and jeopardize their
lives.

1:51 He would squeeze her fingers and make fingernails bleed so she
wouldn't reveal their identity. Once, when Gestapo man was talking to a
lady who looked Jewish, Gerta asks why don't they help her and he has to
squeeze her hands.

1:52 He tells her not to react like that.

1:53 He learned Russian, Polish and German.

1:54 Joseph is thanked for the interview.

END,