

-TITLE-ROBERT MENDLER
-I_DATE-FEBRUARY 15 1990
-SOURCE-UNITED JEWISH FEDERATION HOLOCAUST CENTER PITTSBURGH
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-EXCELLENT (SLIGHT ACCENT)
-IMAGE_QUALITY-GOOD
-DURATION-2 HOURS
-LANGUAGES-ENGLISH
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-

0:01:50 Bob was born on July 6, 1925, in what was once the Gorlice section of Poland. His village was called Novitar (ph.). His father ran a chocolate factory and his mother sold seltzer water. Their home was about 60 kilometers from Kraków.

0:05:45 Bob spoke Yiddish, Polish and German at home. He was the middle child of three. He had an older brother and a younger sister.

0:07:10 Bob's family was Orthodox Jewish. Their business closed on Saturdays. War broke out shortly after his bar Mitzvah.

0:08:38 Bob finished seventh grade before the war broke out. After that, he did not go to school.

0:09:45 Bob had many non-Jewish friends at his school.

0:10:54 There were many Zionist organizations active in Bob's hometown. The Jewish community was well organized in his village. Quite a few immigrated to Palestine (later Israel).

0:12:02 Bob's father did not believe Jewish emigration from Poland was necessary at the time because things were not that bad for the Jews. There had been a pogrom in Bob's village in 1936, organized by Polish farmers. The windows of Bob's home were broken. Local police did nothing to stop this.

0:14:00 Bob remembers that the Jewish students in his school, including himself, were segregated in the classroom. They had to sit in the back of the class.

0:14:52 Bob's father served in the Polish army during the First World War. Jewish war veterans had an organization separate from other war veterans.

0:16:33 The windows of the family's home were always shuttered. They lived in fear constantly. Report cards even mentioned which students were Jews. Still, Bob reiterates that he had Polish friends.

0:21:19 Bob's aunt and her family were able to avoid deportation because they looked Aryan. They lived for about one year in Kraków before someone reported them.

0:23:15 Bob's father escaped to the Russian side. The Soviet Union occupied the area immediately to the east of Novitar (ph.). His father never told the family that he was leaving them.

0:25:15 The Jewish Ghetto in Novitar (ph.) was set up in 1941. Jews had to do menial jobs that they were not accustomed to, such as sweeping streets and cleaning offices. They were ordered to wear white armbands with the Star of David emblazoned on it. Again, these armbands were white instead of yellow. Bob, his sister and his mother remained in their home until the Final Solution began.

0:28:50 Bob's family earned no money during this period. They were able to buy rations with the money they kept in a safe at home. They had kept no money in a bank.

0:31:11 Bob's first job was to help build a super highway and plow snow from the roadway. Later he worked in a lumberyard building pre-fab homes for Germans. His sister Henrietta cleaned houses for the Germans who were moving into Novitar (ph.).

0:33:42 Gentiles supplied the family with food covertly in the middle of the night. This consisted mostly of potatoes. It was not charity - they received money in return for taking such a risk.

0:36:20 Nazis turned their synagogue into a warehouse. Later it became a movie theater, which it still is today. The building was not destroyed by the Germans.

0:38:50 When the Ghetto was formed, Bob's family was required to trade their own property for the house of a German family living in the area that became the Ghetto. The new house was crowded - fourteen people lived there, since people from other villages were forced to move to the Ghetto. There was no synagogue in the Ghetto, but the community got together to light candles for the shiva on Friday nights. Jewish life went on. For example, bar Mitzvah continued to be held.

0:42:10 The killing started as early as 1940. SS troops would come to a person's house, call out individuals by name, take them to the Jewish cemetery, murder them and bury them in mass graves in the woods.

0:45:25 There were close to 5,000 people in the Ghetto, Bob estimates. No radios were allowed upon penalty of death. News spread by word-of-mouth. There were Jewish police forces in this Ghetto, but unlike in other places they did not work with the Nazis.

0:49:53 The few people who escaped from the Ghetto went to Hungary. Bob did not personally know anyone who escaped.

0:51:58 Jews were ordered to report to a football stadium one early Sunday morning. Bob's father knew the reason for this - deportation. Cripples, women and children went to the right, others to the left. Bob's mother and sister were deported on this day to Bepppec. Bob's father was executed immediately, still in Novitar (ph.).

0:55:02 Bob's first concentration camp was Charny-Dunajec. He stayed there nine months.

0:55:57 Bob says he knew that morning at the football field that he would never see his mother and sister again. In all, Bob lost 72 people in his family to the Holocaust. He is the only survivor.

0:58:41 The officer in charge of Charny-Dunajec, at the time Bob was there, was a man named Miller. He does not remember his first name. Miller's dogs often snapped at the Jews. Bob once killed one of the dogs along with a friend. They buried the animal. At night, Bob would dig up the dead carcass and eat a piece of dog meat.

1:01:13 Bob was moved to a camp at Kraków. The commander of this camp was named Geth. He rode on a white horse around the camp, randomly shooting Jews standing at attention. Bob has a picture of Geth being led to execution after his war crimes trial in Poland.

1:07:42 There were very few children at the camp in Kraków because it was a labor camp. Bob was always in good health - he was young and small of build.

1:09:33 When Bob would dig up a skull while doing work in the camp, he would remove gold from its teeth and trade it with the Ukrainian guards for bread.

1:10:21 Bob says he sometimes now has violent memories of the Holocaust at night. He misses his family more now that he is older and has more time to think about the tragedy.

1:13:34 When Bob is sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, he sees Dr. Mengele for the first time. When Bob arrived there, he knew nothing about the gas chambers. When he smelled the smoke from the ovens, he knew.

1:15:40 Mengele decided who would live and who would die. Bob had never heard of Mengele before arriving at Birkenau. Mengele was a handsome man in his SS uniform. From this point, numbers were used instead of names in referring to people. Bob built roads and cleaned the canals at Birkenau.

1:19:39 There were three camps in the town of Auschwitz - Auschwitz itself, Birkenau, and Buna. There were crematories at Auschwitz and Birkenau, but not at Buna. Buna was a labor camp. Birkenau was a larger camp than Auschwitz.

1:23:19 People were identified by the color of the triangle on their uniforms and the bar above it. Bob wore a red triangle with a yellow bar, indicating to everyone that he was a Polish Jew. Homosexuals were identified by a pink triangle.

1:28:53 Bob remained at Auschwitz until January 18, 1945, just before its liberation by the Russians.

1:32:20 After Auschwitz, Bob went to Gleiwitz. From there, he was subjected to a tortuous ten day trek in an open boxcar to Berlin. Along the journey, Czechoslovaks threw them bread from bridges above the tracks. They had no other real food. During the journey, they became cannibals, eating the dead bodies on the train.

1:35:10 Bob still sometimes needs to wear a brace on his back from when he was given 25 lashes at Birkenau by an SS soldier.

1:41:06 Bob was sent to a camp at Pocking, which was extremely unclean. Most people in the camp developed a bad case of lice. When he was liberated, Bob weighed only 75 pounds.

1:46:29 Food was Bob's primary preoccupation after liberation.

1:54:15 After the war, in 1946-47, Bob wanted to follow all of his friends to Palestine to fight for an independent Jewish state. His mother's brother, living in Union town, Pennsylvania, instead wanted him to come to the United States. He did so after four years.

1:59:20 On a ship to the United States, Bob recognized a member of the Gestapo who had been his employer and who had been very brutal to him. He was coming to the United States under the false pretense of being a displaced person. The man was arrested and brought to Boston by the Coast Guard.

2:02:27 Bob thinks he survived because he never lost the will to live. Bob is not as religious as he was when he was younger. He lost his faith during the war and only regained it when he married his American - born wife. He has no use for the Polish people today. He calls himself a Zionist - he is pro-Israel. He opposes the reunification of Germany because the German people cannot be trusted.

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