

**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN, CLEVELAND SECTION**

**HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT**

Name of Interviewee	<b>JOSEPH BENSON</b>		
Name of Interviewer	Leatrice Rabinsky	Date	8/24/84
Name of Abstractor	Esther Potash	Date	9/2/87

**NARRATIVE SUMMARY**

Joseph Benson was born in a small town in the Northern Bohemian section of Czechoslovakia to a German mother and a Czech father. He enjoyed a happy life on a farm with his family and received a strong Catholic education. As a young boy, he acquired a love for aviation that would define the rest of his life.

Joseph was a teenager when the German occupation of the Sudetenland occurred. He declared his loyalty to the Czech ideals and people at this time, and became involved in anti-German activities. At the age of 18, he joined the underground movement and was smuggled to England, amidst great danger, to join the Czech army in exile. He eagerly volunteered for intensive combat flight training, and mastered all facets in a short time.

During an early combat mission, Joseph's plane was shot down over Germany. He parachuted to safety, but was discovered by the Gestapo and imprisoned for interrogation. He suffered torture and imprisonment in Nuremberg, Selenstrasse and Stadelheim prisons, where he was maintained in isolation for a great deal of the time.

Refusing to divulge any information, he was transferred first to Dachau and then to Buchenwald concentration camps. In both camps, he performed labor in aircraft component factories. After a transfer to Schoenbeck, he and a friend escaped to the American lines. He attests that revenge and a belief in G-d helped him to survive.

A strong believer in personal freedoms, he presents lectures to youths about the dangers of totalitarian governments, drawing from his harrowing experiences.

**Joseph Benson**

**ABSTRACT**

**VIDEO 1 OF 3**

INTRODUCTION

CURRENT LIFE

Currently teaches engineering at Cuyahoga Valley Joint Vocational School in Brecksville. Looked forward to leaving industry and teaching in his later years.

BORN IN NORTHERN BOHEMIA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN TOWN CALLED STRASIN (WARTENBURG IN GERMAN)

DISCUSSES PARENTS

Mother was German. Father was Czech border patrolman.

PLEASANT MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD ON FARM

Recalls close family relationships. Family grew potatoes and grains, sold to local mill.

RECEIVES CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS TRAINING AS A YOUTH

COMMENTS ON CZECH POLITICS AT TIME OF YOUTH

FASCINATION WITH FLYING AND AIRCRAFT BEGINS EARLY IN CHILDHOOD

Frequented local airports. Had great desire to fly. Built model airplanes as a child.

ENJOYS FRIENDS OF VARIOUS NATIONALITIES AND RELIGIONS

Had a close Jewish friend who had to move in 1933 and was never heard from again.

FIRST AWARENESS OF POLITICAL TROUBLE IN 1934

Recalls "feeling" a growing danger. No distinct information of unrest at this time.

DOES NOT RECALL ANY ANTI-SEMITISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Believed Czechoslovakia to be a true democratic republic.

Joseph Benson

#### DESCRIBES BEGINNING OF TROUBLE IN SUDETENLAND IN 1934

Germans had a good life in Northern Bohemia (Sudetenland) until Conrad Henlein started the Sudeten-Deutsche Partei, which was like National Socialism in Germany. The propaganda disseminated by the party began to stir up unrest among the Germans living in Northern Bohemia.

#### GERMANS IN NORTHERN BOHEMIA BEGIN TO DISPLAY A HEIGHTENED MILITARISM

No swastikas were displayed, but the workers' party was formed and uniforms were issued.

#### GERMANS CLAMORING FOR FREEDOM FROM THE CZECHS SEEN AS A PROVOCATION FOR INVADING CZECHOSLOVAKIA.

#### JOSEPH BECOMES INVOLVED IN FIGHTS AND CHALLENGES WITH GERMAN YOUTHS

Is 15 years old and is beaten in a fight with older German boys. He then proceeds to organize his Czech friends for future fights.

#### IN 1937, HOSTILITY BETWEEN GERMANS AND CZECHS GROWS

He notices many Germans encroaching on a formerly Czech recreational area. Germans begin to build bunkers there.

#### GERMAN GRANDFATHER AND MOTHER WANT HIM TO BE A "GERMAN," BUT HIS LOYALTIES ARE WITH THE CZECHS

#### OCCUPATION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA OCCURS WHEN HE BEGINS COLLEGE

Graciano, Delamere, Chamberlain and Hitler met in Munich and agreed there would be no war with Czechoslovakia if the Sudetenland was released. Czechs disappointed that the Soviets, French, and British did not help until Hitler attacked Poland in 1939.

#### IN 1938, GERMANS MARCH INTO CZECHOSLOVAKIA, ASSERT THAT THE CZECHS ARE NOT CAPABLE OF RULING BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA

President Benesch creates a government-in-exile in England.

#### JOSEPH BEGINS HIS FLYING CAREER WITH A CLUB SPONSORED BY THE CZECH AIR FORCE

## GESTAPO SETS UP HEADQUARTERS IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Schools and colleges are closed permanently. Professors are arrested and deported. Czech intellectuals and leaders are removed from positions. Hitler sends SS General Heidrich to run Czech occupation.

IN MAY 1938, JOSEPH'S FRIEND LADYA ROHAL INVITES HIM TO JOIN IN THE CZECH UNDERGROUND

Underground organized to smuggle Czechs to England to create an army. Later learned that 400,000 Czechs had been smuggled.

JOINS UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT AT AGE 18

Very willing to fight the Germans. Did not tell parents of plans.

RECOUNTS DANGEROUS, CIRCUITOUS PASSAGE FROM CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO SCOTLAND

Trip included train, ship, horse-drawn cart legs. Passed through Hungary, taken to jail there and then let go as part of the plan. Passed through Romania, Salonika, Dardanelles, Istanbul, Marseilles, North Sea, to Southhatton port in England.

BEGINS GRUELING FLIGHT TRAINING IN ARMY CAMP IN SCOTLAND

Trained to work behind enemy lines, to establish radio communications and spy. Received much war information from Poland, which increased his eagerness to see war action for himself.

JOSEPH IS TRANSFERRED TO NEWCASTLE FOR RAF SCHOOL

## VIDEO 2 OF 3

CONTINUES DESCRIPTION OF RAF SCHOOL AND FLIGHT TRAINING

WITH 27 HOURS OF FLIGHT TIME, VOLUNTEERS TO FIGHT THE GERMANS AS FIGHTER PILOT

JOSEPH LEARNS "HURRICANE" AIRCRAFT HANDLING IN VERY SHORT TIME; RELISHES THE CHALLENGE

BEGINS COMBAT FLIGHT TRAINING

Flew 25 to 30 sorties a day. Intensive training sessions.

BRITISH REACTION TO GERMAN BOMBARDMENT IS FIERCE RETALIATION

JOSEPH'S FIRST COMBAT DUTY INVOLVES AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY OF GERMAN SHIPPING ROUTES

DISCUSSES PSYCHOLOGICAL SURVIVAL AND MOTIVATIONAL AIDS

Maintained strong belief in God. Felt he was destroying something that did not believe in God. Religion helped to overcome fear. Had thoughts of family during Christmas time. When under attack, describes how brain was empty; only vision functioned consciously.

IN 1940, HE GOES ON MISSION TO ATTACK HARBOR ACROSS THE DUTCH BORDER, IN EMDEN

DURING BOMBING MISSION, GERMAN ARTILLERY SETS PLANE ON FIRE, KILLING PILOT. HE PARACHUTES OUT AND LANDS IN GERMANY

DISCOVERED BY THE POLICE, JOSEPH IS TURNED OVER TO THE GESTAPO, WHO INTERROGATE AND BEAT HIM

HE IS SENT TO NUREMBERG AS POLITICAL PRISONER

Gestapo interrogate with various techniques; Joseph refused to divulge information. Is placed in isolation for over a year.

JOSEPH IS NOT FRIGHTENED IN THE BEGINNING, BUT THEN BEGINS TO FEEL DOOMED

Was pressured to sign admission of treason. Knew that other political prisoners were executed by guillotine. Was not in contact with other prisoners.

HIS SURVIVAL TECHNIQUE IN ISOLATION IS INTERNAL DIALOGUE, WHERE TAKES THE ROLE OF A PSYCHOLOGIST, URGING STRENGTH THROUGH LATER REVENGE

Replayed scenes from childhood, family meals. Prayed to survive.

TREATMENT IN PRISON INCLUDES BEATING, VERY POOR MINIMAL FOOD

HE REMAINS IN PRISON FOR ALMOST TWO YEARS

Spent one year in Selenstrasse waiting for trial. Spent eight months in Gestapo interrogation.

**Joseph Benson**

INSTEAD OF TRIAL, TRANSFERRED TO STADELHEIM PRISON IN MUNICH

Volunteered for position as food serve, janitor. Position allowed opportunity to steal food.

JOSEPH ESTIMATES 3,000 POLITICAL PRISONERS ARE BEHEADED AT THIS PRISON

Political prisoners from Czechoslovakia, France, Yugoslavia, Poland. Jews were not included.

PONDERS GERMAN MOTIVATION FOR THE TORTURE AND LACK OF REGARD FOR HUMAN LIFE

ESCAPE FROM GERMAN PRISONS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE

Some tried to escape. Others committed suicide as the escape.

PRISONERS GAIN STRENGTH FROM HOPE THAT THE ALLIES WILL UNITE AND OVERCOME GERMANY

THEY RECEIVE SOME NEWS OF THE WAR, BUT MOST IS GERMAN-SUPPLIED ANNOUNCEMENTS THAT DEMORALIZE THE PRISONERS

JOSEPH IS TRANSFERRED TO DACHAU LATE IN 1943

DESCRIBES ENTRANCE TO DACHAU

Describes delousing, shaving, pulling of gold from teeth.

### **VIDEO 3 OF 3**

DACHAU IS A SLAVE LABOR CAMP, USED FOR THE MANUFACTURE OF THE MESSERSCHMITT AIRCRAFT

JOSEPH ASSIGNED TO WORK IN THE AIRCRAFT FACTORY

ONE BARRACK AT DACHAU IS USED FOR MILITARY SURVIVAL EXPERIMENTS

Prisoners were killed in experiments to test the effects of extreme cold or infection with malaria or venereal disease.

ANOTHER BARRACK AT DACHAU HOUSES CLERGY, WHO ARE REGULARLY TORTURED

FOOD RATIONS CONSIST OF ONLY 350 CALORIES PER DAY

JOSEPH SHOWS PICTURES OF DACHAU, ILLUSTRATING THE GUN TOWERS, BARBED WIRE AND GERMAN SHEPHERDS.

SHOWS PICTURES OF THE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING AND CREMATORIUM

JOSEPH IS TAKEN IN FRONT OF A FIRING SQUAD AND SPARED THREE TIMES

Each time, the Gestapo tries to coerce him to reveal information, but he refuses.

HE IS TRANSFERRED TO BUCHENWALD

This is the first time he encounters Jews during the war. 52,000 people held at Buchenwald. Jews were moved to Poland for extermination. Buchenwald, like Dachau, had gas chambers which were never used. Buchenwald was a slave labor camp. Remained there from November 1943 until August 1944.

DESCRIBES EXECUTION METHODS AT BUCHENWALD

HE AND HIS FRIENDS SAVE MANY JEWISH LIVES BY EXCHANGING JEWS' CLOTHES FOR THE UNIFORMS OF DEAD POLITICAL PRISONERS

RECALLS MEETING AND SPEAKING WITH ROBERT CLARY IN BUCHENWALD

TRANSPORTED TO SCHOENBECK, A SMALL CAMP NEAR AN AIRPLANE-COMPONENT FACTORY

ESCAPES WITH A BRITISH FRIEND, WITH THE HELP OF THE BELGIAN UNDERGROUND

Travelled through Germany. Had to kill two people to survive. Arrived at American lines.

REVENGE IS FOREMOST ON HIS MIND, BUT HE DOES NOT LIKE TO TALK ABOUT THESE FEELINGS

Discusses going back to the places he had been and searching for people who had been cruel to him.

HE IS SHOCKED TO DISCOVER HOW MANY EASTERN EUROPEAN NATIONALS HAVE JOINED THE SS

AT LIBERATION IN MAY 1945, WANTS TO FIGHT THE JAPANESE

Did not initially think of going home, but did eventually go back to see family. Had been able to correspond with mother during prison experience by writing in Corinth German, which most Germans could not read.

JOSEPH INTERVIEWED BY AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS AT TIME OF IRANIAN  
HOSTAGE SITUATION, TO SHARE HIS EXPERIENCE AS A POW.

RECEIVES SEVERAL MEDALS FROM ENGLAND FOR SERVICE IN WW II

AFTER WW II, SERVES AS VICE COUNSEL FOR THE CZECH REPUBLIC  
IN MUNICH

DISAPPOINTED THAT CREDIT FOR THE LIBERATION OF BUCHENWALD  
WENT TO THE RED ARMY; MAINTAINS THAT GENERAL PATTON ACTUALLY  
LIBERATED THE CAMP