

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

**HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT**

Name of Interviewee	<b>ELIAS CALA</b>	
Name of Interviewer	Bea Stadtler	Date 9/10/84
Name of Abstractor	Michelle Heyer	Date 10/15/87

**NARRATIVE SUMMARY**

Elias Cala was born in Dobryzn, Poland, a town of 5,000 inhabitants near the borders of Germany and Russia. The town of Gulzow lay across a river, and the combined Jewish population of the towns was 3,000.

Elias was the third of five children in a close, loving family. His father was extremely religious, and Elias remembers him as a warm and generous man.

There was very little anti-Semitism in Dobryzn prior to 1934. In fact, the town's Catholic priest was very friendly with the Jewish population. When he died in 1934, however, he was replaced by a priest who actually preached hatred of Jews in church, and anti-Semitism seemed to arise overnight. In 1936, when Elias was 16, he went to Lodz to work in a cousin's shoe store. He remained there until 1938, when his father died.

In 1939, Elias was drafted into the army. When Germany invaded on September 4, 1939, his unit was at the German border. After a fierce battle lasting several days, the unit was taken prisoner by the Germans. All Jews were immediately separated from the rest of the unit, but Elias pretended he was a gentile, and none of his fellow soldiers betrayed him.

The non-Jewish prisoners were released soon after their capture and Elias went to stay with his cousin in Lodz. His brother was also there and gave him news of the rest of his family; a younger brother had been taken prisoner by the Germans, his sister and her husband were staying with friends, and his other younger brother and mother were staying with German friends in Gulzow.

Elias went to find his sister, but discovered that she had gone to Russia. He then went to Dobryzn, where the Germans were persecuting Jews - forcing them to clean the streets and beating them. The Jews were eventually thrown out of Dobryzn on November 9. They left the town on foot, unguarded, with nowhere to go.

Elias joined his aunt and uncle and their children, and they eventually settled in a town near the Russian border. They lived in an empty store, and the uncle worked as a tailor for the local farmers.

Elias married his uncle's younger sister, and shortly after this all Jews in the town were deported. They spent three days in a camp at Dzialdowo, then were settled in a ghetto in Piotrkov.

The ghetto was not walled-in, and Elias and his wife decided to escape. They reached Warsaw, and were smuggled through a German zone to Nalewaj, where they found his wife's family.

Elias went to work on a road crew, but became sick and had to be hospitalized. While in the hospital his bed caught fire and his back was so badly burned that he had to learn to walk again. During his recuperation, his wife gave birth to a baby girl.

Elias recovered quickly and was able to go back to work in the spring of 1942. The Final Solution was well underway at this point, however, and they were deported shortly afterward to Auschwitz.

At Auschwitz, Elias was separated from his wife and baby. Three days later he was sent to an I.G. Farben factory seven kilometers away. He stayed there until January, when the English bombed the factory.

The prisoners were evacuated, however most of the other camps were too crowded, and they were forced to mover from camp to camp. After going to Mauthausen and Oranienburg, they were left at Flossenburg. This camp was also very crowded, however, so Elias and some others were transferred to a work-camp near Stuttgart.

They were evacuated from Stuttgart, and again had to wander from camp to camp. Finally Elias decided that he was too weak to go on, and with 21 others, he hid in a haystack. 11 these were found and shot. Those remaining were taken in by the local villagers and given food and clothing. They were officially liberated by the Americans on May 1, 1945.

Elias remained in Germany, where he met and married his present wife. They came to the U.S. in March 1949.

Elias is now retired and lives in Beachwood, Ohio. He and his wife have five children.

**Elias Cala**

**ABSTRACT**

**VIDEO 1 OF 3**

**PRESENT LIFE**

67 years old. Lives in Beachwood, Ohio. Married with five children. Retired, wife still works.

**BORN IN DOBRYZN, POLAND**

Town of Gulzow was across river. Until WW I river was Russian/German border. Combined population of 5,000. Jewish population of 3,000. Gulzow and Dobryzn had separate mayors, police forces, etc., but Jewish community in both was united. Shared synagogues, organizations.

**RELATIONS BETWEEN JEWS AND GENTILES**

Very little anti-Semitism. Leader of Catholic church was friend of Jews. He died in 1934 and new priest preached anti-Semitism. This suddenly created much anti-Semitism. Jews afraid to go out, businesses boycotted.

**FAMILY LIFE AND RELIGION**

Financially comfortable. Elias was third of five children - one sister, three brothers. Went to Hebrew School. Father extremely religious, his father even more so. Family very loving.

**MEMORIES OF FATHER**

Very generous. Elias recently met a man in Israel who remembered father. Said he'd never forget how much father had helped him.

**ELIAS GOES TO WORK IN LODZ - 1936**

16 years old. Worked in cousin's shoe store.

**ZIONISM IN DOBRYZN**

At age eight, Elias belonged to Zionist organization. Most people in city did.

**FAMILY LANGUAGES**

Spoke Yiddish at home. Also spoke Polish.

**ELIAS IS A HAPPY, ATHLETIC CHILD**

FATHER DIES OF PNEUMONIA - 1938

Elias was notified by telegram in Lodz.

SISTER IS MARRIED, LIVES IN A CITY NEAR DOBRYZN

ELIAS HAS A GENTILE FRIEND WHOSE BROTHER IS A HITLER FOLLOWER

Friend told him not to worry because he didn't share brother's beliefs.

ELIAS REMAINS IN DOBRYZN AFTER FATHER'S FUNERAL. GOES INTO THE ARMY MARCH 1939

Older brother was supposed to go, but he had to support mother so Elias went in his place.

BROTHER MOVES TO CITY WHERE SISTER LIVES

Planned to bring rest of the family there soon.

JEWISH SOLDIERS IN ELIAS'S UNIT CELEBRATE PASSOVER WITH HELP FROM TOWNSPEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE STATIONED

They arranged, prepared kosher meals.

ELIAS SEES MOTHER FOR THE LAST TIME

Army commander gave him special two-day leave.

GERMANY INVADES - SEPTEMBER 4, 1939

Elias's unit was at the German border. At 6 a.m. they saw six airplanes. Realized how strong Germans were, knew war was lost. Held border three days, then Germans attacked. Unit retreated. Elias and some others went to main highway to Warsaw.

#### POLISH ARMY MAKES A LAST STAND

Rounded up the soldiers, tried to break through German lines to get to Warsaw. Began at 4 a.m. All soldiers tried to run over lines while Germans slept, but they began shooting. Many killed, remaining Polish soldiers surrendered.

#### POLES TAKEN PRISONER. JEWISH PRISONERS ARE SEPARATED FROM THE OTHERS

All were taken to a soccer field. Jews told to step forward. He didn't - decided if they wanted him, they'd have to find him. No one betrays him. Had no food. Townspeople threw food to them, but they ran so fast to pick it up they trampled it. Prisoners gave townspeople money to buy food. When they returned with it, most fell into a barbed-wire enclosure. Those who tried to pick it up were shot.

#### NAZIS DISCOVER THERE IS A JEW AMONG THE PRISONERS

Didn't know which one. Elias's friends hide him.

#### THEY ARE TAKEN TO A JAIL FOR ONE NIGHT, THEN RELEASED

Elias discovered the Jews from his unit were in the next cell. They ask him to tell their families where they are.

#### ELIAS GOES TO COUSINS IN LODZ. HE MEETS AN OLD FRIEND WHO IS NOW A GERMAN SOLDIER

Life in Lodz very bad. Because of Elias's Polish army uniform thought he might be able to get rations without waiting in line. He went to a bakery, saw a friend in a German uniform. Friend took Elias's arm, gave him as much bread as he could carry.

#### ELIAS DISCOVERS THAT HIS BROTHER IS ALSO IN LODZ. RECEIVES NEWS OF THE FAMILY

Younger brother disappeared - Germans took him from the streets. Sister and her husband living with friends. Another younger brother and mother staying with German friends in Gulzow.

#### ELIAS GOES TO LOOK FOR SISTER. SHE HAS GONE TO RUSSIA

#### RETURNS TO DOBRYZN. SEES JEWS BEING PERSECUTED

Germans were beating them, forcing them to clean streets. A soldier came to Elias's uncle's house, found Elias in Polish uniform. Told him Polish soldiers weren't allowed to associate with Jews. Elias ran away, later found out uncle had been dressed in prayer shawl, forced to dance in the streets with Torah.

**VIDEO 2 OF 3**

**ELIAS AND OTHERS WALK HOME**

Were so hungry they risked going to a German soup kitchen. Elias's knowledge of German made them suspect he was Jewish, so they left.

**ELIAS HEARS THAT POLISH SOLDIERS ARE BEING SENT TO GERMANY TO WORK**

He goes to a friend's house, changes into civilian clothes.

**250 AND FIFTY JEWISH MEN IN DOBRYZN DISAPPEAR, OCTOBER 1939**

Germans took them out of synagogue, loaded them into trucks. No one ever found out what happened to them.

**JEWIS ARE THROWN OUT OF DOBRYZN - NOVEMBER 9**

Germans told them that if they handed over money and valuables, they could stay. But a few hours later they were told that Dobryzn was being incorporated into the German Reich - no Jews allowed to live there.

**JEWIS LEAVE TOWN ON FOOT, UNGUARDED**

Elias was with uncle, aunt and their children. Uncle decided they should go to Russia. They stop at farms every night.

**THEY ARE TURNED BACK AT THE RUSSIAN BORDER**

It was snowing. Knew they had to find a home for the winter.

**THEY WALK BACK FROM RUSSIAN BORDER, STOP IN PLONSK, THEN GO ON TO ANOTHER SMALL TOWN**

All Jews had been evacuated the day before. A Polish woman who was friendly with the Germans decided to help them. She arranged for them to sleep in an empty store. Had no food, begged from farmers.

**UNCLE BECOMES A TAILOR FOR VILLAGE FARMERS**

Lived with them, going house to house. Rest of the family lived in the store. Uncle able to send them firewood and food.

ELIAS MUST CONSTANTLY HIDE FROM GERMANS

One day a German soldier called to him in street. Elias ran seven kilometers to where uncle was staying, hid there one week.

ELIAS TAKES A JOB ON A ROAD BUILDING CREW IN ORDER TO AVOID CALLING ATTENTION TO HIMSELF

ELIAS MARRIES UNCLE'S YOUNGER SISTER

GERMANS ORGANIZE A TRANSPORT TO DEPORT JEWS

Forced to assemble in town square. Stronger Jews had to load the weaker onto trucks. A soldier tried to take Elias's scarf. Elias pushed his hand away - was beaten, thrown into a truck.

THEY ARE TAKEN TO DZIALDOWO

It was primarily a camp for Polish political prisoners. They were taken to barracks. Some prisoners were forced to stand outside all day in strange positions. When outside barracks they were never allowed to walk - always had to run.

AFTER THREE DAYS THEY ARE TAKEN TO THE TRAIN STATION

Forced to sing as they walked.

TAKEN TO PIOTRKOV

People in blue and white armbands told them not to worry, they were in Jewish hands. Took them to a synagogue, had wooden shelves for sleeping.

UNCLE FINDS A FRIEND LIVING IN PIOTRKOV

Friend found them a place to stay, got a sewing machine for uncle.

ELIAS MEETS CHIEF OF JEWISH POLICE - KNOWS HIM FROM LODZ

Chief advised Elias to join police force, but he declined.

ELIAS FEELS SICK FROM LACK OF FOOD

THE GHETTO IN PIOTRKOV IS NOT WALLED-IN

ELIAS AND WIFE DECIDE TO LEAVE

They took off armbands. Had no papers - knew they could be shot, but felt chance of surviving in the ghetto was also bad.

THEY TAKE A TRAIN TO WARSAW, SNEAK OVER A GERMAN-GUARDED BRIDGE

Arrived at midnight. Had to cross a bridge to enter the city. Bridge guarded by Germans. Asked a wagon driver to take them over bridge. He agreed, but another driver overheard, said he would report them to Germans. First driver pushed them into his wagon, drove to the bridge. Germans never asked for their papers.

DRIVER LEAVES THEM AT STATION IN PRAGUE. THEY MUST CROSS INTO GERMAN TERRITORY. A SMUGGLER OFFERS TO TAKE THEM

He gave them half a card - their courier would be paid when he brought that card back.

THEY WALK INTO SOME WOODS WITH THE COURIER, OTHER ESCAPEES. THEY HEAR GERMAN SOLDIERS

Group split up. Elias and wife hide under bushes. Had been told to wait for courier - he'd return for them. When it got light, they were afraid, wanted to run away, but decided to wait. Shortly, the others returned for them.

THEY CROSS A RIVER, SMUGGLER LEAVES THEM. STILL NOT OVER GERMAN BORDER. THEY WALK OVER THE BORDER WITH NO PROBLEMS

THEY COME TO A TOWN. ELIAS GOES TO SEE LEADER OF THE JUDENRAT

They hid in his house for three days, then left hidden in a fruit wagon.

**VIDEO 3 OF 3**

TAKEN TO NALEWAJ, WHERE THEY FIND WIFE'S FAMILY

ELIAS IS OFFERED A JOB ON A ROADWORK CREW



ALL JEWS IN GHETTO FORCED TO WATCH AS TWO BOYS ARE HANGED FOR  
STEALING POTATOES

ELIAS'S JOB

Worked 25 kilometers away from ghetto. Went home once a  
month, brought food back.

DURING WINTER, ELIAS BECOMES SICK. IN GHETTO HOSPITAL HIS BED  
CATCHES FIRE

His back was badly burned. Had to learn to walk again.

ELIAS'S WIFE HAS A BABY GIRL

ELIAS IS ABLE TO RETURN TO WORK THAT SPRING - 1942

Work project was cancelled. Elias returned to ghetto.

MASSACRE IN THE GHETTO

All Jewish police are shot - no one knew why. People cried.  
As punishment for crying, 50 young and old people were shot as  
others watched.

A TRANSPORT IS ARRANGED

Told they would be taken to a special city for Jews. Old  
people were to go first, but everyone panicked - chaos followed.  
The ghetto was split into two groups. Elias placed in the group  
with old people. A young girl in same group ran away, was shot.  
Lists made of each group, they were told time to report for  
transport.

ELIAS REPORTS FOR TRANSPORT, BUT IS SENT BACK

SS asked why he was in group with old people. No names were  
checked, so Elias sent home.

ELIAS JOINS OTHER TRANSPORT GROUP

Before transport, he worked extra hours in exchange for  
extra bread.

THE GROUP IS PLACED ON TRAIN

They travelled two days. Arrived in middle of night. Saw  
six soldiers, other people in striped uniforms.

ELIAS AND WIFE ARE SEPARATED

ELIAS SEES SIGN "ARBEIT MACHT FREI," THEY ARE AT AUSCHWITZ

They undressed, took showers, got striped uniforms. A young boy tattooed them - Elias's number: F6,249.

TWO DAYS LATER, ELIAS IS TAKEN TO WORK AT A CAMP SEVEN KILOMETERS AWAY

It was an I.G. Farben rubber plant. Experimenting with making gas from coal.

CAMP CONDITIONS

Eight barracks, knee-deep mud. But Elias had a bed for the first time since war began. Food was sandy bread, soups made with grass or potatoes. People could live three months on that diet. They lost ten pounds a week.

ELIAS'S FIRST JOB IS DIGGING TRENCH FOR POWER CABLE

KAPO PLAYS SADISTIC GAME

Grabbed a prisoner's hat, threw it into a trench. When prisoner picked it up, he was shot, reported as an attempted escape.

THEY ARE EXCUSED FROM OUTDOOR WORK IN WINTER

I.G. Farben was upset at waste of workers dying of frostbite. In one day 100 people froze to death.

ELIAS CHANGES WORK GROUPS

Asked Czech guard for transfer because the Kapo was so dangerous. Transferred to a group putting up steel beams. Co-workers were English POWs who shared their Red Cross packages with the Jews. Traded clothes for food with POWs.

THE ENGLISH BOMB THE CAMP

100 prisoners killed, including English POWs. Next day they bombed again, but prisoners were prepared and took cover.

THEY ARE EVACUATED JANUARY 20, 1945

Elias collected extra food. Germans were carrying all they could. Asked prisoners to help carry things - including weapons. Many escaped, but Elias felt risk was too great.

THEY SPEND ONE NIGHT IN GLEIWITZ, THEN GO TO MAUTHAUSEN BY TRAIN

MAUTHAUSEN TOO CROWDED, SO THEY GO BY TRAIN TOWARD BERLIN. 7,000  
OF 10,000 DIE ON THE TRAIN

THEY STAY AT CAMP IN ORANIENBURG FOR A FEW DAYS

THEY ARE TAKEN TO FLOSSENBURG

Worst camp Elias had seen. Millions of shoes piled in the  
middle of camp. Dead bodies everywhere.

ALL WHO WANT TO GO TO A DIFFERENT CAMP WERE ALLOWED TO LEAVE.  
ELIAS GOES TO STUTTGART

There was no real camp, just an old factory, where Elias  
worked the night shift.

THEY ARE EVACUATED. MARCH FROM CAMP TO CAMP, BECAUSE NO ONE KNEW  
WHAT TO DO WITH THEM

Stayed in Bavaria for a few days. Baked potatoes in fires  
from American bombs. A Russian ate rat poison, died in agony.

ELIAS DECIDES HE IS TOO WEAK TO GO ON. HIDES IN A HAYSTACK

22 people hid. Of these, 11 were found, shot.

TOWNSPEOPLE HELP THE SURVIVORS, GIVE THEM FOOD AND CLOTHES

LIBERATED BY THE AMERICANS, TUESDAY, MAY 1, 1945

ELIAS AND A FRIEND GET A HOUSE, OTHER HELP FROM JOINT  
DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE

ELIAS MEETS HIS WIFE IN GERMANY

She has immigration papers for America.

ELIAS AND WIFE ARRIVE IN N.Y. MARCH 9, 1949

THEY ARRIVE IN CLEVELAND MARCH 15, 1949

ELIAS SHOWS PHOTOGRAPHS OF HIMSELF ONE MONTH AFTER LIBERATION AND  
OF HIS FAMILY