

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	KAREL HOFFMAN	
Name of Interviewer	Sidney Elsner	Date 12/12/84
Name of Abstractor	Esther Potash	Date 2/23/88

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Karel Hoffman was 21 years old when he was ordered to report to Terezin, Czechoslovakia to help in the construction of a model prison camp. Terezin was originally a fortress town from the Austro-Hungarian Empire which was developed as the sort of concentration camp that the Nazis used to display their treatment of prisoners. Karel details the many ironies and falsehoods of this model camp. For example, the Nazis touted Terezin as having many services, such as a bank; however, money was totally worthless within the town.

While the outward appearance of Terezin was one of fair treatment and normal life, the actual treatment was not much better than at many of the other concentration camps at the time. Living conditions were poor, food rations were minimal and there was much overcrowding. And the inmates suffered beatings, physical abuse and intimidation from the Nazis.

Karel remained at Terezin for three years. He was then one of 5,000 taken to Auschwitz. He describes the horrors of induction at Auschwitz, especially in the later years of the war when the Germans were becoming more desperate.

Karel survived Auschwitz and was transferred to GLEIWITZ, where he participated in the construction of platforms for cannons and machine guns. He was liberated at GLEIWITZ in 1945.

After liberation, Karel wandered through the woods, witnessing the chaos and confusion, and finally returned to his home to search for family members. After an unsuccessful search, he moved to a displaced persons camp in Germany, where he remained until 1949.

Karel was sponsored for immigration to the U.S. by his aunts in 1949. He pursued furniture and carpentry work in the U.S., married and had one son.

ABSTRACT

VIDEO 1 OF 2

INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATION OF TEREZIN BY THE INTERVIEWER

Terezin (Theresienstadt) was set up as a model prison camp, as a town within a prison. It was located 30 miles north of Prague in Czechoslovakia, and was originally a fortress town from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

KAREL IS 21 YEARS OLD WHEN HE IS FIRST SENT TO TEREZIN AS A CARPENTER

In 1941, he was told to report, with 350 other young men, to build the town for the Jewish inmates. There was no contact with the gentile population, and Jews were prohibited from trying to contact their families and friends by mail.

KAREL'S GROUP OF TRADESMEN ARE NOT TOLD THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT; THE MEN ARE CONTROLLED AND DIRECTED BY INTIMIDATION OF THE GUARDS AND SUPERVISORS

THE TOWN HAS A SMALL FORTRESS AREA USED DURING THE WAR AS AN EXECUTION ARENA FOR CZECH POLITICAL PRISONERS

IMPORTANT JEWS, WHO RECEIVED SPECIAL TREATMENT, ARE OFTEN BROUGHT TO TEREZIN

INMATES LIVE IN OVERCROWDED MILITARY BARRACKS

FEW CHILDREN LIVE IN TEREZIN; MOST HAD BEEN SENT TO AUSCHWITZ WITH THEIR PARENTS

TEREZIN INMATES DO NOT KNOW ABOUT THE KILLING CAMPS, BUT ARE AWARE OF THE EXISTENCE OF OTHER CONCENTRATION CAMPS

LIVING CONDITIONS ARE POOR

Older people became weak and died rapidly. Soap and toothpaste were contraband. Food rations were minimal, and stealing from the fields or kitchens was essential for survival.

JEWISH ORGANIZERS ARE IMMEDIATELY DETECTED AND TAKEN AWAY

Germans posed as Jews to gain information.

WHILE THERE ARE CONCERTS AND PLAYS IN TEREZIN DUE TO THE LARGE NUMBER OF TALENTED AND CELEBRATED ARTISTS DETAINED THERE, THE NAZI REPRESENTATION OF TEREZIN'S RESTAURANTS, COFFEE HOUSES, AND ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS IS JUST FOR SHOW

THERE IS A BANK, BUT MONEY IS WORTHLESS

MEDICAL ATTENTION IS AVAILABLE FROM THE DOCTORS WHO ARE INMATES

KAREL REMAINS IN TEREZIN FROM FALL 1941 UNTIL FALL 1944

KAREL IS ONE OF 5,000 TAKEN TO AUSCHWITZ AFTER THE WARSAW UPRISING

DESCRIBES ENTRANCE TO AUSCHWITZ, SELECTION BY MENGELE

HE IS TRANSPORTED TO GLEIWITZ TO WORK. CONDITIONS SOMEWHAT IMPROVED

DESCRIBES TREATMENT IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Tells of shaving, beatings with bullwhips.

DESCRIBES CENSUS AT TEREZIN IN 1943

VIDEO 2 OF 2

KAREL'S WORK AT GLEIWITZ CONSISTS OF BUILDING PLATFORMS FOR THE CANNONS AND MACHINE GUNS. HE ALSO PARTICIPATES IN THE TIME-WASTING ACTIVITY OF CARRYING STONES FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER

HE REMAINS AT GLEIWITZ FOR THREE MONTHS; IS LIBERATED AROUND NEW YEAR'S 1945

DESCRIBES WANDERING THROUGH THE WOODS, WITNESSING CHAOS, CONFUSION, AND DESTRUCTION OF THE CAMPS

RETURNS TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA BEFORE EASTER 1945 TO SEARCH FOR FAMILY

AFTER UNSUCCESSFUL SEARCH, HE MOVES TO PRAGUE, BUT LEAVES FOR FEAR OF RUSSIAN CONTROL

KAREL LEARNS OF FAMILY'S DEATHS

One brother was shot three days before the war ended.

HE PLANS TO RELOCATE TO THE U.S., WHERE FATHER'S SISTERS LIVE

HE REMAINS IN DISPLACED PERSONS CAMP IN GERMAN UNTIL HIS FAMILY SPONSORS HIS IMMIGRATION IN 1949

KAREL MARRIES, HAS ONE SON

DISCUSSES EFFECTS OF HIS EXPERIENCES ON HIS CURRENT LIFE

States that if he doesn't think about the experiences, he's all right, but that if he does think about them, he becomes very emotional.

RESISTANCE IS NOT POSSIBLE AT THE TIME HE WAS TAKEN TO TEREZIN BECAUSE IT IS HEAVILY GUARDED, AND BECAUSE THE PRISONERS DO NOT KNOW THE EXTENT OF THE SITUATION IN THE BEGINNING

IN CLEVELAND, KAREL PURSUES FURNITURE AND CARPENTRY WORK

KAREL CLOSES WITH THE STATEMENT THAT OTHERS WILL NEVER REALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT HE ENDURED AND THAT THE BRUTALITY CANNOT BE IMAGINED