

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	WERNER SAUER		
Name of Interviewer	Sidney Elsner	Date	7/9/84
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NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Werner Sauer was born in 1918 in Gelsenkirchen, Germany which is near Essen and Dusseldorf. The Jewish population of Gelsenkirchen was 3,000 out of a total population of about 365,000. The family had lived in Germany for five generations and considered themselves Germans; they were not involved in politics or in Zionism.

The Sauer family was financially well-to-do. Werner's mother was a housewife, and his father owned a meat-packing plant. Most of their friends were gentiles. Werner has no memory of early signs of anti-Semitism.

He attended a Jewish Volksschule, an elementary school, for four years and then went to a gymnasium until he was forced to leave in 1933 at age 15. In 1938 the Nazis made him relinquish his license, and he became a bricklayer with the help of his father's friend.

When the Nazis came to power, his father's business was destroyed. Still, his parents and their friends didn't believe Hitler would remain in power. There were gradual changes; every few months there were new decrees, culminating in Kristallnacht. Since the Sauers had a special status, his father was not arrested, but Werner was.

Deportations began at the end of 1940. Werner recalls no hint of extermination, although the first rumors about euthanasia of "defective" people came around 1940. People talked of resettlement in rural areas where settlers became farmers.

Werner and his parents were deported to Riga in the winter of 1941 along with 500 Jews from Gelsenkirchen and 500 from Dortmund. They rode in railroad cars with no heat and had no food or water except what they brought with them. His family was able to stay together during this time.

In the Riga ghetto a street with a wire fence divided the German and Latvian ghettos. The German ghetto consisted of six or seven apartment houses in an old part of town, where people lived six to a room. 40 or 50 groups were marched outside the ghetto to work; others worked inside, sorting the possessions of 30,000 Latvian Jews who had been killed.

Next, the family was taken to Stutthof concentration camp. Werner went to a section called Lenta where the Nazis had gathered all the artisans and skilled laborers from eastern Europe. The artisans produced fine goods for upper rank gestapo members. They lived and worked in the factory which Werner was ordered to rebuild with virtually no materials. The artisans in Lenta were well treated because the Nazis needed their skills.

Werner and his father were transferred to Buchgarten, a section of Stutthof where people were exterminated. Werner and a friend, Paul, decided to escape. They were caught but were able to pass themselves off as marine deserters because camp prisoners were not tattooed at Stutthof. They were jailed for two weeks in the holding camp for deserters. A fellow prisoner, condemned to death, gave Werner Russian rubles.

They escaped again and hid on farms. The Russians set up roadblocks to search for guns and found Werner's gold rubles. The Russians didn't believe Werner and Paul were German Jews - the knew only of Germans and of Jews - and arrested them. Werner proved he was Jewish by reciting a prayer from his Bar Mitzvah.

He met some women survivors who had formed a self-help committee and obtained identity papers. One woman thought his mother had survived. When he searched for his parents he found that his mother had been gassed at Stutthof at the end of 1944, and his father had been beaten to death after trying to escape from Buchgarten.

Werner then walked toward Germany. He met two French soldiers in July 1945 who had heard the Russians were taking survivors back to Russia; Werner ran again. After the liberation, he walked to Germany and worked in a Russian-occupied hospital for a while. He stayed in Berlin until he received his emigration papers in May 1949. Since this was the time of the Berlin blockade, he flew out of Berlin in an empty cargo plane and then took a boat to N.Y.

After visiting for a week in N.Y. with fellow survivors from Riga, he got a job in Cleveland where he had an aunt and uncle who sponsored him. He worked for Carling Brewing Co. for three years. Then he worked installing boilers for the Ira E. Baker Co. until the company liquidated and he retired at age 60. He lives with his wife in Middlefield, Ohio. They have no children.

**ABSTRACT**

**VIDEO 1 OF 3**

BORN IN GELSENKIRCHEN, GERMANY. DEPORTED TO RIGA, JANUARY 1942

PRESENT LIFE

Married, lives in Middlefield, Ohio. No children. Retired semi-farmer.

IMMIGRATED TO U.S. IN 1949

Lived in Berlin after liberation. Sponsored for immigration by aunt and uncle, who owned Doanbrook Hotel.

EMPLOYMENT IN U.S.

Worked at Carling Brewery for three years. Subsequently worked for Ira E. Baker Co., installing boilers. Retired at 60 years of age.

CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

Attended Jewish Volksschule for four years. Attended gymnasium, studied French, English, Greek until he was 15, in 1933. School names Adolf Hitler Gymnasium. Interested in sports.

FIRST JOB

Became a chauffeur at 16. Became a bricklayer in 1938 when he had to give up his driver's license.

GELSENKIRCHEN HAD A POPULATION OF 365,000

Near Essen and Dusseldorf.

MOST OF WERNER'S FAMILY KILLED DURING HOLOCAUST

Only surviving relative is a sister who was married in 1938. Emigrated to Kenya. Now lives in Santa Barbara, CA. Parents deported with Werner to Riga. Mother died in Stutthof, 1944. Father died there in 1945. Total of eight family members died in the Holocaust; others live in Argentina and U.S.

3,000 JEWS LIVE IN GELSENKIRCHEN BEFORE 1939

CHILDHOOD YEARS ARE COMFORTABLE

Mother was a housewife. Father owned meat packing plant with 75 employees. Family was well-to-do.

WERNER DOESN'T RECALL MUCH ANTI-SEMITISM IN GELSENKIRCHEN

Most of his friends were gentile. Other than his dismissal from school, no signs of organized anti-Semitism

FAMILY CONSIDERS ITSELF GERMAN

Had lived in Germany for at least five generations. Werner's birth certificate says "German of Mosaic faith." No involvement in politics or Zionism. Spoke no Yiddish, occasionally spoke a word of two in Hebrew.

WERNER PLANS TO BECOME A LAWYER

HE PLAYS IN A SOCCER GAME ORGANIZED BY NAZIS IN RIGA BETWEEN GERMAN AND LATVIAN JEWS. NAZIS FILMED IT FOR USE AS PROPAGANDA

MORE ON LACK OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN GELSENKIRCHEN

WERNER WORKS AS A BRICKLAYER IN A CATHOLIC HOSPITAL

CHANGES IN LIFE DUE TO ANTI-SEMITISM

Father's business destroyed. Werner had to turn in his driver's license in 1938. Changes were gradual, culminating in Kristallnacht. Many Jews emigrated. Werner wore yellow star, but didn't have to wear it openly. Movement outside living area restricted in 1940-41, but not well enforced. Jews lived from day to day.

FATHER AND RABBI HAVE SPECIAL STATUS, NOT ARRESTED IN KRISTALLNACHT. WERNER IS ARRESTED

FIRST DEPORTATION END OF 1940 OR BEGINNING OF 1941

No hint of extermination camps. Told they were being resettled in farming areas.

WERNER REPORTS THE CONCLUSION OF HIS RESEARCH ON EXTERMINATION OF  
JEWS IN LATVIA

November 30, 1941: 12,000-15,000 German Jews from Berlin  
shot  
December 7, 1941: 12,000-15,000 Latvian Jews shot after  
elimination of 37,000 Jews from Grosse ghetto in Riga by  
Sonderkommando  
4,000 Latvian Jews remain in Kleine ghetto  
10,000 German Jews settled in German ghetto  
Daily Aktionen eliminated 2,000-3,000 people  
People gassed in vans after being told they were going to  
work in canneries  
October 1942, command 1001 or 1005 had to unearth 178,000  
bodies for better disposal

FIRST RUMORS OF EUTHANASIA OF "DEFECTIVE" PEOPLE, 1940

WERNER RECALLS DEPORTATION TO RIGA, WINTER 1941

500 Jews from Gelsenkirchen, 500 from Dortmund. Transported  
in regular railroad cars without head, food or water. On trains  
for six days. Four of five people dead when they arrived at Riga  
in January 1942. People rushed off trains - slow people were  
beaten. All baggage remained on train, later heaped in piles.  
Werner and father and 20 others volunteered to clean out train.  
Injured were killed by Nazi in charge - name of Gimnicht. Guards  
were Einsatzgruppe A. Uniformed Gestapo were RSHA,  
Sicherheitsdienst. In charge over Sicherheitsgruppen and Latvian  
mercenaries.

DR. OTTO LANGE IS IN CHARGE OF CAMP

Was one of 15 attending Wannsee conference in Berlin to  
design the Final Solution. Command EK1 and EK2 were in charge in  
Riga.

WERNER TALKS ABOUT DR. FRITZ SCHERWITZ

LIFE IN RIGA

Divided into German and Latvian ghettos by wire fence.  
People lived six or more per room. Sauer family lived with Baum  
family - a mother and daughter - and another family with two  
daughters. German ghetto was six or seven apartment houses in  
old section of town.

WERNER IS THE LAST TRANSPORT TO RIGA. SUBSEQUENT ARRIVALS ARE SHOT IN THE WOODS

Ghetto residents chosen at random for extermination. 3,000 people killed in two weeks, at order of Dr. Lange. Total of 60,000 German Jews killed.

### VIDEO 2 OF 3

MORE ON TRANSPORT TO RIGA

Soldiers on troop train collected food for Jews. Jews permitted 150 pounds of luggage each.

MORE ON ARRIVAL IN RIGA

WORK IN RIGA

Ghetto residents marched to work. Werner saw Russian prisoners of war mistreated, starved. 40-50 different groups worked outside ghetto. Others worked inside, sorting possessions of 30,000 dead Latvian Jews. Best clothes sent to Germany or given to local population.

BLACK MARKET BETWEEN GHETTO RESIDENTS AND LOCAL POPULATION

Jews stole things, smuggled them out, despite death penalty for smuggling. Townspeople traded slices of bread for stolen goods. No penalty for them if caught.

WERNER AND PARENTS TAKEN TO STUTTHOF. WERNER ASSIGNED TO LENTA SECTION

Scherwitz was in charge. Assigned Werner to Lenta section, where artisans and skilled laborers from eastern Europe were interred. Head of Lenta was a Jew named Rudow, who had taken an Aryan, Latvian identity. After war, he was arrested by Russians as a collaborator.

LIFE AND WORK IN LENTA

Artisans lived and worked in a factory. Produced leather coats, gold watches, furniture for high-ranking Gestapo. Also made uniforms for UKRAINIANS and Latvians, dress uniforms for high-level Nazis. Werner became friendly with Jewish jeweler named Ritoff. Scherwitz punished people by locking them in a cement tower with no food or clothes. Werner saved a man named Priskin and two others. Priskin became well-known furrier in N.Y. after war. Artisans were well treated because Nazis needed their skills.

MORE ON STUTTHOF

Camp was near Danzig. Most prisoners were Polish. Only one section was for Jews. Jews treated badly by Polish prisoners and Nazis.

FATHER AND WERNER ARE TRANSFERRED TO BUCHGARTEN. MOTHER STAYS IN STUTTHOF

Buchgarten was extermination camp in Stutthof. Werner worked in Lenin werke. Commander gave Werner Table scraps. Camp food was bread and colored water.

WERNER IS BEATEN BY A KAPO

Kapo was a Latvian Jew. Werner saw same kapo beat a man to death.

WERNER AND A FRIEND, PAUL BRAUNSCHILD, DECIDE TO ESCAPE

Prisoners at Stutthof not tattooed. Other prisoners saved and hid civilian clothes for them. Guards knew of escape, did nothing.

THEY ARE CAUGHT, PASS THEMSELVES OFF AS MARINE DESERTERS

Knew there was a holding camp for deserters at Stutthof. Paul and Werner in jail two week. Fellow prisoners, condemned to death, gave Werner Russian rubles.

THEY ARE TRANSFERRED TO DESERTER CAMP AT STUTTHOF

Inmates lived well on confiscated Red Cross packages.

WERNER AND PAUL ESCAPE AGAIN

THEY ARE INTERCEPTED BY RUSSIAN SOLDIERS

They told Russians they are German Jews, but Russians didn't believe them. Knew only Germans or Jews - not German Jews.

RUSSIANS ARREST THEM AS SPIES

Sent to Bittkopf Romberg. Werner proved he was Jewish by reciting a poem from his Bar Mitzvah.

WERNER DECIDES HE WILL TELL RUSSIANS HE IS DUTCH

Met a woman from Gelsenkirchen, Helga Lindemann. She advised him to tell Russians he was a Dutch Jew.

WERNER HEARS HIS MOTHER MAY BE ALIVE. SEARCHES FOR HER

Found a woman in Russian hospital who told him his mother died in gas chamber at Stutthof in late 1944.

FATHER'S FATE

Werner and father separated at Buchgarten. Father had rupture from carrying loads of cement. Later he tried to escape in disguise of horse and wagon driver. Was caught and beaten to death.

WERNER WALKS TOWARD GERMANY ON RAILROAD TRACKS. HEARS THAT RUSSIANS ARE TAKING SURVIVORS TO RUSSIA. HE RUNS AWAY

WERNER RECALLS RUSSIAN ATROCITIES AFTER LIBERATION

Raped a farmer's daughter, tried to rob Werner in a cemetery.

MORE ON HIS WALK TO GERMANY

Survived by scavenging food in deserted Polish and German houses.

WERNER WORKS IN RUSSIAN HOSPITAL

Fired, told his work was substandard.

WERNER LIVES WITH FRENCH SOLDIERS IN EASTERN SECTOR OF BERLIN

Soldiers were active in black market.

STAYS IN BERLIN UNTIL HE GETS EMIGRATION PAPERS

### VIDEO 3 OF 3

WERNER IMMIGRATES TO U.S. IN MAY 1949

Left during Berlin blockade. Flew out on cargo plane. Relatives had reserved a room in N.Y. at Hotel St. Moritz.

WERNER STAYS IN N.Y. ONE WEEK, VISITING WITH FELLOW SURVIVORS FROM RIGA

HE MOVES TO CLEVELAND IN 1949

Aunt and uncle helped him. Aunt was a founder of Gates of Hope congregation. Werner was not a member.



WERNER'S REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLOCAUST

Inhumanity can exist all over the world. Doesn't think people learned anything from Holocaust. Only loved animals - people can't be trusted. People will do anything to cling to life.

WANTS THE WORLD TO KNOW THE FATE OF LATVIAN JEWS

WERNER'S REASONS FOR SURVIVAL

Luck; knowledge of German language; knew trade in high demand; physical strength; belief in higher being, not necessarily organized religion.

MORE REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLOCAUST

Blames media for dissemination of biased information - without them, Hitler wouldn't have stayed in power. Russians were German allies and are not proud. They are sensitive about information.

SURVIVORS MUST SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES MORE TO CONVINCING THE WORLD THAT HOLOCAUST DID HAPPEN

"God forgot to make a mirror for human beings to see themselves for what they are."