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Summary

The interview with Sam Teitelbaum was carried out in Cleveland, Ohio in 1984 when Teitelbaum was 57 years old.

Sam Teitelbaum was born circa 1927 in Czechoslovakia near the Hungarian border and was the third of nine children. He and three siblings were the only survivors in his family. The town, Bardejov, had a sizeable Jewish population. His family was well off if not rich and lived in a Jewish area near the center of town. They were very religious and spoke Yiddish at home. Sam attended both a secular school where they spoke Hungarian and a Jewish school. The expectation was that he would attend Yeshiva and remain religious. Until 1939 he and his family had a good life and were generally accepted by the gentile population.

But in 1939 the Hungarians marched in. They (presumably the Arrow Cross) broke into houses, beat up Jews, shaved the beards of religious Jews, and even killed people. The Hungarians also took away permission for Jews to run their businesses. In 1941 at 14 years old Sam decided to go to Budapest where he thought that he could earn money and send some back home. He was joined by his older brother who was later taken to a labor camp, escaped, and then joined the Russian army. Sam was able to get Hungarian gentile papers through a Zionist organization. These papers enabled him to move around freely and even to go in and out of the Jewish ghetto to see family, bring in food, and even help a few children escape. (He does not make clear what years he is talking about or who ran the ghetto, but it might be the spring of 1944 when the Nazis took over Hungary.) People lived in horrible conditions in the ghetto and many either died of disease or starvation. Outside the ghetto Sam was almost caught on two different occasions but was able to talk his way out. The Zionist organization provided hideouts and money for Jews, but Sam chose to live outside because of the poor conditions in these hideouts. His main problem was getting food and he was constantly starving.

In late 1944 the Russians were coming close and there was frequent allied bombing. For what seemed like a long time the Russians and Germans continued to fight in the streets of Budapest and Sam continued to hide out. Russian soldiers could also not be trusted. They frequently raped women and put men to hard labor. Russian Jewish officers, however, protected Jewish survivors. After liberation Sam was not sure what to do but decided to go through Germany and Austria to Rumania where conditions were better. There he found his older brother who he thought had left the Russian army and gone to Israel. Sam then went to Italy in the hope to make it to Palestine. There he discovered that a younger brother had been there and made it to Palestine. Sam stayed for two years in a DP camp trying to emigrate to Brazil or Palestine. But in the end with the help of Jewish organizations and his uncle who lived in the United States he was able to come to the United States. One of his sisters had already made her way here after Auschwitz, his older brother followed Sam to Cleveland, where he decided to settle, and a younger brother stayed in Israel. No one else from his family survived.

Sam believed it very important, indeed his duty, to tell his children and others what happened during these years so it would never happen again, and so Jews would be prepared to fight back more than they did during the Holocaust. He also said that he continued to believe in G-d.