

Kolo, Poland. I come from a very large family, with six brothers and two sisters, my father and mother, many aunts and cousins and grandparents. Only my brother and myself survived. My brother is younger from me, and we're living now in Richmond, Virginia.

The war broke out in 1939, September 1. I was a soldier in the Polish army. After 18 days fighting against the Germans, the Polish army surrendered. I was taken a prisoner of war. For two weeks, I was locked up in a school building.

The Germans would not give any food to eat, except it was either water. It was a little lake, which a dead horse was killed within that lake, and that muddy water, from that water we were drinking. They were giving all us herring to eat.

After two weeks, the Germans gave out an order that all the prisoners which came from the territories which were before World War I was German territory, so should be released except Jews. I, myself, having a name like Shlomo Ziemniak, I knew if I come to the office with a name like Shlomo, they will know I'm a Jew. So I changed my name to Zigmund. My last name, they wouldn't know the difference, so I left it.

This way I got out from prison and I came home. When I came home, my town was bombed out. The bridges were bombed.

The Jews from the city had to every day assemble on the marketplace for work, all the dirty work to clean up the latrines, ditches, all the bombed up bridges, work and getting beatings every day. One day, the Jewish Community Council received an order to supply 500 young men, healthy, for six weeks' work to be sent away with good pay and shelter and good food.

Well, I was one among them. We had to assemble in the synagogue. After all we were assembled, the Germans came up with trucks and took us away to Poznan. Poznan, we came in in a school building surrounded with barbed wires and guards everywhere around with dogs. The food we were getting there was a quarter a loaf of bread, a watery soup, and going on doing was hard work and beatings and whippings every day. That was our pay, what we were supposed to get.

We were working in Poznan in the camps. This was forced labor camps. We were sent to clear out slums. From these slums, we made a lake, a beautiful lake. We planted 6 million trees for a beautiful forest.

On this project, hundreds of people died. We were getting beatings every day. We had to march about five kilometers to work and from work every day.

In winter time, they took us on a lake one day to chop holes in the ice that they can catch fish. Dozens of people froze. It was 40 degrees below 0 that day. With the wind chill, you could probably be around 100.

After the Germans, the guards themselves were getting white noses frozen, they told us to start to getting home. We carried the dead people. They were frozen to death. We had to carry on our shoulders because the Germans wouldn't leave dead corpses laying on the street, leave them behind. We had to clean up everything.

From that camp, I was transferred to another camp, also in Poznan, which the Germans were building a railroad line from Berlin to Warsaw. On that railroad line, we had to carry these iron tracks, laid on the tracks. People were dying daily with beatings.

One day, where we were working, the people were hungry of starvation, dying. The Germans gave out an order that any prisoner that departs more than 50 meters away from his place of work and will be caught, will be hanged. Hangings were coming out, was a common thing, occurrence every Sunday.

Poznan were several camps with Jewish prisoners. Whenever someone was supposed to be hanged, they called for the people from all the camps to gather, they watch how these people will be hanged. This chief from the Gestapo said you all have to watch and learn how to hang one another.

One day they brought up to hanging two little brothers, twin brothers, 13 years old each one. They were hanged for they were escaped from camp, and they were caught, brought back. These two little boys, I remember that. For months, I could never sleep, always this picture of these boys in my eyes.

When they took off one of these two brothers, one was still alive. The SS man took the little boy behind the barrack and they shot him in his head. That was a very often occurrence.

One day while I was working on the field, the foreman gave us permission to myself and two others to go-- not far away was a potato field-- to steal some potatoes from the field and bring back for the whole group that we can make a fire and cook our little soup or bacon. One Polack, a Polish farmer on a tractor, was working on a farm not far away in another field and came around from behind. He caught us and took us to the German gendarmerie.

We knew any Jew that we will be brought to the Gestapo automatically will be hanged, for any, whatsoever the crime they committed. So we begged the chief from the gendarmerie, the sergeant, please give us any punishment you want. You can do us any whipping, but don't send us to Gestapo.

He said I cannot help. I have to send you to the Gestapo. So one of my two friends happened to have a gold watch in his pocket. He went to the sergeant in charge of the precinct. It was an order typed up before, ready to send us away to the Gestapo. So he tore up that order and told the secretary to type up a new one.

But he still had to send us to the Gestapo. So we didn't believe him, that's true, that he send to the Gestapo one gendarme got on a bicycle and was riding the bike, and we had to run in front of the bike about 7 or 8 kilometers to the Gestapo.

We got in the Gestapo, and it was on Erev Yom Kippur, 1942. We did not know what happened. They took us, put us in in a dark cellar.

We stayed overnight. We had no place, no nothing. All we did, we hugged around all three of us, and we stood all night crying and praying, not knowing what will happen. Because we knew that this is the end.

Because according to the Gestapo, no Jew ever came out from Gestapo was left alive. It automatically was a hang. There was a special camp they called the stadium. That's where all the hanging appeared.

Each one what came from the Gestapo, they brought it to that camp, and they let him go there for a week or two. He received better food. Then on a Sunday, he came up in the hanging was held.

So the same thing did to us. We got to that camp. They didn't send us to any work no more. They kept us in that camp.

Everybody knew that we are sentenced to die. We ourselves knew it ourselves, because we are dead people because of that. But as luck struck, because of our own defense, that we defended us before the chief of the Gestapo, we all made up among ourselves to give the same identical testimony.

When we came up to this office, he brought up each one separate and ask all kind of questions, what are your father and my parents and grandfather and great-grandfather, what all the history where I come from. But we all testified identical story. We told him that we had permission from the foreman, they gave us to go to get some potatoes, and the potato field was on the place where we were working.

We were laying this out. We did not depart from the place from work. So this saved us.

While we being in that camp for two weeks, came an order I should be transferred to a different camp. So I am the only known. I don't know what happens to our other two friends. I never seen them again.

I'm the only man alive that ever came out from the Gestapo and is still alive, has not been hung, as far as I know. Never happened to anybody else, who ever was arrested, brought to Gestapo was hanged, for any crime. I'm the only one

survivor of them alive.

From that, we were transferred in a small camp from 100 prisoners. That was a stroke of luck to me. In that camp, most of the prisoners were my friends from my hometown.

So the chief from the police, from the prisoner police was my personal friend from my hometown the people in the tower, in the kitchen, the chief, everywhere they knew me and were close friend. So I received, right away, better food, and as a small camp, you know, all with these prisoners.

So some in that camp was some people with their wives were in a camp, also in Poznan, a different camp for women. My older sister for me was arrested about a year later from myself. I did not know that my sister was in Poznan in another camp.

But being in Poznan, every two weeks we used to go to a entlausung, a bathhouse, a public bathhouse. All the prisoners in all the camps used to come at different times. Each prisoner, most of them, were writing their names on the wall. One day I came to the bathhouse, and I noticed my sister's name on the wall.

[CRYING]

I wrote my--

Take your time.

I wrote my name under hers. This is where I found out that my sister is in Poznan.

A few weeks later, when I came to that camp, I found out that one from the chief, from the other prisoners, policemen, kapos, that they have some wives in the same camp where my sister was. So one Sunday, they bribed a guard, and he took us, five of us and myself, too, by streetcar all across the other town of Poznan. He took us to that camp where all the women are.

But it was prohibited for men to meet, to go into that camp. But they also bribed the commandant from that women's camp. So we put it on a separate side building, and we met. That meeting with my sister, I could never forget. We cried.

[CRYING]

We hugged for about 20 minutes. We couldn't speak to each other. At that time, I didn't see my sister for over two years. After that meeting, I never saw her again.

I came back in the same camp. From that camp, I was transferred in the beginning of 1943 to a camp called [? Kreising. ?] There we built an airfield, we were building. On that airfield, we are unloading trains with sacks of cement. We were carrying on our shoulders sacks of cement, loading day and night, unloading on the big barns and carrying the sacks on our shoulder.

One day, the guard was watching. He had a whip, a wire as thick as my thumb. While I was carrying a sack of cement, he swung around that whip, around my body. I just fell down, and I couldn't catch my breath for about five minutes. I couldn't get up. Finally, I got up, and I started carrying the sacks again, the [? cement. ?]

On that camp, I stayed until October of 1943, when it came an order that all camps in Poznan are being liquidated. We were sent to Auschwitz. They put us on boxcars, on cattle cars, and we were riding for about two days and nights and coming at middle of the night to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

That's where real hell began. We were greeted by dozens of SS men with shepherd dogs. Getting out of these cars, we were kicked and beaten and marched into Birkenau.

In Birkenau, they put us into these barracks. There were bunks on three-level bunks. On each bunk, there were 10 to 12 people. We were just laying on a hard board.

We were packed like sardines. We couldn't just turn around. When one wanted to turn around, everybody else had to turn.

These kapos, the kapos, they were receiving a certain amount of food for the people. The more people they killed, the more food was left for them. They were selling this.

I forgot to mention when I met my sister in Poznan, she had a gold chain which she had received from her mother, from Mother. She gave me that chain at that time. She says keep that chain. You may need it sometimes. Thanks to that chain, I was saved.

[CRYING]

Because in Birkenau, where I was about 12 days, I didn't have anything to eat. So when I got in there, I was lucky enough to save that chain. Because when we got in in Birkenau, anyway, they took all the clothing off, shaved us, shaved all the hair, everything, and dumped us in a barrel of Lysol to clean up, to entlausung.

And the clothes we left on clothes in the barracks. But my luck was it was already late. When I got out of the entlausung, It was already dark. And The light was on.

So the electric wire fences were charged with electricity. So they wouldn't let the prisoners go back to the other camp. So I came back to the same barrack where I left my clothes.

But before I had hidden that gold chain under the clothes to the roof to the ceiling in a place. When I came back to that same place, I was watching careful, and I took the chain and I hid it in-- I had already the new clothes, a pair of pants, very long pants, and they had a watch pocket. I stuck that chain in my watch pocket.

The next morning, they sent us over to Birkenau to Block 5. I had that chain hidden. A friend of mine which came to that camp a week earlier came to me the next day and asked me, did you manage to hide anything. So at first, I was afraid to divulge.

I was afraid to divulge. Because I've seen that the people were going around stealing one for the other. Finally, I told my friend that I have managed to save a gold chain.

He says he knows somebody that I can sell it to for bread and some soups. Finally, he took me to that man which he was in charge of one block. There was a kapo.

So I sold the chain for four loaves of bread and two soups. Well, of course, I couldn't take four loaves of bread at one time. [INAUDIBLE] I go back, somebody-- They're going to kill me trying to take away the bread.

So I decided I'd take only two. I cut them up, each loaf in four, and stuck in my pockets. I gave a half a bread to my friend. One-half I ate up right away myself. The rest of it wound up stuck in four quarters in my pockets, under my arm, my coat. And this bread, in the meantime, gave me some strength that I could survive these 10 days which I was in Birkenau.

Well, the next day I went back to the same man to pick up two more loaves of bread and a soup. When I got there, he was handing out soup to all these prisoners on the barrack. It was around lunchtime.

I came to him and I handed him my dish that he should fill it up. He looked at me. That thing he was handing out a little hit me over the head, and I was full in blood, and never received any bread anymore. This was my payment for the other two soups.

But anyway, the two loaves of bread, a loaf and a half which I did eat, it helped me to get some strength. When I came before the selection of Dr. Mengele, he grabbed me at my right arm, touched me, and he pushed me to the right. This why I was saved. I was sent to work.

The next day I was sent away on trucks to the camp Jaworzna about 40 kilometers away from the main camp of Auschwitz. That was a camp with coal mines. But the camp was not built. It was only a couple of barracks there.

It was a big mountain in the middle, around the barbed wire fence. We had to level off that mountain of sand with little pushcarts. We worked for months and months to clean out and building new barracks, you know, finally, until we built the camp. It was 4,000 people for picking up.

I told them I am, what do you call, experienced bricklayer, I'm a carpenter. That saved me. They put me on a kommando. They were building a electric power plant there.

I was working in concrete, as a cement level of pouring the concrete and laying bricks. I was called, like, a skilled laborer. For skilled labor, the Germans received more pay. Because these prisoners worked for private companies. They sent out the prisoners.

At the same time, we worked with civilians on that project, Polacks, from Czechoslovakia, different foremen. At the same time, we did manage to do some dealing with them, like a black market. For me, being a tailor by profession, by trade, I managed to do some work.

Because every two weeks, we went to the clothing. We received new underwear. Some people were lucky to get a new pair of underwear. From this new pair, we had to turn in the old one. From the old one, the dirty one, I cut up and from one, I made two.

The Germans didn't pay attention as long as you turn back two pieces of underwear, that's good enough. So I made from one shirt, I made a shirt with a pair of underwear, with under shorts. With a pair of shorts, I made a shirt. As long we throw in two pieces each, whoever had received a new pair, we were sold to these civilians.

They brought us some bread, sometimes a piece of salami. While I being a worker, I worked at the cement, every day we had a tool shack. That tool shack, in the morning, we picked up shovels. I had to put on rubber boots to work on the concrete. In the afternoon, we put the tools back.

The civilian, one day he brought a loaf of bread for me. He put it, hid it for me in the tool shack. I knew where it was.

When I came to the tool shack, putting back the tools and picking up this loaf of bread, and I turn around, in the door is an SS man with his dog. He noticed that I have something. He said what have you got here? I say nothing.

He started looking. Finally, he found a loaf of bread. Right away, he starts beating me. He knocked me out four teeth right away. He start kicking me.

I was laying on the ground in blood. The shepherd dog was tearing down my pants and my legs. It was biting me. I was all in blood.

We went home. When I got home, my number was called to come to the office from the camp.

Also, he found on me a new pair underwear, extra underwear I was wearing on my back. I was trying to sell at that time. He took away. He searched me. He took away the underwear.

When I came to the office, that loaf of bread and a pair of underwear was laying on the table. There was a kapo there and the SS. He asked me where did I get this from.

Well, I told him I had a pack of cigarettes and a civilian passed by, and I was hungry. He was carrying a loaf of bread. I

was hungry, and I gave him the cigarettes. He gave me the loaf of bread. We trade.

Of course, they didn't believe me, what the story. He put me on a stool, laid over. The kapo got on my head, let down my pants, and left my naked behind.

He had a whip, a rubber whip with a steel inside, a wire inside. I received five whips. He tells me to get up and ask me the questions again. I tell him the same story.

He puts me down again and I get another five whips. Again, I get, eight times the five whips I received at that time. For more than six weeks, I could not sit or lay on my back. I had to stand up or laying on my stomach.

Because I knew I couldn't tell. The Gestapo, the SS man asked me whether I would recognize the civilian which gave me that bread. I said yes, I would.

So the next day, we went to the same place to work. I knew in advance if I tell them who it was, I would not survive the next night in my camp because I would be killed by my own prisoners. And the man I tell, he will be taken to concentration camp. I will spoil the dealing business for the rest of the prisoners.

So I knew either way, I am dead. So I might as well die and not give out, spoil the thing for the rest of the prisoners.

So the next morning, I went to work. The SS man calls me out from there, from the line. They start I should show him around where the place is. Of course, that place was about two square miles large, that plant.

And I was carrying him around, show him everywhere around all over the place. I didn't say-- I never took him to the place where the man really worked. So while I was working, the SS man behind me was kicking me. The dog was biting me.

Finally, he got tired. He takes me back to the place we were working. We were building that power plant. A building was about five story high, already finished.

OK. Hold on.

He took me up to the top floor. He grabbed me in front of me. He grabbed me on the chest.

He says you have your last chance. Now either you tell me, otherwise, I push you down that you die. I started to cry.

I say, do what you please. If I would have known, I would tell you. So he got tired, he pulled me back. He kicked me my behind, and he told me to go to hell.

I never went back to the same place of work anymore. They send me to another place.

In Jaworzna, we stayed until January 1945. January 15, the Russians bombed our camp, dropped a couple of bombs. Several of the kapos in the kitchen got killed, because it dropped in the place where they kept the food. Also, the potatoes, the warehouse was bombed, too.

The middle of the night came an order quick, liquidate the camp. They took us-- on that camp, they gave everybody two loaves of bread, and we marched out. Put us on the death march.

We marched for the first night. When I came up--

OK. I've got to stop.

This was in January, it was snow and ice. We marched. We marched for about four or five hours. They tell us to sit down. We sat down in the snow.

While I sat down, we laid down. I fell asleep. It was raining.

While I was asleep, one of the prisoners held, they had my satchel with the two loaves of bread. Somebody grabbed it away from me. I didn't have nothing anymore. Stolen, I couldn't find.

Walking for one night, the next day the next afternoon, they brought us to Blechhammer, a camp called Blechhammer. In Blechhammer, we were for three days. The Russians were closing in. The front, we could hear at night, with all the artillery shells bombing out close, not far from the camp.

From that camp, we were marched in, 4,000 prisoners. From that camp, one day, one night, the middle of the night, the SS came in and took from three barracks out 800 prisoners on a march without any food, without anything, from Blechhammer to the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, knee deep snow without any food. All we ate, when we found in the field, some sugar beets. We slept out in barns.

We came in when farmers from Jaworzna. After marching for three days, we came to Blechhammer. From Blechhammer, we stayed three days. They took us on the death march until Gross-Rosen. This took us two weeks, that march.

We marched out 800 people. Whoever could not march, they sat down. There was an SS man going behind, the last one. Ever they sat down, he shot them in the head.

He was carrying his helmet on the belt. Every empty shell after he shot, he put it in his helmet. After one day was over, he counted 40 shells. That means he killed 40 people, that one day.

800 marched out from Blechhammer. When we came to Gross-Rosen, was about 80 of us. In Gross-Rosen, we were lucky to be only 1/2 a day. They gave us a half a loaf of bread and a soup and took us to the railroad station in Weimar. Well, from Gross-Rosen, we traveled to Weimar.

One of my friends which lives in Israel now is a Moshe Harrap. He could not walk anymore because he had dysentery. We had to march from the camp about 2 to 3 kilometers. He couldn't make it. He wanted to sit down.

So another friend of mine from our hometown, each one took one arm over our shoulders, and we practically dragged him to the railroad station. Finally, we got him on a boxcar. We got in, and we came to Buchenwald.

In Buchenwald, I was in Buchenwald about 12 days, going to different kind of work. In Buchenwald, we slept in a tent. It was no place.

It was in February. It was no place with any barracks, but was just a tent with ice and snow underneath. All we had, that little blanket, and we was hugging, one next to the other, just to keep warm.

After 12 days, they send me away, a group of us, put us on a railroad on a boxcar. He sent us down to Southern Germany to a camp called [PLACE NAME]. That was a small camp of 400 people.

And when I came here, I met a couple of friends from my hometown who were there before I came there. There we worked on what we call the shell. The Germans shell mountains, shell rock to make oil. That's we loaded the car. We were working from February till April.

In April of 1945, we start to see French air force start bombing around our camp. One day, the French was a air raid while we were working. The French bombed the barracks. They knew exactly where to bomb. They bombed the barrack where the SS was in.

They killed eight SS men right then. In my barrack where I was, was right next to it. I remember I was hiding under a table. The whole barrack was shaking.

So the commandant from the camp said we have to evacuate the camp. He put us on a march. We were marching. The commandant had an order to take us to Lake Constance in Southern Germany, put us on a boat, and sink the boat with a cannon.

But that commandant, that late in the war, he knew that the war was lost, did not want to have this responsibility. So to avoid this, he was taking us instead of a short cut, he took us the long route. While we were marching around and around, the meantime, the French army crossed in, and we couldn't get through the way the shortcut to go.

So finally, after four days marching, I'm walking on a highway on one afternoon. Here there comes a German SS on a motorcycle. He says to the SS guard which was marching with us, he says, are you still here? In German, I understood. Because the French are about five kilometers behind us here.

So the SS got scared. Finally, they told us to get off the road and sit down. They loaded up their truck with their equipment, loaded up their truck, and disappeared, left us just on the highway.

For me, being scared the last minute to be killed, when you saw the end is here, that we were frightened. So little by little, it was a little forest not far away, I crawled into that forest, hidden.

We found a farmhouse. It was a barn. We got in that barn. A friend of mine which is in Israel, his name is Isaac Kinzler, and we crawled in in a stack of hay and we fell asleep. I was feeling scared.

The next morning, we got up, frightened, not knowing what was happening. We just looked out from the barn. We see on the highway a bunch of prisoners walking around, everybody talking and walking out there.

We are free! The French army is all ahead of us. Just, it was so unbelievable, and we did not know what is happening, what to do, what happened. We're just like ghosts. Everybody was so weak.

Finally, we decided we're going to the farmer and try to make something to eat. The farmer made some soup to give us, some milk. He was very friendly all of a sudden. Before, everybody was just scared to death.

So the farmer told us they are not far the railroad station is a train loaded with food, with all kinds of different canned goods. So we went to the railway station. We found a train loaded with all kinds of cans, ham in can, chocolate in cans, sacks of sugar.

The prisoners, everyone was grabbing. They didn't know what to do. They start eating until they finally got sick with eating so much all of a sudden.

[LAUGHS]

And that's the way, how we got liberated by the French army. The French treated us very good. Then it came out the French gave an order to the mayor of the little town to supply clothing and shelter and food.

Right away, the Germans, everybody was going in and taking to the Germans, taking the rooms they supplied for us. That's how we survived the war and liberated.

Of course, there's a lot more stories to tell besides that. You can't detail on the spot, telling everything, recall everything exactly. But I think that that is the story of my life, how I've been liberated.

At first, we lived on the French zone for from 1949-- April 22, 1945, I was liberated by the French army. Of course, the war ended May the 8th. The Germans surrendered. But we were already free.

The French were very good to us. They were giving us food. We had all kinds of privileges given. That's how I survived.

In 1947, of course, Germany was bombed out. In '46, I start looking for somebody who survived from our family. Because at first, we couldn't travel. Germany, all the railroads were bombed out. We couldn't travel.

After late '46, from Stuttgart to Munich, the railroad train was already rebuilt. Finally, I was on the French zone. We got to Munich.

It came to a DP camp in Feldafing. In Feldafing, I found some friends. A friend told me, you know what? I have seen a brother of yours in Łódź, Poland.

I said which of my brother? He tell me Allan, a younger brother. So that same friend went back to Łódź. I told him to give him regards. I told him where I am.

I never wanted to go back to Poland because I knew the anti-Semitism, what the Poles did to us. I never wanted to see that country again. But the friend went back to Łódź, and he met my brother, and told him, I've seen your brother in Germany.

So my brother found out that I'm in Germany. He started looking for me. One day, I was in the same camp in Feldafing. Very often, I used to come and travel. My brother knew the place where I come see.

One day I was there with my friend. We went out to a movie in the camp. They had a movie playing.

I come back in to go to sleep. I had a cot. The lady had a cot for me to sleep. I come back and looking in my bed, somebody is laying in my bed.

I look [INAUDIBLE] and he-- I say Allan? He says yes. My brother was sleeping in my bed.

You can imagine that moment when I met my brother. He is the only one survived in the whole family.

From then, my brother left. We had a reunion. My brother left a girlfriend of his in Łódź. He went back to get his girlfriend, bring her to Germany.

He brought her over to the French zone where I lived. We lived there from 1947 till 1949. But my brother was not married yet. In Germany in 1948, he got married. Of course, he performed the rabbi brought up-- rabbi from Ulm.

And my sister-in-law had two sisters which survived also the war. Her two sisters came to her wedding, where I met one of her sisters. She is my wife today.

Oh, how wonderful.

We married. We got married, of course, in 1948. '49, in June or July, my wife went to Canada. She had an aunt in Canada.

November the 31st, I came to the United States. We got married. Later on, in 1952, my wife came to visit her sister to Richmond, Virginia. While she was on a visit, we got married in Richmond, Virginia.

Now today, we have a son and a daughter. The son is a lawyer in Norfolk, Virginia. My daughter is Director of Emergency Medicine in Cleveland Metropolitan Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio.

Of course, they are here with us today. They came to the gatherings. They were also two years ago in Israel, we went to the gathering.

We are very devoted for Israel. We hope and pray that it will never happen again and Israel will survive.

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