

--DC, April 13, 1983, interview with J. Henry Marton.

My name is Henry Marton.

Can you spell your last name, please?

M-A-R-T-O-N. But I was born-- my real name before the war was Mordkowicz.

Can you spell it?

M-O-R-D-K-O-W-I-C-Z. I was born in Piotrków Trybunalski in Poland. And I was born in March 30, 1918. I was born to my parents. My father's name was Benjamin Mordkowicz. And my wife's name was Feiga Mordkowicz, born Greenberg. At the age-- I had two sisters. Our family was myself and two sisters. At the age of seven, my sister emigrated to the United States of America.

At the age of seven?

I was at the age of seven when my sister emigrated to the United States of America. She was married to an American citizen in our town, which he visited. And he was introduced to my sister, and they fell in love, and married. And they came to the United States. When the war broke out in 1939--

How old were you?

I was 21 years old. I would like to put this on the record that our town, Piotrków Trybunalski, the Germans created the first ghetto in Poland. And that was-- they started around three months after the invasion. I, as a young boy, strong and young, it was a very, very dangerous period for myself. Because going out into the streets, they just picked you up like a dog and put you to work. So in other words, how you have to go out, it was very dangerous for me. Because they took me to labor-- in other words, different types every day, here and there.

Different jobs for each day?

Different jobs for each day. And this was going on till 1940. In 1940, I decide voluntarily to join a factory, which I was protected from picking me up from the streets. It so happened that I was born in that particular town, it was the outskirts.

And there, in that particular section, we had two of the biggest glass manufacturing factories in the country. During the-- before the war, there were 5,000 workers there. And the factory worked 24 hours a day. OK. Now, let me give you a background a little bit about the Jewish population in Piotrków Trybunalski.

The population of this town were about 52,000 people living. And the Jewish population were about 20%, which is over 10,000 Jews living in the town. The main Jewish population was in the center of the city.

The most of them were merchants, and quite a merchants. And also, they had trades, like tailors, shoemakers. A Jew was not allowed to keep a government job. As you know, Poland is a very antisemitic country. And they remain to up to date.

Were you poor? Or were you-- did you have enough food at that time?

No. At that time, it was no problem. Our family were well situated. Now, back to my age of seven when my sister left. Unfortunately, at the age of 13, I lost my mother. And at the age of 15, I lost my sister-- natural death.

I could not continue school because my father was a merchant in the hardware business. And I had to help him. And we both were conducting our business. We were well situated.

Now, when I joined that glass manufacturer, the glass factory, I-- the Germans-- I had a special certificate. And they could not pick me up different types of work because this was a steady job. Because the glass, they were manufacturing exclusively for the Germans. In fact, that the owner was a Volksdeutsche. This means that he was a German descent living under the Polish government before the Germans came in.

In 1940, he started to get short with labor. So the Germans supplied him with Jewish workers. And it amount to about-- before the liquidation of the ghetto, there were working about 650 Jewish workers in that manufacturer. Also, they had a furniture factory, which they were on the opposite sides of the city.

And in that factory, they had 1,100 workers-- 1,000 workers. So altogether, after the liquidation of the ghetto, there were 1,650 Jews left out of 22,000 because they gradually-- you see, they did everything systematically with a formula, these Germans. And what they did-- they started to liquidate around all these small communities around our town.

And they got them into the town, into Piotrków. And then when they started the ghetto, they started from the outskirts. My father had-- we had to liquidate our store. We had to move out and move into a perimeter, where they created a ghetto. And that ghetto got smaller, and smaller, and smaller, and smaller. And it came to a time that 22,000 people were squeezed together into a very small section.

And did you live in a house with other people you didn't know?

Right. And we were-- the 650 workers working in that glass factory, we were coming out from the ghetto every morning with the Jewish police. They took us to the factory and then back in the evening back to the ghetto.

Always escorting you everywhere you went?

Every day, they was working only--

Where was your father at this time? Was he working with you?

No, he was too old. He was 67 years old.

So he wasn't working?

No.

Was he taken away?

No, I come to it. So then in 1943, we had rumors that the ghetto was going to be liquidated. But we did not realize at that time that the Germans are mass killers.

You didn't know the Jews were being killed?

At that time, we did not know. We did not know. And so finally, one day, going to work, I could not get back. The town was sealed off by Latvian volunteers together with the--

You couldn't get back in the ghetto?

No.

You worked out of the ghetto and you couldn't get in?

They left us in the factory isolated. I could not go back anymore to the ghetto. And the ghetto was liquidated within seven days. They took out every human--

Including your father?

--including my father. Well, I have to go back about a week before that happened. We knew something is brewing. And everybody tried to protect their loved ones. Besides my father, we had a very big family because my father had six brothers. And my mother had a sister which lived in the same town. And I had a lot of cousins--

Had a lot of cousins.

--and a lot of aunts and uncles. So what happened-- in that apartment that I lived together with other boys, we built a bunker. You know what a bunker is?

Yeah.

OK. It means that we separated a part of the cellar. And we thought that if they will liquidate again and the people that will live through it, that somehow, they'll be able to join us in the factory and so on. In fact, that-- we started to negotiate with our supervisors in that was factory. And they promised us that relatives of the people working in the factory will be not touched.

Did they keep their promise?

I'll come to it. That day, when I could not go back, I realized that time that was a trick. Because after the liquidation of the ghetto, they gave us the papers. And I still have one in my possession home, my father's picture on it. He was to have that paper signed by the Germans that he would not be deported.

What was good? And I had the paper, but not my father anymore. My father was in that bunker, I found out later. And he slept about three, four days. But it was unbearable. There were too many people hidden. There were small children crying. And they was afraid that anyway, they will be found and shot.

Now, in fact, I'll tell you two incidents. I could tell the incidents that you could sit here for a week tell you stories. But this particular one, maybe the gathering would like to know what happened with these people that remained in the bunkers. And after the liquidation, the Germans did not have the right number what they registered.

They didn't have enough?

Well, the community was run by-- the ghetto was run by Jews. They have to figure how many Jews were there. They knew how many they deported to the gas chambers. Later on, we find out that this transport went to Treblinka. OK.

So they were short. So they instructed the Jewish police to search around. Otherwise, they'll pay with their death. So the Germans on one side and everybody, they start to, with big sledgehammers, start to go from one house to another, and start to look for this hidden places. And now, I live in an apartment house with five families.

And I want to tell you a story about one family. The name was Kilstein. And they had a daughter that married about a year before the ghetto was liquidated. And it so happened, she was pregnant, and she was with her husband. I don't know. I don't really recall. And then when she was caught--

Where was she hidden?

In these bunkers. But they found one by one. And they-- these people, when they were found after, they took him to the synagogue. We had a main synagogue, beautiful synagogue, one of the nicest in Poland. They kept them there like prisoners till they had the right amount of people to take them to a transport. And she was due with her baby. And she gave birth.

And that's-- and the Ukrainians, they were very, very bad. The ones that took care of the liquidation were special-trained people without any, really murderers. They took the baby, put in a fry pan, poured gasoline

in it, and burned in the pregnant. That was one incident.

Did you see that?

No. I was told two days later when it happened. Then when this-- when the ghetto was liquidated in Piotrków, we were still going back and forth to work-- and from work till the place where I was working, they created a small little ghetto for 650 people. And we were guarded by the Germans. It was civilian Germans. They called them Volksdeutsche.

Now, the owner of that factory was a civilian German. He was a very smart businessman. He had 650 Jews working for him. And he realized that if you want a horse to work, you have to give them food.

So on food, we were not short because he was buying for his own money the rations where he were giving that we can work the labor. And this camps-- and this in this glass factory was very, very hard. We were working very, very hard. Shall we not continue?

Yes.

And we were working very, very hard. If I would tell you that I was carrying-- in special-made boxes, we were carrying glass that came out from the factory into the finish-- to make the finished product, you had special belts to carry-- two-- one in the front and one in the back.

We were carrying the boxes that some of them were weighing as 500 pounds, all day long, eight hours back and forth. You can imagine what happened after eight hours of work. But we were lucky to be alive. And that was going on till 1944.

And what did you find out about your father? Did you know what happened to him?

My father was killed in Treblinka.

You found out?

Yes.

How did you find out? How did you?

Because every transport that went to Treblinka, we found out that it was not a concentration camp, it was not-- it was not a labor camp. But it was just a death camp.

So you were all alone.

Pardon me?

You were all alone from your family.

Right, right, all members of our family, except one of my cousins from that-- he remained alive together with me in this work factory. He worked with me together. The ghetto-- in 1944, the end of 1944, he could not hold anymore us in that glass factory because the German was very desperate to have workers in Germany.

Now, that time there were only young people left because the old people were all killed. And he was keeping the young and strong as long as they could get out work from you. But when you got sick, that was the end of you. The Gestapo were taking away-- just till?

Yeah.

So in 1944, that was around-- was October, I think. One day, they encircled us around. They wouldn't let us go anymore to work. And they packed us in into cattle cars-- and this transport, together with this other

1,000 people from the furniture factory. So the whole transport was 1,650, the remaining people in Piotrków, went-- was supposed to go to Germany.

But they made a short stop in Czestochowa. That was a border town between Poland and Germany. And they took us out into-- they pulled in the whole train. They pulled him into one of the ammunition factories. There were three big ammunition factories in Czestochowa. They called him HASAG-- H-A-S-A-G. There were three branches.

And one in this three branches, they put in the whole transport. And out of this transport-- so we were 1,600 people abreast-- four abreast, staying in a line. And the-- I know what they called him, the guy who was in charge of this-- of the Jews there. He was a very cruel and very dangerous man. He came to face out-- to face us.

And I thought that this would be the end of us. He came with a big loudspeaker. And he said, every carpenter or every locksmith, should step out. I knew one thing, that the Germans need craftsmen.

And I was somehow like a locksmith because my father was in the hardware business. And I knew a little bit locksmith. So I stepped out. And also, I grabbed my cousin behind me. And in fact, he was mad that I did it. But he was afraid to go back. So I had him by his-- when I pulled him he pulled his brother-in-law too with him.

His brother?

His brother-in-law. So in the real numbers, we were about, I would say-- the people that know a little bit about locksmiths or other trade about 40, but stepped out about 90 out of this transport. And they encircled us and they took us away.

Weren't you so scared?

I was very scared, sure, scared because we thought that will be the end of us. And the next day, I found out that in the place of this 90 we did not realize what is happening. But they took 96 people. They were not capable to work anymore. And they put them in with the transport. The transport head to have 1,650 people. And this transport went to Germany.

And out of this transport, maybe around 200 survived because they-- the transport was going to Germany and took about three to four weeks till they get to-- they got to their destination. And when I was told later on, they were subject to air raids.

There were no eating for three, four days. They were without food. And when they let them out into the fields-- and this was fall weather. And in the fields, some people found some carrots or raw potatoes. And they ate. And they just died from it. Not eating three, four days, we ate raw vegetables somehow. Then it was very deadly. And they really went through horrors.

So they took you away and they sent everybody on the transport right, and took you away. They took you with the small group.

Right.

And what happened with you-- what happened, what did-- where did you go?

OK. Now, I worked in that HASAG from October. Now, then I had the real smell of a concentration camp because in the glass factory, at least I had food. And I had my quarters, my bed. I mean, bed-- I bet it was like in a prison. But at least you had where to put your head down.

But in Czestochowa, it was more like a concentration camp because we were in shelves. And we were-- it was-- we were so concentrated that-- just to give you an idea, when you slept on one side, you could not turn. Too many people.

How many people slept in the same small place? I would say, in six feet, and six feet space, you had about five people sleeping in that space. Can you imagine? When you lie in 12in on one side, you, cannot turn the other side because you're squeezing the other guy. And It's hard to describe. And it's hard it's hard to imagine that this is possible. Food was scarce in comparison what I had when I worked in the glass factory.

What kind of food did you get there What did they give you?

Soup, water, with a piece a small piece of bread once a day. That was all what we had.

And people were getting sick?

Right. People there were-- they were taking them out. Well, there was more the people that-- the transport from Piotrków. And we were pretty healthy still. But there were people there that were for years working in that. And it was like they were dying every morning. They were taking out that corpses there, just like garbage.

What did you do at night? What was it like at night when you were there? What happened?

There was nothing. You were so tired that you tried to eat what you had. You tried to be social with other people.

Did you try to lift each other's spirits in any way and talk about your home or something?

There was nothing to talk about it.

You didn't talk much?

No, because everybody has his own bundle of trouble. Yeah and this was why it was miserable.

Did you have a special-- did everybody seem to have a special friend that they helped take care of each other?

Oh, yes, yes yes. A lot was-- one tried to help each other. It was no question about it. I met my cousin and his brother-in-law.

You helped each other?

We promised each other when we went to that transport from Piotrków, we promised each other that we will not, under any circumstances, be separated. That's why it took me when I made that step forward and I took them with me.

So I like to go back one incident in the ghetto. When the ghetto was already liquidated, I'll give you a small example how these Germans, everything was so calculated. It was on Purim in 1944.

They came in with their propaganda two days sooner, that the German would allow a small group of people to go to Israel. It was before Purim 1944. And that day, in the morning, two German trucks came in. And they were a selection of intellectuals. Everybody tried to get out. I mean, they were going-- they're going to be liberated.

Then in-- that happened in January. 1945, the beginning of January, it was-- that was around, I would say, the 7th of January, 1945. One day, we did not go to work.

Why not?

We didn't know what happened. They will not take us to work. And I saw, out of the-- where we were encircled, through the wire fences, all of a sudden, I saw coming trucks with people, furniture, belongings,

children beautiful dressed. Found out little by little because they had to move garbage.

So I made to it that they'll take me out. When I was out from camp cleaning out the garbage, I wasn't touched with Poles. So I asked him, what's going on? So they said that the Russians are pushing the Germans out of Russia through Poland. And the Germans are escaping. So I knew something is happening.

Sure enough, three days later-- three days later, they started to take out from our camp, from HASAG, taking out Jews and the small transports into Germany. Now, that time, in Czestochowa was about 9,000 Jews in those three branches of HASAG-- 9,000. And every day, transports were-- they were taking them out from this ammunition factories and sending them to Germany.

I, as a-- working as a locksmith, they kept us. I found out later because they want to dismantle their machines, and after, taking them back to Germany. But it so happened that the Russians were faster. And they encircled the city. And fortunately enough for us, they could not take us.

But I want to bring you the day of the liberation, which I would like to have this on the record.

Oh, Yes.

All right In that evening-- was afternoon-- shooting was going all around the city. When it got a little bit darker, the city was all in flames. The German guards came with loudspeakers, and he says, everybody should form. And we are marching out. So we saw what going on. And we were 3,000-- we were left about 3,000 of us. And we made out between ourselves that we're going to resist. And we told him, no, we are not going.

Were you saying that?

Very scared. We were prepared for it. In other words, we did not have any guns to fight. But everybody was told to spread out as far as we can-- 3,000 people, you can make a pretty far spread. And how many Germans were there? About 70.

So we figured, if we can, if it comes to a fight, and they will start to shoot, we'll go abreast. 3,000 people abreast, can you imagine, against 70 Germans? And we were figuring out that everybody who had any means of defending themselves, with a piece of wood, with any-- you can. When the Germans saw what was going on, they came over, and they said, there will be no fighting. Just let us leave in peace.

Oh, they say that.

They said, the SS.

Why do they care about you? Why do they dress--

They want us-- they wanted to take us out to Germany. So they left the--

Did they know they were losing?

They left their gun-- yes. That was the end of it. They knew it what was going on.

Why did they care? What did they care?

They need people. They need people. They had a little corridor that they could take out the remains of us back to Germany. They want us to walk out of the city to get away. They did not want us to liberated. And they need labor in Germany. So when they walked out, and we took over the guns, we sealed up the-- between themselves, we made between ourselves a militia, and we made sure to protect the 3,000.

Because we were afraid fighting was going on in the city. Because-- and in fact, night arrived, and we were protecting that nobody leaves. We made sure. Because we didn't know who was in the city-- Germans or

Russians. OK. So when they came, the Russians came in, and sure enough, that's how we were-- how was the liberation.

How did the Russians treat you when they came in?

Well, they knew that we were--

Were you all thin?

--liberated.

Were you very thin and malnourished? Or were you fairly--

Not myself, but I was only six weeks in Czestochowa, since I was in Poland. The situation was-- they said, you are liberated. Go wherever you wanted. Where we should go? OK, go into places where the German lived, take their homes, take it over. There was no organized help. It was not like the Americans liberated the west, and they took shelter, they took care of them. In other words, you were on your own.

And you didn't know what to do?

Well, I went to a Pole, and I told him that I was liberated, and I want a room. And he gave it to me because he was afraid. He gave me a room with me and my cousin. And that's what-- how we start our new life.

How did you get to this country?

How did you--

OK, as I told you, my sister emigrated in 1924. She emigrated in 1925, because I was seven years old, she emigrated to the United States. If the war would not break out in 1939, I had legal papers to come to the United States in 1941. But unfortunately--

How old were you when the war was over? When you were liberated, how old were you?

I was 20-- 27 years old, 27 years old. Then I went to Warsaw, got in touch with the American consul. He could not help me. Because they said, you're not allowed to give you any papers to go to America. He was not allowed to.

Not allowed to? Or they--

Were not allowed. For immigration, there was no immigration. It was just right after the war. They were-- that was disorganized, everything. But he told me crying, he was sorry for me. So he says, look, the only chance if-- you have to emigrate to the United States is to go to West Germany, which the UJA helped us leave Poland through Czechoslovakia, and then how I arrived in West Germany.

And then?

In West Germany, I was a little bit late because I arrived in 1946. And already, it was quotas. And I had to wait three years.

Was that hard to do? What did you do in that three years?

In three years, the UJA took care of us.

Oh, they did?

Yes. I went to school, took watch repairing. And I was a very successful watchmaker, had very well-- very good training by ORT. You're familiar with ORT? I took courses the reason I took watch repairing, because



my brother-in-law was in the jewelry business and a watchmaker in this country.

All right, that was a good decision.

Well, it was the advice of my sister because I got in touch with her right after the liberation.

Where did she live in the United States?

New York. And she started to send me packages. And that-- I lived in Germany while I was trained as a watchmaker. A year later, I was lucky enough to meet my wife.

American?

No, she was a survivor too. She was interviewed yesterday. I met her through mutual friends. And I start my new life again.

You were lucky.

Yes, I was lucky enough, after two years with my sister, when I met my wife, I went on my own. And we got very beautiful results. I had two beautiful daughters.

Have every-- ended up being a very wealthy man, a very rich man, having everything that's important in life, right? That's quite an experience.

So she's now an attorney in New York. And the other one is--