

HOLOCAUST INTERVIEW WITH NATHAN, BERNARD, SAMUEL OFFEN

Sid Bolkosky interviewing

THIS TRANSCRIPT HAS MANY PHONETIC SPELLINGS (MISSPELLINGS) AND IS NOT VERIFIED. Zero Counter for reference (NO TIME CODE)

Sam, 1921
Nathan, 1922
Bernard, 1929
All born in Krachow, Poland

1:44

Sam: Went to a vast number of camps.

Nathan: Soon after the Germans came, they were hauling Jews out to do manual labor. Worked in quarry first, came back home after a few months. Ghetto formed; when ghetto liquidated, he was with his brother in salt mine. When Russians advanced he was sent to Gusenwand; and then to Mathausen.

4:45

Bernard: Remembers Germans marched in. Curfew imposed, but he didn't know it, was excited to see solders, was shot at. Family together in ghetto.

Then family gradually disappeared. Was in a labor gang with his father usually. Cleared street of ice and snow, worked in military warehouses. Troops and policemen stationed around the ghetto. Ghetto reduced. Moved into smaller ghetto. Sometimes he smuggled in some food. His mother and sister disappeared, just disappeared; he never saw them again.

8:15

Sam: October 1942, thousands of Jews from the ghetto were taken to Treblinka and Majdanek. When they came home from workcamp, the streets were littered with dead bodies. Couldn't find his mother and sister, found out from other people that they had been deported. Sister only 15.

9:40

Nathan: Remembers when Germans marched in. Heard gunfire. Was petrified. One o'clock in the morning a guy in a trench coat came by. Knew that he wasn't from the area, kept his hands in his pocket. Nathan petrified. Next morning commotion in the streets--refugees from Silesia. Helped a guy fix his wagon, received a ton of Polish money in return. They (Poles? Jews?) opened all the warehouses a let people take what they wanted before the Germans came in. Nathan and brother went with baby carriage and brought a lot of stuff home. Remembers Germans on motorcycles with sidecars and machine guns. German troops came in on tall horses, gave impression of superior race. Showing off their superiority, made a great impression on him. Few days later, Germans issued proclamation that Jews had to wear arm

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bands with star of David. Now they were really the chosen people! Beards cut off pious Jews. Unimaginable.

15:18

Nathan: People had to bring 25 pounds of belongings, and then they were hustled into ghetto surrounded by barbed wire. Father worked in shoe factory, mother made uniforms, both worked for the Nazis. Ration cards issued. Germans came with dogs trained to bite Jews.

Ghetto made smaller, to be liquidated. Germans started to grab people at night, police with the Germans had list of who was to be taken to the transports. They grabbed mother and sister. Nathan wanted to say goodbye to them. He hugged his mother, and wanted to kiss his sister, German just hit him and knocked out his teeth on both sides. Last side he saw his mother.

18:29

Sam: Wasn't there when this happened, was working outside of ghetto. Knew that something terrible was going to happen because streets were lined with extra soldiers. He did not witness his mother and sister leaving. He saw blood running down the gutter of the ghetto.

20:50

Bernard: Was on one of his smuggling trips outside the ghetto when mother and sister disappeared.

21:25

Nathan: Worked with dead and wounded soldiers from the Russian front brought in to a railroad station. Soldiers frozen stiff covered with lice. Germans didn't want to touch them, so Jews did the work. Deloused them. Two Jews carried wounded soldiers to train, young guys. One soldier (German?) called him a friend and wanted Nathan to help him. The whole train was moaning. Nathan put him on his shoulder and let the soldier's head bang on the steps as he was carried down. Gave Nathan satisfaction, but afterwards he cried because he was an animal like the soldier. In morning they were going back to the ghetto. Germans had lots of money and gold robbed from the Russians, but if anybody else was found with anything, shot on the spot. Nathan worked there for a couple of months.

25:25

Sam: Tell how Bernie was in a different camp.

26:06

Bernie: Was in Plasciow?? with his father after ghetto liquidated. All young people told to report to the center of the camp. Was taken out of the camp. Bernie jumped from the wagon and hid in a ditch. One night was sheltered by Polish family, but they couldn't keep him. Didn't know what to do. Went to where he

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thought his uncle was working on construction site. Had to smuggle himself into a camp where there were no mass shooting. As they marched through the gate, he was held up by two people. Not registered, uncle got him food. Hidden under the rafters. Had to be quiet. Saw executions from the rafters. Started going to work, then got typhoid fever. It was usually fatal, but his uncle somehow got him some medication. His father was in Plasciow.

Commandant Miller was shooting as he walked into the camp with his dog. Tended pigs in the camp. Some of the food for the pigs, he ate and brought to the barracks.

29:58

Sam: Mass execution of Jews who had hidden in the ghetto. Plasciow not big and organized well enough to hold everybody.

44:20

Bernie: Was returned to Plasciow, reunited with his father. They both worked making boots for the Germans. Sabotaging boots. They cut into the heel invisibly, so with use the heel came right off. Anybody caught sabotaging anything was caught on the spot. They got away with it. One way of fighting back.

35:50

Sam: There was too little sabotage, most of the time spent looking for a piece of bread. The few partisans were mostly found and shot. There were individual acts of courage, but nothing organized. Most people too ruined to even think straight.

Germans clever, had the Jews police themselves. If one person disappeared, the rest would be shot.

38:40

Bernie: Bernie's camp was shot down, reunited with his father. Then Plasciow camp was liquidated. Father and son put on transport and sent to Mathausen. Later found out that his brothers were in the same car.

39:30

Nathan: Worked on Red Cross train. Ghettos made smaller, Germans shot just anybody on the street. Nathan was chosen to pick up dead bodies and take them to Plasciow. In hospital there were babies, Germans picked one up and hit it against the curb. Did that with the little babies. The Germans decided to liquidate the people who had brought the dead bodies, started to shoot them, Nathan jumped in to mass grave. Not everybody was dead, two Germans would jump into grave with revolvers, finishing everybody off. Nathan kept very still. Things calmed down, crawled out from under the bodies. Somebody gave him fresh clothing, registered for work, worked in Bunaka brick factory. Loaded bricks unto rail cars. Friend got him job in blacksmith shop. Easier job. Made machinery for brick factory. Learned trade. Baked

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potatoes in the furnace. Could bring food to his brother and father.

Was picked with his brothers to work in a saltmine, for probably 6-8 months. Germans wanted to build underground munitions factory in salt mine. Heard that the Russians were coming, evacuated Jews from salt mines to Plasciow. Loaded on trucks.

48:10

Sam: When Russians came nearer, some of the Jews prepared to escape, 5 of them, when Germans wanted to evacuate them. 3 of their friends managed to escape.

49:30

Nathan: Germans found somebody missing, brought their dogs, and they were found. (Brothers start arguing about the facts)

50:20

Sam: The escapees were found and hung right there. Talks about Krachow reunion in Miami Beach. --- Loaded unto cattle car, reunited with father, onto Mathausen.

51:35

There was no food or drink on train. People drinking their own urine. No air. Probably 50% died on the train.

53:00

Sam: 23rd birthday on the train. At Mathausen, they were separated. Bernie and father went to Auschwitz. Father gassed at the age of 49. Bernie survived.

53:45

Bernie: Remembers stench of bodies. On train trip remembers being allowed to get bucket of water. Another train ride to Auschwitz after Mathausen. When pulling into Auschwitz, Bernie remembers weird sounds and smell and fires on the horizon. Had no idea where they were. Doors opened, prisoners in striped uniforms, Germans beating on them, got out of cars fast, confusion. Started to line up. Prisoner told him to lie about his age and stand up tall. Was behind his father, German in uniform pointed his finger at father to go that way.

BREAK

58:50

Bernie: German told Bernie to go to the left. Within minutes they were separated, look at each other and knew they would never see each other again. Visited Auschwitz in 1982, it was then he really said goodbye to his father.

1:01:04

Sam: Superintendent of camp was very vicious. Had to kill somebody everyday. Favorite spot was in front of disinfection building. He would come out of his villa and sic his dog on the

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first person he met, and when person fell down, he would take out his gun and shoot him. Sam attacked by dog, he stood calmly, he did not fall down, then German told dogs to stop and walked away. Still has marks from dog bites. There are very few families that had three brothers survive. Certain details we will never forget, other forgotten. Had big family, they were the only three to survive.

Tells about their luck from the beginning of the war. Concentration camp inmates were treated worse than US slaves. Jews were deprived of their basic right to live. Sam and Nathan stayed together until liberation. Every time he went to disinfection, expected gas to come out of the showers. Afraid to take shower for a while after war. Still afraid of big dogs. Before liberation, inmates talked about what they were going to do after the war. Sam wanted to work in a restaurant so he wouldn't be hungry. That was his plan for life.

GAP ON TAPE.

1:09:56

Nathan: Worked on cleaning the road in Plasciow. SS always had two guns, just shot anybody he didn't like, or said to his dog: Jude, and the dog would tear out a piece of flesh. When dog attacked Sam, Nathan just froze. Couldn't react, had to remain still to preserve himself. Worked in Mathausen and Gusen in a granite quarry. Got up very early, marched in wooden shoes to the quarry, They could smell the human flesh from the crematorium as they walked by. You didn't care, you just wanted to survive. Had to stand for Apell in the middle of the winter naked. Some people fell down and were carried to the washroom. Sam sewed things.

There were homosexuals in with them. They had easy jobs because they were Germans. Sam made a cap for one of them and received some bread in return. They had soup to eat, looked like wallpaper paste, didn't have any salt in it. They needed salt to survive, Sam was able to find some. When crumbs fell off a piece of bread, they counted them and shared them. By helping each other, they were able to survive.

Every day they marched to the quarry. On the back they had to carry the injured and dead so they could be counted.

The guards in the quarry would shoot if somebody didn't work hard enough. To work in the winter in the quarry, lifting rocks with out glove was terrible. Just before liberation, the Germans just threw them some stale bread, but they didn't work. Lay in bed. The living collected the bread of the dead. He was sick. Saw some men with big white stars. He thought it was the Russians, but it was Americans. They dug ditches, and the Americans brought people from the villages to bury the dead.

The Red Cross came, the G.I. came. Nathan was holding on to a piece of bread, and they let him keep it in the ambulance to the hospital. Received 15 pounds of glucose. People were dying in the hospital right and left. Doctors didn't know how to help

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people who had starved for 5 or 6 years. Was in the hospital for 5-6 months. The doctor told Sam that his brother wouldn't make it.

1;21:20

Nathan: After the hospital, they came to Italy. Sam and Nathan didn't want to go back to Poland anymore. They got new papers and put their names down, that is how Bernie found them and followed them into Italy.

1:22:18

Bernie: From Auschwitz he was transferred to Landsberg near Munich. Worked in a blacksmith shop. Just before liberation, he was on a forced march. They were strafed by American planes mistaking them for troops. Stayed in military barracks overnight. In the morning the soldiers were gone. Bernie the only able-bodied person left. Went down to the river, where the bridge was blown up. Got into the town, hid in cellar, heard tanks come. Didn't know who to expect. When he saw the white star, he knew it wasn't Germans. Jumped out of cellar, started waving. A couple of G.I. came over. Bernie could not speak English. One G.I. recognized Polish, and Bernie told about the people in the barracks who needed help. Help couldn't get to them for a few days because the bridge was blown out. Bernie became a mascot of the tank unit for a few weeks.

1:26:30

Bernie: There was a captain who took pictures of Bernie, who was a walking skeleton.

1:25:56

Nathan: A G.I. from Brooklyn, who spoke Yiddish, took picture of Nathan.

1:27:27

Bernie: After liberation, he was wondering if any of his family had survived. Was living in Munich. A man in his room was reading a loose-leaf binder containing the names of survivors, found his brothers' names. Thought they were in Austria. Same evening, he hopped on a freight train to Salzburg, but his brothers had left for Italy. After a couple of months got permission to travel to Italy. Brothers in military camps because they had enrolled in the Polish army. Bernie finally caught up with them in Barry?. Found them in the synagogue for Rosh Hoshana. It was an unforgettable thing.

1:30:48

Nathan: They knew that most of their family was dead, but they kept looking.

1:31:39

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Nathan: The healing process took a long time, to find yourself, to start over again. The hate was so great. He knew in his heart that to keep hating would be self-destructive. He got a job, got married, had a family, just became a grandfather. The experience is always in the back of your head.

1:33:00

Bernie: The mind of a survivor--when people talk about trains, it's like a trigger to a survivor. Many words and sights trigger Bernie's memory. In 1975 he really started to heal himself by confronting the past, how it was running him. He was avoiding talking about it for a long time, but realized that unless he brought it up and let it escape, it would kill him in the end. It's not necessarily about forgiveness. He can only forgive for himself but not for his sister and mother. He still generates anger within himself. He forgives for himself, but forgiveness is not forgetting. Beginning to let things go.

1:37:05

Nathan: What is in the back of his head will last forever. What one human being can do to another one, he will never forget. He does hate, but cannot forgive and will never forget.