

September 26, 1991

Slate #1349-027

Interviewee: Joe Engel

Interviewer: Tom Downey

Notetaker: Rose Shames

0:00 - Joe Engel was born in Poland near Warsaw on October 9, 1927. He was one of nine children (4 sisters and 5 brothers). Father had restaurant. Poor life.

1:00 - Attended public school. There were 5000 Jewish people, synagogues; people very religious. The Polish people were antisemitic.

2:30 - War started in 1939. Town was completely destroyed so family moved to Warsaw. Life was very hard so family moved again to Ploinz.

4:00 - Germans created a ghetto there. Food was scarce, people stood in lines. Family lived with others in synagogue. Brothers went out to do labor.

5:45 - No school in ghetto, no resistance, no organization. This ghetto was north of Warsaw and held 25-30,000 people.

6:30 - In 1942 all people in ghetto sent to Auschwitz. There was selection process for deportation; first parents were taken, then the brothers, then Joe and his sisters.

7:30 - Showing photographs of whole family in 1938 and Joe and brother in 1939.

8:30 - The trains of open cattle cars took them to Birkenau. Trip was four days. Of the 1000 people who arrived in Birkenau, 750 were killed immediately by gas in pits (the gas chambers were not yet functioning).

10:30 - Joe sent to Buna to a brick layers school. Spent 6-8 months doing indoor work. At 5:30 AM there was the "counting", then coffee and bread, work until noon and then soup made of water and potato peels; more work until 5:00 PM. After work there were selections; those who could not work any more were sent to death.

13:42 - Description of discipline in camp.

16:30 - There were different jobs after the brick-laying.

18:00 - January 1945 - the Allies were coming so the camp evacuated. Loaded on trains without food; people only had snow to eat. Many died.

19:30 - Joe jumped from the train, landed in the snow. The SS started to shoot, so Joe remained in the snow for ten hours.

21:15 - Finally began walking in Poland. Joined the partisans for two months in the woods. They sabotaged trains, post offices, etc. at night.

23:50 - Russians put him in jail with Germans for 24 hours. Finally let him out.

25:25 - July 1945 - went to DP camp in Germany to avoid Polish army service.

27:15 - In DP camp, found sister who was at Bergen-Belsen. Also found that two brothers had survived.

28:54 - Coming to United States. Cousin in US army was looking for him. Through HIAS found out location of family in US. They were in Charleston. Took 6-8 months to get papers. Joe arrived in New Orleans and then went on to Charleston.

30:30 - Life was lonely. Tried to work as peddler but did not go well. Went on to New York and had different jobs. Finally came back to Charleston and set up cleaning business.

33:00 - Description of experience in Birkenau in 1942 - Christmas Eve there was a count in the severe cold and 20-30 people killed by severe beating for no apparent reason.

35:00 - Barbed wires - hundreds of people committed suicide on electric wires. Had lost will to live.

36:20 - Thank you to US for freedom and opportunity.