

Holocaust Interviews  
Slate # 1349-003  
Interviewee: Ben Stern  
Interviewer: Richard Irwin  
15 August 1991

- 0:00 Ben Stern, the youngest of 4 (two boys, two girls), was born in 1924 in Kelza (ph.) in Poland. At the age of 6 he and his family moved to Luge (ph.).
- His father worked in or owned a sawmill. At one point, he contracted to make uniforms. He subcontracted the work to tailors and collected the finished uniforms from them. The uniforms were for the Spanish Civil War.
- 2:00 Memories of Luge (ph.). There were approximately 750,000 people living in Luge when he was a youth, about equally divided into Poles, Germans, and Jews.
- Attended public school and the Gymnasium as well as a year at lyceum.
- 3:30 On 1 September 1939 he remembers being in school. Billboards announced the outbreak of war. His family was well-off enough to have a radio to listen to news reports.
- 5:40 As a youth, he both experienced anti-Semitism and was told about it. He was physically assaulted by anti-Semites. For one year he attended a private Jewish school to escape anti-Semitism. There were no particular neighborhoods of Jews, Poles, or Germans.
- Endezia (ph.) was a group promoting hate, bigotry, and anti-Semitism. They were not peculiar to Luge. On one occasion, the Endezia cut power to a movie theatre and positioned ladders outside the exits so that people would trip and they could assault the Jews.
- 9:00 He has no recollection of Hitler until 1938 when a couple and their two children from Austria moved in with them.
- 10:15 Memories of planes bombing Luge.
- 11:10 His brother was in the Polish army. Everybody thought the war would be over quickly with Poland victorious.
- 11:43 Luge was annexed to Germany and its name changed. The Polish Germans who had been living in Luge began wearing the swastika and abusing the Jews. The Ukrainians/Germans were worse than the Poles in their

abuse.

- 12:51 At first, his family continued to live in their own apartment. Eventually, the Germans began to round up the Jews off the streets. He was picked up and taken to a school courtyard. He and some other Jewish youths were made to clean up the courtyard. They had to pick up cigarette butts with their mouths while the Germans kicked them.
- 14:25 The Jews began to wear the yellow Star of David on their right side and on their backs. They were forced to step off the sidewalk for the Germans. This was all still in 1939.
- 15:23 In December 1939, he and his family moved back to Kelza (ph.). Life was easier for the Jews in Kelza than in Luge. They had to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David. His brother had returned from the army four weeks after the war had started (or was over).
- 18:03 In 1940, the Germans began setting up the ghetto in Kelza. He and his family lived in the ghetto until 1943. Life in the ghetto was hard, particularly from the lack of food.
- 19:30 Since he was a blonde, he could sneak out of the ghetto to get food. Traded clothes for food.
- 20:24 Ghetto policed by Jews.
- 21:15 He was caught by a Jewish policeman and a SS guard bringing potatoes into the ghetto. Beaten and threatened with execution if caught again.
- 22:26 Jewish police were sometimes volunteers. Volunteered because they thought they would improve their situation. They received extra food. Strong Jewish men were picked at random -- these were the majority of the Jewish police in the ghetto.
- 24:23 After about six months, he was taken from the ghetto to work in a local forced labor camp. The camp was located in Kelza and made wagons for the German invasion of Russia. Although it was very hot and humid in the factory and food was inadequate, conditions were "not too bad" compared to the later camps.
- All the guards in the forced labor camp were German police -- not Jewish and not SS. He could go to the fence periodically to talk to his family.
- 27:28 In 1943 his parents and relatives were deported. He and the other factory workers had to clean the ghetto

afterwards. The camp members were both Poles and Jews.

A Polish girl (not from the camp?) helped him out of pity with occasional food.

When he asked the remaining Jewish police in the ghetto what had happened to the inhabitants, he was told they had been loaded onto cattle cars and deported. This took place in the summer. Was told that it was so hot that Jews had traded jewelry for a cup of water from the German guards.

German guard shot Polish prisoner for trying to take clothes during cleanup of the ghetto.

31:56 Only friend in the camp was the family physician.

32:42 There were rumors that the ghetto members were going to Auschwitz or Treblinka. The Jews knew of the camps as the war began. He knew that both Auschwitz and Treblinka were extermination camps, but he could not comprehend this at the time.

34:14 After cleaning the ghetto, he returned to the forced labor camp (called Henrikov [ph.]). After a while, the inhabitants of Henrikov were packed into cattle cars. They were packed so tight, that no one could move from the standing position. He traveled for two days standing up in a cattle car.

35:37 Arrived in Auschwitz. Memory of intense fear seeing the camp name. Had to crawl over dead bodies to get out of the cattle car.

Memories of selection to labor camp versus the crematorium. Showered, deloused, and given prison clothes. Formed into groups and marched to barracks after being tattooed on forearm.

42:00 Bitter irony at "Arbeit macht Frei." He knew what the camp was, though it pretended to be merely a labor camp.

When he got to the barracks, he began to think he might survive.

44:00 Difficult to relate his experiences because so numerous and so painful.

45:41 While in the camp, he was constantly worried about the crematorium. He could constantly smell the burning bodies.

Between 5-6 AM awakened by a German political prisoner. Slept in cubicles 3 or 4 high with a 3' x 3' space on

straw. They were rushed out of the barracks to merely stand in line for hours. Around 12 or 1 PM they were given soup that was merely warm water. Evenings they were given a slim slice of bread. Sundays they were given a small amount of margarine and a slice of salami.

51:10 Made to dump bodies into crematorium. Never saw an infant; suspects they were killed before they reached the camp.

51:48 Periodically trucks <sup>WOULD?</sup> were pick up prisoners ostensibly to do work, but often these workers never returned.

There were occasional work details, but the work was mostly symbolic. Relates the story of being at Birkenau (ph.) and being on a detail to move a steel I-beam in the winter. Wore not gloves, so fingers stuck to frozen metal. The four-man work detail moved the I-beam and then put it back in the same place.

53:46 Never got used to the screams of living Jews thrown into the crematorium.

54:20 When the Russians began to advance towards the camp, he was transferred to Saxonhausen (ph.), a forced labor camp.

55:21 Going back to his memories of Birkenau, he remembered barrack #25 where he was incarcerated. Remembers standing in a spot that he moved from and another Jewish prisoner moved into and was killed by a German guard driving by on a truck shooting randomly into the barracks. Wonders whether it was the will of God or merely luck.

57:00 Lost faith in God while in the camps. Most pious Jews were the most harshly treated.

58:30 He spent one month to six weeks at the end of 1944 in Saxonhausen. He was moved to Orienenburg (ph.), Lannenburg (ph.), [?], Dachau, and [?].

59:37 In all of these camps, he never experienced any form of compassion from any of the SS guards.

61:03 Learned from contacts with civilians at Orienenburg that the war was coming to an end and that is why he was being moved from camp to camp.

61:43 By the time he reached Dachau he was emaciated. Fell victim to scarlet fever. Family physician was still with him.

- 62:20 Recollects back to being sick when he had been at Auschwitz. He hid the soup that he could not eat, but it was discovered by a guard. He was beaten on his backside 25 times with a shovel handle. He could not move, which meant death, but the family physician saved his life.
- Recalls hearing the screams of living prisoners thrown into the crematoria.
- 63:53 Family physician died in Dachau a few days before liberation.
- 64:24 Marched to Alla (ph.) a camp 15km. from Munich. He could not march out of the camp because of his illness, so he was left behind. Those who marched out were killed.
- 65:07 Remembers hearing artillery and machine gun fire as the Americans got closer to the camp. One day the guards had all fled and there were white flags flying from the empty guard towers. The first action of many of the prisoners was to rush to the kitchen and start eating.
- 66:15 Liberated by the Americans on 30 May 1945. Inwardly he was overjoyed, but outwardly he could not express his emotions. The prisoners who had rushed to the kitchens and eaten their fill of food died within one to three days.
- 68:11 Put in quarantine and rationed food so he would not die.
- 68:37 Met wife in 1945. Lived in Karlsfeld (ph.) with a German family and two other Jewish prisoners from the camp, one of whom would become his brother-in-law.
- To get to Karlsfeld, he had crawled out of the DP camp because he could not stand the continued confinement. When he entered the DP camp he had only weighed 82 pounds.
- His future brother-in-law went to Poland to find his relatives. Only his sister, Ben Stern's future wife, had survived and had been liberated from Leipzig.
- 71:17 Did not want to remain in Poland or in Europe.
- 71:45 Talks about his children and grandchildren.
- 71:58 Came to the US in June 1949 by ship. Overwhelmed by the Statue of Liberty.
- 73:20 Proud to be an American.

- 74:05 Two cousins returned to Kelza in 1945 from Russia. One was killed in a pogrom and other committed suicide in Israel.
- 74:44 Registered to go to Palestine with the Hias (ph.), but Polish Jews were on the bottom of their list to go to Palestine.
- 75:58 While he was in Germany, he remembered he had an uncle in the US. His family had been planning to emigrate to the US in 1939. He remembered that his uncle lived in Lexington, South Carolina, and through his uncle's efforts, he was able to emigrate to the US.
- 78:40 Memories of early years in the US. Overwhelmed by his first day in New York city. When he moved to Columbia, South Carolina after his stop-over in New York, he tried to become self-sufficient. Though he knew no English (he knew Polish, German, and Latin), he worked as a carpenter. Fortuitously, he was picked up by a building supply owner who thought he was hitchhiking and was offered a job in the building supply company. Within a year, he had become a foreman. By 1960 he had become a house builder.
- 86:00 He believes that all racism and prejudice is wrong and that all people can learn from the Holocaust.
- 87:00 End.