

Jakub Guttenbaum  
Polish Documentation Project  
Polish  
RG-50.225\*0004

### Summary

*[Approximately 360 min]*

Jakub Guttenbaum was born in Warsaw in 1929 to a middle class Jewish family. His father, Aaron, and his mother, Rywa, were teachers in Jewish schools. He had one younger brother, and his family was not religious or follow many Jewish traditions. The Guttenbaum family spoke Polish at home and was assimilated culturally, though not socially, with the Poles. Jakub's father held some communist beliefs and at the beginning of the war he escaped to Russia, but later died in Siberia. Jakub Guttenbaum remained in Warsaw with his mother and a younger brother. They suffered poverty and couldn't afford private education once the public Jewish schools had been closed. After the establishing of the ghetto, Jakub and his family were relocated within its borders. Many new Jews were brought in to the ghetto from all over Poland and Jakub comments on their deplorable living conditions and the mood of passive resignation. Mr. Guttenbaum describes the inhuman living conditions in the ghetto. He recalls the incident of Jews willingly surrendering their fur coats to the Germans; he also comments on the ghetto black market. Jakub Guttenbaum remembers the second relocation of his family after the ghetto had been reduced in size; he then started earning his living as a messenger for the Jewish community while his mother worked for Centos. Mr. Guttenbaum recalls the further worsening of the living conditions in the little ghetto. Although the cultural life was still thriving, shortages of food became acute and the congested living conditions caused interpersonal frictions. Despite these hardships he never considered escaping to the Aryan side. Lack of money, his typical Semitic looks and, most of all, news about Polish szmalcownicy (profiteers) were the main reasons. Mr. Guttenbaum recalls his family moving in with his uncle around the time of the first deportations from the ghetto. The first transports consisted of either voluntary deportees or the Jews apprehended in random round ups. The final destination of these transports wasn't initially known. As the deportations intensified Jakub Guttenbaum was able to watch some transports from his hiding spot near the Umschlagplatz. Eventually the only Jews who were legally permitted to stay in the Warsaw ghetto were the members of "placówki"—the work crews. The rest of the ghetto

population sought hiding to avoid deportations. Mr. Guttenbaum supported his mother and brother by secretly trading cigarettes and other goods; the corruption and profiteering among German soldiers was on the rise. The secret bunker construction began in anticipation of the final deportation action which started on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April. Jewish fighters, who formed the resistance movement in the ghetto, helped the impoverished Guttenbaum family find a bunker to hide. Mr. Guttenbaum comments on the life in the bunker, when the darkness prevented any communication or human interaction. He survived flooding and the ghetto fire before he was discovered by the Germans, likely due to their use of the acoustic listening devices. Mr. Guttenbaum vividly remembers the waiting room at the Umachlagplatz and the Ukrainian atrocities that preceded his train transport to Lublin and subsequently Majdanek. Mr. Guttenbaum was separated from his mother and his brother. Mr. Guttenbaum felt lonely and lost and he never saw his family again despite his repeated searches in other camp fields (Majdanek was divided into “fields”). Mr. Guttenbaum describes the living conditions in Majdanek: the lack of food and clothing as well as the daily routine; he points out the uselessness of work performed and observes that the art of survival hinged on one’s ability to dodge work; he talks about various forms of punishment in the camp and mentions the escape of the Russian POW’s. Mr. Guttenbaum talks of being relocated to the camp in Skarżysko Kamienna, an ammunition plant; he comments on the deplorable state of the prisoners in the camp; he recalls working at the *Werk C* (German: factory C) where he disassembled old ammunition; the mortality rate in the camp was high due to accidents with explosives, hunger, toxic gas and metal poisoning, flea infestation and typhoid as well as random German killings. Jakub Guttenbaum managed to survive by visiting *Werk A*, where the majority of workers were Poles and local Jews—they could purchase additional food supplies and gave away their camp rations. Mr. Guttenbaum recalls that in Skarżysko Kamienna the weak and sick were shot; though sick with typhoid himself he managed to hide and survive. He remembers the Ukrainians, who were profiteering at camp by promising to release prisoners for money. Mr. Guttenbaum was evacuated from Skarżysko Kamienna to the transition camp in Buchenwald and then to Schlieben, another ammunition factory. In Schlieben he met a Belgian dentist **Rosenberg** who was a political prisoner, and who protected Mr. Guttenbaum by arranging a hospital job for him and providing him with a daily dose of vitamins. Jakub Guttenbaum talks about the living conditions and the international political prisoners in Schlieben. The prisoners were proactive and secretly implemented their own justice system—whereby cruel camp administrators were poisoned with the methyl alcohol. Mr. Guttenbaum talks about the changing living conditions in the camp in 1944 when the camp police no longer persecuted the prisoners because the work force was in high demand; all senseless executions or gassing ceased. In 1945 the war ending and the regular SS soldiers were replaced by older men who not always followed the Nazi ideology. Jakub Guttenbaum recalls the evacuation of Schlieben prisoners to Teresienstadt; he remembers the ease of escaping from the transport and the acute shortage of food during the evacuation; he talks about the deserting of German soldiers. Mr. Guttenbaum remembers the entry of the Russian Army to Teresienstadt and recalls many camp prisoners dying from overeating; he talks about the prisoners demolishing the houses and

beating the Germans to death. He talks in detail about his returning to Warsaw in hopes of finding his father; he talks about staying in the orphanage in Łódź and starting high school. After learning about his father's death from his uncle, Mr. Guttenbaum travelled to Belgium to meet with the dentist Rosenberg. Due to the lack of money he realized that he had no chance of higher education in Belgium and therefore came back to socialist Poland. He joined the socialist party organization ZMP and decided to go to college in the USSR, where he studied to be an engineer. Mr. Guttenbaum lists his most dramatic life experiences: realizing that he lost his family in Majdanek, experiencing severe typhoid, visiting the shelter in the Warsaw ghetto and meeting people too resigned to accept bread, living through the first night in Majdanek, which was filled with cries of the persecuted, and lastly, waiting for his transport from the Umschlagplatz. Jakub Guttenbaum comments that he always tried to suppress his memories; to this day he is unable to share his wartime experiences with loved ones. He explains that he didn't meet with anti-Semitism in the academic circles in Poland; however he is aware of its existence. He identifies with Poland and considers himself a Pole of Jewish origin. He is active in the Jewish community and is one of the founders of the Day of the Holocaust Organization.

*[Prepared by Agnieszka McClure on 11/17/2010]*