

INTERVIEW WITH HENRY DROBIARZ

March 3, 1992

Central Village, Ct.

Could you tell us a little bit about yourself, for example, what was your name when you were growing up, where were you born, your date of birth and what was your childhood like?

Yeah. I was born in Sosnowiec, Poland. And then I lived all the time in Kozlow, Poland. When I was seven years old, I went to public school and about five years old, I start to go to the cheder. So, when I come back from the public school at noon time, in afternoon, I get to go to the Cheder--come home about six o'clock. My parents were in business, they were dealing with grain, cattle, and farm products. And we got a decent life, they give everything to the children--what the children need. It wasn't a rich life, but we got everything.

How many children did your parents have?

We have four.

You want to tell anything about your brother and sisters?

Yeah. I had an older brother. He was two years older. And then I had one brother, he passed away. That was the third. He was about six, seven years old. He passed away. Then I had another brother. He was born in 1930 and I got a sister born in 1934. We had been four in the family. When I finished school, the seventh grade, I went to public school, my father says nothing wasn't much to do in town--because my brother was the main help for my parents. So he says that I should go learn a trade and my uncle was a tinsmith in Sosnowiec, Poland so he says I should come learn a trade and I went when I was fifteen years old and I worked there and at night I went two times, three times a week to trade school to learn about the trade.

And which trade was that?

Tinsmith, sheet metal, blocker. And then I did all right, I made already good money and on holidays I came home and visit with the parents. The parents can visit with us because they were coming to

Sosnowiec with the produce to sell. So I wasn't lonesome, so I always see the parents. The war broke out in 1939.

Can I stop you before we go back to that? What was your home like Jewishly? Were you traditional? or?

Traditional orthodox. I didn't know anything else. I have to lay tefillin. I have to daven every morning and every night and Shabbos was real orthodox. I went to Cheder, I learned the main thing, whatever. When I was fourteen years old, then I started to learn a trade. Tinsmithing, you know, I went to my uncle and learned the trade. That maybe saved my life, too, because, you know, during the war in 1939, in my town I was doing the tinsmithing so they give me a pass that I can go from one place to another. Because they didn't have no tinsmiths and I was working in town. I did not have to go out and do the digging and hard work, on the railroad or building roads. It has been like this until 1941. In 1940 in March, they came out and everybody got to wear armbands, Jewish star to be recognizable and you wouldn't get out from the town. You got to have a pass to get out, you couldn't go with the train, you have a pass, you could, you know. And my brother has to go out and work for the Germans. Right away, they took all the young people, they took him to Cracow. They have to work like making bricks, they still could come home for the weekends--they work six days and Saturdays they could leave Cracow and could come home to Kozlow. They were maybe fifteen or twenty boys that age, 22, 23. They took some food with them, whatever they got there, there wasn't enough. So it was helped out, they still could buy some food on the black market. In 1942, so they start to gather us, we have to go--in one spot like a ghetto. In about, I should say, then they took all the Jews--they have to get out. They took them to Slomniki, that was a town--

Could you spell that? (Thank you.)

S-l-o-m-n-i-k-i. That was in Poland, you know. That was county of Miechow. That was I should think in August, the grain was already taken up from the fields in 1942. They started out, they took the young people, the boys, the groups were working already but they took them to the place Slomniki, there was still some young people. And I wasn't there because I still have a pass that I can stay in town and do my tinsmithing, you know. They give me that privilege. They took all the old people and I with my parents because I knew they gonna--so we hid in Kozlow. We hid and we stayed for another three months. They took us from there, they took us to Welbraun. That was where they make the ghetto and that was Judenrein, all around. About in November, they cleaned out the Welbraun, they took it to Miechow, in the county. They load up all the people in the cars and they didn't sort it out no more, they took everybody, young, old. They took to Treblinka that time already.

Oh, really.

Yeah. You know, we think that they went up that way. We don't know, they went up that way. So that was the end of the--. We took off from that town, Welbraun, I got a policeman, a town policeman came to help clean up the town with the Jews. They have to have the police. So the policeman came to me Saturday and he says to me "On tomorrow, there going to be liquidation here." So I knew what it is, so we took off again. We went to Kozlow, to town, me, my father and mother and sister and brother and uncle.

You're still out together.

Yeah, we're still out together. We come back to Kozlow and we went then to Polish people, we hid out for a day. And then at night, we split up. I went with my father to one place and my mother went with the two children, my brother and sister, to another place, to a ghetto in Cracow Podowiec and my uncle went to another place. We stay in town for about four days and then they come out with an order, that if some Jews are left, they can come to Cracow and that's where we went, to Cracow. I went to work to the camp and I took my father with me--we were working with bridges for a German company--Langert was their name. They were from Zwickau. That was Lager--the Judenlager that was Cracow-Plaszow. That was in 1942 and my parents, my mother went with a sister and brother and she was there by herself and my father was working with me in Lager and like a husband, he says he wants to go back to his wife, his kids and his wife, so he went back. Maybe, if he would have stayed with me, maybe he would have been alive. So he went back in 1942, in the end sometimes, they liquidated the Judenlager, they brought us up to the Judenlager and made a concentration camp. There was Cracow-Jerozolimska, I don't know if you heard of it. There I worked in a mine shaft. They have the trades and I was working there until about March, 1943 because they liquidated the ghetto-- all at the same time.

Can you recall what the conditions were like in the ghetto? Do you remember it?

The ghetto was very crowded. The hygiene wasn't there. They got one room and maybe four or five families got one kitchen and it was crowded, lice and bugs, you know. Whenever they could, they washed, they washed the clothes. Like us, we also been with lice and dirty. We washed once a week, we went to a cold shower or something like that. Or you went to the ghetto to get a bath and have a shower so I visited with my parents when I was in Lager I took sick, I was sick of typhoid, you know...

Oh, really. Well, you recovered.

Yeah. I recovered, yeah. And I was--in Lager I was going out to work--we still could buy something outside because Polish people were coming and selling on the black market. They took a chance, you know, brought it into the camp. So in 1943, it must have been in the fall time, or in the beginning so they took us out and sorted us out when we come from that Judenlager, they sort us out. They wanted tradesmen, they took to a different side and non-tradesmen. The non-tradesmen they sent to Skarzysko, to a munitions factory. A lot of my friends went there. They read my brother's name because he was registered also as a tradesman and I don't know, my name why I didn't hear, why they omitted or something, so I see that he's going there so I went too because that time they didn't ask no questions. So they sort us out and we stay on the Jerozolimska we stay about a couple of weeks and they took us from there, they send us to Mielec. Mielec was a big factory, that was the Polish airplane factory. They were making planes, the Poles.

Could you spell that please.

M-i-e-l-e-c. That was an airplane factory. And Henckel the German bombers they build there. We were there for about six months in that factory.

Where did you live at the time?

They got barracks. And you know the food was poor, the hygiene wasn't there. If you want anything you got to wash the clothes and everything.

Were you tortured or anything at that point?

No, you know, the thing is somehow when you come into the camp sometimes they been frisking you or something if you didn't go in line or something. The job wasn't too bad because you know we were working with the Polish people. I was working, making all the things inside what comes in the plane, the fastenoffs, they called it, and was two Jewish boys and one Polak. And he was, you know, whatever has to be done, we did. And my brother was working on the top, he was putting up the covers on the plane. We was there until about June, 1944. Then when the Americans start to come in, what they call it, offensive? so they thought that the Russians are going to come in because we weren't too far from the Russian border, Sandomierz. We were next to the San, that's the water. Past the San, the Russians were there and on this side the San, the Germans. So they were afraid the Russians were going to come and we would be--they would grab us, you know, they grab the factory and everything. So they took us out that time and I think that was the 22nd of June, 1944 and they took us to Wieliczka. That was still in Poland, that was a salt mine. They have a factory there also, an airplane factory. The only thing we didn't stay there too long, maybe a couple of weeks. From

there they took us--again in 1944, they took us to--they load us up in the cars and they say that we were on the railroad siding in Auschwitz for about two days while they were deciding what to do with us. You know, because we were important to them, we were tradesmen. So that's what they say now, who the hell knows, you know, because I didn't know that time. We were in Auschwitz, on the siding, to be liquidated. Meanwhile from there, they took us to Flossenburg. We came into Flossenburg in July--it was real hot, I think the middle of July. They took off all the clothes. We have to throw away the clothes, naked, you know, like you're born.

You're still in your regular civilian clothes, right?

No, no, no. Already in Mielec we already got the mark, you see, that was the mark from Mielec. We were already concentration camp. Soon we came up to the Jerozolimska no more civilian clothes, was already the striped clothes, was concentration camp. And Mielec was already concentration camp. They thought we brought something with us so they took us to shower us. So they took about three hundred people. We thought that they were going to kill us, you know, because people start to scream; so many people and then all of a sudden they let the shower go in Flossensburg.

You had heard stories already about the gas chambers?

Yeah, sure we had. 'Cause that was already 44, you know.

Right, right. Some people say that they--even to the point that they got rumors or whatever, they weren't...

Yeah, rumors sure, all rumors, we thought we are going to get killed, you know. People were screaming and everything. Then on the way out, they shaved us the hair and they threw some lye. It was burning like a fire. You know, they grab and throw it between the legs, in here, (points to crotch) and they marked us. I had a two.

With a tattoo?

No, with paint. The ones they took to work, to dig big stones, what is it? stone mines?

A quarry.

A quarry. You see they didn't care any more. The tools, even the tradesmen, if you was rugged, they separate you. They didn't care. That was in Flossenburg. We were there for about a week, staying in the sun and the hot without clothes. And we were like animals, we were sleeping crossways on the wooden beds, because it was so packed about four hundred, five hundred in one barrack. About five, six days without clothes. And then they give us clothes and they send us from there, they send us to labor the twos, the threes, the fours stay in--I don't know if they send them to kill or something or they kill them off because that was the lowest one. So we went with the twos, we went to labor. From Flossenburg, then send us to Leitwezil, Czechoslovakia, near Theresienstadt. That was carbide mine, you know what carbide is. We could see Theresienstadt (from) the place where we were. And they kept us there also not too long, I should say about six weeks. We supposed to fix some machines, put it in the mines and still working for the airplane. I guess they didn't much realize so they send us from there, they send us to Dachau. In Dachau, we were there about three or four days. From there they send us to Augsburg. That was a big Messerschmitt plant. Everything with no food, nothing much to eat, and you know, hungry, and the railroad cars. They brought us to Augsburg. Every morning about five o'clock in the morning, they wake us up, they give us a little bit of coffee and a piece of bread and we have to go again to an airplane factory. The name was Horgau in the woods. A regular train and for us they got a cattle car, you know. Every day you are going in that cattle car and they let us out in Horgau. And from there they kept us till about, I don't know, every so often they would transfer us from one place to another. Sometimes they'd transfer us in December, 1944. They took us to Leonburg, not far from Stuttgart. Leonburg was a tunnel, a big tunnel--blocked off. Half the tunnel was for cars to go on through and trucks and half the tunnel was building wings for the Messerschmitt planes. All the time, we was supposed to do--they need bolts, we already got rivets, they need rivets--was already everything in disarray. We were there until about April, '45. They took us out from there on a march because then we go in from there to Kaufering. That was a camp, you know, Landsberg was the main camp, Kaufering was a side camp. We were there for about three weeks, nothing much to eat, nothing to do and that was in '44 at the end and a week before the liberation, they took us to Allach that was next to Dachau. On a Friday night, we hear the artillery, the things, shooting and they hit the barracks, a lot of people got killed and the Germans took off. They left the camp and the Germans, what you call the political Germans who were in the concentration camps, the ones what grab us and steal us. The political got a red mark and the rabble(?) got a triangle, a black one. So they were watching us. Sunday morning, the gates opened, so we got liberated May 1, 1945. As soon as the gates opened, there were outside potatoe piles, you know, for the winter. They didn't feed us, the only thing, the piles were still there, they didn't give us. So I took a can, I had a buddy of mine so I said, "I'm going out to get some potatoes." I took a can and filled up with potatoes from outside the camp. So I get out, we made a fire and he was cooking the potatoes. So while he was cooking, I says I'm going to get another can. So I get out, I get another can, he stays and cries, somebody stole the can. We already got liberated and people--it was for them easier to take it from me then to go out the gate. I said what's you crying, we got liberated, let's go. He didn't want to go and I didn't see him since. I went out right away and went on the road with some four or five other concentration camps. We went to the town, about a mile. On the way a jeep went by and the jeep turned back and he give us chewing gum. That was the liberation.

This is the Americans?

Yeah. And they told me to chew. I didn't know, I ate. We didn't know what chewing gum is. So I ate the chewing gum. We came in, they were camping out, they were cooking and they surround us. They were Polish soldiers, Jewish soldiers. They start to ask questions and they give us to drink. I got drunk that evening. And I stay overnight, I was sleeping there on the bunk, where they were camping and in the morning, I wake up, they've been gone. So we went as a group, four or five, we changed clothes. We went to the German houses, they left their houses. So we throw away the striped clothes, they walked away from us, a lot of lice, you know. So we change clothes, we shower and cleaned up a little bit. It took us three days to go into Munich. Because from Allach, we went by foot, there was no transportation. And then we came into Munich, I saw people carrying wine they would sell us. They took out some wine and I was also going in for a case of wine. So we celebrated and then I start after a couple of days, I went to work for the Americans, for the GI's, for the kitchen. That was the best thing I ever did because I had plenty of food and I brought home some food for my friends. A lot of friends came to the kitchen there because they got a lot of leftovers because in the beginning everything was rationed. Even for money, you couldn't buy. So that was a big help.

Could we back up a little bit and go through---we sort of zoomed through these times in the camps. Are there any images of things that you remember that made an impression on you? or any episode that happened to you?

What I can say? On the mark because we were camping outside and I see some people eating flesh, you know, human flesh.

Oh, my God.

Yeah, they were cooking. Yeah, we didn't have too much food. People were eating snacks, they were eating grass. I did myself, I eat grass, you know. What else?

Any episode when you were in all these places?

Yeah, you see when I got sick with typhoid on the way home from work, somehow I still was weavy, you know. I didn't walk straight. So the guy came, he was Ukranian, he was watching out. That was still in Poland, you know, in 1941, 42. He came to the camp and the good thing that the sharf, the SS wasn't there. His wife was there. He said that I want to take off, that I want to run away. I didn't

have no strength to walk, never mind run away. So she called, we would have been there with the bullet, there was no question asked, give you the bullet right away. So she said to call the Jewish kapos, they should give me twenty-five on my body. So they took me in, they say scream, they know if they give me twenty-five, I wouldn't survive either. So they told me scream, they didn't hit me, they didn't touch me.

So these were half-decent kapos.

Yeah, yeah. I was still in Poland in Allach, Judenlager.

Do you know what year was that?

That was in 1942 in the beginning.

When you had the typhus, you didn't have any medical care, I assume.

No, no.

Just had to pass, exit.

Yeah, yeah. We were laying in the thing they got separated, quarantined, you know. You have to go into that quarantine and you stay there. The doctor that was taking care of us, he died of the typhoid. He was an older man, I remember like today. And I got a friend of mine and he died too. He didn't make it.

This was just from the bad conditions.

Yeah, they didn't have the food there, the fever ate you up. What else you want to know?

Anything else you can remember about that. Then you can continue to tell me about what happened, you were working in the kitchen, you were saying. . .

Yeah, for the American Army. And I work for about four or five months. They took them out, they supposed to go to Japan so they left Munich so I was without a job. The only thing, we already formed committees and this and that so I was involved in some. Then I start to look for my--to look in my profession as a tinsmith. We went to try to build houses. This was kind of tough to get into.

Can I ask you, how did the Germans, all of a sudden Germany is defeated and you are in Germany, how did they?

You know, a lot of Germans, they say they didn't know what was going on. I say how come you didn't know. You seen us marching. I was marching in Augsburg in the morning, we were marching for the train. They saw in what condition we were. When I got liberated, I weigh 95 pounds, I was a skeleton marching. So I says how come you didn't know. And the Germans they work with us too, some Germans. I ask them because they say they didn't know. You know, like when I went to a bakery, he didn't take no money from me, he give me bread, he give me cake because he felt sorry for me. The only thing, you couldn't trust them, I wouldn't trust them today.

What about when you were growing up in Poland. Did you feel any antisemitism?

In my town, you know, because I was involved in going to school, public school, because I was not a softie, I was one of theirs, they couldn't fight with me; I'd fight back.

Did they ever call you any . .

No, they called you. Friga (ph) friga, Jud go to Palestine. Fria is Palestinic. Other than this, I didn't care because I was going to their schools and they were learning about their religion and everything. The priest came for an hour so I walked out. Sometimes It was bad weather so I stayed and I listened to the

teaching. I wasn't the type of guy, they did some--some Jewish boys, they wear peyes(earlocks) or something like this, they like to grab the pais. Jewish was the cheder, for school we have to go with them. Afterwards like in a big city like in Sosnowiec, they already have public schools for Jews, just Jewish public school. Where I was, we were maybe a dozen or maybe two dozen Jewish kids in the public school from my town. So we kind of got a mixture and we did the same thing. Like with the physical education or something like this or playing music or exercise or something, we wasn't bothered. It started in 1935, '37 when the Jews came from Germany - -

That the Polish Jews were sent back?

Back, yeah. At that time they start already to...like in the stores, they say don't buy from the Jews, you know. They were picketing, they use pickets. That was the guys that were antisemites. Otherwise, . . .

Were you involved with any youth groups, any Zionist groups, or did you play any instruments or have any hobbies?

No, I didn't have the time. I used to belong to the Bethar organization. The only thing I wasn't involved too much because I have to learn the trade and then I have to go to school at night and my uncle did feel mercy for me. I was working during the day and at night I got to do a lot of things. Sometimes I went to meeting, I didn't get involved too much. I had friends who were not involved. Mostly I went to synagogue for services on Shabbos.

That's okay. You didn't have to be involved. I'd like to go now back to the time just when you were liberated if that's all right. We can talk a little bit about your working for the GI's but then they departed. What happened after that?

After that, when they departed, we were still in the group. We tried to go in business, building houses because I was a tinsmith. It was very tough, it was hard to get into construction. We were four or five of us so we work for about a couple of years. We didn't accomplish too much. They have an office, didn't make too much money. Whatever we made, we got expenses, paid the help and everything. In 1947, 48, we were thinking we should emigrate. We still worried about with the building and everything until 1949.

Can you back up and tell us, were you married by that time?

No, no.

But you had met your wife while you were working for the GI's?

Yeah, yeah. We were together, like the boys were together and the girls were together. We see each other. Then about 1946 - 47, we were thinking about getting married. The only thing, we wait until we come to the United States and we got married in the United States in 1950.

So you came to America together? You came with all these people?

Yeah, she came with my brother together. We didn't have nobody here. So we have to register under the 200,000, I don't know if somebody tell you about this. That's the Truman's quarter. My brother registered as a farmer so they took the farmers first. And the girls registered as domestic. They supposed to go work for somebody. So they took them. And I was a tinsmith, I was the last one to go. She went with my brother together in December, 1949 and I come in June, 1950 and I got married in November.

Did you come to New York at the time?

Yeah, we were in New York. They came, she and my brother. We had a friend, he had already a house so they rent an apartment in the Bronx. When I come, I come already to a real thing. They already got furniture and everything. I got a little bit of money because, you know, from the construction thing, whatever we sold and everything. So I went there with some friends. They were working for the uncle, they were in the jewelry business, costume jewelry. So they tell me that I should go back to Europe and get some connections for the costume jewelry, for the Catholics, you know the prayer beads. Yeah, that's in Jewish hands.

Don't tell the antisemites!

I went back to Germany and make some connections and we're supposed to open up a business. We did open up and then I got my brother, I want him to be a partner and my friend, he got a cousin, he wants him to be a partner. The only thing they said, because they knew the trade, they were working for the uncle, both of them, they said no I can be a third partner. I said I'm not a schlamazle, you know what a schlamazel is, so I says no. Either I take 50%, you don't want my brother, give me 50%, you take 50. No, I give him the key. You take the business. So they paid me out and I came to the farm about a year later. Meantime, my wife was working, my brother was working and I went to work for Bethlehem Steel. At that time, they be remodeling the Liberty Boats--as a tinsmith. I was making good money, \$2.75/hour in 1952.

That's great!

Yeah, I was making about \$75 a week and the taxes--

Oh, a week. First you said \$75/hr.

Oh, no, \$2.75 an hour. At that time it was big money. My wife was making 60 cents, my brother was making 90 cents, I was the big macher. This is my son and wife and me.

Do you have anything else that you can think of that you'd like to add? about your family? about your experiences during the Holocaust?

You know I see a lot of things like in the Holocaust I saw some friends at night, next morning they were dead, all of a sudden--that kind of experience.

Okay, I think I'll turn off the tape now then if that's okay with you. Thank you very much.

Okay.