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Summary

Jack Frenkel was born on December 3, 1929 in the small Polish town Gombin (Gąbin) which was near Plotsk and in the district of Warsaw. Besides Jack's (born Yaakov) mother and father he had six brothers, three older and three younger. There were about 350 Jewish families and 250 Polish families in the town and surrounding area. Jack's father was a successful hat maker serving both Poles and Jews. His mother was a homemaker and came from a well-to-do family with twelve children. The family was religious. There were two public schools, one for Poles and one for Jews. Jack attended the school for Jews where Polish was spoken. He also attended a cheder after public school where Yiddish was spoken and where he studied Hebrew and Torah and Talmud.

Jack recalled that Polish antisemitism increased significantly in 1936-1937 but that because Jews were in the majority they did not feel in danger. In September 1939 the Germans invaded and burnt down their wooden synagogue which had been built 1710. The Volksdeutsch formed a police force and used Jews as forced labor. Polish intellectuals, professionals and political leaders were killed, and the rest of the population removed from the area. In 1940 a ghetto was established, and Jews were assigned homes by the Jewish elders. Money and valuables were taken from the Jews. In 1941 Jews in the ghetto heard rumors from neighboring town that Jews were being exterminated in gas vans in Chelmno. The elders refused to believe it. In 1942, Jack (then only 12 years old) and his brothers Henry and Sam were able to convince the Germans to include them as part of a work brigade, and thus they escaped the mass shootings and deportation of most of the ghetto's inhabitants. During the next year Jack and his brothers were sent to a series of labor camps. He and Henry were able to stay together, but they became separated from Sam. Jack was very resourceful and was able to convince the Germans that he was older than he looked; otherwise, he would have been killed along with others too old or young to work.

In 1943 Jack and Henry were sent to Auschwitz. They were selected for work, first in coal mines and then learning to lay bricks. There, they were able to trade with Polish co-workers, clothes, which they took from Kanada, for food. As the Russians moved closer in 1944 Jack and Henry were marched to Gleiwitz, then to Gross-Rosen, where they experienced the worst treatment. From there Jack and Henry were sent to Dachau where he contracted typhus. As the war was ending the prisoners were taken out of Dachau, first on trains supplied by the Red Cross, and then in a forced march. He and Henry escaped, and with the help of neighboring Germans who gave them food made their way to American troops. Given the choice to return to Poland or go to a DP camp Jack and Henry chose the DP camp in Mittenwald.

At first, the brothers wished to go to Palestine, and therefore went to Italy for their eventual departure to Palestine. But because of their young age they were not chosen to go. While in Italy they were told that their brother Sam was still alive and living in Hanover, Germany. They went there and found him. Jack was then able to emigrate to the United States. His brothers followed afterward.

Jack attributes his survival to luck and his need for less food because he was so young. He explained his fellow Jews' passivity as due to continued hope that they would survive and to the gradual weakening of their conditions.