

ALEX GROSS
RG-50.323.0005 (recorded 1983 in Atlanta)

Alex Gross was born in 1928 in rural Palanok, Czechoslovakia village near the Carpathian Mountains in Czechoslovakia. He was one of 8 children in an observant family. His father was a tailor. Their life centered around the synagogue. At the start of the war his area was given over to the Hungarians, so he didn't notice much difference. When the Nazis took over there was more violence. Jews were made to wear the star of David and were routinely humiliated. Because Alex was in a boy's choir that sang in Budapest he was fed enough to survive. He was in the ghetto at Monkacs (now Mukacheve, Ukraine) for about a month with family, where he reports conditions were very poor with no sanitary facilities and little shelter. After that, they were all sent in cattle cars to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Alex said it took 7 days to get to Birkenau. His father said to tell them he was 18 so he could be picked for work. He believes Dr. Mengele was the one at the station making the selections. He describes in detail the process of losing clothing, having his long blond hair shaved and being given a bowl and spoon, without which you could not survive. He was then marched to the Auschwitz camp. Along the way he saw his mother and sister but almost didn't recognize them with shaved heads.

1-2 thousand prisoners were sent daily to work in the IG Farben factory in Buna, where they worked 12-16 hours a day. Alex details his existence in Auschwitz, where torture was normal and they were forced to watch the Germans torture people for amusement. He said people claiming some German heritage were tortured the worst because they were defacing pure Aryan blood. They were not permitted to pray; Alex said the Germans replaced religion with Hitler. Alex dug ditches, laid railroad tracks and also worked making aircraft parts. People tried to sabotage the parts, but if you were caught you were executed.

Alex describes life in the camp; if you were sick, you died because no medical care. Only 5 minutes were allowed for the latrine, which was full of rats. This was very problematic since most had dysentery. He recalls that an SS woman called the Bitch of Auschwitz, who mutilated prisoners.

As the war was ending, Alex and 45 thousand other prisoners were put on a death march. After 8 days of walking around 8,000 people were still alive. He found one of his brothers at Gleivich but they were separated. Then he and 100 prisoners were marched to Buchenwald, where about 8 survived. He remembers the terrible thirst which was alleviated when it snowed. For a time, he carried another prisoner on his back. He spent 3 months at Buchenwald where the conditions were slightly better. He worked in a local house where he cleaned pigs and repaired fences; the families 12-year-old son and the mother beat him and poured boiling water on him. He reported them at the war's end.

The American planes dropped food and messages and after liberation he found 2 of his brothers. They went to Prague where they found two other brothers and their sister. Alex was eventually sent to England on a kinder transport and later to the United States, where he settled in Atlanta near his siblings.

Alex said he couldn't talk about his experience for the first 25 years after the war, and then he couldn't stop talking about it. He remembers being on TV 5 years ago where he met an African-American soldier who had taken part in Buchenwald's liberation. He considered him an angel, Alex served 2 years in Korea. He is proud of being a Jewish American.