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Summary of Oral History with William Waller, recorded on July 17, 1996

Part 1

William Waller, born December 16, 1912 in Dukla, Poland (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), raised after 1914 in Kosice, Slovakia, and then Nowa Sol,* in Galicia until 1927, one of seven children (three boys and four girls), describes: a strict Orthodox Jewish upbringing; his father struggling to make a living; moving to Katowice, Poland in 1927 until 1939; establishing a clothing business that did reasonably well until Hitler-inspired anti-Semitism intervened; being fluent in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, and Polish; joining the Communist Party as a desperate way to combat extreme Polish anti-Semitism; being jailed for a week because of his communist views; the great importance to him of lifelong self-education to raise his standard of life, particularly upon being excluded from formal education opportunities; his family being ardent Zionists but having no possibility of leaving Poland; having a loving, affectionate family despite often straitened economic circumstances with the entire family living in two rooms; Polish anti-Semites becoming ever more violent through the 1930s; there being absolutely no prospect of leaving Poland; in September 1939, moving from Katowice to Warsaw with his wife [N.B. first mention; married in 1938, his wife dying of unspecified causes in late 1939]; surviving the German attack on Warsaw but concluding based on prior experience that Jews would come to eventual destruction and death; obtaining false papers; moving into the Warsaw ghetto with his brother and the brother's wife and child; not appearing particularly Jewish and thus being able to move fairly freely and spend time in the Christian areas of Warsaw; being very depressed after his wife died; not suffering great hardship in the early period of the ghetto and being able to live on the outside, but becoming aware of the hopeless suffering of others there; moving to Krakow; believing he could protect his sister-in-law, who didn't look Jewish, but she not believing things would become as bad as they did; the sister-in-law and child being apprehended outside the ghetto and disappearing; [Break at 01:30:44]

Passing for a Pole in Krakow, and helping Jews avoid capture; [Responding to question about whether he had pursued similar activities in Warsaw or worked with partisans]: Warsaw was a hopeless situation and the partisans were impossible to work with as they were as bad as the Germans; perhaps 100,000 Jews would have survived if not for the partisans, who showed no sign of wanting to help and there being no prospect of success with them; regarding it as a miracle that he survived; the Poles being more hostile to the Jews than even the Germans; [Returns to subject of move to Krakow in approximately summer 1941]: risking capture by helping a Jewish woman escape; living a celibate life to ensure he would not have a child; deciding to move to Hungary as the threat had become intolerable in Krakow; helping a young boy but then being separated from him and never learning his fate; being intercepted by Slovak police near Kosice and held to receive ransom from local Jews; being released but being fingered as Jews in Hungary and arrested again; being returned to Poland; being taken to a jail in Stanislavove (now Ivano-Frankivsk), Ukraine, where he witnessed several executions and beatings; those who appeared to be Poles taken to Lvov for subsequent use as slave labor; being physically inspected in Lvov and revealed as a Jew, then being transported in cattle cars

to Auschwitz; [responding to a question] having heard in Poland about Auschwitz that “you came in the door and went out the chimney”; arriving in Auschwitz- Birkenau, being selected for labor; being given a hot bath and then, with many others, kept outside in freezing weather; considering committing suicide but surviving and, after about two weeks, being taken to Buchenwald for slave labor; being badly beaten by a German Kapo and taken to a first aid station; being well fed to regain strength to work; being assigned to a metal works, which were making aluminum outer shells for V1 and V2 rockets; working seven days a week in 12-hour shifts; not realizing what the aluminum containers were for; being used with many others to clean up damage from Allied air strikes on nearby cities; carrying coffins following mass executions; being taken on foot among several thousand prisoners to Dusseldorf; returning to Buchenwald for about a month as the Americans approached and being taken to another camp [unnamed]; being taken on another night-march and concluding that he could not survive it, escaping in a village, where he hid atop a shed for three days; arrival of the Americans; trying unsuccessfully to expunge his memory of the horrible events he experienced. Recounts learning of the deaths of his siblings.

Part 2 [00:55:00]

Ruminates on the historical status of Jews in Europe and the causes of the Holocaust, proclaiming mystification at how Europeans could sink to such depths of the Holocaust and focusing on the backward economic, educational state of most Europeans, as well as widespread provincialism and parochialism; places blame largely on Slavic traditions of hatred of the Jews; analyzes motivations and behavior of camp Kapos, having particular scorn for Jewish Kapos; describes his postwar efforts to track down camp persecutors; describes feelings after liberation of profound loss and despair, with no sense of hope or freedom, asking what the value is of life or freedom if there is nothing to live for; moving to Munich, establishing a business, and marrying; immigrating to Australia in 1951; being grateful to Australia and feeling “utter resentment” toward the country of his birth; hoping that his children continue a tradition of fostering Jewish values.

*As heard/transliterated