

Oral History: Jack Fields, June 19, 1997

Jack Fields, born in Przemyśl (no date given but context suggests about 1929), in southeastern Poland, east of Krakow, describes: attending a Polish school and his mother insisting on speaking Polish at home so as not to have a Jewish accent; living in a family home inherited by his mother; his father, a courier between Przemyśl and Warsaw, and his mother, who opened a small restaurant; a younger sister and brother; his former surname, Felder*; his father and mother, née Unga*, both from large Orthodox families; for uncertain reasons, his father becoming an atheist and strongly encouraging the rest of the family to do the same; recalling anti-Semitism in school but not experiencing it personally because he didn't look Jewish and spoke Polish; the German attack and arrival in Przemyśl, where they immediately hunted down Jews, capturing 450 and executing them in the cemetery [00: 28:35]; the Germans turning over the city to the Russians and life returning almost to normal; German reoccupation of the city and renewed persecution of Jews and others; establishment of the Przemyśl ghetto but weeks later, leaving his family behind, being ordered to a central point for resettlement [00:40:35]; encountering Ukrainians as Volksdeutsche, who were as cruel as the Nazis; being taken with other young men by cattle car to a factory work camp; never seeing his parents or siblings again; being selected into a group of mostly sick people, marched to Rzeszów, and placed into ghetto "B," where there was no work or food and only "misery"; losing consciousness and finding himself in a hospital, and then being selected to go to ghetto "A," a work camp; being taken by truck to Pustków and assigned to clean barracks [00:55:44]; being moved to another camp, near Pustków, adjacent to a Polish work camp; being transported by train to Auschwitz-Birkenau, which he had not heard of before [01:03:35], and where SS troops argued over the fate of his group; being marched to an unknown barracks and smelling burning flesh; the next day being showered, deloused, and tattooed; after the war, having the tattoo removed as a "mark of shame"; going through another selection and being taken as a cook to a camp in Gleiwitz, where there was a munitions factory; in winter [probably 1944] being force-marched to a camp in Blechhammer and then in quick succession to Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald [01:27:27], and Mauthausen, where he was disinfected and briefly hospitalized [01:29:08]; being sent to a succession of small factory camps near Mauthausen; awakening to the disappearance of the guards and arrival of US forces; "half" of the inmates dying after gorging on food; being taken to a hospital; the area being taken over by the Russians; traveling to Krakow; moving on to Bielsko-Biala where, at about age 16, he was taken into a Jewish orphanage; returning to Przemyśl, where he found his house still standing; going back to Bielsko-Biala; sponsored by a Jewish orphanage organization, moving to France, near Paris; immigrating to Australia in 1950; marrying in 1956 and having two children. [Shows photographs.]

*As heard.