

Oral History: Bernard Friedman, January 20, 1998

Bernard Friedman, born July 27, 1923 in Krakow, Poland to a middle class family, describes: his mother, née Rubinstein; his father, Isaac; his sister Lucy; his father owning a flour mill on the outskirts of Krakow; at the beginning of the war, his girlfriend being killed in a bombing; widespread antisemitism in Poland; his father and his uncle being taken to Auschwitz in 1941; his mother being shot to death in 1943; [00:27:00] performing forced labor for a construction company; living by himself in Raciborowice, and working at a nearby military airport; having mechanical and electrical skills that later saved his life; creation of the Krakow ghetto and moving into a shared apartment (his father dead by this time); moving to live in a work compound at the airport; remaining in the compound as the ghetto was liquidated beginning in 1943 and working in an electrical shop as a “semiskilled” electrician; deciding with his cousin to run away and join the partisans; arranging contact with the partisans but falling into a trap at the initial meeting site; being arrested by Polish and German police; being taken among twelve prisoners to an execution point and made to dig their own graves; [00:40:30]; claiming he was a car mechanic—though he knew very little about cars—and thus being one of about four people, including his cousin, who were not executed; being routinely beaten; working in the Plaszow camp and being treated brutally; witnessing public hangings; in 1944, being taken by truck with a group of fifty electricians on a long journey to Strasbourg, to the Natzweiler concentration camp; [01:05:00] receiving an unusually thorough medical checkup; having to wear a red triangle patch; no longer being identified as a Jew; learning of a group of elite intellectuals who were sentenced to death but had the sentences personally commuted by Hitler, but then were forbidden to work in their fields and isolated for the sole purpose of preserving their genes; [01:10:30] being sent to a camp in Neckarelz, where he worked underground at an aircraft factory in a former gypsum mine, the camp being mostly inhabited by Italian POWs and no Jews; [01:14:50]; working in a group of five prisoners who quickly became close to one another and all of whom survived the war together; his group being sent to a nearby forest to build barracks; working at bomb disposal; not wanting to speak about the horrors he witnessed; while in Neckarelz witnessing two executions; in early 1945, getting news of the approach of U.S. forces; being informed that the camp would be liquidated; in February 1945, being force-marched to Dachau; Jews being separated out; being sent to München-Riem, a military airport on the outskirts of Munich (site of the 1972 Olympics) to work on extending the runway; being subjected to Allied bombing; returning to Dachau and being liberated by U.S. forces in April 1945 but being restricted to the camp; after liberation, many people dying from gorging on food and bad alcohol; running away from Dachau to a refugee camp on the outskirts of Munich; going to Feldafing DP camp, where he remained from June 1945 to March 1946; discovering that his sister survived and was living in Krakow; returning to Krakow, marrying, and returning to school; having two children in Poland, in 1951 and 1953; applying to immigrate to Israel; applying to immigrate to Australia; living in both Melbourne and Sydney.