

DONOR: BEN SOSNOWICZ
INTERVIEWER: EMILY SHANE
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TAPE # 38

Tape Footage: Background

1-350 Ben was born in Zambrow, near Bialystok in the northeast corner of Poland, on March 23, 1914. The town had a population of 6,000, 60% of whom were Jewish. Just before the war, the population grew to 10,000. Life in Zambrow was terrible. There was always so much anti-semitism that Jews could not even leave their homes safely.

351-598 Ben was the third of six children, two girls and four boys. Ben's father was serving in the Czar's army when Ben was born, and was imprisoned in Japan for seven years. Ben's mother worked a little and received help from her parents. Her father was a gardener/farmer. The Jews in town were mainly tailors, shoemakers, and gardeners. The economic situation was very poor. Lantsmen in the USA would send the townspeople money.

600-980 Ben attended public school, but like all Jews was not allowed to attend the gymnasium. Jews could not become doctors or lawyers. He also attended cheder and then Hebrew School.

After 1936 the anti-semitism became more overt. Poles, with German encouragement, would smash the windows of Jewish homes and businesses and it was dangerous to go out. The town's population increased as Jews from places where the situation was worse, migrated to Zambrow. Also, many German Jews arrived. The Germans occupied Zambrow for three or four weeks. Then the Russians came in and the situation improved. They gave the Jewish population jobs and supplies. But they sent the wealthy Jews to Siberia.

981-1925 Most Jewish youth in the town belonged to one of many Zionist organizations. Ben was a member of Chalutz HaTzair, and joined a Hachshara program with the intention of joining a kibbutz in Palestine. But because he was of conscription age, the government would not allow him to leave the country. Ben served in the Polish army from 1936-38, came home for a while and was mobilized again in 1938. He saw what was happening, that even the officers were running away, and so returned home. Jews could not become commissioned officers.

One of Ben's sisters was killed by a bomb the first day of the war, and his older brother was also killed in 1939. Another sister had a good job with the Russians, and his younger brother was drafted into the Russian army. Ben worked in a tailor shop catering to Russian officer's wives.

There were seven Sosnowicz families in Zambrow.

The Russian occupation was better than the Polish government, as Jews could move around freely. The Poles used to attack Ben and his friends when they would go to the shows in the evening.

1926-2153 In 1941 the Russians left, and with German permission, the Poles conducted a 24 hour pogrom. They stole everything and killed anyone who got in their way. Then

the German occupation took over, and the Germans began to do their work with the help of the Poles.

At this time Ben was working as a tinsmith, like his father and younger brother, repairing barracks roofs for the Germans. Ben was able to hire on some helpers too.

In 1942 the Germans made two streets of Zambrow into the Jewish ghetto. In order to make room for all the town's Jews, the SS conducted its first action, rounding up 2,000 of the Jews in the market at 5 a.m., and sending them out of town to be killed. They were told they were going to work. The trenches were already dug.

2154-2443 Living conditions in the ghetto were terrible. 3,000 people were living on two streets, with as many as five families per home. Ben was living with his parents and two other families in one suite. There was no water or electricity, and all windows had to be covered. There was barbed wire around the ghetto, not a wall. People could leave only to go to work. The Poles would betray any Jew who left the ghetto.

Ben found that the German soldiers from Austria were not as bad as the ones from Germany. The SS and Polish police guarded the ghetto. Jewish police, appointed by the Judenreit, patrolled inside the ghetto. The Germans put the leadership of the ghetto in the hands of an assimilated Jewish newcomer to Zambrow named Glicksman, who spoke fluent German and Polish, and no Yiddish. He was more for the Germans than the Jews. He ended up hanging himself in Auschwitz.

2446-2682 The community's 95-year-old Rabbi was taken away with the first action.

Food was brought into the ghetto by farmers, and the Judenreit with the Germans, determined who got what. Those who worked outside the ghetto were able to trade for food. Diphtheria and chicken pox were rampant, and one house served as the hospital. One day, all those who were hospitalized with contagious diseases were taken out and killed as a means of stopping the spread of infection. Sanitary conditions were very bad. Ben's father worked outside the ghetto as a tinsmith for high ranking Germans, so his family had it a little better than others. Poles he knew would bring them food. There were no schools, so parents taught their children at home. There was no organized Jewish life.

In January 1942, the remaining 2,000 Zambrow Jews were driven 17 kilometres by sleigh to the train station, and taken to Auschwitz. There was no place to move on the train. At Auschwitz half of them were selected by Mengele and gassed.

Ben, with the stronger ones, was showered and shaved, and given clothes and a number. Typhus kept them in their barracks for weeks because the Germans were afraid of catching it. There was little water and food.

2968-3116 Ben did not see his parents or younger brother from the time they reached Auschwitz.

In 1941, before the ghetto was built, Ben had fled to the forest 4 kilos from town with a group of 40 other Jews. They dug an underground bunker, hiding during the day and scavenging for food at local farms at night. They lived there for 25 days until some Poles betrayed them and the Germans surrounded them. The Poles

received a kilo of salt for every Jew they brought in.

3117-3404 At Auschwitz, a Polish man who knew Ben's father, greeted Ben with kisses. He worked as a chef and told Ben he had extra food, and would give Ben his regular portion every day. Ben went to the chef's barracks after supper every evening for the food, until a Polish priest warned him not to come again. The chef tried to defend Ben, and agreed to leave the portion out in the lobby. But the priest saw Ben again and threatened him, so Ben did not go back.

In the barracks, the beds made of pieces of wood, were piled three high. You could not even turn over. German and Polish kapos woke them each morning with sticks.

3405-3724 There were 600 men in the two story barracks. There was running water so they could keep clean.

Birkenau was where they came in. It had the gas chambers and crematoria. Four kilometres further was the city of Auschwitz. The Polish army had been in the barracks previously. For work, Ben dug ditches and took apart buildings. He broke his leg doing this and was sent to the hospital. There the doctor learned he was a tailor, and brought him work and tools and food, and kept him covered up so he could stay in the hospital longer. Everyday the Germans would come in and take out people to be killed. Ben stayed in hospital 12 weeks. When he was healed, he asked the doctor if he could get him a job as a tailor. A friend of the doctor's arranged for Ben to work in the tailor shop.

Ben was made a foreman, and a kapo told him that if he beat the workers he could have access to a pantry full of food. Workers had to complete 12 pieces a day each, or work through a whole other shift. When the kapo complained to Ben that he never hit anyone, Ben said it was unnecessary as they were doing their work. The kapo said he still had to hit them, and Ben replied he did not want to be a foreman then. Then one day, a worker could not fix a pair of pants. The kapo found the pants, but Ben refused to give away the tailor's identity. So the kapo, a 250 pound Pole, beat Ben. After the war, Ben met this other tailor's brother in Munich, who said that thanks to Ben he was living, though his brother had died.

The tailor shop and laundry were downstairs in the barracks. In the morning the prisoners were given water, and at noon, soup made of weeds.

In 1943 the Germans wanted to get rid of some of the prisoners, so they poisoned the soup. A Jewish doctor prisoner warned them not to eat the soup with potatoes for at least two weeks. Those who could not resist got dysentery and died. Ben took his advise and instead ate burnt wood for two weeks.

Ben worked in the tailor shop from the fall of 1943 until January 19-20, 1945 when 40,000 people were sent from Auschwitz to Dachau. At the time of liberation, Ben weighed 90 pounds and could not stand on his own two feet.

4080-4240 The prisoners were marched to ^{Gross Rosen} ~~Grausausen~~ enroute to Dachau at night in the snow, standing still during the day. While they were in Auschwitz they were unaware of what was going on in the war. But some Russian prisoners told them the Russians were in Cracow, which was about 30 miles away. That is why they left Auschwitz for Dachau, which was in Germany. Anyone who fell enroute was killed.

In Auschwitz, the Polish Jews did not get along well with the German Jews. The Rumanian Jews were very big, and had enjoyed the good life, but they seldom lasted long.

The prisoners stayed in Gross Rosen for two nights, then travelled by boxcar to Dachau. There, typhus was rampant.

4241-4494 In Dachau everyday the dead were thrown out the window like chickens. The prisoners had walked barefoot from the train station. German people watching threw them food and wept, and were killed by the soldiers.

From Dachau the prisoners were sent to an underground bunker in nearby Midoff. There were people there wearing cement bags instead of clothes. For the first time, Ben heard Yiddish spoken by Litvaks. They had been there a couple years.

A German offered Ben a smoke, and asked him to repair his pants. Ben saw he was wearing an entire suit underneath. The German explained that he was prepared, and that made Ben realize the end was near for the Germans. This man brought Ben bread crusts. They lived underground until April 25th. Then they were taken by train outside Dachau where they were to be killed. But the Germans were afraid because the Russians were nearby, so they just travelled back and forth for four days. On the last day the prisoners were given one bowl of hot water each for every 10 people.

4495-4602 Then the American army arrived with Eisenhower. The train doors were opened, and Ben was told he was free. He could not believe it. He saw black people for the first time. Ben could not stand, so he was carried out, given a packet of five cigarettes and taken to hospital that had served as the Hitler Youth School. He had good care at the hospital, fed an increasing amount of rice, milk and soda biscuits each day for three or four weeks. When he was strong enough, he moved to the UNRA DP camp and opened a tailor shop where he was paid by coffee, milk powder, egg powder, cigarettes and white bread.

4603-4791 Ben was afraid to go home. Through the Red Cross he knew one brother was alive. He and Ben were reunited. Ben was in Ferdolfine for two to three years. In 1948 the CJC began bringing tailors to Canada. Ben applied. His brother went to Australia where a cousin lived.

Ben met his wife right after the war. She had been on the same transport from Midoff. They were married in the fall of 1945. They were given a bag of potatoes, a cord of wood and two pounds of butter as a gift.

4792-end Ben had been trying to get out of Germany from the beginning. He and his wife arrived in Winnipeg on December 1, 1948, where they were met by a Mr. Selchin of JIAS, who took them for a kosher meal of borscht and potatoes. There were jobs waiting for him and his wife at Jacob and Crawley. Later she took sick and had to stop working. Their son Harold was born in 1951. Ben's wife died in 1981.

In Canada Ben is a free man and can do whatever he wants. He still has the \$80 he brought with him to Canada. In Winnipeg Ben worked as a tailor and was a member of the garments workers union for 25 years. He has remarried and has three grandchildren.

For Ben the one question is how people like Keegstra and Zundel can say the things they do.

From Zambrow, six or seven Jewish people out of 6,000 survived the war.