

TITLE-Harry Toporek (note; name misspelled on video)

DATE-November 15, 1992

SOURCE-Holocaust Education Foundation

RESTRICTIONS-

SOUND QUALITY-good

IMAGE QUALITY-good

DURATION-1 hour, 30 minutes

LANGUAGES-English

KEY SEGMENT-

GEOGRAPHIC NAME-

PERSONAL NAME-

CORPORATE NAME-

KEY WORDS-

NOTES-Summary from unauthenticated transcript. All information from interviewee with ONE correction regarding a misstatement on a date. Mr. Toporek was transferred from his home town to his first camp in March, 1942. He was transferred again in April, 1943, but on tape he mistakenly repeated March, 1942. The discrepancy was brought to Mr. Toporek's attention and he did verify that the transfers were one year apart. Later in the tape he did mention that he was transferred in April of 1943.

CONTENTS-

TIME:

00:00 Harry Toporek was born on April 20, 1923, in Lask, Poland. Lask is about 30 kilometers from the town of Lodz. Before the war there were about 350 Jewish families in the town. His family struggled to make a living. 00:01 In 1938 and 1939 they felt the war was coming but there was nothing they could do and nowhere to go. He was sixteen and a half years old when the war broke out. He and two of his brothers, Efroim and Leib, tried to flee to Lodz. Leib only got as far as the town Pabieniez (ph), and stayed with an aunt. 00:02 Harry and Efroim got into Lodz en route to Warsaw. They decided not to continue to Warsaw because of the Germans strafing civilians on the roads. 00:03 The Germans arrived in Lodz about one week after the war began. They appeared to Harry as super men; numerous, motorized, and invincible. The brothers decided to go home to Lask. 00:04 Harry and Efroim went to Pabieniez to pick up Leib. 00:05 When he returned to Lask he saw his father without a beard for the first time. His

father had heard about what the Nazis did with bearded Jews and he wanted to avoid that problem. The family continued to struggle for a living. 00:06 The Wehrmacht used to buy baked goods from the family and slept in their houses. These Germans told them not to worry because Hitler did not like rich Jews, but poor Jews had no need to fear.

00:07 The SS came and took whatever Jews they could find, including the Rabbi, and brought them to the marketplace to make fun of them. Harry and his brother saw this from a hiding place. 00:08 That same day, November 11, (1939) the Polish intelligentsia was collected and taken away. The Germans had a list of names and addresses and Jews were asked to help identify where the civic leaders lived. Harry and his brother decided to flee to the Soviet side. They managed to get a travel certificate to go look for a brother they said was missing in Grodno, on the Soviet side, and this certificate would allow them passage.

00:09 He went to Lodz en route to Warsaw and Malkin. Malkin was on the border. He was in Lodz on November 12 and saw that the Nazis took ten Jews and hung them.

00:10 Harry began the trip with his brothers Efroim and Leib. Leib was not well enough to travel and had to return home. Harry and Efroim stayed in Malkin for three days because they had no money to pay for their passage.

00:11 Harry overheard others planning to cross the border. The brothers tagged along. They had no money or food.

00:12 The people who organized the passage realized they had two extra people. The brothers worked their passage by carrying the rucksacks of the others. 00:13 That was good because there was food in the sacks. On the Russian side, in Bialystock, they met a man named Tanenbaum. Before the war the Toporeks had purchased some tannery equipment from this man. 00:14 The brothers were offered Russian citizenship but they refused because they expected the war to be over soon.

00:15 Efroim was afraid to return to the German side because he was a member of the Bund. Harry decided he would go back to his parents to ask their advice. For a week he tried to cross the border back to the German side but he couldn't. 00:16 He then returned to Bialystock but his brother Efroim had left and Harry did not know how to find him. He tried to find him in the town of Brody. 00:17 In Brody a man leaving the synagogue saw Harry and asked if he had come from the German side. Although this man was very poor, he offered Harry shelter. After a few weeks Harry went back to Bialystock.

00:18 Back in Bialystock he told Mr. Tanenbaum he could not find Efroim and he wanted to go back to Lask. Harry was young and alone and lonely. Tanenbaum begged him not to go back home. Harry tried to cross back over the Bug River, since he had been unable to cross back over land.

00:19 He crossed on a boat and entered the town of Bielsk. He saw what the Nazis were doing to the Jews there and he realized he had made a mistake that might cost him his life.

00:20 It took him a few weeks to get back to Lask. In Lask he saw Efrogim. Efrogim had organized some others and was leaving for the Soviet side the same day Harry returned. Harry was sick and unable to go.

00:21 While trying to cross the Bug River he was bombarded by German grenades and he ended up in the water. He had to return to the Soviet side. 00:22 The Russians left him, and the others with him, overnight in a barn. They were cold and wet. The day Harry returned to Lask, Efrogim and two other brothers, along with some other friends, went to Bialystock. Harry was together with Efrogim for just a few hours that day before Efrogim left. 00:23 The Nazis moved the Jews into a ghetto in the poorer section of town, which was where his family lived so they remained in their own home. The population in the ghetto increased as Jews from other towns were sent there. Also the ghetto area kept shrinking every few months when the Nazis decided to change the boundaries. People had no choice as to where to live in the ghetto or with whom they could live. It was very unpleasant. 00:24 Nobody cared about the Jews. So far the Jews were not being killed. The Lask ghetto was never locked or guarded but the movements of the Jews were restricted on pain of death.

00:25 From 1940 until 1942 he was in the ghetto. His family had owed money to some people in the town of Lodz, a debt that preceded the war. Those people had raw leather and the idea that the Toporeks could manufacture the leather in lieu of payment of the debt. The Toporeks would also get a percentage of the profit. It would be mutually beneficial. 00:26 At that time there was free movement between Lask and Lodz (1939-1940). The people in Lodz sent 200 calf skins with the agreement that the skins would be tanned within a certain time frame.

00:27 In the meantime, the Lodz ghetto was sealed closed and there was no longer any communication possible. Leather was very

valuable merchandise. The Germans had prohibited Jews from having leather; it was against the law. The family hid the leather and was able to use the leather to allow themselves to live better than they had before the war began. 00:28 It was not their merchandise and they were worried. They did not hear from the people in Lodz. In 1940 the Jews were being taken to areas around Lask to work on the railroad lines. They thought times

were tough, but at least they had food.

- 00:29 On March 25, 1942 the Germans sent 250 young people, including Harry and his brother Sam, to Judenlagers. He was sent to a camp called Neklau (ph) near the town of Posnan. When he arrived there, others had already taken the best available positions in the camp.
- 00:30 The brothers who went to Russia remained there. He had correspondence with them, they were in Novesibersk-Oblesk. Harry and Sam were taken by the SA to the marketplace where the Jews were being counted.
- 00:31 There was a policeman counting the people there. Harry had done some leather work for this man and thought if the policeman saw him, Harry would be released. The policeman pretended he did not know Harry. When the policeman began a second count, Harry was afraid to be obvious, afraid that the policeman might try to get rid, maybe even try to have him killed.
- 00:32 The policeman's name was Polezimeister Preisler (ph). Three months earlier, this same Preisler told Harry that Jews his parents age would not survive the war. Harry never did know if Preisler knew of the decision from the Wannsee conference or if this was a warning for Harry and his father to flee.
- 00:33 250 Laskers (people from Lask) were sent to Neklau. They worked on railroads. The Germans were rushing to lay a second railroad line along the existing single rail line. This had become a priority now that the Russians were in the war.
- 00:34 Life was miserable. The first thing they saw in the camp was a gallows for four people. The prisoners were told they would not survive the camp but could only delay their execution by obedience and work. There was nothing the Jews could do. 00:35
After three months about one third of the people there were dead. They had no facilities there for anything. They were awakened at 3:00 a.m. to be at the job site by 7:00. They worked for companies and the camp was paid for the prisoners' work. They were watched by Polish police in black uniforms, but they were not guarded by the SS or Gestapo.
- 00:36 This was one of the worst camps Harry was ever in. They thought it was so bad because they were not used to being in camp.

00:37 Later they realized that it was, for them,
worse even than Auschwitz. Harry was there
from March until September or October. Sam
was transferred to the camp Guttenbrun, and
Harry was sent there later.

00:38 Every week in Neklau people were being hung
for all

kinds of offenses. In Guttenbrun there was a sign that said the Jews were the misfortune of all the nationalities. The lagerfuhrer had lots of speeches for them that began with the words, "Jews, I want you to be aware...."

00:39 This was also a bad camp, but by the time Harry got there it was better than it had been. In the beginning Guttenbrun had been horrible. Harry felt the prisoners were treated like horses. Jews were nothing, nobodies. At night stones might be delivered for the railroad work and the Jews would be awakened to clear the stones off the track. Then the prisoners would have to work day and night even in bad weather. It was hard but at least the brothers were together.

00:40 Sam tried to "organize" potatoes and Harry was afraid that Sam would get caught and hung. Sam had two friends and the three had planned to go together to get potatoes but Harry prevented Sam from going. The others were caught and hung. Sam took more risks. Harry would rather go hungry than risk taking chances.

00:41 Sam shared his potatoes when he did manage to get some. Their mother had asked Harry to watch out for Sam and he did. The brothers were there until April, 1943 [note; on the video Mr. Toporek mistakenly repeated that this was March, 1942. See note on page 1 of this summary for details], when they were sent to the camp Anjauv (ph). This was about 7 kilometers from Lodz. There were half a million Jews in the Lodz ghetto, but the Nazis chose to take 200 Jews from the Posnan area to work in Anjauv.

00:42 They thought they might be sent back to the ghetto when the work was over. They knew their father and brother were in the Lodz ghetto. The ghetto in Lask had been intact until August 24 (1942), when it was made Judenrein. The Nazis took about 700 people and sent them to Lodz and the rest were sent to die in Chelmno.

00:43 Harry's father, age 59, and sister, age 16, went to Lodz. After the Nazis had their 700 people they gassed all the others, regardless of age. His mother, sister, her young son, his sister-in-law, and about 90% of his family vanished in Chelmno. Until then the brothers had hoped to survive and be reunited with their family.

00:44 Harry had been in Neklau when he heard that Lask and some other towns had been made Judenrein. He got the news from Poles the same day it happened. He had already heard about Chelmno. People from the towns of Konin and Kolo managed to escape from Chelmno and had come to Lask and told what they had experienced.

00:45 The people in Lask could not believe the stories and were afraid of the escapees and their stories. In April, 1943, he knew of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. At that time he was still in Guttenbrun. Polish civilians gave the prisoners news. He was there from April until the beginning of September. 00:46 Harry was again being transported, this time people from Lodz were in the transport, including some who were from the sickhouse. The ill were transported naked. He knew the sick ones were not going to work so he expected that they were going to Chelmno.

00:47 He passed through Lask and he could see the Poles at work there. He thought it would be the last time he would ever see his home town. They spent days on the train until they were in German territory, not Chelmno.

00:48 They had arrived in a concentration camp; Birkenau [Auschwitz-Lager II]. They arrived approximately September 3rd. When the cattlecars were opened there was a selection. Most people went to the left but he and Sam went to the right. At the time Harry was 20 years old.

00:49 He was given a number: 145183. He was no longer a human being, just a number. He was in Birkenau for about two months, during which time he tried to be transported out. There were selections every two days. Unproductive people were put into a block and were gassed at the earliest opportunity.

00:50 The Germans asked for people to work in the coal mines. Harry and Sam went. By the end of 1943 they were in the camp Yavoshno (ph) working in the mines. There were four or five thousand people in the camp. The Siemens electrical company operated a power station there for about a quarter of the German territory. The coal was used to generate electricity.

00:51 The brothers remained there until January, 1945. Many people died there and every week they exchanged prisoners with Auschwitz. In this camp there were rabbits. In Lask Harry had worked with skins. Harry went to the lagerfuhrer and told him he can manufacture the skins. The lagerfuhrer had Auschwitz tattoo #1. Harry believes that this lagerfuhrer was a criminal and was imprisoned for killing his wife. His name was Bruno. 00:52 Harry suggested to

Bruno that the furs could be used to make gloves and other things. Harry needed only a few materials, including flour and salt.

00:53 Bruno gave him a plate of flour, more than he requested. He thought this was a test and said he did not need so much flour. Bruno told him to keep the flour and later the brothers made soup with it.

00:54 The lagerfuhrer took Harry into the kitchen and

ordered that he be given extra soup. From then on he had an open door to the kitchen and this saved his life. He was weak and got pneumonia and fainted and was sent to the hospital. It was dangerous to be in the hospital, but he was too sick to work.

00:55 Two weeks later Sam got sick too. Sam had been coming to visit but had suddenly stopped coming. Harry used to be able to give Sam bread that he was able to get in the hospital. A friend told Harry where Sam was.

00:56 Sam was sicker than Harry. Both were hospitalized. A transport came with food and with an order to clean out the sick. There was also a quota of prisoners to be shipped back to Auschwitz. When it was Harry's turn to be taken he identified himself to the lagerfuhrer as the tanner and the lagerfuhrer removed him from the transport.

00:57 The Germans needed more people to meet their quota so they started taking people who were coming back from the night shift. Sam had already been taken out and was lying between the dead and the sick. The trucks were by the kitchen unloading food.

00:58 Sam saw Harry speaking to the lagerfuhrer. Harry told the lagerfuhrer that he came from a family of six brothers and two sisters but this was the only surviving brother he had. He asked the lagerfuhrer to allow his brother to stay and not go on the transport. The lagerfuhrer said not to worry, that the brother was going to a convalescent home and would return. Harry said he knew exactly where his brother was going because they had been in Birkenau, and that he would never see his brother again. The lagerfuhrer asked which prisoner was his brother and Harry identified Sam.

00:59 Harry offered to go with Sam on the transport. The lagerfuhrer ordered Harry be given clothes for the transport. The order was given to the doctor, Dr. Powell Heller (who is alive and still practicing medicine in Chicago).

01:00 Then the lagerfuhrer changed his mind and allowed 1 hour both brothers to remain in the camp. Everyone else in the hospital block, except for one prisoner hidden by the doctor, was transported. There had been over a hundred people in the block

before. 01:01 The brothers recovered and returned to work. On January 18, 1945, they started marching. On Christmas, 1944, he and Sam had enough food. 01:02 The skills Harry had learned in Lask helped him to survive. He became the camp tanner and other SS had him making leather. Then the head of the SS told the prisoners that they would be taking a long and hard trip. Those who could not walk, the weak and the sick, should remain in the camp.

- 01:03 The prisoners did not trust the SS. They saw the SS burn down their own barracks. They were marched and after the first day out the weak were returned to Javoshna. Two days later the Russians arrived in Javoshna and those prisoners were liberated. 01:04 Harry was on the Death March, just as described in Elie Wiesel's book Night. Harry's group marched with the other satellite camps of Auschwitz. They were supposed to march to the town of Oppen (ph) but it was already occupied by the Russians. The march was halted while the Germans checked their maps and decided to change direction. As they changed direction they chased the prisoners through open fields and shot at them with machine guns. Hundreds died that day.
- 01:05 They went to Blechhammer, which was also part of the Auschwitz network. The inmates from that camp were ready to march out. Harry's group was offered an option; those who would march with the Blechhammer prisoners were promised bread. Those who did not march would remain in the camp. The brothers decided it did not make a difference whether they stay or go. They now knew the dangers of the march and they had had enough, so they decided to stay in the camp.
- 01:06 It was a Sunday morning. The brothers stayed with some other people from Lask. The SS came back a few hours later and went up the observation towers and opened machine gun fire into the prisoners. They put prisoners into barracks and then burned the barracks. But that was only one day. The brothers were lucky. When the shooting started they broke a window and jumped into a barrack for safety. They were afraid to be outside. 01:07 In January, 1945, there were as many dead in Blechhammer as there were when the British got to Bergen-Belsen. There were mountains of dead bodies of people who had been burned or shot. Then for three days there were no Germans, but no Russians. 01:08 That night Harry had a dream that his mother told him to be careful because the Germans would come back and pick him up again. He told his friend David Lerer (who now lives in Israel). David told him not to worry, that they would be free soon. Instead the Wehrmacht came in and got them marching

again. The prisoners, especially those who
could not walk, were being shot.

01:09 After a few days they arrived at
Gross-Rosen. The inmates there were to be
transported. Harry's group was given some
salami and bread and put into wagons for
transport. After a few days they arrived
in Weimar, 7 kilometers from Buchenwald.
They were marched into Buchenwald.

01:10 Sam's feet froze and walking was
painful for him so

Harry helped him. They got into the same block and Sam was put with the sick people who were in a separate part of that same block. Harry was nearby and used to accommodate the doctor. The doctor asked if Harry wanted to help. For an extra piece of bread Harry was glad to do it.

01:11 Meanwhile, transports were leaving Buchenwald for other camps. One transport was going and an SS man took the doctor from the block and sent him to accompany the transport. Harry, the assistant, was made the new doctor. He was adequate to the job since there were essentially no medications anyway, except for black pills that were given for diarrhea. Five days later Harry was sent, as a doctor, to accompany a transport to Magdeburg (ph). This was Shaneburg (ph) by Magdeburg (ph).

01:12 This is when the brothers were separated. Before they were separated, Harry tried to get his brother into a better section of Buchenwald. There was an old section of the camp and a newer one. The new camp was more organized and its leadership was of political prisoners, not criminals. Treatment in the newer part was better. The brothers did not see each other until after the war. Harry was given a red cross armband and when he got to Shaneburg people from the health department came and asked him what medications he needed.

01:13 They thought they were talking to a real doctor. The lagerfuhrer came over and told the officials not to get involved with the Jew and that they had their own supplies. The health officials asked Harry to list the cause of death when a person died. One prisoner in the camp survived and wrote his history and mentioned that Dr. Toporek saved his life.

01:14 He was there for a few weeks. The Americans got to Magdeburg in April and the camp was evacuated. This was before April 20th, because by then he was in Oranienburg (ph). April 20 is Harry's, and Hitler's, birthdate.

01:15 Magdeburg was liberated early in April. People asked Harry to remain in the camp, but he was afraid. The people he left behind were liberated in a few

hours. Harry was marched across the Elbe River and saw the Germans blow up the bridges. The Allies met at the Elbe River. He was marched to Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen. Prisoners worked in the Hankel (ph) factory making airplanes.

01:16

On April 20, 1945, there were constant bombardments of Berlin. Sachsehausen is only 7 kilometers from Berlin, so the prisoners could see the bombing. This was a "birthday present" from the Russians to Hitler and the prisoners enjoyed it. In Oranienburg a farmer complained that prisoners took

turnips from his fields.

- 01:17 Prisoners were sleeping in those fields. On April 20, the lagerfuhrer had a speech for the prisoners and he said he knew they had come from lots of other camps, but they should not expect to get out of this place. They need not await the Russians since they would all be destroyed. The camp was surrounded by Russians. The SS escaped and the Wehrmacht was sent in.
- 01:18 The Wehrmacht marched them out. The Germans had also picked up Russian prisoners outside Berlin. They marched until May 8, and were constantly shooting prisoners.
- 01:19 The prisoners knew things were critical for the Germans. A transport came from the Red Cross on May 8, and the prisoners were given packages. All non-Jewish prisoners were released to go. The Jews were kept and put in a farmer's barn. This was unusual since they had been sleeping on the fields.
- 01:20 Harry heard the Germans talking and planning the burn the barn that night. Harry had only one person, a prisoner from Javoshna, that he knew in this group. His name was Shalek Bromberg and Harry told him what he had heard. They planned to escape to a small forest that was nearby since they knew they had nothing to lose. Shalek had said he only wanted to have enough to eat one day and then he could die. There were two SS guards who shot at them, but they escaped.
- 01:21 They got to a deserted farmhouse and hid. That night the prisoners in the barn were burned. At about 3:00 a.m. the Russians were there and Harry and Shalek were liberated. The Russians were looking for the SS.
- 01:22 They asked Harry, who could speak some Russian and German, to take photos and they would make copies for him. Harry shows the photos he has of the dead bodies of the prisoners burned in the barn. The 2 photos were taken the day he was liberated. Germans were taken from the nearby town and ordered to remove the dead bodies and bury them.
- 01:23 This was somewhere between Parkin (ph) and Shvarin (ph) on an open field,

Harry does not know exactly where. He has the original photos and he made copies. Shalek Bromberg died the day after liberation. There was plenty of food left from the Germans but when Harry started to eat he felt sick almost immediately. Shalek ate too much after being starved for so long, and died.

01:24 Harry was in over 20 camps but there is not one person alive who could say he was liberated with him. This is unusual for survivors, most were liberated with other people.

01:25 He went back to Poland and in Lask he did not find

anyone from his family. There were only five men, plus Harry, and about four women who returned. They stayed with a Jewish man who survived in the city of Lask.

01:26

When the Nazis were liquidating the ghetto he went up to an SS man and asked, in Polish, what the Germans were going to do with the Jews. The SS man assumed the questioner was a Pole and kicked him out of the area, and he survived. Harry was the first member of his family to return and he did not know if anyone else survived. Then his brother Joe returned. Joe had been in camps with their father and their father had died in camp. Harry then went to Lodz and learned that his brother and friend David were alive.

01:27

Sam and David had been liberated together. They were shipped out of Buchenwald together and were supposed to be sent to the Tyrolean area to be killed. Dr. Heller had also been shipped with Harry to Buchenwald. Dr. Heller is a Czech Jew who was sent to Buchenwald early in the war (Dr. Heller's story is recorded on tape with the Holocaust Education Foundation also). Brothers Efroim and Leib survived in Russia but a third brother died there.

01:28

Five brothers survived; 3 in camps and 2 in Russia. When Harry went to Lodz he met friends from the camps that were working in a tannery and he went to work there too. Harry met his wife in Lodz and they married Sept. 6, 1945. His wife, Faye, died in Chicago in May, 1970.

01:29

They had three children. His wife was very sick after the war. She had been injured on her left shoulder during an aerial bombardment (she was on a train). After the war doctors thought she had bone TB which was inoperable/untreatable. They married.

01:30 Later the doctors in Germany realized she had a different illness; osteomyelitis. She had TB in the lungs and was hospitalized. They married in 1945 and did not get to the US until 1949. On September 17, 1949, she was still in the hospital and on October 13, 1949 they were in America. When

she died, years later, it was from a
different problem.