

Interviewee:	<u>SHAY</u> , Arnold	Date:	1978
Interviewer:	Zoslaw, Bernice		
Audio tapes:	6 English	Transcript:	1 vol. (unpaged) English
Restrictions:	None		

SUMMARY

Arnold Shay, born in Poland on February 16, 1922, was the fourth of five children of a traditional, religious and poor Jewish family. He describes pre-war life, his warm home, his education, his active involvement in Zionist youth movements and antisemitism in Poland. Arnold completed 10 years of secular and religious schooling and received a scholarship to an art school, but became a tailor like his father because they could not afford the trolley fare to the art school. He discusses at length Zionist leaders, politics and his feeling that *Hashomer Hatzair* and attending Zionist training before the war encouraged resistance by those youth in the ghettos and camps. He remarks that that Jews did not to leave Poland before invasion because of poverty, fear of separation from family, experience with previous escalation of antisemitism and mixed message from Zionist leadership.

After the German invasion in September 1939, the family was forcibly moved to the Bedzin Ghetto in the middle of the night. Arnold describes horrible conditions, overcrowding, scarcity of food and no way to earn a livelihood. Arnold also describes acts of resistance in the ghetto: teaching, establishing a clandestine school, selling on the black market, Zionist meetings, and personally blowing up facilities and trains. He describes these as resistance because the penalty if they were caught was probably death. Arnold was able to pass as a Christian outside the ghetto and would smuggle food into the ghetto. In August 1942, he witnessed his mother being taken from the bunker where she was hiding. He went with her to the *Umschlagplatz*, but was hit in the head by a Jewish policemen (an act which saved him); when he woke the transport had left to Auschwitz. Later he learned that his mother had been betrayed by a Jewish policeman who sold her identity card to a wealthy Jewess. He speaks at length about the leaders of the Bedzin Ghetto and relates their deportation and subsequent shooting in Auschwitz in June 1943.¹

In August 1943, Arnold was captured while returning to the ghetto, not knowing that it was already *Judenrein*. He was deported to Auschwitz, and was there for one and a half years working in the kitchen, a position which he attributes to his survival and being able to steal food for others. He also worked as a nurse, a tailor and an interpreter for the SS. Arnold both experienced and witnessed medical experiments under Dr. Mengele's charge; a Dr. Tiller operated on him. He witnessed Gypsies being taken out to the gas chambers. He reports that members of the *Sonderkommando*, whom he knew from his town, blew up the crematorium and killed the head of it. He describes and stresses the culture of *mentshlekhkeyt* among the Jewish prisoners, how they helped one another, doing everything they could to help the young survive. He describes how he was able to supply government clothing which helped members of the underground escape while he worked as a tailor. He also aided a few boys in escaping final selection for death

¹Arnold does not specify whether these were reports brought back to the ghetto or whether he learned these after his arrival at Auschwitz.

by changing their tattoo to save them. He explains how bribes were made and with help from a Kapo, they would sneak a prisoner out of the barrack selected for extermination and Arnold would change the number of his tattoo to be the number of someone who had died during the night. He explains how certain numbers could be changed; for example a three or a five could be made into an eight. He found out—years after the war—many of his assignments in Auschwitz were set up by the underground. Arnold also talks about how his philosophy, personality and ability to help others enabled him to survive Auschwitz from August 1943 until January 1945 when he was sent on a death march to Oranienburg, Ravensbrück, Sachsenhausen, and then Dachau.

Arnold was liberated by the American Army on May 10, 1945. He states that he was one of the healthier prisoners weighing 59 pounds at 22 years old. He then worked with the American Army CIC (Counter Intelligence) searching out and recognizing the SS who tried to meld back into the German population. Arnold's siblings all survived, three in the camps and one sister in hiding in Warsaw. His parents perished. In October 1949 he arrived in Dallas, Texas and came to Philadelphia in January 1950.