

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Broclawski, Bernard

Date of interview: 11/12 & 12/19/1991, 4/23 & 6/24/1992

Summary: Four interviews. The first covers his life from birth to the German invasion of Poland in 1939. The second begins with his injuries and closes with his decision to go to Siberia. The third interview covers his time in Siberia, up until his return to Poland. The final interview details his time in postwar Poland, through his exodus in 1968, and up to the present day.

Bernard was born 1/27/1917 in Pabianice, Poland. His father was a Hassidic Jew, very religious, and the home was very religious. His mother died in 1923 of throat cancer, and Bernard and his brother Abraham went to live with his father's parents for a while. His father remarried and they had another son, Yitzhak. When Bernard was young, he rejected the religious school that his father sent him to and went instead to public school, taught in the Polish language. His classmates were all Jewish, since the Polish schools were segregated by religion. Bernard spoke Yiddish at home and Polish in school.

When Bernard was ten, his father asked him to help support the family financially. He worked and went to school until he graduated elementary school at age 13 and went to work full-time as a textile worker. He worked and continued to educate himself, particularly with regard to the Nazis. His political leanings at that time were socialist, and thought it was a solution to the anti-Semitism he felt on a daily basis; he led a Jewish socialist organization from 1936-1939. In this role, he learned German and listened to Hitler's radio broadcasts and was convinced that the Nazis would destroy the Jews if he came to power.

In 1939, the army drafted Bernard, and he was wounded and broke his hip on the first day of the invasion. He was transported back to Lodz, where doctors put him into a body cast for three months. While he was in the hospital, his stepmother visited him and told him about some of the treatment that the Jews of Lodz received from the Nazis. He also learned about the Nonaggression Pact with regard to POWs, and when released from the hospital in December, he arranged to be sent to Soviet-occupied Poland rather than remaining on the German side, where he was convinced he would be killed.

He crossed the border into the Soviet area and met his father and brothers in Grodnau. Work was difficult to find, so he signed up to mine coal in Siberia to earn enough money to help support his family. He left for Siberia later in January of 1940, to Anzhero-Sudzhensk in the Kemerovskaya Oblast region. His leg kept him from mine labor, but he worked as a machinist. After 1941, he did not hear from his family in Poland, and he found out later that they had been shot by the

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Nazis soon after the Germans invaded the Soviet portion of Poland. He became a German-language teacher that year, until his arrest in 1943 for counter-revolutionary speech. He spent eight months in prison under interrogation; sleep deprivation, and isolation, until his sentencing in May 1944. He served four more years in a labor camp until his early release in 1948 due to a clause in a Polish/Soviet agreement. He returned to Poland, found work as a bookkeeper, and married his wife Irma in 1949. His daughter Johanna was born in 1950. Bernard and his family remained in Poland, and he was a leader of workers' organizations and studied toward a Master's degree in Economics at the University of Lodz. He and his family left Poland in 1968 after an increase in Polish anti-Semitism following the 1967 war in Israel. They were classified as political refugees and moved to Chicago with the help of HIAS. The rest of the tape discusses his time in America.