

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Berenshteyn, Semyon

Date of interview: 6/10, 9/24/1992

Summary: Semyon Mikhaylovich Berenshteyn was born on Jan. 3, 1930 in Moldova, USSR to Mendel Berenshteyn, a government worker and Sarah Berenshteyn, housewife. After the war began, Sam's family moved from Balta to Odessa, where they had relatives. The family stayed in a Christian building so that they could buy food. At first the owner did not know that they were Jewish, but then she told them to leave quickly when she found out.

On Aug. 5th, the Germans surrounded the streets and selected Jewish men to work on the railroads. The Germans also organized a ghetto in Balta, surrounded by barbed wire. When the Germans destroyed the Perinotti Airport, they picked random Jews from the ghetto and put them to work, including Sam's older brother, who was only 15 years old.

Sam worked for his Christian friend's family in their garden. He did not have a hard time with Romanian soldiers because he wore a crucifix to hide the fact that he was Jewish. If he failed to greet a soldier who passed, he was beaten. Jews were not allowed to read newspapers, but sometimes Russian Christians had them and would sneak information to Sam's family.

In March 1944, the Germans needed work with artillery bombs on the ground. They took about 200 Jews a day to work. Men were potential soldiers for the enemy, so they were killed. German soldiers would kill children while mothers watched, and then they killed the mothers. When Sam returned home one day from work, he found that the door to his house had been knocked off. He found 5 people dead inside, including his father. Sam found his mother, and he hid in a barn with his brother.

On March 29, the Russians liberated everyone. On April 1, his brother decided to join the army, and Sam decided to as well. He was later sent to the naval academy and then to the marines. He met and married his wife, who gave birth to a son, Michael, in 1954. When his son was older, Sam and his entire family immigrated to America in Nov. 1988. They lived in San Francisco, and Sam became a citizen in 1994.