

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Garcia, Max

Date of interview: 10/18 & 11/15/1990, 2/21 & 6/20/1991

Summary: Max Garcia was born in Amsterdam, Holland, on June 28, 1924, to Elie Rodriguez Garcia and Rosetta Veerman. Both his parents were born in Amsterdam; the first record of the Garcia family in Amsterdam is from 1613. Max had one sister, Zipporah, who was raised to be a housewife and became a seamstress. Max's father was a diamond polisher and a strong union man. He lost his work permit in July 1943 when the last Jewish diamond-polishers were arrested and sent away.

Max went to a public school. He only attended until the age of thirteen, and then was apprenticed to a diamond polisher. The family was not too aware of anti-Semitism. About half of Max's class was Jewish, and he had non-Jewish friends. When German Jews began to be affected by the Nuremberg Laws they started coming to Holland and told the Dutch Jews about beatings and boycotts.

The Garcia family moved to Antwerp, Belgium to look for work during the Depression. Max's father was alarmed about the Anschluss in 1938. When Czechoslovakia was taken over in June of 1939, he decided to move the family back to Holland from Antwerp. They were more aware of anti-Semitism in Antwerp - Belgian Jews had not assimilated like Dutch Jews had and were still very religious in the midst of a Flemish Catholic country. Max describes anti-Semitic vandalism such as broken windows and swastikas. Dutch fascists had attempted to actively foment anti-Semitism in 1938 but the public was not as receptive at that time.

In 1941 there was a longshoreman strike that lasted for three days. This is the first time the Nazis picked up Jewish boys. Nobody knew where they were taken; the Germans threatened to shoot people at random if the strike wasn't stopped. Later that year a few hundred Jewish young men were picked up and sent to Mauthausen. Max learned later, from survivors, that all were killed on the 'Granite Steps'. At the time, the Jewish community was aware of the forced labor camps, but not of the death camps. The Jews learned to accept each edict – the law that they had to wear yellow stars, could only go to Jewish movie theatres, could only go on the streetcars at certain times. They could shop all day in the Jewish store but in the non-Jewish stores there were designated times. Jews began to feel terrorized when a member of the family had to report or was picked up. The deportations began sometime in the summer of 1942. Max's sister went to work one morning in December 1942 and was never seen again. The family found out later through Red Cross records that she was gassed on the 15th of December, 1942, in Birkenau. This was her sixteenth birthday. Max's mother and father were sent to Sobibor July 13, 1943. They arrived July

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16th, 1943, and were gassed on his mother's birthday.

When Max's sister was deported, his parents got in touch with the underground and in January of 1943 Max went into hiding. His father took off his yellow star in 1943 and came to wish Max a happy birthday on June 28, 1943, at the home of his 'new' family. This was the last time they saw each other. Max's parents were picked up when his father's work permit expired and he had to report.

At first Max lived with a family, but he was discovered and went to live in his aunt's empty house. He was caught and was shipped to Westerbork, which was the main distribution point. Max's first stop was Birkenau. They walked from Birkenau to Auschwitz. Max went through undressing, shaving and tattooing. When the Nazis asked his profession, he said he was a carpenter. Max had read enough about architects and had an interest in becoming one, and he knew they wouldn't need diamond polishers. At this point there was no fear, just daily battles for survival. Max was first sent to Buna, where the Germans were building factories for the I.G. Farben Co., which made artificial rubber. He was a gopher on a construction detail and then became a cinderblock hauler. In Auschwitz he was assigned to a construction detail. It was heavy work but it was warm inside and he was able to take some breaks. Max did this all winter long while everyone else was outside; this helped him survive. In the spring he was transferred to a roofing detail - when he asked if he could remain in his old detail he got a fist in his face. A friend dragged him away and told him what an idiot he was for even asking.

Max attributes his survival to discipline and luck. His luckiest break was to meet Lex Van Veedles in the hospital. Lex was a star trumpet player in the Auschwitz orchestra who was also giving trumpet lessons to an SS officer. Through him, Max got a job in the 'poketchta', the work detail in Auschwitz where all the packages arrived to be opened and distributed. Max became what was known as a "prominent member." A prominent member had better clothes, better food, better conditions, better treatment and recognition. He moved into the prominent barracks and lived there until January 1945. Max had blankets, food, clothes, socks and shoes. Clothing was important; if a prisoner had better clothing the SS and knew that he had connections. There were 12-14 people working this job, which was somewhat of a fantasyland in the middle of the concentration camp. Max's job was to clean the front room, shine the SS man's boots and work in the back opening mail and care packages. The packages were loaded with food such as cakes and salamis. In a place where food became the currency, this was obviously a good job to have. It wasn't until Max got to Ebensee that he started losing a lot of weight.

In January of 1945 Max was sent to Mauthausen. When he got off the train at Mauthausen, the prisoners recognized that he had been a "prominent member" at Auschwitz; they told him that he was not going to be a prominent member here and beat him so severely that he probably had a concussion. Max doesn't

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remember anything about Mauthausen, but thinks that he got to Melk around February 1, 1945. In the first week of April they were shipped up the Danube in barges to Linz, Austria. They started walking towards Ebensee with the SS. The camp was about 85 miles away, and each prisoner was given two loaves of bread for the journey. The conditions in Ebensee, which was built in 1943, were worse than in Auschwitz. There were no selections, but Ebensee was built for 3,000 to 4,000 people and by the time Max got there, there were 16,000 to 18,000 people crammed into the camp. Each week there was less food, and typhus was rampant. Prisoners had built tunnels into the mountains. There were about 23 of these tunnels, and they were set up to be factories for making V1s and V2s. It was a 24-hour a day operation. Max was a "schlepper". His personal goal was to do as little as he could without being noticed. He was there for three to four weeks.

Max describes his liberation by the Americans on May 6, 1945, in great detail. He feels that he couldn't have survived much longer in Ebensee. Max stayed with his American liberators for quite awhile; he served as an interpreter as he had become proficient in several languages. Eventually he became an agent for the CIC (Counter Intelligence Corp). When his commander determined that his presence at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials would be too dangerous due to the Russian counter-intelligence there, he was sent quickly to America.

Arrived in the US September 30, 1946.

Max describes his difficulties making it in America as an immigrant and his eventual success as an architect. In his retirement he has also done some very important work - he helped start the Holocaust Library and Research Center of San Francisco. It started because a local Nazi party opened a bookstore in San Francisco in the spring of 1978 or 1979. A survivor named Mr. Weiss and his son tore down the window and destroyed lots of literature. They were arrested - these events galvanized the Jewish community. The JCRC (Jewish Community Relations Council) called a meeting of survivors to ask them what should be done. The Holocaust Library and Research Center seemed to be the right answer. Max stayed the head of the library for four years.