

## Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

**Name of interviewee:** Garbarz, Moishe

**Date of interview:** 8/20/1991

**Summary:** M. Garbarz, who goes by Moshe, Moishe, Moshech, or Maurice depending upon the country, was born in Warsaw, Poland, on December 28th, 1913. His father died of Typhus when he was one and a half years old. He was the youngest of four children: three boys and a girl. He grew up in a neighborhood populated in equal proportions by Jews and Catholics. The two groups fought brutally, neither side establishing dominance. Sometimes the police had to break it up, but the Jews were always blamed for the violence. He went to a Socialist school along with other Jewish boys. The Jewish youth were relegated to this type of education because of the blatant and often violent anti-Semitism in Polish public schools. Nevertheless, he and his friends were attacked on the way to school. He never allowed the Polish to subjugate him, however. He always fought them as hard as he could. He lived in squalor along with the rest of his family. "We weren't hobos, but we were almost hobos," he says. He recalls often having begged in the street. Every night, at home, his dinner consisted of one third, or sometimes one fourth, of a baked potato, the other portions going to his siblings. He quit school at 12 to work, having stayed in school for six years, more than either of his brothers. He worked in a textile factory. His uncle who lived in Paris volunteered to take Moshe and his elder brother and offer them jobs working in another textile factory. One of the main draws in moving to Paris was that he'd be able to send money to his family.

He emigrated in May 1928; he had eaten meat only three times. He worked without a permit, and hid from the police many times. He ate meat almost every night, and sometimes even drank wine. He belonged to a sports club, and loved to box. He married at 21 and had a son soon after. He describes these times as the "good days." In 1941, he was rounded up, along with many other foreigners, but felt secure because he was married with a child. He was sent to Le Vernet, a Vichy concentration camp along with his brother. He stayed there a year and a half. He didn't think it was so bad. He worked with the local peasants as an apprentice. A number of his friends escaped; while Moshe wanted to escape with his brother and didn't think it was worth the risk. He worked with a number of other Jewish emigrants. Most of them were professors; one was an engineer. They warned him that it would get much worse very quickly, but he didn't believe them. The Germans quickly encircled the camp and he was deported to Auschwitz on July 18, 1942.

The first night he got there, he was told by his Kapo, "I would rather kill one thousand Jews than let someone scratch my pinky nail." He went to sleep and there were thirty corpses outside. This became routine. He was small but strong. This was soon noticed. He was transferred to a special electrical unit that built

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portions of the gas chambers. He suffered greatly at the hands of the SS and a few sadistic Judenrat. One day, an SS man drew him aside and told him that he was going to box. His opponent turned out to be a man on the brink of death, skeletal and weak. Had he boxed the man, he would have killed him. He danced around him, threw punches, but never hit him. The SS eventually noticed and got angry. They stuffed him in a barrel full of cutlery and rolled him 1,500 feet. He was so badly cut up that he was excused from the day's work. Another time, he was instructed never to pick up cigarettes, by his unit commander, a sympathizer. He obeyed, not knowing why. One day he saw an SS man on a platform drop a cigarette. One of his comrades went over to pick it up, and was shot dead on the spot. He worked hard, his eyes always on the ground. One year, right before the winter, he was transferred to a coalmine, working side-by-side with gentiles. Down in the mine, it was warm. He escaped the brutality of winter. However, one time, an SS man came up to his neighbor, a gentile, and asked him how M. Garbarz was working. "Like a Jew," the man said. The SS man beat Moshe bloody with a cudgel.

Eventually, Moshe was transferred to the kitchen, where he solved many problems pertaining to food storage. Here, he was well fed, and even had a little power. He was "a little prince." He heard reports that the Russians were winning the war, but they were vague. One day, all the inmates started marching, and they didn't stop until they reached Buchenwald; this was the death march. After he got to Buchenwald, he weighed only one hundred pounds. One day he was working with heavy machinery, alongside a gentile. They were using a jackhammer; the gentile used him as a prop for the jackhammer. Moshe told him that he was tired, and the gentile started hitting him. Somehow, something flew into his eye. He was temporarily blinded and was sent to the infirmary. The doctor, a Greek Jew, made it seem, to the SS that his injuries were much more severe than they were. Moshe was given three days to recuperate. He slept for thirty-six hours, straight, after he was given a bed.

One day the SS started shooting, at what, Moshe could not see. They told everyone to stay in their bunks. They fled. An hour or so later, the Russians arrived. They offered him Vodka and meat, but his only thought was to walk, of his own accord, free.

When he got back to Paris, he found his entire family in tact. They had all been hidden. Many of his friends, with whom he had marched, were not so lucky. One of his friends got to his flat and found a woman living there whom he didn't know. He asked her where his family was, but she had no idea. They had all been killed in concentration camps. He remarried, but killed himself two years later, unable to live. When Moshe met his son, he frightened him. His son told him he looked like a monster. Moshe himself recalls how his years had deformed him. His eyes bulged out of his cranium, and when he smiled, it was frightening. Moshe had two more children. Two of them are now doctors. The other is an engineer. They have all graduated from highly prestigious schools. Moshe has written a book

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detailing his experiences called "Un Survivant." In English, it is called, "A Survivor."