

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN KENTUCKY INTERVIEW PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE INFORMATION

Melvin Goldfarb

Residence: Louisville, KY.

Length of interview: approximately 2 hours.

Date(s) of interview: 5/12/00

Related resources:

- Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation video interview, conducted 2/19/96

Evaluation/further information about interview:

On my first visit to Mr. Goldfarb's home, he told me how things have changed since the Shoah interview was conducted (see below): he had a stroke, that he felt was caused by the difficulty in speaking of his Holocaust experiences. Speaking causes him a lot of pain, he said, but he feels that he must do it. When the interview was actually conducted, this pain was apparent—he was overwhelmed with emotion, in particular, when reading on tape some of the letters that he had received from students of Trimble County High School, where he had gone to speak.

Summary of Shoah interview (interview is approx. 2 ½ hours long):

Born in Pruzhana, Poland, on May 31, 1924. One sister, two years older than MG. Traditional religious upbringing. Parents were buyers of small commodities. Harsh living. Mother prepared extensively for Sabbaths every weekend—memories of the specifics of that preparation. “Life was pleasant, because no one else had any more than we did.” MG spent much time studying, reading a lot of books. He belonged to a mandolin orchestra, consisting of about 25 members. Had gentile children living nearby, with whom he got along well, until war broke out in 1939. The Russian army occupied Pruzhana soon after start of war, and there was a reprieve, more or less, until the German occupation of Pruzhana in June of 1941. Ghetto was soon established, and Pruzhana's 10,000 Jews ordered to wear a star to identify them. Scarcity of food, medicine.

On 1/27/43, an order from German headquarters came for the expulsion of the ghetto. Jews were taken to railroad station, loaded on cattle cars (without food, air, water) and taken to Auschwitz. During selection process after unloading, MG declared that he was a blacksmith, though he actually had no trade. “Saying that word saved my life.” (Was retained for slave labor, rather than being summarily executed.) Sent to Birkenau, a sub-camp of Auschwitz. Given tattoo number 98889; thought to himself: “From now on, I'm just going to be a number.” 11 inmates allocated to one bunk; shared one blanket between them. No one else who MG knew from Pruzhana survived.

MG was in Birkenau for 6 weeks, then in Auschwitz for about 2 months. The torture that took place there was indescribable. Because MG had said he was a blacksmith, he was then sent to a satellite camp called Swientoclowitz. There, he worked in a factory with civilians, making anti-aircraft missiles. MG worked a drill press.

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INTERVIEWEE INFORMATION

Worked there for about 18 months. Some of his co-workers risked their lives by sharing food with him.

In January of 1945, the camp was evacuated, and the prisoners were sent deeper into Germany and Austria. MG was sent to camp Mauthausen, but it was full, and then forced to march on to a subcamp, Ebensee. Worked there in stone quarries.

On May 6, 1945, MG was liberated by the American army. He was lying on the floor, 95% dead. He wanted to live, and was taken to a sanatorium in Goisern, where he stayed for 18 months. Then went to Bad Ischl, where there was a displaced persons camp. He found an acquaintance there, and lived with him.

MG knew that he had surviving relatives in the US—his mother's three brothers. He was able to contact a cousin in Alice, TX, with whom he corresponded.

MG married his wife in Vienna, Austria in October of 1947. He met her in the soup kitchen of a DP camp. Some details about wife's experiences during Holocaust. They came to the US in January of 1949. Held up in Ellis Island because of a spot on his lungs. Stayed with uncle in NY, and then went to Alice, TX, where he met his cousin, who gave him a marvelous reception. MG worked in cousin's hardware store. Learned English and Spanish in the process.

In '53, MG's wife learned that she had a sister in Louisville, and they moved to be near to her (although the sister subsequently moved away to Los Angeles).

Discusses his work experiences as a salesperson for Singer sewing machines, then bought a clothing store, and was in clothing business for 21 years.

Raised three children, Charles, David, and Perry, who are all professional people, and live elsewhere.

MG was in business for 36 years. He retired in 1989. Customers in store were crying, asking, "How are we going to get along without you?" –MG was the kind of merchant that if a mother came in with no coat, he would give her a coat. If she had money to pay, OK; if not, OK. He was an old-fashioned merchant, who learned compassion from his early home life.

Has spoken publicly about his Holocaust experiences, with an enthusiastic reception. Photographs of family shown, and then some more details given about his family background and early childhood. He helped his parents with their business. The family had an excellent reputation as merchants, because they were always honest. Then more memories of ghetto: "They ruined in 4 days a community that had been in existence for hundreds of years." Discusses faith: "You have to believe in God. But the question is: Where was he?" MG had a hard time with it for awhile, but has made peace: "God granted us bread, potatoes, children and grandchildren."

Mentions a talk he gave in Trimble County school, where the students "received me with such compassion." Mentions other public talks given.

It took MG 50 years to tell his story; he finally did because of his son's encouragement. "You hope that time will heal the wounds, but unfortunately it does not." His message for children: "The Holocaust happened because people were silent.... Sooner or later it'll happen to you too, if you don't speak out against hatred."

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INTERVIEWEE INFORMATION

More memories of childhood discussed, and his patriotic feelings towards US: “I always finish my speeches with ‘God Bless America’—if it wasn’t for America, we wouldn’t be here.”

Photos shown of his own grandchildren.