

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN KENTUCKY INTERVIEW PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE INFORMATION

Oscar Haber

Residence: Lexington, KY.

Length of interview: approximately 5 hours.

Date(s) of interview: 5/17/00; 5/30/00

Related resources:

- Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation video interview, conducted 9/16/96 (see summary below)

Evaluation/further information about interview:

Many questions were pursued about Oscar's pre-war and wartime experiences, due to gaps in the Shoah interview (see summary below). We covered most of these questions on the first day of taping, and then I returned for another day's taping, during which we mainly focused on his postwar experiences. There was a strong momentum to Mr. Haber's speech—moments in that first session when he even seemed entranced, transported into even the minute details of his experience more than 50 years ago (see summary of tapes 1-3 of this interview, following summary of Shoah interview).

In some ways, our conversation became more interesting after I had put my recording equipment away. Oscar mentioned how the Holocaust has become a business; he talked about his belief that all religions are holy, drawing a distinction between the religions themselves and religious practices, which, he said, have nothing to do with God. Talked about his belief in one God, his desire to believe in Jesus, and the reason why he doubts that Jesus was "the Messiah."

Oscar apologized for talking too much about his thoughts, rather than the chronology of his life. I told him that on the contrary, I was quite interested in his thoughts, and he said, "My thoughts are the most important thing about my life."

Summary of Shoah interview:

Born in Dembyce, Poland. Was the second son of nine children; born into an orthodox family. OH rejected the Orthodox Jewish tradition: went to high school, and studied to become a dentist. After the war, he continued his dental studies in Germany and Israel.

OH's family had a normal farm, with cattle and horses. It was the biggest farm in the village. Father grew everything they needed to survive. OH had an extensive religious education as a child; Talmudic study was extremely important to him.

OH served in the Polish Army in 1935-36, in the mountains of Hungary. He was a good soldier and a Polish patriot. After finishing service, he returned to Cracow, Poland, and worked as a dentist. When war broke out in 1939, OH wanted to fight for his country, and was told he would have to go east in order to serve, which he did, and then found himself under Russian occupation for several months. He decided to escape back into Poland, and succeeded in returning to Cracow.

By this time, he was engaged to Fryda, who was staying with OH's family in their village. OH returned there, and he and his family lived there in relative safety, until May

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of '41, when Jews in area were to be deported. OH had been working in a nearby camp as a dentist, and he and his family were granted an exemption from deportation as a result. A Polish woman took the family in. "In my view, she was Jeanne d'Arc," says OH. He managed to feed his family by setting up an unofficial dentist's clinic, and exchanging treatments for food. But the area was supposed to be "cleansed of Jews." One of OH's patients was a priest who offered to help by providing the Habers with false papers, that would enable them to live clandestinely as non-Jewish Poles. However, these papers were only offered to Oscar and Fryda, who did not look Jewish, and spoke perfect Polish, unlike other members of their family. Making the decision to accept the papers and leave his family was "the most tragic decision of my life," says Oscar. Only one of his brothers survived.

Oscar and Fryda were sent by the priest to a dairy farm, where they posed as non-Jewish Poles. There they met another non-Jewish Pole, Frantisek Muscha, who was to be instrumental in their survival. In May of 1943, someone in the village who knew that Oscar and Fryda were Jewish denounced them to the authorities, and the Gestapo came to arrest them. They escaped, however, to the forest, where they made contact with a peasant who, at their request, contacted Muscha. Muscha then risked his life, and the lives of his family, by arranging for the Habers to live with his sister. They lived there and with the sister's son, passing as Polish Catholics, until the time of liberation.

Liberation: The Russian army came in, and the Germans ran away. Oscar and Fryda decided to return to Oscar's village, where the people, who were "wonderful", returned all the belongings that the Habers had left with them. Then they traveled towards Cracow, where they "lived like pigs" at first, and slowly built up their lives again.

Fryda's father survived Auschwitz; the three of them together moved to Belgium, where Fryda had family. They later (dates, times not mentioned) moved to Israel, where Oscar practiced dentistry. Oscar was Vice President of the Dental Association in Israel for 15 years. They lived a "happy nice life."

Regarding what he would like people to know about the Holocaust: Wouldn't want to generalize that any group of people are bad or good. He is convinced it will happen again.

Photographs of family shown.

Summary of Holocaust Survivors in Kentucky Project interview (tapes 1-3, side A): May 17, 2000

Note: Although these notes are taken in first person (as if Oscar Haber said them), this is not a verbatim account of the interview. Also, spelling of place and personal names may be incorrect in some cases.

Tape 1 side A

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B. March 8, 1910. [name of town?] High school was in Debica, Krakow district, about 9km away from our village. We always had a teacher for religious purposes. Also regular studies. I was a good pupil. When went to public school in Debica, and lived in the home of rabbi. Difficult, long days. I was living with this rabbi about 6 years. Then applied for high school, but I was too young. My father knew the director of this high school, and spoke with him. Still I had to repeat 7th grade, and then was accepted to high school.

First language we spoke at home was Yiddish. But we had Polish gentile servants, so we had to know Polish, too. When I went to school, studied German. Also Hebrew. Started to learn Hebrew at age of 3. Most of prayers, until today, I know by heart. At age 4, started to learn the Torah. I'm quite acquainted with religious Jewish life. I was also interested in world history and German literature.

It was a hard thing, because the distance to the town was 8-9 km, and on weekends, we used to go home. In our house, there was a Minyan. My father, with his own funds, founded a Torah. People from villages around would come in to pray in quorum. In afternoon, father would nap for an hour. We had to sit down and repeat everything we had learned over the week. No one worked on Saturday. Only to feed the animals and milk the cows.

My father was a Hasid. He didn't go to Ropczyce, because the main rabbi had died. Father used to go to Sanz, quite a distance, for holidays. He wasn't a blind Hasid, didn't overdo. Of course, my mother did everything that my father said to do. My father's first wife passed away; died in childbirth—I have older half sister. My mother gave birth to 9 children. Our [half] sister married a very interesting man who was a teacher in our house, teaching us the Hasidic ways. She gave birth to 8 children; only 2 survived, and they are still living. Two nieces. One married in the war, and had a daughter in the war. Ran away to Lvov. [Quite a bit more on nieces and their families.]

I have two brothers, a second cousin—they were all in camps. Try to keep in close touch with family.

High school wasn't the main purpose of my father. He would have liked me to go on, perhaps pursue rabbinical studies. But I was very stubborn. And studied despite difficulties, such as hunger. Becoming a dentist was my idea. A cousin of mine was a dentist—I liked the way he was living. I liked the free life—religious life didn't match my character. Always looking on the broad world.

I was a Polish patriot, but I was not interested in Polish politics. Deep in my soul I was Jewish, but I felt we ought to be loyal to our country. I could have avoided serving in the Polish army. A lot of Jewish people started to do everything to avoid going into Polish army; I felt it was my responsibility, and did it full hearted. I loved the country.

Tape 1, side B

There was a time I was involved in Zionist org's. I will not deny that there was antisemitism in Poland, but there are many different types of antisem—economic, racial, politics, etc. I think Polish was economic variety, and that there were reasons. Logical reasons. Nobody's fault. I cannot say there was racial antisemitism, in general. Jews

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were absolutely more educated than common people in Poland. When it came to elections, the Jews knew what they want, and the masses didn't know. Jews in different areas had different opportunities.

I was primarily with non-Jewish Poles while I was in the army. About 10% Jews. Difficult to say that I was discriminated against, because there was not time to play these games. But the Polish officers generally were antisemites. They were well educated, and didn't want to show up as antisemites, but you could feel it. The poor Jews were in the army, because they were not able to pay their way out. Wealthier Jews always bribing. After matriculation, you go to officers school, and they didn't want Jews to become officers. So usually they find a way to send Jews back to normal army. Very few Jewish officers. It was difficult to advance.

I was a dentist already while in the service. When the time came to go out, got a call from Cracow that a doctor had a heart attack. The last day in the Polish army, they made me a party. Biggest antisemite in the unit came to me and said "You are the first Jew I know had such a good time in the army." The next day I came to Cracow to work. In the army: I got along—they all needed me, because I was in the army practicing dentistry. I organized a clinic and received patients there, and I had really a good time. I came from the army with some saved money.

I got involved with the Armia Krajowa—in 1942, when we fled with Aryan papers and came to a village, the lady who was the owner of the farm, the priests sister-in-law—the AK started to organize themselves there. I said I'm from Poznan, and that I'm hiding away because I was a Polish officer. They heard about this and came to me to ask me to join them. I was cleaning and taking care of [weapons?], and working as a medic. I was not fighting.

[brief microphone interchange] In every village, the Germans had their spies. They chose Easter 1943 to go to make an action and arrest the Polish people who were in the underground. They took 10 people; between them was the commander of this base, the unit in this region. One released, the other 9 taken to Auschwitz. Commander of this part was the brother of the woman working on this farm. This woman was a fine, noble person. She knew that we are Jewish. When we arrived, the brother of the priest was there, and he was very angry, saying "Why did you bring these Jews here?" But she tried to influence her brother to help us. She used to bring us bread, and other things. I think maybe 50% of surviving, we have to thank her. Stanislaw Oszczewska [ph]. Her family was antisemitic—even the priest who helped us was antisemitic—he was calling in his sermons for people to buy only at Polish stores. (An economic antisemite.) I cannot say he's racist, or political antisemite. We Jews are very sensitive, for good reason. Still if you have a brain, and you want to understand human nature, you can find out why people behave the way they do. We'd like to be taken care of as the chosen people. But we're chosen because we have obligations. We chose those obligations. We have to find a way to live with and respect others, so that others will respect us. This is my conviction after so many years of living, reading, and studying.

Working in concentration camp called Pustkow. I was not interned there as a prisoner. That was some kind of miracle—maybe the reason was the German discipline, because they followed the orders of the commandant. I volunteered and was but in this

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camp as a dentist. There were three MDs there, and there were rooms with beds. In the beginning, people got care, and sometimes were released. How strange it would be—there was an SS colonel who was the head of Health Services there [name given]. The Jews were slowly being encircled with restrictions. After 2-3 weeks, he left, and another officer came in [names].

Tape 2, side A

If some people were unable to work, the Jewish doctor could not release them—the SS doctor had to. Later there was no releasing—it was treat, and work.

I organized a clinic at the end of 1940. SS were not allowed to go to a Jewish dentist, but they knew that they would have special treatment with Jewish dentist, so they came to me, and that was a difficult task, because I didn't have the equipment. For about a year, I had an SS ID—I worked in the camp, and I left. Even some of the workers were allowed to go home. After a year, approximately, there was an order to take the SS IDs from all the Jews. But was told "the Jewish dentist can come to the camp whenever he wants." I don't know why he did this. I did not personally know the commandant who made this order—it's a mystery to me. But I was assigned by the working office—because they gave me this job, I didn't belong to the SS, but to the working office. Head of this office was an officer in the Polish army, with a German name. He was very good to me, and I was good to him. Maybe this was the reason. When I came to this post, and said "I'm the Jewish dentist, I need to go to camp," they would provide an escort into the camp. When I was ready, I said I want to go out, and the escort came and took me out. This was something really extraordinary.

I treated only Jews. There was a camp for Polish political prisoners nearby; I treated a group of them only once. But various SS officials in camp took my treatment. I also made a little clinic at home, which is how I got my income. Bartered—they brought tea, coffee, etc. Most SS people knew me, and I was really tolerated in this place.

The Jews were evacuated earlier than my family was. Family all went to ghetto in Ropczyce, then to another ghetto, then all sent to annihilation, I think to Treblinka. Except to my brothers, who ended up in Herman Goering werke, and one was killed.

My Polish was exceptionally good, better than most Poles. Until today, the Poles who come here say our Polish is immaculate. No trouble with adopting this new persona. Living in a village, you are involved in the peasants' lives. I knew about the habits. Even being orthodox, my father was very respected in the peasant community. Spoke Polish very well. The children all were speaking Polish at home, when father wasn't there. When he approached, we'd switch to Yiddish.

The question of whether our family was integrated—we were not living in a shtetl. The closest Jewish family was a mile away from us, which was a great distance at the time. The Jews who came to our house to study were really poor Jews. [description of some villagers, some Jews in area—no one survived.]

Thanks to my involvement in the AK, I could find a [microphone discussion here] place to go when I had to escape, when the Gestapo came to pick us up. I didn't experience too many fights, except one when it was already 1944, when our unit was

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affiliated with another unit, and we made an attack on a police station. Quite a real fight with the police. Some Germans escaped, some were killed, and the AK got more weapons from there. The main active AK man in our unit was a released criminal from Polish prison. From him I got myself a gun. For security. I didn't use it, because I didn't need it.

Antisemitism in AK: in the neighbor village was another AK unit, and orders were passing from one unit to another. Orders passing through me from other village to my village. I didn't have a radio, I was relying on news from acquaintances. This was already 1944. The last message I got: "The Russians are approaching, don't give them our units, and before they come in, clean up all the people you find in the forests." Didn't mention Jews. But that was the only personal encounter with antisemitism. Never spoke about being Jewish with other AK men.

You have to watch everything you do. Have to drink alcohol, have to curse. Have to not try to be different. Of course, you were always scared. I wanted to be always prepared, and I always was handling the gun.

Met Frantizek Muschau because he was working on this farm...

Tape 2, side B

I recommended my commandant to accept Muschau in the AK. He was a very nice man, and he was not like the common peasant. Was more civilized, because he was working in France as a miner. We exchanged opinions about the political situation. He invited me in his home, and he invited the neighbor. They accepted all the news about the war from me, a Polish officer and patriot. And I drank a lot of moonshine. I never allowed myself to be drunk, because most dangerous thing was to lose your mind. Didn't drink all that I appeared to drink.

Towards the end of the war, you could hear the Russian front approaching. One day they brought to me two English pilots who escaped from German camp, and I had to transport them to the Russians. I said already goodbye to Frieda, and when I came to the next base, they told me not to go farther, because the fields are mined. So I went back to Fryda. And [the war was four months from ending].

Nighttimes, I worked with the AK. The AK didn't work in the day. Worked till 12, 1 o'clock, and in the day I would sleep. The people who were sheltering me knew I was working with the AK.

Liberation: It was a very mixed feeling. On one side, you felt: The Russians are coming, you will not be more in danger as a Pole. But as a Jew, you will be in danger. And then comes the reality. You find out what happens. You realize only slowly, when you came to the big city Cracow, which had 90,000 Jews before the war, and now you find only maybe five or six. So you ask yourself: why me? And those are things you can't understand why until today. What is the role we have to play by being alive? Many Jews today living as Poles. But we couldn't do it—our roots are too strong. We didn't know what to do. We were poor like mice. We have to look to find something to eat, not to speak about finding a way to organize your life. You live surrounded in animosity. And you look for some Jews. I found some—I remember the first night, we

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didn't have where to go—no home. But somehow we met somebody who I recognized as Jews. I asked “Who else his here?” and he said “Come with me.” and there was a room filled with all kinds of Jewish survivors. And we sit there in this dark room, and started to sing Yiddish songs. All the Yiddish songs were sad. But in this moment they were healing. They were like balsam on a wound. Remembrance, for a moment, your heritage. We passed this night, sleeping on a broken couch, six or seven people, and each one with his song. Not story—we didn't talk yet about story. We are here, we left everything behind, and we are sitting here in nostalgia, remembering Yiddish songs. But we woke up in the morning, and we find out from one of them that one of my friends survived. Where is he? Who is it? Before the war, he was a beautician. He survived on papers, but was already in the Russian intelligence. Somehow I met him. I asked him what to do, where to go. He said I got back my apartment. He says you can go there, but there are already some people which survived Auschwitz. Then came other people. We slept on the floor. We decided to look around, and we went to my village, to the older woman who took us on. And she fed us, and we left in their house some of our clothes and furniture. Her son lived nearby. I had made a little clinic in his house. And we went to sleep in his house. And in the night, someone knocked on the window—a Russian [Ukrainian] officer, who said “You have here Jews?” and they said no, only Polish people. I think that they went to the rich Pole where we'd left a lot of things, and he told them to come here to kill us. But they left. In the morning, we asked the son to help us move back to Cracow. So he took his mother's horse, and another horse and wagon from a neighbor, and we started to move to Cracow. Our house in Brzeznicza had been burned.

So we started to go, not by the main road—this was the 25th of January [approx.] 1945. We started the way to Cracow. It's not describable, the conditions. Had to take food for the horses, first. Most of the wagon was food, and we took also some of the furniture and the clothing. They were very honest people—gave us back everything. My wife was more dead than alive. Came to Tochow [ph]—all Jews there were killed. Continued to next shtetl. Fryda fell down on the ground, fainted. Put her back on the wagon, and she fainted again, several times. Fed the horses, continued to go. Night came, and it was curfew.

Tape 3, side A

A woman came out of the house, asked me what I want. I took Fryda from the wagon, said we have to warm her up. She said “She's dead already.” I warmed her up, and we slept at this house through the morning. In morning, came to Cracow, to house of our friend, and Stanislaw Soltys helped us, then went home with the horses. What he did was angel work. The horses was all the people had. Fryda went to what was her house before the war, and the janitor was still working there, and she was looking out for a letter—said she'd give a hug and kiss if he brought letter from father. Few days later he came with postcard from Auschwitz from father—he's sick, asked to be picked up. Meantime I met another acquaintance who had a dental office in an apartment. He wanted to sell office and leave for former German territory, where he could set up a modern office. He was a partisan with Armia Ludowa. He rented office to me. I started

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to organize a practice, and I had a nice room to sleep. Started to think maybe I could do the same thing—organize clinic in Polish-occupied German territory. I went, but found nothing I would like. He met another guy there—a survivor—[more details about this guy..] We met, and recognized each other as Jews. I found some instruments I could use to establish practice in Cracow. But before this, I went to Auschwitz to pick up father in law. He was in hospital there. This was still January, 1945. I knew from Polish accounting what had happened in Auschwitz. He was about 56 pounds—when I saw him, I knew everything. That was before we left to the occupied territories. I knew what father told us, but I didn't have the time and the courage to look around while I was in Auschwitz, so I only knew what he told me.

On the way back from occupied territory to Cracow, I had a car accident, and broke some bones...Fryda had to take care of father and husband. Meantime, connection by mail with a brother of her father, Solomon, in the US. Gave us some money. I didn't want to stay in Poland with the Russians, though I had my roots in Poland. I had dreams about keeping a clinic on our farm. But with the Russians, I would not have my freedom. In beginning, we wanted to go to Germany, because one of my brothers, who lives now in US, came to visit us in Poland, and he said in Germany had an apartment and we'd make living there. We left our apt., and went to Katowice, on border with Germany. Then decided to go back to Cracow, where we stayed until August. We found a connection—someone makes passports with visas to Costa Rica, with a transit visa through Belgium. We stayed in Belgium for 5 years. Our intention was not to go to Costa Rica, but to stay in Belgium. But come 1948, did everything possible to get to Israel. My mother, even before the war, somehow said there's no future in Poland for Jews. Let's go to Palestine. But my father said no. He was sure it would be difficult. Said he'd go to Israel when messiah would come. My nephews wanted to go, and not one of them did it.