

Third Interview—Holocaust Survivor

Hank Brodt

Born December 1, 1925, Boryslaw, Poland
Religious background: Jewish

Date of Interview: October 23, 2006

Location: [REDACTED]
High Point, NC [REDACTED]

Conducted by Marcia Horn

Videographer: Alan Gleiner

Survived liquidation of Boryslaw, Poland, Sept. 1942, and forced labor camp
Worked at Plashow armaments factory (April-August 1944)
Sent to Mauthausen; later survived forced march to Ebensee (April 1945)

Hank (born Henek) Brodt lived with his mother, father, brother, and sister in Boryslaw, then part of Ukraine. They were a poor family; his father worked in a factory, and from age 14 Hank helped support his family. The town was mixed about equally with Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians, with little discrimination before World War II. Hank attended Hebrew school. Schools were integrated before the war.

In September 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. They overran Boryslaw in 1941, facing very little resistance. Hank was 16. A Jewish committee (Judenrat), largely doctors and lawyers, was quickly formed; the Germans gave orders through them. Drafts of Polish citizens began February-March, 1941. After the Nazis took power, all Jews had to wear a Jewish star. Curfew was at 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. There was no ghetto at the time, but there was little food, and many died of typhus. Then in September 1942, a huge liquidation of over 5,000 began. The poor and sick were especially vulnerable. Hank's mother was bedridden; Hank accompanied her to the railroad station. This was the first Selection; Hank's mother was put on a truck, the last time he saw her. When the Gestapo asked how old he was (he was 17), he was spared. Then he went to the Jewish committee and stayed in an attic for three days in a Jewish house with 8-10 other people whose families had been broken up. No one knew what was happening to the Jews. More people were killed. His sister worked at a local hospital. A forced labor camp was started in the outskirts of Boryslaw. At this point, Hank was in a ghetto; the Ukrainian police were escorts. Hank and others were able to get some rations from the outside. During this time, acts of kindness were connected with payment; Poles would hide Jews when paid; when the money stopped, Jews were turned in. A "very small percentage" behaved "as people should."

At the end of 1943 the ghetto was liquidated in the "6th Aktion." His sister had just given birth to a baby. Hank had a pass to go to town and visited her and gave his rations to his sister. She left her baby, Adela Bromska, in an orphanage. Hank's sister was killed shortly after giving birth. To this day, Hank has been trying to find out what happened to his niece Adela.

On April 13, 1944, Hank, along with others, was sent by train in a cattle car to Plashow, a forced labor camp (not a concentration camp), which manufactured armaments. Hank was a messenger. He did not starve; he was able to get food from the outside by peddling and from the open market. There were men and women in the camp, who were not separated. However, if a woman gave birth, the baby was taken from her. A family "adopted" Hank and he was able to get food from their kitchen. While Hank was in Plashow, no resistance was attempted. Friendships were casual; there was time to get together in the evenings, with occasional music from musicians who had come from Boryslaw.

From June-August 1944, Hank was sent to work in Wieliczka, a camp near Cracow, which was a satellite camp of Plashow. This camp had salt mines; the task was to remove salt from huge caves. In August 1944, the Russian front was approaching, and Hank was sent by cattle car to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. The trip was very hot; there was no water and people were dying of thirst. They stopped at Linz. A Wehrmacht officer heard cries of "water," but other officers told him that if he gave water to those in the cattle car, he would be sent to join them.

Mauthausen was a huge camp, owned by Himmler, which supplied humans to other camps. There were huge stone quarries, and prisoners had to walk up 186 steps, carrying enormous boulders, throw them down, and start again. Many couldn't make it up the steps, and the Nazis threw the prisoners down. Hank was in Mauthausen for two weeks and was then sent to Melk, a factory in the mountains which made industrial parts, supervised by German civilians.

In Melk, many were sick with dysentery. It was here that Hank came across a man who tried to commit suicide. The rations were very sparse. Bread tasted like clay. A story went around that black coal stopped dysentery. The men tried to make "toast." One day a guard took bread from one of the men, and this man tried to hang himself. Hank saw him, cut him down with the edge of a spoon, and gave him his own bread ration. The man survived. (Years later, Hank met him in Chicago!)

In March 1945, Hank was evacuated from Melk to Linz and then by boat to Ebensee. Part of this trip included a forced march of 25 km. Those who couldn't make it were shot. Ebensee wasn't equipped to handle 30,000 prisoners, and its crematorium couldn't keep up with the dead. People in town said they "didn't know" what was happening, even though they saw people marching every day. One day, the camp officers called the interpreters, who announced that the prisoners should flee to the caves to protect themselves from the approaching Americans. The French refused to go! At 1:00 p.m., the Americans liberated the prisoners at Ebensee. Some prisoners

took the law into their own hands, attacking the camp foreman. The American soldiers couldn't stop them. Other prisoners could not avoid the temptation to eat too much too fast and died. Hank went to the American army to look for work and food. An American soldier told Hank he could be a KP and wash dishes in exchange for food and a place to sleep. This man, along with Hank's brother-in-law, helped Hank come to the U.S.

Hank arrived in New York on March 17, 1949. There was a big parade, which Hank thought was for the liberators, but it was really for St. Patrick's Day! He worked at various jobs, first in Washington Heights, then the Bronx, then Chicago. In 1950, during the Korean war, he enlisted and was sent overseas to Mannheim, Germany. The army gave him a chance to take English classes twice a week, since he had only completed 7th grade, and to take other courses. In Germany he resumed courtship of a young woman from Czechoslovakia he had met. It took her 9 months to get clearance to come to the U.S. She had a sister in New York and persuaded Hank to move there. They moved from Brooklyn to Washington Heights. Hank got a job working for a newspaper.

Hank's most vivid memory during the Holocaust was simply surviving and also saving his friend's life from hanging. To Holocaust deniers, he asks, "Is it ignorance?" and wonders how anyone can deny, for example, that his sister, before she was killed, had left her baby at an orphanage. He sees dangers in the world, especially in Iran, whose leader doubts that the Holocaust ever happened. When the subject of how to explain to children what happened, Hank revealed that he didn't want to talk to his own children about the Holocaust until they were much older. When his daughter was about seven, she asked one Rosh Hashanah why she had no grandmothers, aunts, or cousins. Hank did not want to tell her that as far as he knew none had survived—with one possible exception. Hank is still troubled by what happened to his niece Adela. He tried intensively from 1945-50 to find her, placing ads in Polish papers, writing to the American consulate, and even to the mayor of Boryslaw, with no success so far.

Hank now lives with his wife Ada in High Point, NC, and is active in the Jewish community. In addition to English, he knows Polish, Yiddish, German, and Russian. To commemorate Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), Hank has participated twice in the March of the Living, traveling with Temple groups to Poland and to Israel. His message is to let people know and "Never forget." He urges others, "Make the best you can make of your life. Be satisfied with the little things you have."