

Primary Source: Holocaust Survivor - Testament of Abe Borenstein

Long before Hitler's arriving, we in Poland felt the discrimination against us, the Jewish people. It came from the top, from the government. Anti-Semitic outbursts were not right. The struggle was hard for making a living.

I learned to be a Carpenter and in 1939 when the Hitler army overran Poland I already had a shop of my own and hired hands.

At that time I had very little cash. My money was in material or in long term checks. Anyway, I could not collect anymore.

The Germans started catching Jews to work. They beat, tortured, and cut beards from the elderly people. Polish children showed the Nazis where to find the Jews. They created caps at the new border with the Russians and sent there young people. Young people from all over the country started running to the Russian border. Most made it there. My brother and I tried but we had less luck. The Ukrainians caught us, a group of 15 people and handed us over to a Russian officer and they forced us back to the German site.

Instead of trying again we decided to go home and try to persuade our parents to go back with us, so the whole family would be saved. We observed things happening at the border.

To our sorrow, we could not influence our Daddy. Our uncle also worked against us. They did not like Stalin very much. I decided to stay with my family. I was the oldest and besides I had a girl with whom I had went out with for years. I was afraid to take her with me because the conditions on the other side of the border were terrible. My brother left and he made it over to the Russian side.

In the beginning of 1940 I got married. I still made some money by manufacturing soap and other different things.

The town of Radom had about 100,000 inhabitants, 30% of whom were Jews. The German administration established two ghettos in town, one with twenty-two thousand and one with eight thousand, where we were forced to move.

We found an apartment with two rooms. We moved in together with my family. Then in 1941, my wife became pregnant. We had a boy. When the baby was six weeks old he became sick. We had to go to a larger ghetto for a doctor. We risked our lives to move to the larger ghetto, but it did no good because the baby died.

We brought two cows with us to the ghetto. We sold the milk to feed ourselves and the cows. It wasn't much but better than nothing. People were hungry. It got worse from day to day. People were shot trying to get out to buy food for their families. The Poles were afraid to come near us to sell us goods. There were a few in certain places that would. Our people traded everything they had in exchange for potatoes, bread, flour, etc.

The worst was at night hearing the children crying, "mamma I am hungry". The Jewish ghetto administration organized a kitchen with one meal of soup a day. Unfortunately lack of funds made it impossible to continue. People looked like skeletons and then they would swell up. They would fall on the streets dead. Death was everywhere. They were being shot by the Nazis. The Jewish administration had a full time job of picking up the bodies to bring them to the cemetery on horse wagons.

In the meantime, the Jewish ghetto police received order from the Germans to provide people for work. We received cards instructing us to come to the police station. If we didn't show up they would look for us. They would force us to work.

The ones who had money bought replacement hands. Some were glad to go because they had the chance to buy or get something to eat outside the ghetto.

In the beginning of 1942, a German gendarme accompanied by a Polish policeman walked into our yard. They began searching all over. They noticed one of our cows didn't have an earring of registry. They took my father with them. The next day we received the news he was dead. They brought him in the large ghetto near the window of a friend and shot him. His face was blue and swollen from them beating and torturing him. His last word was "My children," then Shema Yisrael Addonai Elohaynu Addonai Ehad." [Here O Israel the Lord is My God The Lord Is One; Deuteronomy; the Kiddush ha-Shem]

God did not listen. The hell went on. There was nowhere to run. Some people ran to the Polish side to look for Polish friends but very few had any luck. The German administration threatened the Poles to shoot them if they found any Jew with them. Then they paid five pounds of sugar and five liters of petroleum for denouncing a Jew. Some denounced and

even killed to get the clots or the watch off. In the forest there were some reactionary organized resistance groups with initials A. K. They too, killed many Jews who came to organize themselves in groups to fight the Germans.

>From everyone's point of view, it looked bad. One night, S. S. Troops came into the ghettos searching for young people. They took them out into the streets and shot them. They called it an action against communists.

One day about three months after my father's death, they started putting up new bulbs on the electric posts. We wondered what was coming now. It used to be dark but now we were going to have light. At that time I worked in a Bata shoe factory close to the ghetto. I had a certificate for coming and going to work. My shift was in the afternoon. As usual, my wife, who was six months pregnant, would escort me to the end of the ghetto. I kissed her good bye. About an half an hour later the ghetto was surrounded by armed S. S. Everyone knew something bad was coming.

What I did not know was when I came to work, they didn't let any Jewish workers through the gate. It was about 20 Jewish workers. They didn't stop me, their mistake. Later I met three more Jewish workers they mistakenly let in. None of us could do our job, but my manager didn't mind. The four of us went up to a higher building to look down in the ghetto. It was lit up but we couldn't see much.

Around eleven o'clock the shooting started, machine guns, revolvers, shooting like in a war. We could hear crying from woman and children and the hollering of the S. S. men. They formed a line of people making them move in the direction of the train station. As they passed by the fence of the Bata factory the shooting still went on. They pulled out people, we could hear them hollering, begging for their lives, asking for mercy, then a shot and then quiet.

The night started disappearing as did the marching people. From time to time, we could still hear raffles, probably on people who tried to hide.

We went back to the first floor of the building where we could see clearly the field around the factory . Our people were digging holes and the S. S. men were watching them. Some carried the dead to the holes. We learned later from a friend who was shot in the arm that his mother and sister were dead. They were lying on him. The boys helped him. He helped carry his mother and sister to the grave so the S. S. men would not notice. He is alive and lives in France now.

I didn't have my family to go home to any more. We were not allowed to go to the ghetto. By ten o'clock a.m. the gates opened and in marched several hundred Jewish people from the large ghetto. After a selection they went through. The S. S. men took away two thousand people from the large ghetto and put them on a train together with the eight thousand of ours. From a few Jewish policeman who brought the workers to the Bata factory we learned that they marched the two thousand people to the train. Again the same shootings and beatings.

The cattle wagon floors were covered with bleach powder about two inches thick. They pushed in every wagon, so many people, that it was impossible to breathe. They pushed the smaller children over the heads of the people. After it was filled up we knew they couldn't stay alive for very long. It was a choking death, a terrible death, I felt like I was choking myself. I was resigned, I didn't care when they gave out coffee and pieces of bread to the people.

I almost got shot when an S. S. man chased a man who tried to go in the direction of the ghetto. He ran back mixed in with the mass and the S. S. man thought that I looked to be the one. He finally gave up.

We were quartered in the Bata factory. We received some food but it was not enough. We slept on a cement floor. I had nothing to put on the floor to make it softer. Then it was August 17th, we were ordered to line up. They marched us to the large ghetto through the fields behind the town. The fields were full of bloody spots and other signs of killed people; like hats, bags with bread and sandwiches and damaged suitcases.

They let us in the ghetto. We learned we were trapped. They were putting up bulbs on the posts. The S. S. surrounded the ghetto; like animals in a cage. People ran around to find any spot to get out.

It was already dark when S. S. troops marched in the ghetto calling and hollering to get out on the street. From there they ran us to a huge place free of buildings.

There a mass of people squeezed together fighting for breathe. Mothers lost their children. People stepped on some, there was no way to help them. You could not bend down to help. What was going on? Were the people in front the ones the S. S. picked out to shoot? Everybody in front tried to move to the middle. This was calculated strategically by the S. S. to keep mass together. They formed lines, higher rank S. S. officers stood in front of them selecting by pointing with their finger where to go, left or right.

It didn't take much to see that right was the good side. He showed me to the right. There was a group of young people I joined. When the group got bigger, they led us, four in a line, to a yard in a leather factory. They also brought in young women but kept them separated from us.

I like to mention that a week or so before that compulsory transfer some factories, run by Germans, like the ammunition factory or division of the army and police enlisted young people and kept them quartered there. Some ran outside the ghetto and are hiding in the forests taking their chances there.

The S. S. troops marched the people from the ghetto to the train the same way as before, and us the so called lucky ones were brought back in the ghetto only a smaller one. They let us have a small part of the large ghetto. Everyone ran to find a place to stay. It took about one hour when S. S. men and Jewish Police started knocking on the doors calling to get outside again. They ran us in one direction of the street. They stopped and started forming two parties; it was hard to decide which was the good one. Only a little later we knew. I was lucky again. They needed some more people to fill up the train. To take the gas chamber in Treblinka, we learned a few days later. Also the ten thousand people with my family went there.

A day later they took people to work. I was among them. The S. S. men took us, a group of 30 people to work in the ghetto emptying the people. We went through the place where the selection was made. It looked like a slaughter house. Blood all over, packages with belongings, some had groceries, bread and so on. Everyone of us were hungry but few of us grabbed the bread. I watched one take off a slice soaked with blood and the rest he ate. I couldn't forgive him. The bodies were already removed.

We searched in the houses for the better things, that was the orders from the S. S. men. (furs, textile materials, leather and so on.) Of course, we dressed ourselves a little better too when we found something suitable.

I started working with a group in a gendarme unit, building barracks. It was the beginning of 1943. They brought back to the ghetto people from different places where they were quartered.

On the morning of January 13th, again the little ghetto was surrounded by S. S. They didn't let us out to work, yet people registers from before to immigrate to Palestine were called out by name. They let them in the yard of the Jewish police. The others they lined up to go to the train. I was in. I knew I was marching to my death and yet there was nothing I or we could do, now or even before.

The biggest part of the polish population was anti-Semitic. The influential Catholic Church would not practice "MERCY". When I think of that it makes me so sad; how we could have helped each other against our mutual enemy.

Like I said we were moving toward the gate of the ghetto, and the S. S. did nothing to discourage people from turning back. The S. S. knocked them over their heads with anything they got a hold of. They used legs from chairs, their pistols and they shot some and so on. Then I noticed a friend of mine, he was a carpenter on the side walk with an S. S. man. I called him loudly, he heard me and gave me a sign to come over. I did. They looked for more carpenters. Across the street from us three wooden boxes were displayed and they made the people take off their gold rings, watches, necklaces and so on and put them in the boxes.

Our group got bigger. The S. S. added some tailors, shoe makers, etc. , we were 30 people. He led us in police yard and we waited until the last of the people left the gate. There we stood in a line. Before us was laying a dead man who had been shot.

Our S. S. man walked out with us. He took us to a camp at the end of our town, Radom Barracks under barbed wire. There I surprisingly met a cousin of mine between the hundred of young people. Men and women who worked mostly for the ammunition factory. There was also a tailor shop in the camp, a cabinet maker shop and others.

We made furniture for the high ranking officers. They shipped it home to Germany. As the days went by we talked and wondered how life is so strong. We lost our families, our own life was in danger every day and yet our people joked, sang and ever performed theater sometimes on Sunday evening.

A group of our people were taken every day to work in a printing plant. They often brought back a German paper. We learned to read between the lines. It was encouraging. The news from the Russian front. We hoped that the United States and the allies would start the second front.

In the meantime these murderers kept on murdering. They picked up a group of intellectuals, doctors, lawyers and so on, over thirty people. Outside the ghetto was waiting a truck with armed Ukrainians, under S. S. Command. They brought them on a field and shot them. One doctor managed to grab a pistol from one of the S. S. men and shot him. One woman they brought back to the ghetto alive. It looked like they wanted her to tell the story.

Then one day in 1943, I don't recall the exact date, they liquidated the little ghetto. They bought all the people in our camp and kept them separated from us. They went through a selection, and picked out the young people. They put the young people to one side. The older people and the few children that were still left by saving them in different ways. On the other side, I stood and watched a friend of mine, they wanted her to give up her little boy. He was 6 years old and they would let her go to the other side if she gave him up but she wouldn't. She put up a fight when they grabbed the boy. They finally took her by the legs and arms and threw her and the child in a big truck with the others. A truck with armed Ukrainians followed them.

As so my telling the story could go on and on, and sometimes it is a heroic story of some of my people I have to shorten it because I only have 45 minutes of recording time.

Around July 1943, our camp in Radom became officially a concentration camp. In July 1944 they liquidated the camp. They brought us to Auschwitz, where we went through a selection, then sent to Vaihingen, Germany.

In November 1944, from Vaihingen, we were sent to Hesselthal. In the beginning of April 1945, from Hesselthal, we marched to Allach (Dachau).

In the morning of April 29, 1945, we noticed a white flag in front of our camp. We knew we were free, but most of us could not get up from the cement floor. We looked like skeletons.

The first American officer came in, we yelled greeting him. The sound was like from yelling cats. I was feeling sick. I went to a doctor and he told me I had T. B. I was put in a sanatorium.

<http://www.holocaustsurvivors.org/data.show.php?di=record&da=texts&ke=2>