

Isak Federman Testimony Transcript

I'm Isak Federman. I was born in 1922 in Wolbrom, Poland, a small little city of 12,000 population. Half of it was Jewish. I had a family that was the prettiest, physically, the prettiest family in town. I had my mother, she was gorgeous and beautiful. My two sisters, they were in their early twenties. And I had a little brother. My father died when I was nine months old, and I don't remember my father at all. Although my mother was left with three little orphans, she maintained her living by manufacturing men's shirts and she worked very hard. She was so good that she wouldn't get remarried, she told us, because she didn't want a stepfather to be involved until we grew up. Eventually she remarried and I don't remember exactly but I must have been about ten or eleven years old.

In 1936, I left home and I went to Bedzin, which is a town about 60 kilometers from Wolbrom. I attended school for a year and then I went to Lodz. Until 1939, I worked in Lodz and I went to school. And my mother insisted that I come home because there was going to be a war. And this was sometime either July or August. And I came home and of course, a few weeks later the Nazis invaded Poland in September 1, 1939. We were very close to the German border, where I lived. So, it didn't take too long for the German army to occupy Wolbrom, my little town. They came in on Monday morning. Hundreds of hundreds of tanks came through our city and they occupied our town and about Wednesday, the Gestapo moved in and set up shop. And, of course, they announced that all males, fourteen years and up, must report at the square. Nobody knew for what reason and, of course, anybody that wouldn't, would be shot. It so happened that my sister was able, my younger sister, she was older than I was, except she was one of the younger one of the two, spoke to the German and he let me go somehow because she told him that I wasn't fourteen years old, because I was seventeen. The Gestapo took all these people and they marched them to a little town of Zawiercie, which was forty or fifty kilometers from our city. For no reason in the world did they do anything except just torture them for several days in the heat, without food and they let them go. And they all came back to back home.

A month or two went by and as I mentioned before, my mother and my father, my stepfather now, had a little manufacturing plant of men's shirts and, of course, my father had a long beard and in those days, whoever had a beard it wasn't because it was stylish. They had a beard because they were recognized as religious Jews. So, of course, if he went outside the German soldiers used to take these guys and tear the beard out. So he couldn't operate this business. So at that time I had to get involved and somehow to make a living. So I took a bicycle and I used to go around in the little small farm country places and peddle some of the shirts that my mother and father used to manufacture. And from there I went with my bike back to Bedzin and Sosnowiec where I knew some people. And this way I was moving merchandise from one place to the other in order to make a living. And one day on the way back I came to a little town, by the name of Slawkow. And there was a bridge going over a small little river and

the German soldiers were guarding that bridge. So they asked me to stop. I came through on the bicycle, and of course, I knew that if I stopped that there will be trouble, so I didn't. And I just went as fast as I could and they shot after me and, of course, I got a flat, so I had to return back and they beat me up and turned me over to the Polish police. They had Polish policemen in the area and they took me back to the city. And the Polish police took me into their place and interrogating me to find out who I was and so forth and I was lucky then, that they did turn me over to them because otherwise, I probably would have been shot. I found out later that anybody that was caught on the bridge, was immediately shot and thrown into the river. And I was lucky enough that I survived this particular situation except when I came out of the police station, I found that my bicycle was gone so here I was completely out of business. And I walked forty or fifty kilometers back to my city. I stayed overnight in one of the Jewish homes in the square, slept overnight and the next morning I walked home and I came home without my bicycle.

I was home several months and late in '39, my mother sent me to get something from the grocery store, get some sugar, and buy some butter, and six SS men stopped me and they kicked me and they told me to get on a truck. And I was arrested and I never came back home. From there they took me on a truck to Miechow (7:18), a little town which was twenty-one kilometers. And henceforth, I spent the next couple years in five different labor camps. These were really not camps. They were like we worked for a private construction company, a German private construction company, that built roads, bridges, railroads, barracks and stuff like that. And what they did, they used you know slave labor supposedly for that purpose that they didn't have to pay. That's all they did is get the army to guard us, and feed us, and work twelve hours a day. And we were told, the main thing that we were told, is anyone that tries to escape, will be shot. And then they will go back and get the family and shoot or take them into concentration camps.

The first real concentration camp that I came into was Rzesow. Rzesow was east of Krakow and a little bit south. We worked in an airplane assembly plant that was really a precise kind of work and if you didn't do your job, it was all over with. I stayed in that particular camp over a year. That's the longest that I stayed in one camp. The winters were absolutely horrible. The food was terrible and the beatings were just horrendous. I stayed in there over a year. In fact, that's the first place that we saw that we realized that they were really killing people. Anyone that got out of line was taken behind the barracks and shot. In fact, I remember a person that was there with his son. And he must have been, I'd say, 45 years old and he was probably my age. And the winter was so bad that he went outside to relieve himself and evidently a guard noticed that from the tower and they put the light on him and they sent another guard with a dog and they caught this guy, and they put him into separation away from the barracks. And the next day, his punishment was to dig a hole for the latrines outside. You know and a latrine was probably as big as a half a football field. And no person could get it done by himself. And so all of us from the barracks used to jump out and try to help him. But eventually, they shot him right behind the barrack.

After the Rzesow, we were taken back east into several areas. Behind the after the Germans invaded Russia in 1941, they kept going east. And as we stayed in Rzesow they took some of us out of there. They took us on these trips out to the Russian side, to do some work for the German Army. And eventually, we were retreating with the Germans into Plaszow and that must have been around 1943. I stayed in Plaszow three months or so, I don't remember exactly. But when I came in I ran into a young kid, a young kid, I was at that time twenty-one and there was a young kid, that was probably about fifteen, sixteen and he was from my hometown and he told me to make sure that I do not go between barracks by myself. Because usually when you come into a new camp, the most important thing to do is to kind of find out where everything is so you can kind of know what to do and how to protect yourself. And this kid really told me not to walk between barracks, because Mr. Goeth, was the camp commandant of Plaszow, was shooting down, as you saw on *Schindler's List*, anyone that he could point at, anyone that was walking by himself and he could kill him, that's what he did. And I made sure that I didn't go by myself, usually between barracks, while I was in Plaszow.

We were taken to Wielicka. This was an area that had salt mines and we were taking over the work and the mines for several months. Again it was very cold. This was already the winter or 1943 or the fall of 1943, if I can remember correctly. And we spent several months in those cold mines those salt mines – just bitter cold. I couldn't wait to get out of there and to find something else, possibly get away from there.

We were lucky enough to get out of there and they loaded us into box cars and they took us west into Germany. That was the first time I came across the German border as a inmate. And they took us into near Brunswick, in German it's called Braunschweig, in English it's called Brunswick. There was a camp and the name of it was called Klinker, another horrible camp. The food again was very sparse. At night I would go into barracks that were occupied by German civilian guys who came out of jails, they were jail inmates, certain convicts, that were made in charge of a particular camp that was inside of the camp. They were running the operations inside. And I used to go in where there was a dining room, where they were feeding those people and usually they had better food than we did. So I tried to help at night and clean the place up. And I used to take the potato peels and put them in a sack and take them back to my barrack. And in the morning, that was pretty good food. With the watery soup that we got it went pretty well. It helped. Several weeks went by and one of these convicts, his name was Otto, I don't remember his second name. He says, "Come over here." And he was a guy, probably in his thirties or forties and I was a young kid. And he said, "Why are you eating taking all those potato peels? I've been watching you." And I was afraid to tell him, but I did. And I said, "because I haven't got enough food and I eat that." So he told me that he'll help me and he did. He let me come in and clean this place gave me some food every once in a while and he also announced to me that no Jewish person gets out of this camp. Now if you want to get out I'll try and help you. But you must leave, because never will a Jewish person get out. And when they

have transports get out of there, they are usually non-Jews that they move out. Of course, he helped me get out of there and he was a good guy.

From there we were taken to Flossenburg. Flossenburg was a camp near Dachau. We stayed in Flossenburg several months and it was in the Bavarian Mountains. During the day it was hot and at night it was freezing. And what they did, the first thing they did, they took our clothes away and they kept us naked for three or four days. Supposedly that they were sent to disinfect and several days later we got a pile back and it was anybody's guess what you gonna get. You got whatever you could to get some clothes on and then we used to take and exchange. I was a little guy and I had a big suit and the big guy would have a little suit and we just changed courses and we survived somehow. This was another camp that there was absolutely no work and it was strictly to torture people and to kill them off. And I got out of there. And I took a chance and volunteered again and wound up in Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen was a bad choice.

I spent a couple months in Bergen-Belsen and from there we were transferred to Sachsenhausen. Sachsenhausen was near Berlin. And there I ran into, again my luck, that I ran into a fellow from my home town. He still lives in New York City. And he was a watchmaker at home. I remember him. He was a little older. And what the German's did in Sachsenhausen, they used to bring in all the stuff that they took away from all the different camps – watches and all kind of stuff. And they had a manufacturing plant to repair all this stuff and to put it in shape. And Wellner is the guy that worked in there and I found out and they were separated with barbed wire around their particular situation over there. And I found out so I made my way over there at night and Joselow Wellner used to take care of me and give me a little package because they fed them better than us. The worst thing we had in Sachsenhausen was the appell, what they called, in the morning. They'd wake you up at 5:00 in the morning, and sometimes earlier and you'd stand for roll call for hours in the mud up to your knees. And then after they decide that everything is in order, we'd get a little soup and coffee, not too hot and then they'd load us in trucks and they'd take us to Berlin and after all the bombings, we'd clean the streets up. The Americans were bombing in the daytime and the British would bomb at night and we used to go in and that's the work we did at Sachsenhausen.

I did that several months and then I was lucky to go on another transfer. And this time, I caught a pretty good one. I went to France – Colmar. The Americans are coming closer, so the Germans packed us up in trains and took us again back to Germany. From Colmar they took us into Hamburg. From Hamburg I was sent back again.

They moved up back to Bergen-Belsen. This is my second time to Bergen-Belsen. And of course, Bergen-Belsen wasn't any better than the first time. It was awful. People were dying, people were being murdered going to work. One day I tried to volunteer again and we were specifically told that no Jews should volunteer because you're not accepted. But I did anyway. And evidently a German recognized somehow that I'm Jewish. And he asked me to pull my pants down and in Europe, you know, Jews were the only people that were circumcised so he

recognized and he told me to report that night. But I knew that if I report, it's gonna be over with. I had a very wonderful Russian friend at that time and he started out with a POW from the Russian Army. And we made it out of the camp that evening. But we weren't gone too long. I was shot a couple of times, and eventually, we were recaptured and we were taken into Hamburg. And I was dumped this particular time I was lucky that there was a big alarm, and they were bombing the city and our German guards had to run into a bunker and they dumped us into a jail. And I got mixed up with all the inmates over there and that saved my life again. And a few days later, we were all gathered up and put on a train and we were evacuated again. We were on the train for eleven days without any food. By that time we got to Sandposten [Sandbostel] which was my next camp.

I'd say that probably 60% or more of the people were dead by the time we got there. And this was pretty close to the end of the war. This must have been probably March or April of 1945. And that's all we were doing there, is gathering the people in the morning and putting them on a pile of the guys who died over night. Typhus was all over the place. One day they brought in a transport of Hungarian the last of the Hungarian Jews. And I went with another guy to take a barrel of soup for the newcomers. And of course, by that time, I think most of us were like animals. And this guy and I took that barrel of soup into the latrine and we literally ate that hundred gallons of soup by ourselves, the two of us. And of course, after that I was sick and full of typhus, diarrhea, high fever. And I found myself, the only thing I remember, that I was under a water pump trying to stay alive. Two buddies of mine, dragged me over there to that water pump and they kept pumping the water on me. And the only thing that I remember, is that I saw a British tank come across the wall.

And the next thing I woke up three days later two or three days later I don't remember I was cleaned up and I was hooked up, being fed intravenously and a British captain was standing over and he said in Yiddish, "what is your name." I weighed 80 pounds. And this doctor Bloomfield, in later years, we went to visit him in Manchester, England. Ann and I went to visit him. He told me that I had two hours to live and that they really saved my life. I was in a field hospital – a British field hospital. I spent six seven weeks, I don't remember, couple months, and they put me back together somehow. I survived. A lot of us didn't. So one day a soldier came in a British soldier and he said, "You're gonna be discharged. You're getting out of here." And he said, "Where do you want to go?" And I said, "I don't know where to go." And he said, "Why don't we look at a map and we'll see where you'd feel comfortable to leave. "Here I'm in a pair of pajamas. It's all I got. At that time I'm twenty-three years old. I have nothing.

So he takes me in a jeep in my pajamas and we go to the little town of Soltau. And we go into a house and a lady answers the door and he says, "Is your husband home?" And she says, "No, he's in prison. He's on the Russian front." And he says, "Have you got a picture? We want to see him." He takes a look at the picture. Says, "He's too big. We gotta go." We finally went into another house and he got me dressed up in a pair of pants, this was August 1945, and a pair of shoes and a shirt.

And we decided to go back to Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen was now a displaced persons camp. And it's maybe 70 kilometers from there, which isn't too far and I said, "ok, we'll go there." He drives me into the camp and, of course, now this displaced persons camp are the buildings that the administration was occupying during the war. Now the displaced persons live in these nice buildings. Little rooms where the Germans used to live. And he dropped me off at the office and it's in the afternoon and I go in the office up there and they tell me that the JVC is operating in the area and that they have a list. They're compiling a list, this is only two months after the war and they're compiling lists of survivors. And whatever they had, I couldn't find anything of anybody that was my family. And that's really when I found out that my whole family was destroyed – in 1942 that everybody was gone. And prior to the liberation, on my second trip to Bergen-Belsen, I'm going back a little bit before the liberation. I ran into a guy that was a friend of my friend who I was with quite a bit in those days and he was from Ann's hometown and he had a friend who was Ann's brother. And then a few weeks later that's how Ann and I met – in Bergen-Belsen. This is my story up to now.

Interviewer: This is Isak Federman and his wife, Ann. We understand that you met in Bergen-Belsen. Can you tell us about it? First of all what year was it?

Isak: That was in August of 1945. And as I started to say, this was the best thing that came out of Bergen-Belsen. But I told her right away that we going to America. We got to get out of here. So, a few months down the road, we decided to get across to the American zone. Bergen-Belsen was in the British zone, as I told you before. The British took me there. And we decided, again, to travel and get to the American zone. And when the American consulate opened up in Frankfurt, in April or March or April of 1946, we were there to register to go to America.

Interviewer: You were married by then?

Isak: No, we married in Kansas City.

Ann: We made a promise to ourselves not to get married in Germany. So we waited. Because we knew we were going to emigrate to the United States, so we waited and got married three months after we came to Kansas City.

Interviewer: Can you describe that trip?

Isak: Yes. They picked us up in buses, no trains, and took us to Bremen, and gave us \$50 a person, and then they gave us a ticket to get on the ship. And when we came to the United States, we were eleven days on board, and when we came to the United States, they picked us up in New York. The HIAS took us over. And they took New York in a hotel. And they picked ten of us. And they said we ought to go to Kansas City. And we said, "Where is Kansas City?" and they said, "Well, it's a nice town." So, we had nothing to lose. That's fine.

Ann: The people had awaited us at the Union Station. You know, we traveled from New York by train. And the Family Services in Kansas City, had a social worker, not a social worker, excuse me, a volunteer, who came and picked us up and took us to our respective places wherever we gonna live. The boys were in one place and we were in another place, the girls. And she took us to a room and board place. Most people rented rooms in those days, so just room and board. And we waited about three months till Isak met this rabbi and I'll let you talk about that.

Isak: Later on I got acquainted with Rabbi Stern and he was writing a book at that time. So I kind of looked up things for him. I had nothing else to do sometimes in the evening. We were just two blocks away. So, I kid Ann a lot about that I never proposed to her. Because one night he said to me, "Hey, how long you gonna mess around with this girl? It's time you get married." I said, "Call her up and tell her." He did.

Ann: And we made a date for September the 22nd.

Isak: So we did we got married and the City was at the wedding.

Ann: They had this big article in The Jewish Chronicle that Friday, before our wedding Sunday. They were talking about two concentration camp people who were going to get married. But the wedding took place, and no invitations, just an announcement in the paper. We had to have 500 people at that wedding. Those days the community really showed up! We had a reception wedding.

Isak: They were wonderful!

Ann: We to Denver on our honeymoon on a Greyhound bus.

Isak: We went to night school and we learned how to read and write and speak a little bit and then we went to citizenship class.

Ann: And then after five years, I was pregnant with my son, when I got my citizenship papers, five years later.

Isak: We were very happy to become American citizens.

Ann: It was the most wonderful feeling to be in that courthouse holding up a flag to become citizens of this United States. And we're just very lucky to be here.

Source: Isak Federman Video Testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/federmanisak/>

