

Joseph Gutovitz Testimony Transcript

My name is Joseph Gutovitz. I was born 1918, May 18, 1918. We were born in a small town in Poland - Bialobrzegi is the name of the town. I was born actually in Warka, but when I was a baby we moved to Bialobrzegi. I don't remember those times. Anyway, I remember the times we lived in Bialobrzegi. I went to school. I have seven grades education. My dad was a cobbler. I had five, I had six brothers and a sister. The oldest one was Sam. The second brother was Abe. The third brother was Israel and my youngest two sib... And after them I was born, Joseph, and the two youngest which were twins – Benjamin and Esther. And then when I, after high school, we lived that little small town... Not high school - grade school, and we moved to the small town, Bialobrzegi. That was in the village we used to live - that village was Biejków. The name of it was Biejków. And my dad kept a little orchard there. So we all kids, grandkids used to go in there and get some of that fruit – cherries, pears, prunes and plums, and all those kinds of fruits. And I used to, you know, go up in the tree and try to get them down the bushels. Then we moved to Bialobrzegi.

In Poland you could only be a tailor, a shoemaker or one of these little professions. And I didn't want to be a shoemaker, because I saw my dad working so, so hard, being up from 6:00 in the morning to 12:00 midnight making shoes from scratch. And I didn't want to be a shoemaker. After school I was 12 or 11 years old. I wanted to be a barber. And I went to college, to barber college. It took about four years. Studied books about hygiene and sanitation, you know all that. I became a barber. I licensed barber when I was about 17 years old. Then the time, that was in 7, in '30, in '39 - '37, I start working in a barber shop. Open the shop, the barber shop and I had two people working with me, apprentices.

My dad worked awfully hard. And, you know, I tried to help him, you know. If I would get an extra, I went to barber shop and had some tips, and stuff like that. I tried to accumulate or save it and give it to him if he need it, you know. And he was a gracious man. My mom, we used to sit and eat dinner at home - I don't remember a time, five in the afternoon, when we sat down to eat dinner that some beggars didn't knock on the door. You know, there was a lot of beggars – a lot of poor people. They offer a penny, offer a nickel, offer a dime, whatever you could [unclear], but my mom couldn't take it. She opened up the door, got up from her seat and gave her meal to the beggar. I never seen her eat a meal together with the family. She was so good-hearted.

I got to be about 14, 15 years old and I worked already in the barber shop. And when I was home, I start dating about 15. You know – dating, you know, “kids love,” you know, a boy for a girl. My dad didn't like it, because I woke him up, 12:00 coming home, or 1:00. So we start arguing not to come home that late. He works hard and coming back home, got tired of listening that, you know, and all that story. One morning I packed up. My mom knew it and she

didn't want me let go but I packed up my few things, and I said goodbye and there was an automobile and I went to Warsaw.

I went to Warsaw – I knew some people there that I knew and checked in with a friend of mine. Next day I went out to look for a job. I found a beautiful job as a barber and I made a good living. In those days, a good living, I made 20 zloty, 30 zlotys was a good living plus tips. I could rent myself an apartment. I could rent myself - buy little gifts or bring to go home to bring for my nephews some gifts. My mom I wanted to by a gift. Or I saved something. I used to go twice a year home. I lived in Warsaw.

In meantime, I met in home was coming a girl. She was going to *Gymnasium*. And I met her. And she fell in love with me and I fell in love with her and I was 16, 17 years old. She had an uncle in my town, Bialobrzegi. And finally, she find me a place in her building that I rented. And we got engaged. I was about 17, 18 years old. And during the war, you know, I was too young and I didn't think of getting married. But she was in Warsaw Ghetto. Closed up in the Warsaw Ghetto. In the ghetto you could not find any bread. You could not find any people was going alive. Starvation, you see one week from another. People falling, people laying on the street, people begging, for no food. Hitler got closed up the whole Warsaw Ghetto with Jews, only Jews were there. Polish people couldn't enter this place otherwise they could get shot too. After the Warsaw Ghetto start building, we heard that the Germans going to start shooting up the ghetto. And two weeks later they start shooting up ghetto, but I escaped at nighttime to Poland to the town that my dad lived in – Bialobrzegi. And I left my wife there. We got married. And she went with her parents to Auschwitz – to, to Treblinka – the gas chamber.

Interviewer: How did you escape from Warsaw?

I escaped during the night. It was 72, 70 kilometers. Nighttime. I laid in the forest - find a grape or a grape juice or whatever or a potato. I ated *brot küchen* that night. Just walked at nighttime until arrived to my little town where my parents lived. That's how I arrived from Warsaw Ghetto.

Interviewer: Were they gone by that time?

No. Parents were still in Bialobrzegi. And they made a ghetto in Bialobrzegi. And from there, they took them out. The ghetto... from all small little towns, the Jews left, and villages, the small towns, they gathered in that little town. And then the town, the ghetto was closed. They start liquidating them.

I was in Bialobrzegi and I start barbering again. I had a friend of mine – a Polish, good friend of mine. He said, “Joe why don't you go out and work for me? He start be a policeman. And he said, “You run the shop. You are a good friend of mine. I know you was apprentice from me.” You know, he was an older gentleman. And I went to work for him. So I had paper that I could go out from ghetto and work in that Polish neighborhood. And the Germans used to

come in and get their haircut from me. There was one mean gendarme. He was, his name was Felzgraff. I even remember his name. Felzgraff. He came over and laid down the gun on the table. He said, “You *Jude*, you Jew, if you give me a haircut...” “I let you give me a haircut and a shave. But, if you give me one scratch with the razor blade, see this gun? You’ll be dead.” So you can imagine I start shaving and my hands were going like that. I was, I was 17 years, maybe 18 years at that time. Seventeen and a half years.

Time came they came to Bialobrzegi. In 19-, in ‘42 it was bombed four times by November - September or November. And one night they came along and said “*Aussiedlung!*” You know, they *aus* - every Jew go, have to go be on the street. Whatever you can take possessions, shirt, or... Go, leave everything!” You know. They start all the Jews in one place. They found in the place like 60, 50 years old - they shot him right on spot. They shot him. They didn’t let him go any farther. Why they do that? They liquidate Judaism from the whole area. They took them to Treblinka. We didn’t know at that time. Time, later on, we found they gas chambered them all.

I was left as a barber to serve the Germans. My brother was left as a shoemaker, as a cobbler. And I had a third brother was left. We both worked for the Germans. We shaved them, we cut their hair and all that because there was no Polish barbers there. There was no Poles that were barbers at that time. And we worked. They let us live and work there. They left a tailor, a shoemaker and a barber, and a couple shoemakers... a couple tailors. That’s all, about ten of us altogether. They gave us a room, a special room to live in. We lived in fear, day in and day out because one day we found out they found in, in the forest a couple our friends and they shot them. The next day we found out the same thing, the next day and so on. We thought our ends are coming too. All of a sudden, about a year later, come an order they have to liquidate all the Jews what are left, the few Jews we left in Bialobrzegi and to that take them to ... So at that time they took me and my brothers, a big boss, to Skarżysko-Kamienna. That was ammunition plant where Pollocks make ammunition – bullets, bombs and all that nature.

Interviewer: [When you got on the bus to go to the camp, what was that like?](#)

Horrible! We didn’t know where we going. We don’t know if we going to survival, we don’t know if they taking us to death. We went three brother to Skarżysko from Bialobrzegi – two barbers, me and another brother, and the shoemaker. And we worked. And all of a sudden, big tall German, you know - Talbott was his name - tall German, come over to me and he said, “You right, your two brothers left.” I didn’t know what that, you know, what that means, you know. “*Recht und links!*” you know. “Left and right!” I didn’t know what... I said, “Herr Talbott” – I got up, stood up like that [Joe stands] and big German and I said, “Herr Talbott, you can’t separate us. We were seven, six brothers and a sister. I got nobody left except two brothers. If you take me, you take me together with them wherever that...to dead or alive.” He looked at me, the German, looked at me like that. “Where are your brothers? Show me your brothers.” So I pointed out I said, “there is my brother and this is my brother.” He took both

brothers and he said, “They going to stay with you.” He took my wish, and he was apparently a good German. And he said, “I’m going to give you wish that you going to stay here.” The other side, they took them [unclear] work C, you know with the, C – A, B, C. Work C was a camp where you worked the poison for the bombs – yellow poison, you know. If you worked there four weeks you had to die because your lungs got yellow, and you couldn’t live longer than four weeks. So I saved right there. I didn’t know at that time. I saved their life right there, you know.

So in concentration camp, in Skarżysko – you want to know about Skarżysko - I worked 12-hour shift. Then I got a [unclear] leader, was a German, from Germany. But anyway, that German used to bring me a piece of cigarette, a piece of salami. Anyway, in concentration camp, I got the first man sick. I had typhus fever. I didn’t tell you this story yet, before then. When we come Skarżysko, I had a pair of boots on me. And I wear like a 5 ½ number shoe, for a very small foot, you know – very small size. I was 18 years old. And when my shi..., son, brother was a shoe... cobbler, my dad and mom gave me jewels. My mom jewels diamond earrings, she had a chain around the neck with a golden watch, and when they parted, they said, “Joseph, hold that, maybe that save your life.” And I had a little sack like that with jewels with all of it everything. And my brother went and put it in, in my heel, both my heels. So he dugged a hole and put in both my feet the jewels and the rings and then we went and everybody had to get undressed. I undressed my shoes, and I said there my jewels go, can’t save it, you know. Every German went to put on the shoe. Nobody could fit – it was a small number. So throws that to the floor. Don’t have [unclear], can’t wear that shoe. And they gave it back to me. And another German came. My brother made those shoes, you know. I put back the shoes on. There were the shoes. When I got sick, from typhus fever, you know, you have high fever. There was no medication, no doctors. If you couldn’t survive, you just lay in barrack, they come out and take you out and shoot you. If you couldn’t produce they take you out and shoot you - middle of the field, whatever, you know. So I was going to work, sickness and my thick feet were [unclear] and I was falling asleep on the machine, you know, making some special things for the bullets. And that German, you know, that..., you know, he said “What’s the matter, Joseph? You don’t feel good?” I said, “No, I’m sick.” He get me a little water on the side. Nobody saw it. He brought me a little water. I had fever, probably of 107, 8, who knows. I survive. And my brother took out a jewel and he sold the Germans for a couple loaves of bread, and we had bread. Enough, and then we bought some rice. We cooked at home, after we got home and cooked on wood, you know, outside.

Then you know this is a sickness that you can get it from..., you know. My brother slept with me and the other one. All three of us got sick with typhus fever. So one brother was so sick, and one time we left in barracks. Me and my brother said, “they going to kill him today.” We left him, we forgot to take him with him, you know. So we both went with the work [unclear]. We said, “We forgot something in the work [unclear]. That *meister*, mine, mine over-man said, “Take him, they left something.” We left to save our brother. Because, there was already a

machine, with machine guns take out my brother to shoot. There was about five dozen of them laying in bed from typhus fever and they have no medication or nothing. They shoot. And we went up and we took off my brother went up on the truck and threw my brother off and we hiding behind the truck and my brother was, you know, dragging him, and that's how I saved, we saved our brother. That's how he come out alive.

Anyway, life went on. They took us...the Germans start marching forward, when they start liberating, defeating German. I mean the Russians start marching forward when they start liberating Germany – defeating Germany. So they moved us from Skarżysko to Częstochowa, it was about 500 miles, to another camp [unclear]. But we knew then where we going because same *fabrik*, same ammunition plant was in Częstochowa. We had to walk there and I know the machines already, how to work on them.

Interviewer: What was it like in that camp?

In camp? Horrible. You see, you stepped over dead people day in and day out. You didn't want to live. There was electrocuted wires. So I went down, hundreds of people went down every day - just touch it, you dead. Every time I went down, like inside of me my mom would push me, "Don't do it Joseph. You going to live it through. You going to live it through." And I backed off. Every time I went down to it, I backed off - didn't commit suicide. The strength of life was still there. I was young. I seen a dog, the Germans with a dog. I said, "I wish I would be a dog. I have liberty" you know. Think of it, you know. There was no soap. There was no water. There was no bath. Lice. And that's why you got the typhus fevers. You lived in horrible conditions. We lived it though. Mark. You can't understand how you've lived it through.

Russians start arriving, that was 18th, 18th of January '45. My brothers, they took both to Buchenwald to Germany. I didn't know at that time. I was saved because I had night shift. They had day shift. They took them away. I had night shift, I was left. I come the next morning up, where's my brothers? I'm all left alone. So I got to be very disappointed – very, very distressed – and I said it's no use to live because I'm not going to survive myself neither. Anyway, the Russians came.

Interviewer: Can you remember what it was like when the Russians came?

No good. I didn't like it. They said to me like that... I went from Częstochowa to Radom. On the train, when I... I was in the clothes from the concentration camp, like a prisoner, you know. So they said, "You *Jude*?" You know, that I'm a Jew. I said, "Yeah." "You was in concentration camp?" "Yeah." "No good. *Jude* no good!" German, I said, "This is mine liberators?"

Interviewer: When the Russians came into the camp, what was the... what happened after? How did you leave that camp after they came?

Well, I escaped. They came in one time when I was in Bialobrzegi looking to find some brothers. We had a dream that maybe our brothers were... Matter of fact, I find my wife. She was a cousin of mine in that little town. And I found another cousin there but no brothers or sisters.

Interviewer: So you went from the camp back to your home town.

Right, right.

Interviewer: You walked back.

No, no, I wanted, was no buses. No communication. Trains for animals, like for fare, you know. Like for things to wear, you know. Like transportation, no passenger transportation. So I went up on that and went to that town and that's where we found those Russians dragging me around, you know, and saying what's good or not bad.

Interviewer: Did the Russians, at the munitions plant, after they liberated that plant...

They did nothing with it.

Interviewer: Did they turn you loose?

They turned me loose. They took all that equipment into Russia [unclear] that – all the equipment. All the ammunition plants, they took to Russia. They took away from Poland everything they could. They robbed them, they took them to their country – to Russia – with buses, with trains, you know, whatever, whatever. And then we were freed. To do what you please, you know. But how did I... Remember, because I knew I had two brothers in Buchenwald. I had a letter in middle May that the two brothers living in Buchenwald they survived - Abe and Israel. That was through direct course. So, I know they're in Buchenwald so me and my present wife went to Buchenwald. We came to Buchenwald some people told us they went to our town looking for me. They heard that I was alive. That far, mis-communicate. I went there to Germany and they went there. We finally got together. We got together in Landsburg am Lech in Germany after the war.

Interviewer: Is that a DP...?

DP camp, a DP camp, yeah. It was about 5,000 Jews and I was policeman there. You know, DP police, you know. But no, no guns. No nothing. In German, that was West Germany. West German.

Interviewer: How long were you there?

I was in West Germany three years waiting for the visa to come to come to United States. An uncle here was trying to bring me out. How did it happen? There was one time a man, right when we arrived in Landsburg, was a man displaying shoes, new shoes for us people from

concentration camp. So I looked him up and I talked to him and I said to him in German, he spoke good German. I said, "Where you from? You an American?" I said. He said, "Yes." I said, "Where you from?" He says, "I'm from Kansas City." I said, "I have an uncle in Kansas City." He said, "Tell me your, his name." I told him, "Abe Gutovitz. He's got a furniture store on Truman Road is the name of the road, of the street." He said, "I know him personally. I know his kids." And that's how I got communication with my uncle that we were all three brothers got liberated.

Interviewer: Were you at the camp for those three years? All three years?

Yeah, in DP camp. In DP camp. That wasn't a camp. That was freedom. You know, it wasn't under Germany, or under, under gun, or anything. Under rule. You got so much to live on. They paid you so much - to get by. Then I was policeman, so I get extra - extra food, extra cigarettes - three years.

Interviewer: Now where did you go when you left Landsburg?

When we left Landsburg, we wait four years to get our visa to come to this country, to this beloved country. And we kissed the ground in America even today - it's a beautiful country.

Source: Joe Gutovitz video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/gutovitzjoe/>