

Abraham Kopec Testimony Transcript

My name is Abraham Kopec. I was born in 1933 – December of 1933 – Christmas in a small town of Goworowo, Poland near the town of Bialystok, not far from Bialystok. In 1939, when I was about five and a half years old, not quite six, the Germans came into our town. They chased all the Jewish people out into the street, burned our houses, and lined us up in front of a machine gun, and to want to shoot us all. Then one of top commanders came in and said, “That’s too many people to kill as one time.” Of course, that was in 1939. Things were not quite as brutal as in 1941 or ‘42. Finally, they dispersed us into fields.

My father was able to hire a man with a wagon to take us to the Russian sector of Poland, which was Bialystok. When we came there, we were living they gave us quarters in a resort area which the Communists confiscated from the other people. And we lived there for six months. The “us” included me, my father, my mother, my aunt. I had an aunt and an uncle and their two children too. And my grandmother was still alive from my mother’s side and also my grandfather and my grandmother of my father’s side. We lived in Poland approximate nine months.

In June of 1940 the Russians came and loaded us into cattle cars on a train and they shipped us – we traveled four weeks by train to Siberia. When we got there we lived in a, in like army-type of barracks that were constructed out of wood. We lived there about a year and my mother died. She had heart problems. And me and my sister, my father couldn’t take care of us, we had to go to an orphanage. And we stayed in an orphanage for approximate four years, four and a half years- until 1946 - the first part of ’46. First we were in an orphanage in Russia near - I’m trying to think of the town – Michurinsk, which was central Russia. Then after the war was over, we were in an orphanage in Poland for a couple months. And then my uncle came and got us.

[Interviewer:](#) Can you tell us what it was like those nine months while you lived in hiding in Poland as a five-year-old?

Well, in Poland see, when we lived in Poland, near the Russian occupation, things were rough, very badly, but it wasn’t, you know, people were dying of more hunger and disease, but not really being killed. See. The only people who ever got killed in Russia were those who were sent to labor camps in Siberia, which we were not in labor camp. We were more in a just a rural area more or less. We were not in a labor camp, see? My father had to work but we didn’t have any armed guards. Because the reason we were sent there is because my father refused to take Russian citizenship so they considered us nuisance, you know – not really citizens – so more of a nuisance deal. So they just left us alone. We didn’t commit no big crimes as far as the Communist system was concerned at that particular time. We didn’t do any major, you know, like spoke against the government, or try to do any espionage or whatever, or try to do any

subversive activities. So that's the reason, you know, was the only part that was bad is the couple weeks that we lived under the Germans. I don't know if it was three or four weeks before we were able to get out of there from eastern Poland, because they caught you, they either shot you or just killed you.

[Interviewer:](#) So how did you get out?

Well, my father was able to, see when the war started there was a lot of commotion. It was disorganized I assume, 'cause I don't remember the exact details but I understand then how things work in a new system. And there was a lot of commotion and my father was able to get somebody to – some guy he was able to hire – a farmer just to transport him. And we weren't very far – I think it was about fifty or seventy miles from the border. He was able to, however he transported us, to the Russian sector.

[Interviewer:](#) And who'd he transport with you?

It was me, my sister – I got a sister that's three years younger than me, and my father, my mother and my grandmother –my mother's mother, and my aunt and uncle and their children and my grandfather on my father's side and my grandmother. Was like, we were like twelve people probably. So we were able to get transported, you know from that side to the other side. Once we were in the Russian sector of Poland, we were more or less safe - as far as being killed.

[Interviewer:](#) You were together?

Yes, we were all together. We traveled most of that time I think we traveled at night, if I'm not mistaken. At that time they were that particular part of the – see, since the Russians occupied that part of Poland, I don't think the Germans were messing with that part of the territory. It was closed to the Russian border, which were their allies at that particular time. Germany and Russia were allies temporarily for about a year or so – a year and a half.

[Interviewer:](#) What was your life like when you got to the other side?

Well, things were really rough. I mean because food was very scarce – food was very rationed. And as a kid, you know, when you are rationed of food, you only think about food. And that's the part I remember. I always remember being hungry. That's one part I remember – always being hungry, because when I was in the orphanage, we used to get like, if I'm not mistaken we used to get like a quarter pound of bread a day – I think 250 ounces or 200 ounces or 200 grams or 250 grams. I don't recall and it just didn't ever seem to be enough, you know. There never was a loaf on the table. They just rationed you exactly a small portion. But somehow we managed to survive.

[Interviewer:](#) Did you have any kind of a Jewish life?

No, I had no Jewish life at all. As a matter of fact when I was in orphanage, I was strictly between all the children were Catholics. ‘Course, I was with a lot of Polish kids and they were all Catholic basically. The percentage of Jewish kids was very minimal. And I knew I was Jewish and my sister knew we were Jewish, but we had no Jewish education or upbringing at all until I was about when I got out of orphanage in 46 till I was about twelve, thirteen years old. I had no Jewish education whatsoever or any knowledge of any. Because when the war started I hadn’t Hebrew school. I was about to start Hebrew school. And it just when the war started, I didn’t go. I was supposed to enter Hebrew school that particular year after the holidays or something. I can’t recall what was the deal and I never had any Jewish education till I was 13.

[Interviewer: Tell us about liberation.](#)

Well, we were really when, when, when we heard the war was over, it was the greatest celebration in the world you know. But we were not you know enslaved in a concentration camp or anything like that. So really it wasn’t as like the people who were liberated from the concentration camp. You know, it’s just the joy of the war being over more than anything else.

[Interviewer: So what happened after you left the orphanage? What happened from that point on?](#)

Well, my uncle came and got us and we went to western Poland where they lived. He traveled to western Poland and from there we smuggled through the...

[Interviewer: You and your sister?](#)

Yeah, me and my sister. We smuggled, we were all smuggling through, there were some Jewish people who were helping all the other Jewish people to get out of Poland. And the way they used to do it is they used to assemble close to the border and at night. And they used to bribe the guards and we used to go through the check from Poland to Czechoslovakia. When we got there somehow the Czech government permitted us to travel Czechoslovakia, even if we didn’t have any money. He permitted us to travel with trains through Czechoslovakia to Germany, to Austria. And when we came to Austria the Federation helped us to get into Germany, I assume it was the Federation. I can’t...

[Interviewer: So it was pretty scary in Poland even after the war then?](#)

Well, there were a lot of that antisemitism existed in Poland even after the war, you know. It didn’t diminish. I mean you know, some of them got more power after the war because they blamed the Jewish people for everything – for the war, for their problems, for everything. So a lot of Jewish people were blamed for all that regardless.

[Interviewer: And then how did you decide to come to the United States? Well you were still a child but how did you come to the United States?](#)

Well, my parents, we either was gonna go, we had papers to go to Australia if we couldn't be granted a visa. We had some papers. We had some relatives in Australia. My father did and he sent them some papers so we did have some papers to go Australia in case we were unable to come here, but somehow we were able to come here so we didn't go to Australia. But we would have probably ended up in Australia if we couldn't come here.

Interviewer: Well, was there a particular reason why you came here?

Oh we had some relatives here. We had some relatives here.

Interviewer: In Kansas City?

No. My uncle lived in Chicago and my father had an uncle in Providence and some other places so, you know, we did have some relatives in here before the war.

Interviewer: And how old were you when you got to the United States?

Oh I was, in 1950, I was 16 years old already when I came here.

Interviewer: Of the people that went across the other side you told us about – of those 12 people – how many of them survived and came over to America?

Oh, the only ones survived is my father survived, and my aunt and uncle and my cousins, me and my sister. My grandparents died and my mother died and one of my cousins died - so just about almost half of them, four, we were 12 I think, or 33% - about four of five of them died before we came here.

Interviewer: What was your impression of the United States as a child or as a 16-year-old?

Well, I never seen nothing like it! I been through Europe, that was all destructed so it's like going from here to Mars. I mean you don't see that – even when we lived in Germany, when first we got to Germany, it was all ruins. Was nothing you know. It looked like this paradise.

Source: Abe Kopec video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/kopecabraham/>