

Jack Mandelbaum Testimony Transcript

Actually, my name is Janek, which is J-A-N-E-K, in Polish. I was born on April 10, 1927 and we lived in the Polish port city Gdynia, which is spelled G-D-Y-N-I-A. I went to a public school, which was Catholic oriented because about 95% of the population was Catholic. I had, I would say, upper...a comfortable upbringing. I remember that we always had a housekeeper. My father had a fish cannery where they canned sardines, and they were also smoking fish and so on, so that's why we were in a port city. And I remember going to the beach with my mother and younger brother and sister frequently in the summertime and my father would come by and he would bring some fresh fruit to us on the beach. And it was a very I would call it upper middle class comfortable life.

I never experienced, in this particular city, much discrimination. I never heard of it actually. Maybe I was sheltered from it or maybe there was no recognition on my schoolmates' parts that I was Jewish. I didn't speak Jewish before the war and I spoke Polish fluently so maybe they didn't distinguish anything. And, possibly, my parents tried to shelter me from any - the real world that went on. So I grew up a normal life. I remember being scolded many times because on the way from school, which was in the center of the city, we had very elegant shops and I would stop at every window and look at the mannequins and the clothes and I would forget what time it is. And finally, I would get home, probably an hour, an hour and a half late, and my mother would be very worried and she'd scream and yell, because she thought maybe something happened to me. So it was, it was a lovely life.

I had a sister that was three years older. She was born in 1924. I had a brother that was five years younger. He was born in 1932. And my parents were young. My father was born in 1903 so when the war started he was only 36 years old and very successful. And my mother, I discovered only recently, was actually three years older than my father. And I always assumed that she was younger, but she was actually three years older. And many relatives - my mother came from a family of 13 children - and none of these children survived.

I didn't have any religious upbringing at home. Before the war broke out, I was 12 years old and they were getting ready for some kind of Bar Mitzvah for me. And I remember that my father had hired a teacher that came from Vilna. A private tutor, that came to our house and gave me instructions but that lasted a short time, because then the news of a possible war came and most of the people who were not natives of this city decided to go home to their own cities because they were afraid that this particular city was very vulnerable and that they would...this city would be bombed. So he left. And I also remember about my mother making like gallon jars of different brandies that she had put in like raspberries and gooseberries and blueberries into different jars with sugar on top and for that to ferment. And they were getting ready to have homemade brandy for the Bar Mitzvah. But by the time I was 13 I was already in... the war had started. So I was never Bar Mitzvah.

And about two weeks, in late August of 1939, my father also felt that we would be in danger where we lived. The war started September 1, 1939. So in late August he decided that we should go to live with his father in a town called Działoszyce, which is located between Kielce and Krakow. We left only with our personal belongings and my father was going to send the rest of the things that we would need on the train, and nothing ever arrived. So we, we were left with no resources – only the clothes that we took when we boarded the train. I remember that when my grandfather met us at the train, he was shocked. He was absolutely shocked because I was wearing short pants and a white shirt and I had no hat on. And to him it was just outrageous and he says, “I live to see the day when my grandson walks around without a hat.” And I remember that my mother had made some comment that he never asked, “What happened to my son?” “Where is he?” “Did you have a nice trip?” Or “What happened?” But he was completely devastated because I didn’t wear a hat. He was a very religious man who his claim to fame was that in four years that he led the services in the synagogue. He had never missed a single service. He was very distinguished, with a white beard and he um... Działoszyce had a very, very elaborate synagogue with paintings you know on the ceilings that had been about 200 years old. So they had a very vibrant Jewish population.

After being there about two or possibly three months, my mother decided to move to another small town called Slawkow, which is near Krakow. She was born there and she had an older brother in this small community. It had about 900 Jewish inhabitants and she felt she would be more comfortable over there. So as we were getting ready to move to Slawkow, my father’s younger sister, who lived in Slomniki, asked that we send my sister to live with them. My sister was older, she was 15. And she [Jack’s aunt] was expecting a baby and she wanted to... she told my mother that they owned some flour mill in Slomniki and the sister could come to live with them, help out with the baby, and that since they owned the flour mill that there would always be enough food during a time of war and it would also help my mother not have the additional child to take care of. And my mother agreed and my sister went to live in Slomniki with my aunt and her husband and the expectant child.

We went to Slawkow and this was already during the time of war. Oh, I have to back up. The Nazis entered Działoszyce on September 6, 1939 and I was on the balcony of my grandfather’s house looking out as the tanks came through town and some soldier in a black uniform were coming out... they were standing in the turrets of the tanks and some people didn’t know – they thought maybe the British were coming, because the British were supposed to aid Poland when they declared war in 1939. So I was actually on the balcony of my grandfather’s house when the Nazis marched in and watched the whole scene. There were early patrols that came in on motorcycles with side cars. They made rounds of the cities. They made sure that there was no – no one there that could obstruct them. And the tanks came right through and then they established a police force in the city.

When we went to Slawkow, I immediately was, felt responsible for my mother’s well-being. By now I was almost 13 years old and we had no resources. And the Nazis actually had,

everything that was done was done through the Jewish Council. So if they needed 300 people to remove snow, I remember the first winter, if they had to shovel snow off the roads so they, they could run the transports back and forth. They came to the city council, “We need 300 people.” And the city council had to decide what able-bodied people they had to send out. Since I was only 13, I was never even... I was not asked to work on these forced labor battalions, but other people were and it was still possible to substitute a person who didn’t want to go. He would pay me to go for him. And that’s how I was earning some money to help out. And I was substituting every single day on different battalions. And I wound up working for the Nazi mayor of this town as electrician. I was an excellent electrician’s helper. And this went on – I worked there from like December of 1939 till June 14, 1942, at which time the Nazis came in.

They surrounded the whole town, and they drove all the Jewish residents, who by then had been concentrated in a ghetto – in a small area – and they drove all the people to the city square. And once they rounded up all the people, they marched them to a local brewery, which was surrounded by a big brick wall. And inside that brewery, they had a Nazi officer who selected people. Of course, no one what he was doing so he was selecting people to go left and right and left and right. And I was with my mother and younger brother, and they put us over to one side – all three of us. And for some reason I had this piece of paper on me, and I showed him this piece of paper that I had worked for the Nazi mayor. And then he grabbed me and pushed me to the other side. And that was the last time that I saw my mother on that, on that day - and my mother and my younger brother. And several hours later I wound up on a truck with other able-bodied people and was sent to the first concentration camp called Blechhammer. And that was my first camp and I was never to see my mother again.

We did have one postcard from my father that he was in Stutthof concentration camp early in the war, not to worry, everything was fine. And I never heard from my father again until I did some research after the war and found out what actually happened to him.

During the time in the concentration camp I was shifted from camp to camp - almost a dozen different camps where I found myself - and there were different experiences in different camps. By then I was 15 years old and I had worked for two years already. So I had built up some working skills. I worked on bridges. I worked on highways. I worked in chemical plants. I’ve had every work experience that was possible.

In some camps we were given some soup – a piece of bread in the morning and soup after work. And maybe at noontime they would serve like watered down - what looked like coffee - but it was made out of wheat. They burned wheat. They called it like “*ersatz Kaffee*,” which was artificial coffee and they had kettles that they came around. ‘Cause we worked, in this particular camp where they brought around this drink, we worked in forests – very, very heavy work removing trees and tree stumps by hand in order to create a railroad line. And they were very particular that nothing would be growing underneath that could possibly lift up the tracks.

So that was extremely hard work because you worked with axes and chains and blocks and tackles and stuff like that, so...

So we had to – we had the barracks and in the middle of the camp we had - in this particular camp we had... In Blechhammer we had showers and toilets. And when we wanted to go to toilet in the middle of the night, it was just freezing. We just had a thin blanket. No, no clothes or anything like that. People normally had their mess kit – like a little can – and they would urinate during the night in the can and the next morning they would get the soup...the next evening they would get the soup. So that's how...they wouldn't go out. They would just urinate into their own can.

For the smallest infraction people were beaten. And mostly, they were beaten by the prison *kapos*, who did the work of the Nazis. Very few times did the Nazis themselves. They were more reserved for shootings and hangings and so on. But the daily beatings were actually by - they had - by the *kapos*. They had rubber truncheons. So they had stick or something like that. And fortunately, I escaped most of the beatings because if you were beat, chances are, you couldn't work. And if you couldn't work, you were beat again. And that was the beginning of your demise as the beatings were very severe.

We were provided with wooden shoes and canvas tops – the bottoms were wood and the tops were canvas. And I remember distinctly that we had a difficult time - especially in Europe it's very cold and a lot of snow - and when you walked on those the snow kept building up on the bottom of the sole and you got taller and taller and then you had to kick your feet to get this build-up of snow off, because it was twisting your ankles while you were marching and of course, when you were marching to work, depending on what camp we were in, it could be from two miles, to three miles, four miles to work every day. And you couldn't stop, even if somebody had to urinate, you were urinating while you were marching on the guy in front of you. So the shoes were not a problem except for marching. We got used to wearing them.

And we had uniforms. We had no, really no underwear except the thin uniform and remember that we would unload boxcars of cement. And we would carry these cement bags on our shoulders and walk on a plank from the boxcar to the ground - because the boxcars were higher so the plank would swinging up... was swinging up and down. And we would use this cement in cement mixers. And some of the prisoners, when it was cold, would take these cement... the empty cement bags that was double or triple layer paper and they would cut off the sides and the bottom and at the top they would cut a hole and they would pull it over their head under the jacket to protect them. And the Nazis would carry a bamboo stick and they would go around periodically hit the people if they heard the noise of that paper. They would make the guy take it off and give him a good beating because he took... he tried to protect himself against the cold.

And in one particular camp called Bad Warmbrunn, we were privileged to work in the kitchen, after hours, peeling potatoes for the SS. And that was a big privilege already because if you were around food there was always the possibility of stealing something. It so happened that in this particular camp, we had an outbreak of typhus and many prisoners were dying. And the cook and his two assistants died of typhus. And all of a sudden, my friend and I became the cooks, in this particular camp. For some reason in this camp, they had given us meal cards. And that had everyday around the meal card there was, you know, the date and as you went through to get your soup, they punched a hole in your meal card. Since my friend and I were working in the kitchen, obviously, we didn't need the meal cards ourselves. So we had – he had a brother that was in the same camp. So he gave his card to his brother and I gave my card to another man who was a tailor and he would help us, you know, like he would wash out our uniform. Because when we worked in the kitchen, we had some privileges that most people didn't have. So, when they had two cards they could go through the line twice and get an extra meal. And someone reported us. And it was a terrifying experience that we had, you know, given somebody these cards. It so happened that the *Obersturmbahnführer* they called him, who was in charge of the camp, had been also in charge of a previous camp, Dyhernfurth, where I was with my friend. And maybe he knew that we had been prisoners for a long time. But we were absolutely terrified when he came into the kitchen and we didn't know what he was going to do because he could have killed us. And all he did was he said, "If you have so much food to eat, you don't need any ration cards." And he took the cards away from us.

So there were all kinds of things that we had to do to survive. And you couldn't survive strictly on what was given to you, because the work was just enormous. And we, we were able to help – they called "organize" different things – to steal a potato, to steal a bread, to steal a beet or a carrot or so on. And that's how we could survive. But it was important that you worked with someone.

Also in this particular camp, we didn't have our own crematorium. It was a smaller camp. I would estimate no more than 3,000 prisoners. And so whenever people died, they would store them in a room and they were just skeletons. And my friend and I – this Moniek Chesla – would be on a detail to load the bodies on a truck and drive them into town. We didn't drive, but we were on a truck with the bodies and the SS would drive the truck into town. And we would then unload these bodies and take them into for cremation. And I remember distinctly standing on the truck and he would lift the legs and I would lift the head and we would throw off the bodies off the truck just like it was wood. And didn't think about the people - I only, I remember what went through my mind was who was going to throw me off the truck because I never dreamt that I would survive this experience. At that point it was late in the war and already I became a little more cognizant that I may not survive.

The last camp was Dörnhau. Dörnhau was a camp that had mostly Hungarian Jews. And we found ourselves in that camp completely out of the elements and not knowing the power structure. The power structure in the camp was now in the Hungarian hands. So up to now

wherever the camps we were in, the power structure was Jewish people from Poland. So we got to know people, in 1944, of course, many Hungarians came into the concentration camp. So in this particular concentration camp, most of the population was Hungarian. So we didn't know anyone, we didn't speak the language and we were strictly left to the mercy of the food ration. They also had the typhus epidemic and the, the lice were just horrible. If you went to the bunk at night you couldn't pick off the lice. You had to just shake them off. In the morning you got up and you shook them off. And I remember, I was very despondent because it was towards the end of the war and I felt I didn't know anyone in the camp except this friend of mine. I was very depressed. Obviously, I was not in a position to help myself or help anyone else. And I was sitting on some concrete steps because - most of the camps were wooden barracks. In this particular place, those were concrete barracks, high-rise – maybe two or three floors. And I was sitting on these concrete steps thinking that I would not survive. And the lice were so numerous that I felt that they could literally carry me down the steps. It was a time where I seriously considered that I may not survive.

In this particular camp, one morning we woke up and the Nazi flag was gone. And we didn't know what was happening and all the guards were gone. So we opened up the gates. My friend and I left the gates and when we went out on the roadside - still in our uniforms - and we found abandoned Wehrmacht trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, armaments. Everything was abandoned on the roadside abandoned. And we found an abandoned military supply wagon with two chestnut horses strapped to the wagon. And we jumped on that wagon that was loaded with sugar and cans of marmalade. And we drove, not knowing where we were going. But we just followed the road. And we wound up in a women's concentration camp where they didn't even know that the war was over. This was on May 7, 1945. So, actually we, my friend and I became the liberators of this women's concentration camp.

We found ourselves in a place called Peterswaldau. And at that time most of the German population didn't want to be captured by the Russians. So they all went west to be captured by American troops or by the British troops. They felt they would get better treatment from Americans or British or the French. That left many of the homes completely intact and we would go into these different homes and just started living there - maybe three boys and three girls or five girls and two boys. We would go into the closets and take out clothes. We would stay in one house till all the dishes would get dirty then we'd move to the another house, because all these houses were empty.

Later on, I decided that I wanted to go over to the American zone. In the meantime, I went back to Poland several times to search for my family and, of course, I didn't find anyone. The American zone, I wound up near Frankfurt in a displaced person called Zeilsheim. It was probably in early 1946 by now. And I registered with the UNRRA – the United Nations relief organization. And I didn't live on the campus, actually, I had moved in with a German family and lived with them. I had a room in the suburb of this camp. But I was, all day long I was at the camp and they were organizing different activities. During that particular period, we had

many, many couples that were married in the Displaced Persons Camps. So we had weddings. We had dances after the war in Displaced Persons' camp. Someone in Zeilsheim even opened up a sidewalk café, where they had in the summertime they had music and dances and someone served tea or coffee and they started businesses immediately after the war.

And from that camp, my friend that I mentioned, this Chesla, had an aunt in Toronto. And one day he was going into Frankfurt because he wanted to apply to immigrate to Canada. But we found ourselves in the American Consulate that was run by a general. It was... I guess it had the status of an American Embassy, but this was during the American occupation in the American zone. And he... I just went along with him to keep him company. And they told him that he couldn't apply to immigrate to Canada because this was the American Embassy - that he would have to go to the Canadian Embassy. And there was a young WAC - an Army personnel - and I had visited with her while he was inside talking and I said... When he came out, he told me the story. I just made a casual remark about I wish I could go to America. And she says, there's some possibilities, that I should check with them again. And I found out that there was some visas available to come for people who had lost everyone who in concentration camp. That they didn't need individual sponsors, that the Congress, I guess, approved so many visas for concentration camp inmates to come to the United States.

And by now, I had found that my father's younger brother, his name was Sigmund Mandelbaum, had survived the war. And he - I found him in Munich. He was in a displaced persons' camp in Landsberg. And I found him and by then, I already had a visa to come to America. And I was supposed to immigrate. And then I went back to the Consulate and I said, "You know, I'd love to go but I found the only surviving member of my family and I certainly am not going to leave him behind." And they were able to work out documents for him. So he and I came on the same ship to New York on June 24, 1946. We came on a troop transport. But before that, I had found that my mother's younger sister also survived. Those are the only two living relatives from our family of probably 85 to 90 members that had survived besides myself.

The experience of coming to the United States, for me, was very, very difficult. Specifically, at one moment of coming on this troop ship that was named *SS Marine Perch* - coming into the harbor of New York, I was looking down from the ship and I saw a mass of people. Several thousand people who came to greet the returning soldiers from the war. And they had, had made big signs, "Welcome Joe," "Welcome Bill," you know, "We love you!" - something like that. And I was on this huge ship and I looked down and all of a sudden I realized that there was no one waiting for me.

When we were interviewed for resettlement I was asked where I wanted to live. We were given many choices. We could stay in New York, we could go to Detroit, to Chicago, to Los Angeles and so on. I guess they had parceled out the people in different communities. But they did give us a choice. And so I said to the interviewer that I... When he asked me where do you want to live, I said I didn't want to go to a place that's too big or too small. And he suggested

Kansas City. I never heard the name. You know, because in Europe people know ... they know New York, Los Angeles, and maybe Boston or Chicago. But I never heard of Kansas City so I asked him, "Why do you think Kansas City?" He said, "In 1936 and 1937 they had sent some Nazi-escaping refugees to Kansas City – people who were escaping the Nazis. And they send them to Kansas City. And it must be a good place. So I said, "Why?" And he said, "We never heard from them, so it must be good." So that's how I wound up in Kansas City and I think it was an excellent decision for me.

Source: Jack Mandelbaum video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/mandelbaumjack/>