

Abe Sander Testimony Transcript

My name is Abe Sander. I was born in Poland in 1922 – February the 10th. I grew up in the same city, close to the German border. And I went to school – start school about seven-year-old – only went five grades because I not rich. I was poor boy. I liked to eat. I was a big eater and they couldn't afford to feed me or to dress me. So I went introduced me by the packing house and the butcher by the packing house and start working there. And finally, there was one family – a big family of 13 children - they liked me – always volunteered for hard work. When I worked they fed me. They gave me room and board over there. And I worked there till the war was ...the start of the war.

I remember the Germans moved in in September - I think the 2nd or the 3rd. And I still was working part in the packing house and then they make a curfew. You couldn't go out from the house. We lived in one room – six of us in one room and we couldn't go out from the house. From 7:00 in the morning - from 7:00 it was a curfew. Whoever got caught in the street after 7:00 got shot. When the Germans moved in they came in with power - with tanks and motor cycles, with gas. And whoever was in the street they didn't care – they shoot anybody. Was a lot of deads. So, the following days we have to take the corpse of dead people and bury on a certain mass grave.

I worked in the packing house during the day. It was Polish people – mostly Polish people. They know me because I work all my youth for six years there. And they help me. There was no problem there. By 7:00, I had to go home. One day in '40, 1940, I remember, they make in the street whoever was - with trucks they grabbed the people and they took them to a high school with a big hall there. And they took...my brother was captured two weeks before, the older brother. And they sent him to Germany to a, to a camp. They making there work camp. There was no concentration camp 1940 – forced labor camps. I was captured, they took us to a high school in a big hall and they select – make a selection who was strong, weak, under 18 – they let 'em out, over 40 – only between 18 and 40. And they took us away to the Polish-Czechoslovakian border, the... southeast Poland and walk with security – with the SS, the guard. But we lived in a house there and the farmer, the German farmer, took over 20, 30 Polish farms. And they didn't need any 20 houses – just more a two, three room house on 20 grounds. So we were in groups – 25, 30 groups and we torn down the houses and we left one house and one or two barns. And we slept in the house, the last house, we slept, we tore them down, went to other village. So we going from village to village.

And I was working over there – from 1940 August to '41 of September. Then we went back to – not my hometown, but six kilometers in the high school – to the big auditorium. And then came a German in 19... about two weeks later... came a German from Germany – he needs hundred young boys. The age was between – I was 18 at that time. Because I was born 1922 – I was 18, 19 years old. They took the strongest guys to Germany to a factory. And that factory

was a weaving factory. They make materials for uniforms, for all kind of stuff. There was six or 700 women – Jewish women – and were about 75 men. We did the hard work and the women - like my wife – I met her then – about two years later, I met her. And she was on a weaving machine.

We lived in a barrack – not in a barrack – in a building – same building with the women. Only thing – a wall divided. And the women had a kitchen. The main kitchen was in the women’s kitchen. And we got everyday two meals – in the morning, a little like coffee make out of chicory and a piece of bread, piece of margarine. Evening ate a soup – always potato soup. What qualify for potato soup. And we were wearing civilian clothes. That’s all I had – a pants, a jacket, a underwear. For two years I wear the same clothes. Oh, I took a shower once a month or once in three months. I don’t remember taking shower. We had no showers. The women went inside to the women’s shower room in their camp with a big building, was beds – you know stacked up three beds high and we had same thing. And we have to wait to survive – survive the time in the camps.

One day the camp leader came he said, “We gonna liquidate that camp.” They sent us to other camp. When they went and they camp trucks... And I had no nothing no belongings. Some people had, there were some rich people had some money, a gold ring, a watch. I had nothing. Only thing I had – letters from home what they wrote me with the censored letters. And I had few pictures. They load us up on truck – on same truck, on same day, camp women – about 25 or 50 women came like men – dressed in overalls, shaved their heads and they took our jobs of hard workers – carpenters, plumbers, all kind of... and loading trucks. And when they took us with the truck we went maybe about 200 kilometers. In time we got in the forests. We got in the forests, we saw towers, barbed wire – I never saw barbed wire before. Was barbed wires and towers with Germans in the tower. And that was concentration camps start – 1942. Wait a minute... end of, end of 1942.

There was a new concentration camp built – a small one – I remember 3,000 people. There was a group from – if you heard Gross Rosen – that’s a group of Gross Rosen – well, not in the camps. And we got in, on the truck, came out – there was two, three guys – they were Germans, prisoners, green triangle. And they told, they went out – they killed two boys right on the truck. And they scared us and they said a speech. And they were inside the gate already. They say, “Whatever you got belongings – money, gold, diamonds – lay it out.” So everybody was so scared for them everybody had to lay it out. I had nothing to give it to – I had no money or gold. And we wind up in that camp and as we get out then we think we going take a shower now. We went and they took us in a shower room – big tables – big tables like big picnic tables. And everyone had in their pockets – some friends of mine – they were wealthy, they had buttons, had gold pieces sewed around like this one with a piece of cloth as a button – were scared. So what happened, they even give the buttons up. Then they took us to a shower room. Went to a shower room and got our clothes off – all of us. One, we took a shower we [unclear] and they give us soap – liquid soap and we showered, we cleaned. We were filthy and dirty. And as we

clean up, we didn't dry because we had no towels to dry. And we stay in the line there was barbers. They were not only barbers, they had clippers, and they shaved us all – all of us. And they cut us hair like a crew cut. In the middle of the head – right here – they shaved – I won't say shaved. It's also a clipper with fine clipper – you know what I mean? So the hair was about an inch to inch and a quarter high – in the middle they shaved us out in the middle about that wide (indicates width with fingers) a strip. In case you run away, you'll be recognized. When I went out from the shower, after they shaved us all over and they put Lysol-like acid around, you know, around, we start yelling. When I went out from the shower room all of us, there was no clothing no more. They give us the stripe uniform. We went one side went in the other side went out. So the clothes... We lost, I lost all the pictures whatever I had. Everybody lost everything.

We got the stripe uniform and we went out. Then we had a meal with a soup and a piece of bread. And we went to barracks. And they put us in barracks. As we went in the barracks, I meet some, I met some other people. They were from different cities, from different camps they liquidated. And we went next day we had a *kap*... we had a block leader, was about maybe 80 or a hundred in a barrack. We had no beds but we had shelves and we laid lined up on, on straw. And we slept on that. That was our, our bed to live in.

We went to work. That was a work concentration camp. They building new buildings. They unload box cars like loose cement, loose sand, bricks. And we loaded up on trucks sacks. And some other places they on the trucks, they building buildings and that was our job. We went to forests. There were lot of forests over there. We got utensils, we cut the trees down and we cut 'em certain sizes. We load them on trucks. So every day we worked about 12 hours a day – from sun down... from sun up to sun down. In winter time was we came home in the dark, we marched, we were singing. You know, there was Germans – sing German songs – whatever. We got used to it, the work.

But I was lucky. I had two, I found two pieces of wire, you know – two pieces of wire. We had no pockets. We only had like a coffee can for the soup out the tin. And I found two pieces of wire where I worked there and always tied my ankles with the wire if I found some potatoes or carrots and put in my pants. And once I put coal, you know, I found pieces of coal, because it was wintertime – we had an oven in the barrack and if you see the farmers got big round oven. We have to heat it, the oven, with coal or with wood. So, the coal brickets, they make blocks that look like a brick – the Germans made out of the coal. And I smuggle in. That went by for for long time. Every day went to work and every day we got back.

I met over there Russian prisoners, Italian prisoners. They were in different camps but we went to work in the forests. And then was a one German – my foreman came - all Germans - but they're not qualified for to be a soldier – like 45, 50, 60 year old. They came to work for seven day – six days a week. We don't work on Sunday because they wanna take off one day so we stay Sunday home. So we worked in the camp, cuttin' - I mean raking, empty toilet – there

was no toilet in there, it was one general toilet like a - oh maybe I want to say about eight, ten feet deep. There was a bar – a wooden bar – over, and that was our toilet. When done they empty it with buckets. They empty it and the farmers using it as a... What to you call it? In the fertilizer for potatoes with human waste.

Before 1944, the war... the Russians... the Germans start retreating and the Russians came closer to Poland. Poland was already liberated. Some camps were liberated in '44. We stayed in '44 and one morning he said, "Now we gonna march to a different camp farther south." And they went a truck went with, you know, a big platform truck - about ten or 15 or 20 boys was pulling the truck. There was no tractor, no motor – just a flatbed – to bring the bread from a factory about ten kilometers away. They never showed up back because they were already captured by the Russian. And we were about ten miles, about ten kilometers from the Russian and we march out foot to a different camp. We were marching for weeks. We were filthy, didn't get any food. We had a little soup that was like you see army kitchen on the road – you see army kitchen with a kettle. You know, they heat it and they cook soup. We would march so every night we march we slept on all the farms. You couldn't go on the, on the main highway. We went the side roads. And the Germans keep retreating right behind us. We would... You couldn't run away. Some friends of mine – some ran away and they got killed.

One day, maybe we march maybe five, six weeks. We were filthy, we lived in the barns. I helped myself. I went to hog barns and the farmers cooked you know little potatoes with the they make their own flour. I pulled out from the hogs the potatoes and I ate – whatever I could eat. Oats – I had a pocket. I sewed myself inside a pocket from – a pocket from the material, was the material. And I had pocket oats, little can. We march in winter time with wooden shoe. No winter wear, just stripe uniform. No winter wear. And we... I went up in the middle – no water. We march for, from sundown... from sunrise to sundown. And I'd have to bend down and scrape a little slop.

One day - Sunday, the Germans want take off so rest and he said, the camp leader said, "Boys, now you gonna go take a shower." Boy everybody was so happy take a shower – a hundred of us in a time. They took us in the middle of the forest –middle of the farm in a lake. Was still the ice – I could see the ice still – a sheet of ice. I was a good swimmer. When I was young – matter of fact, I [unclear] dive from the bridges to the river in the city. I saw what happened say, "Get undressed." We got undressed and "Now go take a bath." So I dove in the water. I didn't care how deep it is. I was a good swimmer. Some of them couldn't swim. With a machine gun, some of them got shot. Some of them drowned over there. And we stand the next group. We told them, "Don't go." But because we know what happened. Everyone thought you go to a shower room and take a shower, a bath, you know. I mean, that was the wintertime – in January. I think it was January, because we didn't know no dates or month. I know we left before Christmas. Left before Christmas that camp and we march for 13 weeks. Like I say, I always volunteer. There were wagons – big hay wagons – the sick, there was no doctors, so the sick was on hay wagons – 40, 50 of 'em. And we pulled them with ropes and

some pushing ropes. And we got our meal in the evening – piece of bread and a little soup – whatever you call. And some like I said I helped myself - got a few raw potatoes I was eating it. But one day the Germans said, “Now the sick gonna go to hospital, to hospital.” So we pulled them to a hospital – we pulled them on the cemetery. We dig a hole and we dumped them alive and the machine gun run over back and forth– and I shoveled and then the bodies up. That was the whole thing I went through.

We march for 12, 13 weeks. We got into Buchenwald. Buchenwald was a camp maybe 20,000 people – the capacity of 20,000 people – so many barracks. When we got in already 60,000 people. We can hardly get what to eat. We wind up our group went out with about 1,200 – we got into the camp maybe 500. About 700 died on the way. So I was only in Buchenwald for three weeks.

The last three days – the last week, they said, “All, all Jews, all Jews have to report to the gate in the front.” So they start chasing us. Some Germans took off the bands, you know, they didn’t wanna chase, they know, they know what’s gonna happen. From the end of the camp – from old camp was a barracks and the new camp was already buildings, built of brick buildings. They start chasing us. I was in the old barrack. I came to, to the front gate – like you see here in the United States army camp – like to report, you know, like you see in the camp, in the army camp. They stay in line up and they march out. They gave everybody a piece of bread and a piece of margarine. And people was willing to go out. They killed the most. They stopped so many – they had so many security guards – and they stopped them and then they came back. They brought the same bread back and they gave them... In the same time, I stayed maybe 30 or 40 away from the front gate. The camp alarm - American planes start coming. I know what a helicopter was. I saw a plane and everybody started yelling, “Into the barracks!” So, I saw what happen. I couldn’t get in my barrack. I went down. I was hungry. I saw where they had a big platform truck. Not truck, a wagon with two, with four Belgian horses. They haul from the kitchen the food to each barrack. Maybe you see it here like a can – like a milk can the farmers got the two handles. And they haul those cans to the barracks and they give to the barracks. You got in the barrack, the barrack leader – he likes you – he dig out the soup from the bottom. If he don’t like you they gave you the water from the top. I didn’t go back to the barrack. I went down to the barn were the horses were, and there were potatoes and I found a sugar bag. A [unclear] sugar bag was wet – still a lot of sugar from the wetness – got a lot of sugar. And I chewed that sack for three days and I had some oats from the horses and some potatoes. And I slept on the hay above the horses. When I kicked I found somebody else there who was hiding out – were hiding out. And I hid out for three days.

The third day in Buchenwald I went out. I looked down from the hill to the – from the barn, I see trucks coming. Tanks, trucks. It was Americans. And as soon as they got in, the Americans, they came before they even... They opened the gate, they went to the [unclear] and they cut all electrical wires and the Germans was still in the towers watching us. They didn’t know what’s going on. And I remember there came a helicopter – first time I saw a helicopter. I

didn't know what a helicopter... I know airplane –I never saw a helicopter. They dropped cases of C ration food. So I grabbed it, I run there from when I saw the tanks coming we saw America with a star, with no Germans - the enemy of the Germans, 'cause we friends. When I got there to the part where they dropped it I got two packages. There was four little chickens in a pack, little can sardines, and four crackers. Crackers [unclear].

And the Americans already in the camp and the Germans run away and we start talking. I couldn't speak any English. What happened was I know a captain or lieutenant. And I stayed there when I grabbed it and my pants were all torn, whole body was showing out. And he start talking to me English. Couldn't understand a word English. And I said, "Polsky, Polsky. That I am a Pollock." And he start talking to me in Polish. I say, "How do you know Polish?" I say... I don't know whether a captain or lieutenant, I say, "My parents were in Poland and I am a Polish - I am born in Chicago." In fact, I was there in Chicago, looked up and couldn't find him. And he took four of us with the Russians into the barracks and the Americans took over the German barracks - had five, six beds – regular beds but stacked up beds. And we start working. And they fed us.

In the beginning, I'll tell you the truth, I hated him. I thought he was teasing me. He took out a can of chicken. You know they send them overseas. He gave me a wing. I could eat up the metal too. Then he took a piece of chocolate. He broke off a little piece, gave me a little piece, gave all us a little piece. If you asked him, "Why you doing that to us?" He took us by the arm, and then after two, three days already, people was - the Americans went out and they found, you know, wild hawks in the forest, and they cooked pea soup, and potato soup with pieces of fat like that floating around in soup and people were eating and people were dying by the thousands because their system was not used to eat that food. And he told me, "If I gave you the whole chicken, you going lay outside." And then we start realize what he done to us. So we shined his shoes. We make the bed for him – the feathers – every day to get our system little bit of time to get our system used to.

It went by a few weeks like that. The American kept - he gave me - he saw my uniform, he gave me a pair of pants from some GI and a pair of shoes because we wouldn't have no shoes. We had wooden shoes. We had cloth sides and a wood shoe. When I was walking in the snow, we was walking, it got so high it got sticked to the shoes. I lost the shoes in Buchenwald – I was barefooted. So some GI must have two pairs shoes and they gave me a pair of shoes and a pair of pants and I was wearing the jacket.

So, it took me about two weeks. We moved from Buchenwald into the city. We took over a German house – a room. And that happened – it was my cousin, my present wife - the only relatives I know I could had. And I went to Bergen Belsen on a bicycle. [Unclear] no transportation, no trains, no buses – nothing. So I took it away from the German a bicycle. I rode a bicycle. Some American army truck went by, I hold onto the truck and I go a little faster.

As I got into the English, some of them, the English... I found my brother and the English [unclear]. I said, "What you doin' here?" I said, "Come on with me." I stopped in Bergen Belsen. I took my cousin and a other cousin of hers. She was work in the kitchen. She was helping my own cousin during the war in the camp and went to Weimar. And we decided to go back to Poland, looking for families. [Unclear]

I got into my home town – was nobody there. I went to my cousin's town. There were a few people over there. And they said, "Nobody survived." And my friend said, "Let's come to my town – Lodz." It was about 300 or 400 kilometers away. There were transportation boxcars. We sat on the boxcar on the roof on top of the boxcar. We got into town the four of us. We get into my friend's town, Lodz. There were some survivors – some hidden out in the bunkers or someplace in the sewer lines. A family. And they were neighbors to my friend. When we got there they only had one room. There was quite a few survivors came from all city looking for families. And they said, "Kids, are you married?" I said, "No." "So, you cannot sleep here. You gotta get married." So I said, "So we get married." We didn't intend to get married. I told my cousin. I say... I went downstairs to the main street. I see a man, you know, like a big rabbi with a beard, with a big frock, a hat. I said, "Are you a rabbi?" He said, "Yeah." I told him, "Can you marry us today? Can you marry us?" He said, "Yes." I said, "When?" I said, "Tonight." We got married and then we stayed there all the week.

They start getting trouble over there. Russian, Poles were there. They call AK (Armia Krajowa) they start. Because I have nothing to in Poland to look for – I was no rich. Some rich people came to collect their wealth. Some of them got killed. Some of them had houses, you know. They wanna' take away. They, they got killed for it. They start pogroms. And I talk to my friend and my friend told me, "Let's go back to Germany." In Germany we going to try to get in the West Zone to the Americans. So we wind up in a train going back to Poland and I signed my name, in case somebody survive they see there was a Jewish office there. And there were a few people working there in case somebody came – and my sister - matter of fact she found me – my name – that I'm alive. She was in Russia – survived with her husband in Russia during the war. And so said we going [unclear], we going back to Germany and went through the border. It was hard to go through the border because one side the Russian border and the Polish border and the Russian border. We smuggled into the American Zone.

I got in to Frankfurt - Frankfurt Am Main. And I met some people over there and they told me, we met some survivors. We could recognize some with the stripe uniform. They said, "Where you going?" I said, "There is about ten kilometers is a displaced person camp – by by [unclear], by Zeilsheim." I got in 1945 and my friend went someplace else through Bavaria in Bayern. And I got there and I met over there a lot of, a lot of my friends from my hometown – I mean my age people. We were the only people was – 22, 25, 27 –that age people. And I survived it.

I stayed there and my wife got pregnant. I married there and my wife got pregnant. My son was born in 1946. And I lived there till 1949 – till yeah, 1948 actually. Then I registered, in this year I registered to go leave Germany to the United States. I was a butcher. And so I registered to Australia, Argentina, Canada – we had registration. Anyway, I wanted to leave Germany. I had enough. I want to leave Germany. They came. They called me as a butcher.

We transferred from that camp to other displaced person camp about 30 miles away. And I waited for till they're gonna call me to come to United States. I went up in a camp, oh maybe 50 kilometers from the ocean before we went on a ship. So a big, was a big map. Bigger than that wall - maybe 30 feet wide and about ten feet high. And I see Kansas City. I see horses and cows in this street on that map. I see Chicago, Illinois. Kansas by Kansas Missouri was all a farm town. And I, as a butcher, they shipped me here to Kansas City.

Source: Abe Sander video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/sanderabe/>