

Sam Sander Testimony Transcript

My name is Sam Sander. I was born June 6, 1926 in Będzin, Poland, which is about 25 miles from the German border. My family, my personal family - my mom, dad, two brothers and a sister.

In 1939, as the war broke out, everybody was trying to save themselves. So, my sister left with her boyfriend to Russia. My brothers were inducted immediately when the Germans came in – two different camps, which I don't know where they were. At the time we found out they were labor camps. And myself – I was the breadbasket at home. My folks couldn't get any work because they were too old to work – they were 45 and 50. And at that time, they didn't want to take them to work. So, I'm the one that had to go to work, which I did and supported the family as much as I could. We were rationed at certain things like bread, meats and other vegetables and stuff like that. We could only get so much so we made do with whatever we had. But at the same time, I work with some people that did let me go out to the farm and buy some stuff for some other things. But at the same time the German requested that all the Jews had to deliver their valuables or the things that were important to the war like silver, copper, many other things. Especially entertainment – things like radios or anything we had in possession. We had to deliver it. If we didn't and they...we were caught with them, they would shoot you. And at the time when they were talking about shooting somebody, we were talking about, "don't worry about it. He's not going to shoot you just because you had..." – but they did. So everybody was afraid and they went and delivered whatever they had.

I went to school till 1939. When the war broke out or when the Germans came in to Poland, I never got to go to school. They would not let us take any kind of classes. So, personally, I went to about fifth grade – going into sixth grade when they came in. That's as far as education I got. They just burned all the synagogues. They burned all the smaller educational places. And they burned all educational books. And whatever was taken away and we just went from there.

They started out to all the Jews, to separate them out from the Gentiles to what we called the ghetto, at that time. So where we lived, we had to leave the place where we lived to move some other places where they could put like a - you would call it like circle around the area, where they could get ahold of us anytime they wanted to.

I worked for the German – well, let me call it a company – shoe company, where they paid me weekly a small amount of money. When I call a small amount – it was very small. But I worked there mainly to get the pieces of leather that were falling off. What we would call the scraps over here. And I had some people that would come up to my house and buy the scraps from us because leather was not available. And they were making military shoes so whenever

you cut out soles, you had a corner. And I used to pick 'em up every night and take 'em home. They would let me do that.

You couldn't move wherever you wanted to go. You had to wear a Star of David or an armband and you had to be recognized because even the people that lived in the other side of the ghetto – which I'm talking about the Gentile people – could come and harass you and do things and we couldn't do anything about it. We were strictly there. Whatever the Germans wanted to do, we had to go along with what they wanted to do. And harassment was the biggest part and there is nothing we could do about it. We just have to live with it. We couldn't go back to tell them, "Say, don't do that or do it or why you doing that to me?" There was no question. There was no answer. When he came up and he whip you or he pull you or he push you, you took it the best you could.

About 1942 or late '41, they gathered all the Jews at a baseball – let me call it a baseball stadium. And from there they put us in different kinds of buildings to go ahead and separate the younger from the old. And you could get a card. They have cards of three colors. There were pink, yellow and blue. The pink card meant what we call now extermination. The yellow card meant you could be there for the time being. The blue card meant you had to go to work. So the place that I worked, the woman came and took me and my parents out of the area. And she had to go up to next town to get the cards. When she got the cards, she brought back, she brought back yellow cards. They would not give 'em blue cards because of my parents not being able to work. I did work, but they would not issue me a blue card because my parents got the yellow cards.

From there, a couple months later, the SS came in to my house and took me out to go to work. Where I was going I didn't know. All I know that they took a group, at the outside, of right around 25, 30, whatever and they took us into next town. The name of the town was Sosnowiec. Sosnowiec is right next town from Będzin. They put us on boxcars without food, without water, and sent us off. Where they send us we didn't know until we got to the destination. It took about two days, two and a half days, to get there and we found out we went into our first labor camp, which was named Seibersdorf.

When we arrived at the camp they let us keep our clothes. We went in the barracks. There were approximately 50 to a hundred people in the barrack. The bunks were double bunks - looked like they did have a cot on it. And they gave us a blanket. And they gave us a bowl and a cup. And then they called reveille. They took us in and they gave us a bowl of soup and a slice of bread – something we didn't have for two and a half days. And when we got that they were telling us that we were going to work the next day. And that's what we did.

The food there – the food there was consistent. Morning they gave us a bowl of soup - real thin soup. For lunch they used to bring us soup to the, to the working area, which was dry

turnip soup. At night we would get potato soup or noodle soup or whatever with a slice of bread every 24 hours.

The working conditions that we had to do was build a railroad for the German Army to go to the what they called the *Ost* front – which called it East to Russia. We worked hours – the hours were really daylight to nighttime. Otherwords, we left in the morning when daylight and we went home before night. We were guarded at that particular place by regular army guards. SS supervisors. We were there for a year. One year to date - maybe a few days more, a few days less. From there we were told to take our gear – which we didn't have any – to, that we're gonna leave –we're going up to the next camp. And that was 1943.

We went from there they put us in a boxcar with no water, no food and, if you've seen a boxcar it's got a couple windows in it. What I call – let me call 'em windows. The windows had barbed wire on it from the outside. And when we got into the boxcar they pushed in all they could and if the boxcar could hold a hundred of 'em, there was 150 of us in there. If they held more, there were more. They pushed in all they could. And the last ones they went in, they hit over the head or whatever to get them in to be able to close the doors. The heat was bad enough from the people inside of it and we didn't get any water or food until we arrived at the next destination. To get out of the boxcar, you needed help. And whoever was strong enough to help the next person, he would help so, and the main reason was because we didn't get to sit down. We didn't get to lean against each other because that's all there was. So when we got off our legs was stiff. So somebody would bend in a hurry - like myself. I wasn't, I bend my legs, I helped the next person coming off the top- bringing off maybe ten, 15 people, then walk away with them because we didn't know what was gonna happen after we got off. So when we – when all of us got off together it was right around 500 of us in that particular camp.

When we got into the next camp we got off the boxcars the 500 were already guarded by SS guards – not anybody else – SS guards. And we marched in into the concentration camp. Blechammer was a concentration camp. And we found out it was a subsidiary of Auschwitz. When we got in there, they put us in the barracks. Again there were cots – bunks. Two tiers. They had some cots in it and they had blankets on 'em. They gave us a bowl and a cup so we can have something to eat or whatever. And they did give us some soup and a slice of bread at that time. The next morning, we got a bowl of soup and we stayed there all day. We didn't go to work the first day. Maybe it was because it was Saturday or Sunday. We didn't know the dates coming or going. We didn't have no information. So, the second day we were there we got food three times a day in that particular part. Then a day later they came in and they told us to come out and take all our civilian clothes off and they issued us new uniforms, which was striped uniforms – blue and white stripes, with the Star of David on the left side, on the left pocket and they had a triangle with a yellow and red marking. In that particular camp, there weren't only Jews in there. There were Catholics, Protestants, gays, Gypsies, and many other denominations of people. And they also told us that we're gonna get a number on our arm. The

number on my side on my arm, is on my left forearm. My number is 178554. We were tattooed by one of the inmates from that camp.

A lot of times people have asked me, they've said, "Couldn't you run away? Couldn't you do something to, to help yourself?" You were looking with the type of food that they give you to survive. Survival was the thing. But how can you run away when you got three strikes against you? First, you got a uniform that is striped that none of the Germans have seen before and we were already inside of Germany. The second thing you had a number on your arm. And the third thing was they cut out a two inch strip from the top of our hair – what I called a reverse mohawk – instead of having hair growing up, they were just cutting hair right out of the middle. To go ahead and shave the hair, I was asked by people, "Why didn't you shave the hair off from the sides - and then you have no hair?" Well, that was not very common in Germany to see a skinhead or a person without hair. If they did, he was one of the robbers or comes out of jail if he didn't have any hair.

Late January of '45 all of us had to leave. And we went what they call the death march. The death march consists of walking on foot – not in boxcar – on foot, to the next camp. They did not tell us where the next camp was. They did not let us take our blankets with us. But it was January so it was not warm. I would say, the degrees out there were around, right around maybe ten below. Maybe 20 below. Maybe 5 above at certain times. And during the day we walked through the highways – what they call it over there autobahns or whatever. And we at night, if any possibilities, they wanted us to stay in the woods. But as we walked through small towns – we never went through big towns – why, I don't know. I have not really looked up the map to find why. But we always went through small farm towns. And when we went through small farm towns we dispersed and ran into different farmers to find food, because they didn't feed us on that particular march. So whenever we got ahold of anything that was edible like corn, wheat, sugar beets, beets, potatoes - anything that was edible, we grabbed it and shared it with our friends who didn't have any or who walked slowly because the weaknesses. At the same time we could grab water - just in a pot or bottles - whatever we found. Fill it up water and take it with us.

We left Blechhammer there was 5,500. Arriving in the next camp there were 1,200. The rest of 'em either run away, got killed, died from walking or whatever. I don't know. I cannot say what happened to the other people. I have not met any after the war was over. So, naturally we assumed they were dead. Walking through – we walked through the woods. We didn't get anything to eat. At times, we had snow for water. We also picked some top of the grass. We chewed on that. We found out it's not bad. Some animals lived on it. Why couldn't we? And we did. It helped. Because all we were looking to surviving because we knew there was something going wrong with this war but we did not know what was happening.

But when we got into the next camp which was called Gross Rosen. I was only there about two days maybe, maybe a little more. All I could see around me was dead people. People

laying around and begging, or people laying around half-dead, people laying around that turned upside down, and people laying around face up with their eyes open with their tongues sticking out. An SS leader came up and asked for volunteers. They were looking for strong people that can go to work. Well, I was not weak but I was not strong, but I volunteered to go to work to get out of the place for what I've seen was going on over there.

But the next camp that I went to was Buchenwald. Again you got out of a place that was bad, as I explained before, and got into a place that was worse than the one you just left. Again somebody came in they looked for volunteers. I don't know why I was the lucky one to go ahead and volunteer. The next camp name was Zweiberge. It was worse than the camp we just left. When they put us in the barracks we went in. People in the barracks, there were no cots, there were no beds, there were no bleachers. There was a floor and some straw on the floor. The people laying around in that particular place half dead, half gone. They couldn't get up. The SS would come up and whip 'em trying to get 'em up. How would somebody get up if you can't get up? So when we just got there we trying to help them to get up. Well, you stood 'em up and if you stay and hold onto 'em it worked just fine. But if you let go, he just fell. So, the first thing you did, what we say, you mind your own business. You're trying to survive. You know the next person that you just picked up will not survive. So you're trying the best you can do for yourself.

The other thing they had over there that I did not see in the other places was they have a pit. And a pit what we call it – to make it, to clarify what a pit was – it's just like a dump over here. You dig a deep hole and you throw the people in that hole – dead or alive. If they could not work, they were just about dead. If you could work, you went to work. I took the night job over there and the main reason was because they gave you an extra slice of bread if you worked at night, which helped me survive. We were there right around the first week of April or maybe a little later. We did not know the dates. The only thing we knew that it's been so many days that we been at this certain place.

Orders came out we had to evacuate that particular place. And we knew something was going on but we did not know what was going on. The civilians wouldn't tell us. You couldn't talk to the SS. So we just took it the best we could. We left that particular place all together on a death march. As we went, started marching on foot, we went into different farm houses and again, tried to find food. In the farmhouse you could always find food. At certain places they stopped in the farmhouses and they would boil potatoes for us. Or we would run into places where the hogs were eating where they were feeding the hogs and stuff like that and we jumped in, grabbed their food. And we could eat faster than the hogs did. We needed it. We didn't care how sour it was or what was on or what kind of flour they put in to make 'em fat or whatever. But we ate it. I ran into one of the houses and I happened to see some ration marks on the table and I took that. And I took a bottle of water with me and when I came back out the first thing I know the guard was standing outside the door like to say, "I'm waiting for you." Well, he tried to hit me in the back with his butt of the rifle but I jumped pretty fast and I jumped off the steps

and I went right back in the group. But the guard that was walking with us, they didn't get any food either. So what I did, I told him that I've got some ration marks if you have any money, you could go out and buy some food and both of us could eat. And he said, "That's a good idea." So I gave him the ration marks – about a half a dozen of 'em – six of 'em to be exact I think. And he went and gave me his rifle. Gave me his pack, that I carried, while he went to get some food in that particular place. He brought back two loaves of bread and some salamis, and bolognas and butter and whatever and all I told him you keep all the stuff, just give us the bread. So he went and took out a knife from his pocket and cut a half a loaf of bread. By the way, their bread is not like our bread. Their bread weighs four pounds loaves – farm bread. And he cut half of it up. I took a bread and a half right to my buddy who was standing next to me. He shoved it in under his shirt. And you couldn't even recognize what I had a bread under my shirt. I didn't. He grabbed up the half a loaf. He grabbed a piece. I grabbed a piece. We shared as much as we could with some of the others to survived. We knew it was going. So when he came back I said to him – I did speak German – I do speak German. I said to him, "What is going on?" And he said, "I cannot tell you, but it's getting closer with the war to be over. How, I cannot tell you." Now that was an SS guard. He did not have the food. He did not have the stuff. But he trying to cooperate to see. What I was thinking he's trying to save his own life, by having friends like me and some of the others, which helped. We went on for a long period of time that the walking at nights. We stayed in the woods. We stayed at farmhouses. Wherever we could. Whatever they told us to stop, we stopped. Whenever they told us to go, we go.

We went up to a town named Ermsleben – was about April 10th, April 12th – right around that area. And there weren't as many of us as there were before. I assumed some of them again either run away, got shot, got killed. We don't know. They didn't want us to stay in Ermsleben. Ermsleben was a pretty good sized town in an area where we were gathered and they told us to march on up to the next town, which was a farm place – a place called Endorf. Endorf was, I would say, maybe 50, 60 population – most of 'em farmers. And we gathered up at a place and as we were standing there we wanted to get some water. And we were close to one of the pumps. I don't know you've seen the German pumps of water, but there's a outside pump where you had to turn the handle to pump up the water. And they wouldn't let us have any water. And as I was standing there, a couple children walked up to me. They started speaking German. I kneeled down and talked to them and the little girl was, I would say she was about seven. The little boy was maybe five. And the little girl came up and sat down in my lap and talked to me in German and I was answering her the questions. Her dad came out, which he was the commander of the SS in that particular town. And he grabbed these children off of my lap and grabbed them away and the first thing I know the kids are crying and he's yelling at me, "What are you doing?" I said, "I didn't do anything. I just talked to these kids. I don't know whose they are." And the little girl jumped away from him and came back to me and hugged my leg around. Again, I kneeled down and I talked to her. And he gave orders to take the rest of 'em away and leave me there. At the time the rest of 'em were leaving, they were taking shovels and picks with them, which indicated that they were gonna dig their own graves – to me. And when I went – he took

me inside his office. And I can recall it now – it was a black leather sofa setting in his office – that he told me to sit down. And both of his children, one on each side sitting next to me talking German. And he came back and he asked me, “What are you doing to my kids?” I said, “First, let me explain it to you. I’m not one of them. I’m in a concentration camp for doing something I wasn’t supposed to do.” So he came back and he asked me, “What did you do?” I said, “I happened to cut a wire which was going into the radio. Intelligence, I guess I don’t know. The bowl I had had a hole in it and I needed something to hang it on so I cut the wire. I took a piece of the wire and hung it on the bowl and they put me in, in concentration camp as being a spy.” I said, “Really I am a German. Speak German. I was raised in German.” He said, “Where were you raised?” I said, “In Bensberg, which is in Oberschlesien.” And he said, “Bensberg?” I said, “Yeah.” “You speak good German.” I said, “Yeah.” And that what saved my life.

The afternoon of that day – all of a sudden they disappeared - and the afternoon of that day the American Army came in to that little town and the shooting was going on so much that the American Army pulled back out. I did not know that was American Army, but they looked different than the German Army. That’s all I can say. And I stayed in that office and then I went in on a farm to get away from the buildings, because of the shooting. A day later the American Army came in in full blast and that was the day of liberation – April 14, 1945. I call that my second birthday.

And I met the company commander, which was the 759 Light Tank Battalion that liberated me. And the company commander at that time was Major Miller that I remember, recall his name. And he told me to stay with them and the next morning we had breakfast. And my breakfast consisted of pancakes, but I’m not gonna say how many. I ate enough of ‘em. And then we went up to lunch and they made fried chicken. Never in my life have I eaten before fried chicken. And I think that was a delicacy in Europe. I told ‘em what I need is I needed a change of clothes, because I’ve gotta get out the clothes that I have on, which was the striped uniform infested with lice and dirty and all that. After all, we wore it for about three years. So he went and gave me a pair of his pants. Well, he was no little man. He weighed right around three, 350 – I would say. When he gave me his pants you could put two of ‘em like me inside. But he told me, “Don’t worry. As you stay long enough with us, we fill ‘em out.”

Interviewer: You had lost how much weight?

I came out, I weighed 85 pounds. I was 19 years old – not quite 19. June 6th – D-day is my birthday, which is my second birthday – or my original birthday. And he said, “You stay with us. But one thing I can say that we’re gonna have to leave this area here. We gonna have to go farther west.” Back into the, what they called, they divided Germany in four zones – the American zone, the English zone, the French zone and the Russian zone. And the place where we were, were close to the Oder River where the Russians and the American met as the war ended. So we had to leave that area to go back to West Germany and the American zone as they divided it. Our next destination was a place called Bauschheim, which was next to Rüsselsheim,

was not too far away from a big town called Frankfurt. Frankfurt Am Main was the big town. There was a displaced person camp not too far from Frankfurt, called Zeilsheim.

From 1945 to 1949 we stayed in the place called Zeilsheim until we left for the United States. I went to the United States for one reason because my brother was already going to the United States. So I figure if the family wants to stay together, the best thing for me is to follow my brother. I left for the United States. I came in to the United States, again on my good day, June 6th I left Germany. I came in to the United States June 16th. But when I came in to the Joint, which was 103rd and Broadway, and that was the place where they were separating us to go to different places, like I say to go to Pittsfield or to go to Boston or to go to Kansas City or to go to Chicago, wherever the assignment was. And they do ask, ask whether you had family here. After all, my brother left first and we knew he went to Kansas City. So when they asked me if I had any family, I said, “Yes, I got a brother.” They said, “Oh, where’s he at?” “In Kansas City.” “Good, that’s where you going – to Kansas City.”

Source: Sam Sander video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/sandersam/>