

Bernard Tenenbaum Testimony Transcript

My name is Bernard Tenebaum. From 1939 the war started up and then everything was going on fine. We was working and we was trying to make a living.

Interviewer: What was your life like before the war?

Oh, you live like you live here now. You ate. You kept your belief and your Saturdays is a holiday like, just like here. See holidays was holidays and you... People was raising their families and everything and there was no complaint about it till the Germans came in. I didn't go to school so much because I was about eight years old I start to washing the home. My mother used to help my father and we had already four children and I was eight years old. And she says, "How you gonna do it?" I wash diapers - not like here you take a diaper and throw it in the trash. At home you used to wash them in the water, hang them up on a rope and raised my sisters. I didn't have a brother till 1939. See? And my sisters was young - one that was helping, the other one was two.

In 1941, I was going out - there was a separation from the Jewish people to the Gentile people. It was fenced up with a wall. I don't remember how tall it was - was, I don't know, eight or ten feet. Very high. In Poland - Warsaw. Plus the wall high - there was barbed wire on the top. Plus this was glass in case you wanna climb over you would cut yourself to pieces. So they didn't have no choice. I was going outside and bringing in food from the Polish side - non-Jewish side. See, they had everything. We didn't have nothing. Because they let us, they let us just have a little bit flour and piece of bread - that's it. No food for us. So I was bringing in from the outside. I was doing fine. But then I don't know what happened. I got caught. Somebody looked up from the, from the window - didn't like me - from some floor. I didn't pay attention. When I was taking it, I didn't think anybody sees it. Was a [unclear]. I don't know what happened. I went in through the gate, where the Germans and the Germans asked me, "What you got in there? What you got in there?" I says, "Nothing." "What you got there?" I says, "Nothing." So he says, "You going up here. You know where you going." There was a, a special building where they occupied, the Germans, and they watched whoever brings in any food. Was not allowed - no food - nothing. So, they, somebody told him I had some stuff in there - meat, and cigarettes and butter and cheeses - loaded everything. I had a double bottom in the wagon. It was kinda high and I packed everything in there. So, I don't know it was like I was going away, he was going with me and I was traveling with the horses - just walking slowly and he says to me, saw a girl looked through the window and she called him up and she says, "C'mon." So he looked at her and he says to me, "You go in there. You know where you going?" I said, "Yeah, I going right up, right to the nat.. the building burned up there." So he says to me, "Oh, you know where you going." I say, "Yeah." "I'll be over there in a few minutes." I says, "Fine." She called him in, he went over there, he went over to her. I went into the burned out building and I unload everything - to get everything out of there and dumped

everything. I went up there to the - with all them sitting there. And they told them, “What you got there?” I said, “Nothing.” “What you got there?” and they kept on beating, knocked me the hell out of... Didn’t have no teeth no more and they knocked... My hand is up against the wall, and I was crying. Was swelling, by face was swelling. My behind was swelled up. Everyplace that was beaten. Was no stop. “What you got there?” “What you got there?” “Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.” Okay. So finally, they tell me to come and open up the bottom, bottom. I opened up and they looked in and there was nothing in there and they let me go.

So they let me go so I went up to the gate and I says... I know this guy, the policeman. I says “I wanna bring in the food.” He says, “Go. Go. Bring it in.” Put it back in and come on in.” I paid him off. So I got a run back and load it up and run in there. The German they look my pass and he says, “Go.” That’s it. Everything was paid up. And I was doing several times this.

They started up to evacuate. They used to take old people, those who had babies, old people, whoever it was – start to load them on wagons, and take them to the boxcars – just like cattles almost. And push them in in the boxcars and take them to a gas chamber. And they said it was not a gas chamber, just the name was Lublin. Lublin called it Majdanek, where it was just like a gas chamber. So they took all the people out was about of this load of the boxcar was about 10,000 of us.

[Interviewer: Where were you?](#)

I was with them.

[Interviewer: Where did you come from?](#)

From Warsaw, Poland they picked us up. And then, we were sitting in the, in the yard and the Germans was running around behind us and looking who they gonna keep alive and who they gonna kill out – take them to the gas chambers. So they, they took away my sisters and my mother. I wanna go with them so the German was staying behind me with a rifle and hit me right in the mouth and broke my teeth, and hit me over my head and blood was coming. He was laughing and I was crying, and took them away. And my mother was pulling herself the hair out. I don’t know what they did to my father. I never seen him anymore. And my brother they were run to the German and said, “Don’t kill him. Don’t kill him.” He was three years old. And the Germans stayed and looked at him. He was crying like a baby. They pushed him in and they didn’t know what to do. Then I didn’t see him no more.

They took me away and so many people. I don’t know was maybe about from 8,000, was maybe 3,000 of them. They put us in the boxcars and took us to another camp – put us to work.

[Interviewer: Where did you \[unclear\]?](#)

To Budzyń. It was fully eight miles from Majdanek. And that was a factory but they didn't put me on to work then. So they took a lot of guys out on the, on the fields, in the yard to dig and take all the manure out and fill everything up. And then about two weeks later we were staying working on the, on the yards and the railroads to dig the dirt underneath so the trains doesn't fell in. So they called me. They called me out. Says come on here. Says, "Ok. What'd I do wrong?" They say, "You didn't do nothing wrong. We gonna put you in another job." I said, "OK." So they put me into a factory where they're building airplanes. I went into the factory to work airplane. They gave me a airgun, and rivets and they show me the map how everything has to be worked out. "And don't make no sabotage because if you smash up a rivet, we blow up. We kill you right then." Which they did. Was three guys, mashed up the rivet, they took them out, outside, knocked them in three bullets and that's it –right in the head. You couldn't do nothing for them. It's their... That was their policy because you doing sabotage.

Then, then from... I worked there about seven months and they took me away to another camp – Mielec. Was Mielec - M-i-e-l-i-c-e-c (sic). Mielec they used to call it. So I stayed worked there about nine months on airplanes again. I thought maybe something else. And I stayed there. Then they decided to take us out again. I went to Wieliczka – it's in Krakow they call it - a little town. And they said too, "we gonna build airplanes." They... It was a hundred,– 270 feet under the ground, the factory. We went down there to work and then, what was there? Airplanes too. And I was working the same position, the same parts. They changed me a little bit but not so much. Was almost close. It was something anti-aircraft machines I was building. So they says to me, they says to me "Well, you doing a good job." So they took... Was four guys there. So says the guy, "Go get my sheet, a metal, sheet metal." There was a whole stack of sheet metal, you know – they building the airplanes. So this went over there, the guy put the hand on, he was electrocuted. All the cables – see was strong power because it was 270 feet under the ground. The cable was laying on the sheet metal. So he says to the other one, says to him, "Go get another, another sheet. Don't worry for him." So he was electrocuted. Then he told the third one – he was electrocuted. He came to me. I say, "You got get the machine gun and kill me. I'm not gonna go there." He says, "Yes, you are." I said, "Go get the machine gun, I'm not going. You got one choice." So he couldn't do nothing - eating himself up. He took a cigarette, he smoked and walked away, and I didn't go. And I didn't go. So I stayed there underground – I think it was about five months.

Interviewer: You mean you never came up out of the factory? [Unclear]

Yeah. Yes, it was in the barracks, you had to come out to go to sleep.

Interviewer: Okay.

They gave us some sauerkraut with flies in it and roaches in it. They don't want, they don't want you to live. They want you to die. So I stayed there and then they took us on another camp – to Flossenbürg. It was in Germany. Was it Flossenbürg? Yeah – in Germany. We

stayed there and worked at, at the, at the factory but before they put in the factory they took all the clothes away from us and put us in a paper sack – in the wintertime and people was dying like hotcakes.

Interviewer: Your clothes were [unclear]?

No, no they threw the clothes away but they had special paper sacks for us to climb in there in case you die you don't have to be dressed or anything. Just pick you up and throw you like trash. That's the way – I digged a hole for 1,500 of them. And there was a lift that pushed them all right in the, in the hole, and they stayed with the machine guns and kill them out.

Interviewer: Where was that?

In Poland. It was in Poland. Because there were so many people. The gas chambers couldn't take it away so many people and they wanna kill them out as fast as they can. I asked the German, "Why you doing this?" He says, "Gas chamber can't take away." It took too long, took only three minutes for 3,000 of them. Three minutes.

Interviewer: Did you changed jobs at that camp?

There was... No, this camp there was no jobs there. Just to take them and to kill them. So, I saw what happened there so I disappeared.

Interviewer: Unclear question.

Yeah. I run away from there. And I didn't have, I didn't have no chance to live anymore because my life was up in the air anyway. Didn't have nothing to risk – everybody was gone. So I says, take it or leave it – I took it. I escaped from there. It wasn't fenced in. It was outside. And I run away and God was with me so I made it. But I didn't stay too long and that truck and put me again in a concentration camp. So, I worked there.

Interviewer: Where did they put you?

They put me – they send me to Dachau. In Dachau we went in there was laying clothes there - maybe four, five story high. Where the people what they killed out, you see they had to take off their clothes. So, it was laying piled up there. I saw a system I says I better put on, better put on this suit underneath my prison uniform on the top – but what am I doing? I got two here – I got a, I got a haircut in the middle. But, I'm not worried. I'm gonna take a chance and I'm gonna go on. They said in Dachau they said they're gonna kill us out. So I says okay they gonna kill us out – fine. We start to march up in the mountains. It was horrible – about 20,000 of us – maybe more. I couldn't count them. So I says what did I do now wrong? Well I have to find a place to escape. We passed by a bridge and they blowed up the bridge right behind us and when they blow up the bridge there was smoke. One person cannot see another one and a hundred of us was working over there died out on the road– right on the road. They died all like

hotcakes. You couldn't work because no food for whole month. How long can you survive without a food.

Interviewer: Did you have no food for a whole month?

No, didn't have no food.

Interviewer: Did you eat anything?

Peels from potatoes and grass. So we was working over there, so since they blow up the bridge there must be some end to it. Something is going be... So, when I escaped I wait a whole night in the water to hide myself out. I didn't know what's going to happen to me. I might get caught, I might shot – either way. So, but the water was dripping from me like heck. It was the first of May. It was kinda cool at this time. I says, “no, you better do something.” So I walked out from the water – was about 4:30, 5:00 in the morning. The daylight was coming out. I set down by a farmer. And I was sitting there and a, some stones and I was shaking like heck. I said, I'm sorry I making [unclear] I don't know if I be alive or not – probably not. God says you probably will be alive. So the German comes out says, “What you doing here?” I says, “I'm hungry.” Said, “What you wanted?” Say, “I wanna piece of bread.” He said, “Brot or tod” – Bread or dead. I say, “I wanna bread.” He says, “Okay.” He goes into the house, comes out with a rifle. And I says, “See, where's God and where's my life?” He says to me, “*Aufgehen!*” – go up where the other guys are. And I turned around and looked like this and he pointed a gun. I go like this, he points it like this. I go like this, he points it like this. Keeps on pointing it. So you should... He don't know what to do...to kill me. And I kept on walking just like a zigzag. I didn't have no strength to walk – just slowly. And he pointed and pointed and then I was so far away from him he couldn't see me no more. And I saw a barn there. So, I says the heck with him, he's not seeing me so I'll go in there.

The bullets are coming like heck from a high hill and running up like no... horrible. And there was coming out two Germans running down and I was laying in the barn underneath oats hidden so in case somebody comes in they might kill me maybe. I was laying there and I eating oats and I looked and I couldn't lay there anymore. I was so nervous; I didn't know what to do. So I look out through the cracks like this and I see two German soldiers running from the mountains. They're running like wild Indians. Well bullets are coming. I wonder who's coming. They're running. There must be some other organ... other troops down there. So they running down. I thought... I was worried they're gonna come after me but they passed it. And I'm laying there and looking, looking. It must be about 12:00... This was about, must be about 7, 8:00 in the morning because I didn't have no watch. I looked at the sun. I was familiar with the sun. So they, they looked at me as go back in there and I stay there and stay and bullets are coming like nobody's business. By now about 12:00 I see some soldiers are coming down with jeeps with machine guns. I say, wait a minute. They're different troops. They're not Germans – different uniforms.

And they come down and they kept on whistling, and hollering, screaming. I didn't understand what they were saying. And I looked out of the cracks and looked, and looked, and looked. And then, then I says – must be somebody else. So I opened up my prison uniform and I have this civil suit underneath and I grab with the hand up. I grab of the hand and he speaks to me English – was a Major. He was a chaplain, was a officer. Now I know who they were but at this time I didn't know it. So I stayed there and I looked at them. He says, "Do you speak English?" I says, "No." So the officer said, "You speak Polish?" I said, "Yes." So I spoke to him, "We have no time. We wanna go after the other guy to be killed. So you go on this way. The army's coming in and they know to take you. If you tell them who you are they will go with you." Two soldiers picked me up and they say, "Who wanna kill you?" So the first one they went with me to this farmer and they asked her, "Where's your husband?" She says, "I don't know where he is." "You know where he is. Where's your husband?" And the two soldiers stayed with their guns and she's not scared. "I don't know where he is." She didn't wanna give up where he is. So we walked away.

We went into the little town. The soldiers took me into the town – was about ten of us. The ones escaped. There was about ten of us and the, and the soldier says to the farmer to give us something to eat. So that - it was at night. So they put us out sauerkraut, and milk, and potatoes, and cheese, and bread. I think that's about all, that's all there was. And coffee, I think – no they didn't have no coffee – tea, it was. So, so this guy sits next to me. I says, "Look them guys how they eating with both hands they pushing it in. I bet you they be dead by tomorrow." He says, "Why?" I say, "You watch and see it." And I took a piece a bread and put it in my pocket and chewed it a little piece. I didn't touch no milk. I didn't touch no potatoes. I just ate, break my stomach in on bread. Just on bread because my stomach was so dried out – so shrunk. I weighed about 80, 80 pounds. I went over to 150. And so they said, "What to do?" We gonna go to sleep. So I says to this guy who was sitting next to me and he listen to me, I says "You know Jack, you pay attention to what I tell you and you be alive. And the all them gonna be dead in the morning. You watch and see it." He say, "You a doctor?" I say, "You wait and see it. I went through. I know it." So he says, "Ok, I listen to you." And he did the same thing – watched me when I would took a bite. And his mouth was full of white here, because he was so hungry. He wanted to eat, you see, and I stopped him. So, he said, "Let's, let's do something." I said, "No, no don't touch nothing. Let's go to sleep now. We get up in the morning. Then, we see what, what's gonna happen." Got up in the morning, eight of them – there was ten – him and I was alive. The eight of them was dead.

[Interviewer: When you met the Americans, after you had been in Dachau, what happened to you then?](#)

What happened to me then? You see I went from this town. I didn't wanna stay. There wasn't enough people I should know. The Germans I didn't wanna... had enough of them. So I told my friends I'm Jewish people so I can talk to them and everything. So they told me to go to Munich. I came into Munich it was already a lot of Jewish peoples. I stayed there... I stayed

there about a month's time. And I said, "I don't wanna stay here. I wanna move farther." There was a few boys and I was their cook and I cook for them and I tell them how to wash their clothes and clean their house, apartment we had there. And just get doing not sitting around and feel sorry for you – it's too late now. So I went, I cooked and about seven months later I found out this Sergeant says, "If you wanna go to a town there's another mess sergeant there – he's Jewish and the Captain there he handles you guys." I said, "Where is it?" "Frankfurt am Main." So I picked up and I left. I went to Frankfurt am Main. I stayed in Frankfurt am Main. I stayed four years.

Interviewer: How did you get to Kansas City?

I had this friend, he told me to come here. He told me to come here, and I, that's why I came here. He had a brother here living too. I was partner with him in Germany so I came here.

Source: Bernard Tenenbaum video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/tenenbaumbernard/>