

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
ABSENCE OF HUMANITY PROJECT (AOH)**

MEMOIRIST: ABRAHAM (ABE) BESSER
INTERVIEWER: JANE LEAVY
LOCATION: ATLANTA, GEORGIA
DATE: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW BEGINS

<Begin Disk 1>

Abe: My name is Abe Besser . . . B-E-S-S-E-R. I was born in Poland in a city named Krzepice.¹ We had in our family seven siblings: four sisters, three brothers. I was the youngest. We had a pretty comfortable home [with] about ten rooms plus a *sukkah*, which was a separate room . . . yearly *Sukkoth*, used for that purpose only.² We had a pretty comfortable life. My father [Wolf Hersh] had a shop, which was a sheet metal shop and other sorts of construction. We lived pretty comfortable. My father made a good living. We went to school. All the children were educated.

Then the war started in September of 1939.³ The Germans invaded us [Krzepice] about six o'clock in the morning. The first thing they did was bombing the city. The synagogue was the first one they hit and several of the homes as well. People started leaving town. Everything was in disarray and everybody was running. We left town—the whole family did—and we scattered all over. We lost each other during the ordeal. After two days, the Germans were just about everywhere. There was nowhere to run because they just invaded the whole country. We returned home.

Our house was already occupied by the Germans, so we had no place to go. One of our neighbors across the street made room [for us]. They only had three rooms for their total family. We were all living in one room temporarily. After six or seven months, finally the Germans gave us three rooms. We went back to our house. We were in that house until

¹ Krzepice is a city in southern Poland. It lies 32 kilometers [20 miles] northwest of Czestochowa, and 240 kilometers [149 miles] southwest of Warsaw, on the Liswarta River. In the 1930's, the Jewish population of Krzepice comprised more than 40 percent of the town's inhabitants. Krzepice had 2 synagogues and 4 houses of prayer.

² *Sukkot* is a seven day long Harvest Festival that celebrates G-d's protection and bounty in nature. During *Sukkot*, Jews transfer their living quarters to a *sukkah*, which is a makeshift booth whose roof is of branches or vegetation thin enough to let the rain in. The *sukkah* is meant to remind Jews of the fragile booths in which their ancestors dwelt when they wandered in the wilderness during the Exodus.

³ On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Krzepice was captured in the first days of the war. About 200 Jews were expelled to Czestochowa, Poland leaving 1,500 in Krzepice and neighboring Koznicka.

about 1940. In 1940, they evicted us again from the total house.⁴ We moved down about two blocks from the house to a bakery, which was an operating bakery, but at the time we moved in, the bakery was already closed. We lived there until the end of it.

In 1941 . . . actually they started in 1940 to round up the Jews from town for different menial jobs—young and old, regardless sick or whatever—to shovel snow, clean the streets, and also work for the Germans . . . keep wherever they occupied the houses . . . keep those clean. My father was actually well known in town. We were working most of the time that I can recall on churches, which was Catholic churches mostly. We were getting a lot of help from the churches at that time with food and so forth.

In 1942, they rounded up about 300 people in that town. My youngest sister—which is older than I am [but] she was the youngest of the sisters—they got her in that round up. In order to release her, I had to volunteer to get her released. I was the youngest. At that time, in 1942, I was about almost 17 years old. I volunteered, they released her, and they shipped me off to camp. The camp was called **Niederkirchen**.⁵ We worked mostly there on the *autobahn*.⁶ We built the *autobahn* until 1943.

In 1943, they shipped us off to a camp that was called Markstadt.⁷ In Markstadt we were start constructing Kruppe-Werke, which was manufacturing ammunition, and also light machine guns, and so forth for.⁸ We stayed at Markstadt until 1943. In 1943, we built

⁴ The Germans did not set up a ghetto although they did force the Jews into hard labor beginning in the spring of 1940. In 1941 and in the beginning of 1942, selections of skilled laborers were deported to the ghetto in Częstochowa. In June and July 1942, most of the remaining Jews in Krzepice were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Others were deported to the ghetto in Sosnowiec and later also sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

⁵ **Niederkirchen – unclear if this reference is to the town in Germany (which makes sense as he was working on the *autobahn*) or if he means the Niederkirchen forced labor camp in Poland. In searching for more info, I found other sources where other survivors from Krzepice mention a camp in Poland called that, but I can find little info on it.**

⁶ The *Autobahn* is a federal controlled-access highway system in Germany. Construction of the *Autobahn* was begun before Hitler came to power, but the Nazis appropriated the project and the *Autobahn* became one of the Nazi regime's showpieces. Conscripted labor had been used to construct more than 3,000 kilometers (1,900 miles) of roadway between 1933 and 1938. As the war progressed, available labor became more limited and the focus shifted to other war-related projects. By 1942, forced laborers, including Jews, were being used for construction.

⁷ Markstadt [German: Märkstadt] was a labor camp for the Kruppe-Werke. It was later renamed 'Laskowice Olawskie.' Prisoners from Markstadt helped to build Funfteichen labor camp. Markstadt appears to have been liquidated in March 1944. Those who could still work were sent to other camps in the area and the rest sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau to be murdered.

⁸ The Krupps were a major industrialist family in Germany. Krupp became famous for their steel production and for their manufacture of ammunition and armaments. During World War II, they were enthusiastic supporters of the Nazis and were the largest suppliers of tanks, U-boats, guns, and armaments of every type in Germany. They were based in the Essen region of Germany, a heavily industrialized area that was essentially a Krupp system of factories and towns devoted to the Krupp empire. However, a 'Krupp-Werke' was any factory around the country that was part of their far-flung armaments industry.

another camp that was called Funfteichen.⁹ We worked at the same construction site, which was Kruppe-Werke. At that time, we transferred from civilian clothes to striped suits. That was the first time I'd seen the striped suit. They took our civilian clothes. We went through a complete checkup. Everything we had, we had to drop behind us. They gave us striped suits. There we worked until late 1944.¹⁰ In 1944, the Russians as well as the Americans started bombing Funfteichen all around us. Of course, at first we didn't know who was doing the bombing. Afterwards, we found out it was mostly the American Air Force that was doing most of the bombing.

They started transporting us from there to a camp that was called Gross-Rosen.¹¹ We got to Gross-Rosen and that was the worst atrocity I've ever seen in my life. There were mountains and mountains full of bodies, just piled up. That was the first time I'd ever seen that. [It was] the first time I'd ever seen the crematoriums, and the smoke, and the smell. It was absolutely awful. We stayed there [in Gross-Rosen] for about three weeks. After three weeks, they kept transporting us further on out.

<interview pauses, then resumes>

Abe: What I want to emphasize: at the occupation . . . when it first started in 1939, before we were rounded up and there were also the Germans, my father lost an eye. My father and myself . . . went to the *mikveh*, which is a tradition in Poland to go—which is a ritual bath—

⁹ Funfteichen [German: Fünfteichen] was the site of an armaments plant run by Kruppe-Werke. It was built in early 1942 and production started in early 1943. It was the largest sub-camp in the Gross-Rosen system. The first transport of about 600 Polish Jews prisoners arrived in late September or early October 1943. There were about 6,000 to 7,000 prisoners in the camp towards the end of the war. Sick prisoners were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau to be murdered and others were transferred to Gorlitz labor camp. Most of the prisoners worked in the Krupp factory manufacturing cannons and torpedo launchers. The prisoners walked from the camp to the plant every day, escorted by SS men and dogs. The conditions were terrible and the beatings and executions regular. Many prisoners committed suicide by "*going to the post*," that is, getting so near the fence that a guard would shoot them.

¹⁰ Funfteichen was evacuated starting on January 21, 1945 when about 6,000 prisoners were marched out of the camp. The temperature was 20 degrees below zero. The prisoners were marched on foot to Gross-Rosen. The journey took four days. Most were moved on again by train deeper into Germany ending up to Buchenwald, Flossenburg, Dachau, Dora-Mittelbau and Mauthausen. There were only about 300 prisoners left in the camp when the Americans liberated it on January 23, 1945.

¹¹ Gross-Rosen was opened in May 1940. It was situated in a quarry near the village of Gross-Rosen. It eventually grew to control a whole network of sub-camps, which included Markstadt and Funfteichen. By 1944 there were about 110,000 prisoners in the system. The living and working conditions were brutal. The rations were a slice of bread and watery soup each day. The prisoners slept on straw sacks that teemed with lice. It was classified as a Category III camp, or the most severe treatment classification. As the war neared its end, conditions grew even worse as evacuation transports arrived from the east swelling the camp to near bursting. The death rate skyrocketed and bodies were piled up outside the barracks. In January 1945 the camp population was evacuated ahead of the Russians. Some of the prisoners were packed tightly into open freight cars. Others were marched out on foot. Over half of the prisoners died on the death marches in the final days of the war. The Russians liberated gross-Rosen on February 13, 1945.

every Friday evening before the Sabbath.¹² As we left that ritual bath, the Germans got ahold of my father and hit him with a sword on the side of his face. He severed his eye nerves and he lost his eye's vision. The eye had to be removed. He had to leave town to get an operation. [He went to] a town by the name of Krakow.¹³ They inserted a glass eye. He never had the vision on that one eye. It was an atrocity that happened in that town, if they caught somebody with a beard, they caught him and cut the beard off with a sword—just mutilated as much as they could. The beating went on constantly even when we were working. At work, if an elderly person could not shovel as much as a young one, G-d knows how many beating he would get. They would take a shovel, turn the shovel upside down, hit him over the head until blood would just gush out of his brain, until finally they turned him loose . . . It's an atrocity that's almost unbelievable. That that could happen by a country that is cultured and civilized . . . it was just unbelievable.

Going back to that camp: Gross Rosen. We left that camp after a certain time and we kept marching. We marched in snow and rain. It was absolutely cold. While we were marching, we were bombed and striped all over the place. We lost thousands and thousands of people on the road. People could not walk any longer. As soon as they'd sit down on the side [of the road], they [the Germans] would shoot them immediately on the site. There was no relief whatsoever. The food . . . there was no food on the roads, no meals, no hot water, no cold water, no nothing. For days and days, we were marching absolutely in snow.

In the camps where we were working, everybody received about four to five ounces of bread a day. In the evening, when we returned to the camp, it was just a bowl of soup with nothing but just water and maybe a little spinach in it. [There was] nothing to keep you healthy or [that had] any calories in it whatsoever. Meat—there was no such thing as meat. We hadn't seen any meat in the total time I was in camp. During the construction site, the only time that you had an occasion to get something that would nourish you is either from a civilian that worked there on the site or a German that happened to like you and he would give you sometimes a sandwich or a piece of meat or whatever. Whoever was lucky that you did have somebody that you could organize something like that, you could survive. Otherwise, there wasn't a way to survive. People were just losing weight. Most of them [were] just skin and bones. I was about the youngest in my company. We had about nine

¹² A *mikveh* is a pool of water gathered from rain or a spring, used for ritual purification and ablutions.

¹³ Krakow [Polish: Kraków; sometimes also 'Cracow'] is the second largest city in Poland, situated on the Vistula River. It is about 150 kilometers [93 miles] southeast of Krzepice.

people in the company working. I was the youngest one. For some reason or another, I was the most likeable. I don't know why. I guess because I was producing more than anybody else. I was given quite a bit of food by Germans that I worked with. That's one reason that I survived and I was in good shape when I did survive the camp.

The atrocity was so hideous that it's almost indescribable how anybody could be that hideous to a human being. It's indescribable what went on—the beatings, the killings. We worked every day from eight to ten hours a day. There was no way out except work, work, work with no end. We were losing people just by the thousands. Everyday, people were just starving to death. In the camp, once we returned to the camp, it was the same thing again in the camp. Unless you knew anybody in the camp to take a bath, otherwise there was no way to take a bath. It was so extreme that people were actually almost eating each other up. It's hard to describe. It's hard for me to describe because those memories—when you talk about them—it's just unbelievable.

We had in our family, for instance, four sisters, three brothers. I survived. My four sisters survived. I lost two brothers [Meir and Arie] and my mother [Rivka] and father, nephews, nieces, brother-in-laws, sister-in-laws, uncles, aunts . . . We had a large family. I would say in our family, if we had a party or a wedding, three or four hundred people were just in the family. It's all it took, just for our family. In all that was going [on], my brother, he was hiding out in a bunker. When he left that bunker to go out and get some food or water or whatever, somebody squealed. It had to be a Polack that squealed on him.¹⁴ The Germans followed him. They caught them all. They took every one of them out [of the bunker]. My brother had twin girls. They were all shot on the site. Every one of them that was down in the bunker—my brother, my two nieces, my sister-in-law, and G-d knows . . . I don't know who else was there. That was in a different city. Every one of them was shot on site. For what reason? I don't know any other reason except that we had a different religion. Why? We didn't do anything wrong to get that kind of treatment. For no reason whatsoever, they were just killing us all, just from left to right.

My father, when he died I was told—I was not there in that camp, but I was told—he was in fairly good shape. An older brother of mine: he was a genius and he was a giant. He was strong as an ox. They tell me that he was killed in a cave with bayonets and with the end of a rifle. They just kicked him and beat on him until he finally dropped dead in that

¹⁴ Polack is a derogatory reference to a person of Polish descent.

cave. To that, I have a witness that they have seen what happened for no reason whatsoever. Those things went on and on and on. I don't know if I could describe more in details the atrocities. I'm sure that a lot of people had different experiences than I have.

There was such thing as Gross-Rosen. I was there just a short period of time. People were just dying in the thousands. It's unbelievable. It's unbelievable what I've seen in that camp. While we were marching, people were just dying like flies all over the road. I don't know what happened to them. I guess they just took them back in at the crematorium and burned them afterwards.

We were marching for months and months. Finally, we got into a village called **Stamswede**, very deep in Bavaria. They took us into a nearby woods and they lined us all up, four abreast. We thought that they were going to shoot us all to death. About ten minutes later, the American Air Force flew over and dropped leaflets saying, "This is the American Army. We will march in within ten minutes. Nobody move. Everybody stays in place." We thought that was the end of it then, that they [the Germans] were gonna sure enough kill us. Luckily, they did not. They immediately—after they picked up those leaflets, which was in German—changed their uniforms into civilian clothing. They threw their uniforms away. Of course, the armaments they kept. [They] told us, "You go to the left and we go to the right." So we marched into the village. I don't know where they marched because I wasn't interested to follow them. We went into the village. By the time we got into the village, the American Army was arriving at the same time. The first tanks drove in. We just grabbed them and kissed them. There were some that spoke German and some spoke Yiddish. We didn't speak English at all. We started conversing and they found out who we were.

From then on, the Red Cross came in afterwards.¹⁵ They set up quarters. There were people who were very, very sick. They could hardly walk. We had to physically drag them into the village. They made quarters for those real sick ones. [The Red Cross] set up field hospitals and they were treated immediately. The ones that could walk, they were assigned to certain homes and the Germans had to take care of us until they nursed everybody back to a certain health.

After that, I think we stayed about six months. There were three of us staying at the one place. After three months, we all left the village and went to a city that was called

¹⁵ The International Committee of the Red Cross ("Red Cross") is a humanitarian institution based in Geneva, Switzerland. After liberation, camp survivors faced a long and difficult road to recovery. The Red Cross worked to organize relief assistance to those countries most severely affected by the war.

Weiden—also in Bavaria.¹⁶ There, I set up quarters in Weiden with a friend of mine that I was in camp together [with]. We were in Weiden for about a couple of months. A girl came into Weiden from the Russian zone.¹⁷ It just so happened that she was in a camp with my sisters. She told me where my sisters were. The next day, the three of us packed up and we went to the Russian zone because they had family there too. I went and got all my sisters—which was four sisters—and brought them to the American zone. My father didn't survive, and my mother didn't, and the rest of the family didn't. I had also an aunt that we found there in the Russian zone. We brought her back. I brought with me ten people including myself. We brought them over. We set up home in Weiden until we got the visa to leave Germany into the United States. I had an opportunity to get several visas. One was Israel, Canada as well, and Australia. I had four different places to leave.

<End Disk 1>

<Begin Disk 2>

Abe: After we settled in Weiden, we waited for visas. I was in business while I was in Germany—several different businesses. We were sitting, waiting to get the visa to the United States. My youngest sister left first. She went to New York. My older sister got a visa to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]. Myself and the oldest sister left to Atlanta [Georgia]. My oldest sister is still in Germany at this time. I left Germany in early December 1949 and arrived in the United States December 24 or 25 by ship. The ship was named *General Samuel Sturgis*.¹⁸ We arrived in Atlanta. We were just the luckiest people you've ever seen in your life. We actually kissed the ground when we arrived in New Orleans [Louisiana], where we landed. We made home in Atlanta, Georgia. I've been here in Atlanta since 1949. I have no regrets. I worked for the company that guaranteed my visa, name of Rosenthal Metal Company.¹⁹ I worked three years with that company. After three years, I started in business for myself. I went into construction business. I started in 1953 and I've been at it ever since. After I formed that company, I've had a lot of people also wanted to join with

¹⁶ Weiden is a city in Bavaria, Germany. It is located 100 kilometers [62 miles] east of Nuremberg and 35 kilometers [22 miles] west of the Czech border.

¹⁷ From 1945 to 1949, Germany was occupied by the Allied forces and divided into four administrative zones by the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and the United States. The American occupied zone was in the southern portion of Germany and included the city of Weiden. The Soviet Union occupied the northeastern portion of Germany.

¹⁸ During the war the *USS General S.D. Sturgis* was a troop transport, but after was put to use as general transportation often bringing displaced persons to the United States from Europe.

¹⁹ Rosenthal Metal Company, Inc. was a sheet metal company in Atlanta, Georgia owned by Samuel "Sam" Rosenthal.

me, which I did have some with me. Up to date, I'm still in construction business.

I really want to thank the United States. I never will forget the opportunity that was given us. I have no regrets. I became a citizen in 1955. I became an American citizen. A gentleman by the name of Sam Rosenthal, he was the guarantor of my visa.²⁰ He was one of the witnesses. Dr. [Irving] Greenberg's father was the other witness when I received my citizenship papers.²¹ That was a moment that I'll never forget. We were in tears and we were laughing . . . It was unbelievable what went on at that time at the federal courthouse. This is about the story of me.

Jane: Abe, you are a businessman. Talk a little bit about German industry employing slave labor . . .

Abe: We were slaves with no pay whatsoever. It's not just that we were not paid for it. We were not fed properly or clothed properly. In the wintertime, all you had is a thin jacket, underwear, and a coat. In Germany or Europe, it is very, very cold in the winter. That's all you were given. Shoes . . . unless you were walking barefooted, otherwise they would not give you a pair of shoes. We built the industry practically. The Germans were not able to work there because they were out on the fronts. Most of the people that were employed were slave labors. We had some civilians and we had some Germans overseeing it, but most of all slave labor. I think that was very, very wrong for a country even to invade another country. What business did they have to invade another country? Country after country . . .

Jane: There are going to be a lot of people coming to see this exhibition and to see these videotapes. If you could give a message to people who are learning about the Holocaust, being introduced to it, what would that be in terms of today's society?

Abe: Meaning what went on?

Jane: What would you want them to learn?

Abe: What I want them to learn, to see [is] what had happened in a civilized country, what a civilized country did to human beings. Therefore, I want them to see that this education is being brought forward, and taught, and taught, and taught [so] that an atrocity like that

²⁰ After the war, opportunities for legal immigration to the United States remained limited. Although restrictions were loosened to allow more displaced persons to obtain visas, it was still necessary to have a guarantor—someone who would be responsible for ensuring an immigrant didn't become a public charge. Various welfare organizations worked to connect visa applicants who did not have any family or relations in the United States already with guarantors.

²¹ Dr. Irving Greenberg (1911-2006) was born in Poland and came to Atlanta with his family in 1913. He was active in Atlanta's Jewish community and worked as a general surgeon. It is unclear what his father's name was.

would never happen again to human beings. This is the only thing I'd like to see. That it will not occur again, regardless of what religion a person believes in. What right does any country got to irradiate a nation because of their religion? Here in the United States, it's a free country and everybody believes whatever they want to believe and that's the way it ought to be. I'd like to see more and more education, more and more people to see the Holocaust and the atrocities that had happened [so] that it will not occur again. This is my only wish.

<End Disk 2>

INTERVIEW ENDS

Cuba Family Archives