

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Holocaust Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 809

GEORGE JACOBS

Interviewed

by

Barbara Crowley

on

February 2, 1981

## GEORGE JACOBS

George Jacobs was born May 27, 1918 in Germany, the son of Herman and Miriam Jacobs. He was raised in Jaworzno, Poland which is a town very near Auschwitz, and attended public schools there.

In March of 1942, Jacobs was sent to a labor camp where he worked making desks and, later, airplane parts. He was completely separated from the rest of his family and had no knowledge of where they were. In June or July of 1944 the camp was taken over by the Nazi SS as a concentration camp.

After the war, in September of 1945, George was reunited with his sister Laura--the only other immediate family member to survive. At that time, George was arrested by the Polish Army and sent to a camp from which he escaped. He and his sister then returned to Germany. Jacobs immigrated to the United States in 1950.

Today George and his wife Eva have two children, Esther and Joy, and live in Youngstown. Mr. Jacobs has a successful business, George Jacobs' Kitchens, in Girard.

Barbara Crowley

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INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE JACOBS

INTERVIEWER: Barbara Crowley

SUBJECT: labor camp, family, survival, escape, Poland,  
Auschwitz

DATE: February 2, 1981

C: This is an interview with Mr. George Jacobs for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project, by Barbara Crowley, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs, 2485 Barth Drive, Youngstown, Ohio, on February 2, 1981, at 1:50 p.m.

Mr. Jacobs, where were you born?

J: Jaworzno, Poland.

C: What was it like?

J: It was a common, ordinary city, an industrial city. It was a coal mining city and also a steel mill city. Our ethnic groups were divided into different sections. The Irish were living by themselves, the Jewish by themselves, and the Germans by themselves.

C: What was your family background and father's trade?

J: My father was a cabinetmaker by trade. My mother was a housewife. My father was brought up under the Russian regime since the part where I was born once belonged to Austria. Mother was born in that area and father was born in the Russian zone. Actually, father was a Russian Jew and mother was an Austrian Jew.

C: How long has your family been in this country?

J: I lost my whole family. I have been here since 1949. I came with my sister. She has passed away. From my family nobody is here but me.

C: Could you tell me about your education, what was it like?

J: In the city where I was born the basic education naturally started out in public school. The basic background of education came from Hebrew universities and such. We had our parochial schools as far as Judaism. We sort of moved up with the parochial schools. My education as far as elementary school or public school, I attended seven year classes at the public school. That was compulsory.

Later on I went to a university, sort of like rabbinical classes. I went there until the war broke out because I was too young to further my education, so I stopped right there.

C: How far did you go then?

J: I went until I was eighteen and one half years old; that was the end of it. I was sent to a concentration camp then from when the war started in 1939. It wasn't direct; actually I went to the concentration camp in 1942. Our father country was taken over, the first push by Hitler, from into the eastern part of the world, which means Poland and Russia. The third day of the war I was already under Nazi orientation, September 3, 1939.

C: When you were a child is there anything major that stands out?

J: I went to a Polish public school for the first four years. Just to give you an idea of how far anti-Semitism was engraved in Poland, I would say more than in Germany. At the free period, fifteen minutes between one hour and the other, we had to stay in the corner; otherwise we got beat to death--only for one reason, because we were Jewish kids. I have nothing good or anything precise to say about the Poles towards Judaism in Poland.

We were on the border of Poland and Germany, and I spoke German fluently. We used to run over to the German side before Hitler came to power. As a matter of fact, we have never seen such outrageous incidents as we saw as children. We never saw such things as we saw from the Polish people towards us.

C: Is there any one incident that stands out in your mind?

J: What can I say when it was there everyday . It was a way of life. We knew that if we were going to public school we were going to get beat up. It was only for one reason and that was because we were Jewish kids. Only the strong survived. You asked me why I didn't advance my education beyond seven years, that's why. It was compulsory; you had no choice. That's why we created our own schools, our own system, because we could not survive in the other schools.

On September 3, 1939 the German Army was moving into Poland. My whole family escaped. We tried to escape into the dark of Poland. We thought maybe the Polish Army would hold them back. We had two evils, either Polish people or German, but we knew the Germans were worse at the time. We escaped and we ran, and ran, and ran. When you see the flight of Vietnamese and Cambodian people on television, that's what we were like. That is what I did when I was eighteen. We escaped into the middle of Poland. They were a little quicker than us; they had tanks and machinery, so they ran us over. The Polish Army couldn't hold them back, therefore we turned back.

Families were broken up, that was the tragedy of the whole Holocaust, the beginning of it. Before we had a close-knit family; everything was melted together. Then everything fell apart. It was so bad the year it started that even brother and sister, or mothers and fathers, or mothers and fathers and children weren't a neat bundle anymore. Everyone was for himself. Everyone had an individual holocaust, plus every family had one. You have to divide this thing into molecules. Every human being had a holocaust of his own. My family ceased to be a unit September 1, 1939.

C: Your life changed in that your family was close-knit and then they were separated. How were you separated at first?

J: The separation of myself completely from the family was March 1942. I was sent to a slave labor camp. In 1944 that was taken over by the concentration camps. A camp was the same camp, but it depended on who it was taken over by. I had no knowledge of where my brother was, my sister, or my father. At the end of 1942, groups of people entered our camps from different regions, which is like a state. When they came in they mentioned some that were taken in by the Nazis later than myself. They told me they were aware that my family was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp and had been gassed. That is how much I know about my family, no more. That was the first thing I asked, "Have you seen my family?" They said, "You have nothing to worry about. Don't think about it anymore because they were gassed already. They're dead." That was the end of that. Then my brother was in a camp someplace. Some people told me. These people told me they saw my brother; that is the only knowledge I had of him, and no more. Then I knew about my sister from someone; where, I never knew.

C: You never saw her again?

J: I saw her here. Then I didn't see her until the war was over, September or October 1945, when I found her. I went looking all over Europe. They told me there were different camps and I traveled to them. We looked around for people that we knew. Then we advertised names through the Red Cross and I still didn't hear. The only solution I found, the best thing

for me was to go back home to find out if someone has seen her. When I came home fortunately I found her. She was waiting for me. She hadn't heard anything about me. She did the same thing; she was waiting for me and I arrived. Again, very fortunately, the Polish Army arrested me immediately.

C: Was she married at that time?

J: No.

C: What was your age at that time?

J: Nineteen.

C: The big change for you then was not only being taken to a camp, but your entire family was extinct?

J: Yes. We had a large family. My father had eight brothers and my mother had four brothers and four sisters. We were all in the same area. Our family was about one hundred all together, and they were completely wiped out.

C: What was the year you were deported?

J: Not deported, I was taken into a slave labor camp in 1942 in March. Deportation is different. Every city has old, middle-aged, young people and babies. The eligible people were taken into labor or concentration camps. When they cleaned up all these people they got to the older people; they deported them with the small kids. They didn't deport them, they took them immediately to Auschwitz to the gas chamber. If you were deported you were sent to a different country or city or existence. They weren't deported they were taken out to be killed.

C: You were, weren't you?

J: No, I was taken out to work to the labor camps.

C: It wasn't a different city?

J: No, an entirely different place. I didn't even know where it was. I was in a city near Berlin.

A lot of people today ask me how I survived. Number one, there were a lot of Jews, and to wipe out a lot of people you need a lot of time. Plus, as the war progressed on the Russian front they were short of labor. The German Army also fell like flies. The Russians did a good job on them too. They needed replacement labor and the only replacements they had were us. When the war began in 1941, 1942, they weren't as generous and immediately killed us. Later on they needed us. I personally think because of the need of labor . . . Most of the people who survived were mostly in the mechanical or technical. I was a technician

working on parts for airplanes. I was good at it. I knew I would survive if I contributed something. I also realized that if I did my job I wasn't abused as much. As long as I was needed I knew I would survive. That's why I did my job and followed orders.

Another philosophy is that as the war progressed there were problems in the German organization. They began to lose the war and have so many casualties. They began to lose grip on the whole situation. They had their own problems. In other words, Hitler had to exterminate his own people, his own bodies, his own best friends. They didn't have that much time to put that much effort on us, so we were sort of in the middle of a vacuum.

C: Many people mention the reason for survival was a sense of humor too.

J: Yes. Psychologically you have to have a will to survive. If you lose your will of survival you don't survive because you kill yourself. In our camp people came from Belgium and France and they didn't even know they were Jews. Their backgrounds, assimilations, intermarriages were so deep rooted they didn't even know it. It was probably seventeen generations back that their grandfather was a Jew or such. They came in and they were doctors, very intelligent people, painters; they survived six weeks. They had no will to live because they didn't have the stubbornness as the Eastern Jew. The Eastern Jew is a sufferer; he survives. You hit him over the head and he'll sing you a song. We had our background from Poland; we knew how to take abuse before. A little bit of humor and a little bit of competence helps you to survive. You have to have a little will to live, this is basic. Even in prison you have to have a will to survive.

C: Do you feel the day-to-day coping with the pressure put on you by your surroundings in Poland made you survive?

J: That gave you a good background. You were used to being hit.

C: What was it like for you day to day in a concentration camp?

J: Not even day to day, it was hour to hour. You could be on a production line and an hour later someone could come and pick you out and take you to Auschwitz. There was no reasoning why.

C: How long did you stay in the camp?

J: Until I escaped. I wasn't freed.

C: Were there any particular incidents that you remember from the camp?

J: If you did your job you survived the day. On the job itself, in the shop, you were a third-rate citizen. You were left alone to do what you had to do. The problems started when you came home to the barracks. In the barracks is where the camp took over. Everyday we had counting in the morning and counting in the evening. In the counting in the evening they didn't go through a day in which they didn't kill someone or beat someone to death. One Saturday afternoon the factories were closed for some reason or another so we had to go back to the barracks. That was the worst Saturday afternoon we ever had because prisoner killed prisoner, the SS killed the prisoners, and it was nothing but a massacre. If you survived that Saturday you survived. They split open my head once in two. I could put my hand inside and feel it. There was nothing but a field hospital, no doctors. God comes in here because they put a patch on me and that's all. Somehow it healed and everything was fine. I had no medical assistance, nothing. I know for sure the brain was exposed. Everyday it was something else.

How could a person survive on the food they gave us? If we stole something . . . If you were a German co-worker and put down a half of a sandwich, I stole it. I ate it because it was a method of survival. There are so many little episodes of how we survived.

I'll never forget, there was a horse and a wagon in the front of the factory I was working at. I walked over to the horse and I took his oats and I ate it. Not only me, a whole bunch, we all ate it together. We were that hungry.

The Germans raised rabbits during the war for meat. They had those little hutches and they were looking out. If we could cut one out we took it home and ate it. That was hunting. Most of us looked in garbage cans and these were poisonous; most of them died. I never did that because my mother was in the medical business and she taught us not to touch things as children for cleanliness.

Since I was mechanical in the shop I was on a production line. We made desks and later on I was transferred to make airplane parts. They used to call me to do repair jobs in their offices, fix a table or chair or something like that. As I went out from one place to another I went back to the main kitchen. The main kitchen hall was feeding about 25,000 people. The smell was so good so I went into the kitchen and looked around. There were German people sitting there eating. The kettle was almost a foot high and I jumped in and ate it. Later on I was walking and you could see the footsteps. The girls in the kitchen saw what was happening and didn't say a word; evidently they were human too. If they would have reported me I would have gone to Auschwitz. You didn't think what was going to happen in the next two hours, because I could have been killed. My stomach was full and I was happy.



I was put in prison for twenty-five years and I counted out everyday. I didn't know what was next. The emptiness I felt I don't wish on anybody. You are so empty you don't even have the guts to pick up a knife to kill yourself. That was the worst part of the concentration of the Holocaust, not the fear. The fear was not so bad. After the war I was empty and didn't accomplish anything. I had to put the pieces together myself without a psychiatrist.

I lived with my sister and I found her and we were not like brother and sister. They took away the ties from me too. We were torn apart. Before, we were a tight-knit family, nice. Later on I had no feelings; I was empty. You have to be fulfilled to give love and take love. I had no love to give or take.

C: When the war was over did you want to go back to Poland?

J: I didn't want to go back to a country where I suffered even before Nazism. The only thing that pulled me back was to find somebody in my family. I wasn't only looking for my sister; I thought I had cousins or other family. Since I found my sister I was very happy, but I was arrested that evening by the Polish Army. The first question was why wasn't I in a concentration camp and I wasn't in the underground. Anyhow, I escaped from prison.

C: What year would that have been?

J: 1945, in September. Later I took my sister and we ran away and came to the American soldiers in Germany again. We established a sort of residence there. There were refugee camps in the American zone next to Munich, Germany. We established residence, but she went to a different camp than me. It was an after-war preparation to move to a different country. They placed us in a camp in order to have control over us. The United Nations Organization gave us food and shelter and that. We were waiting to immigrate to a different country. They divided us into Canada, America, whatever. My sister, in the meantime, got married there and he was working on a job. Myself, I worked a little bit as a cabinetmaker and I was just bumming around. The first year we were all wandering Jews looking for one another.

Let me tell you how I came into Oberammergau. The owner of the house where I lived had a cottage in Oberammergau. He asked me to take a weekend down there and gave me the key. I went there for a visit. Oberammergau is a part of Germany, but it is not Germany. The whole area from Munich to Oberammergau is mountain people. They have their own uniforms; they live their own life and they don't like to be bothered. They go back 400 or 500 years with their traditions. Their way of life is different than in the city. They're educated, but they don't want to change their traditions. They had their own

slang language.

C: You were mentioning how painful memories still come back to you.

J: This is the worst part of the concentration camp. You dream about somebody chasing you at night. You wonder why you have to suffer psychologically now. If you get hurt you can heal that; this you can't heal evidently. Maybe some people can, but I cannot. When you see a concentration camp victim you think he is normal; he isn't normal inside. He has flashbacks of the killings.

C: Another interesting part of your life is that you grew up near Auschwitz and I wondered what you felt about it looking back on that?

J: Geographic situations don't affect you, I don't think. The problem is so big that geography falls aside. Hitler picked Auschwitz because it was near his border and it was centrally located geographically for him. There was a big railroad station and a big industry there and he needed workers. At first he took the people into labor camps, and then later to the gas chambers.

C: That's where your parents were killed, but it wasn't really in your city as far as where you were?

J: No. Maybe the fact that it was Auschwitz scared other people from father away, but we weren't afraid because we knew the city. It was a normal city.

One incident is when the Russians came in. I saw the tanks moving and we walked toward the Russians and told them that we came out from a concentration camp. We looked like it because we had the blue and white uniforms. Also, we were shaved out. We were very skinny too. When we approached them one officer said, "They're spies. Let's kill them." These are episodes again that brush your mind. The physical never bothered me; even today nothing bothers me physically because I know I can heal it. But your brain nobody fixes. As we were standing there there were sixteen of us. They were ready to take us to the firing squad. Suddenly a jeep came in and a little guy jumped out. Everybody was saluting him and he asked what was going on. They told him they had found these Jews. I speak Russian so I understood them. They said, "We found them and they say they are prisoners of war." I immediately jumped in and said in Russian, "Doesn't he believe us that we are Jews and prisoners of war?" He said, "I can see you are." That's all he said. The second lieutenant asked what he should do with us and the man told him to give us water and fruit. The German Jews couldn't speak Russian, so he said to me, "What do you guys want to do?" I told him we were just freed and had

been lying in the woods for seven days suffering and that we would appreciate it if we could go into a house someplace and lie down. We didn't want anything, just to lie down. He said, "Okay. Do you know who you are talking to?" I said, "No." He opened up his zipper and had medals all over the place. He said, "Don't worry. I'm a Jew also and I'm the general of the tanks here and am running this war here." I told him that I knew the Russian Army and I asked him to give us a piece of paper so that nobody would bother us. He gave us a paper and I showed it to all the armies that came through. Everybody was reading it and saw his signature and let us go. Then we stayed at the headquarters and little by little came to life. We ate a little bit, some soup and then recuperated. Then they made us interpreters and we stayed with them for three months. They told us we were very valuable to them and they wanted to take us to Moscow. They had a couple of ponies and they gave us the ponies to ride. We rode into the American border. We left the horses and we ran into the American zone. We still had the uniforms and everything.

Every person has a different feeling towards the Holocaust. Some people think that it was the Holocaust and they suffered and they like to be reminded the rest of their lives about it for some reason or another. I personally don't like to be reminded. I want to forget it and erase it completely. If you go back in history you will find that every nation had a holocaust, every race had a holocaust. It wasn't at such a magnitude that this one was though. I'll never forget it as long as I live, but I think as a human being you have to forgive.

END OF INTERVIEW