

Martin Kahane

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

My name is Martin Kahane and I was born in Ciechanow, Poland on October 17, 1923. My name at birth was Mordechai. Our home was in a small city where there were few Poles. I had five brothers and one sister - their names were Avram, Sidney, Sam, David, Leo and Hinda. My father's name was Mosche and my mother's name was Dwora. I am the only member of my family still alive. My brother Sidney and my brother Sam both died in the year 2000. We were the only ones to come to the United States after the war. My brother Leo died in Ciechanow before the war. Everyone else died in the camps.

My life in Ciechanow was good, but it was nothing special. My father bought and sold things for a living traveling by horse and cart. My mother took care of the family. Everything changed in 1939 when the Germans came to Poland. I had graduated from high school. We had heard about the Nazis, but we did not think they would come as they did. I remember when the tanks came into our town. I remember seeing the soldiers walking the streets carrying rifles. They made many rules about what we could do and what we couldn't do. We had to wear the yellow stars on our coats. There was a curfew that said we had to be in our homes by a certain time. I remember that because the first person I ever saw killed died because of the curfew. He was out at night after the curfew. He was running and the Germans shot him.

Not long after the Germans came, we had to move out of our house. But at least the family was together. We were also forced to work for the Germans. We did all kinds of work, carpentry, digging ditches. In September 1942, they moved us to the camps. We were sent to Auschwitz. The whole family went in the same transport. We were told that we were going to work. Upon arrival we faced a selection.

My mother father and brother David were separated and I never saw them again. My sister went with the women and I saw her in the camp. We three brothers were together. I got my number at Birkenau. It is 73718. Sam's number was 73719 and Sidney's number was 73720.

In the camps we worked. We were separated into work groups and each day we were given different jobs to do. Sidney worked with recently arrived Jews. Sam worked on sewer lines in Auschwitz. They fed us once each day. I worked making windows and doors for new construction for German officers and their families. Yes, we knew about the gas chambers and the crematoriums. I also worked making the crematorium but did not realize what it would be used for until later. I did not work with the Sonderkommandos. In 1944, I got typhus and went to the hospital. Dr. Mengele came once or twice a week to look the patients over. He told the doctor that I could return to work.

I remember the day we were liberated May 1, 1945. We knew the war was coming to an end. The Germans were nervous. They sent us by train from Poland to a camp in Germany. One day a captain led a group of us out of that camp on a march. Nobody knew where we were going or

what they were going to do to us. The captain marched us slowly, hoping we would be found by the Americans. We were outside of a town, resting on the side of the road. The town was Wolfratshausen. The captain had gone and while he was away a car drove up. Inside was a German general. He asked a sergeant what we were doing and who was in charge. The general asked that the captain be sent for. When he returned, the general told the captain to take us to the village of Buchberg, about two miles away and wait there for the Americans. It was in Buchberg that I was reunited with my brothers Sam and Sidney.

It was while I was in the relocation camp in Regensburg, Germany, that I was recruited to go to Israel and join the army. My brothers Sam and Sidney did not go so I went by myself. I was stationed in the Negev desert and was there in 1948 when Israel became a country. We had to go to several towns and drive the Egyptians out. I was given a medal for being a soldier.

I could have stayed in Israel but I decided to go back to Regensburg to be with my brothers. We decided to move to the United States. My name was still on the list for a visa to immigrate to the US. We were like refugees. I went first, to Chicago. Sam and Sidney moved to Oakland, California. Eventually I joined them. I met my wife Peggy in 1955 and we settled in Richmond. She already had a son from an earlier relationship. His name is Terry. Peggy and I were married in 1957. Our first son, Ivan, was born in 1958. Leo was born in 1961, Shellie was born in 1964 and Julie was born in 1973. Peggy and I divorced after Julie was born, but I did not move far away from my family. I still helped them financially. I spent time with my children, taking my sons to hockey practice and games, and taking my daughters ice-skating. We would get together for family dinners like Thanksgiving and Christmas. I did not raise my children to be Jewish. I lost my faith in God from the war.

I worked for Grove, Valve and Regulator in Emeryville for twenty-seven years and also had a small business, a coin operated laundromat. I retired from Grove in 1986 and sold my business shortly after. Over the past several years I have spent my time taking care of my rental properties, fixing things, riding my bicycle and spending time with my children and grandchildren. I have had several health problems. I had colon cancer, triple by-pass surgery and a stroke. The stroke made it hard for me to walk and I cannot use my left hand very well. But I can still drive my car to McDonald's for breakfast when I want to.

My children are doing well. They work as a mechanic, a teacher, a professor, a doctor and a locksmith. I have four grandchildren, all boys, and a fifth one on the way. From time to time I think about returning to Israel because, even though I have been in this country for over fifty years, I would like to be around more people like myself.

About my experiences in the Holocaust, I do not think of myself as special. It happened to all of us.