

Bernard Offen

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I, Bernard Offen, was born in Krakow, Poland in 1929. My parents, two brothers Sam Offen, the oldest and Nathan Offen my middle brother, one sister and I lived in an apartment in the Podgorze area of the town which was transformed into a ghetto for Jews during the Nazi occupation of Poland. My father Jacob was a shoemaker. During the ghetto period, my mother, Rochme Gittel Schiffer, and my sister, Miriam, were deported, probably to Belzec, where they were murdered.

Following the liquidation of the ghetto in 1943, I was marched to the Plaszow compulsory slave labor camp from which I later escaped. During the few days of freedom I hid in an old cemetery. Eventually, without help, I was smuggled into the Julag I (Judenlager) camp in Plaszow. I was helped by others to remain hidden and alive. Eventually I was able to work by taking on the identity of another inmate who had been killed.

The Julag camps were absorbed into the Plaszow camp, which had become a concentration camp shortly after the liquidation of the ghetto. On returning, I was reunited once more with my father with whom I had worked making boots in one of the barracks. Following the liquidation of the camp in 1944, father and two brothers and I were deported by train to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. There my brothers remained. However, after a short time, father and I were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau where, on arrival, we were separated for the last time. I spent nearly three months in the quarantine barracks at Birkenau. Due to the advance of Soviet-Allied forces, I was sent to Dachau-Landsberg concentration camp in late 1944.

I was liberated by American Allied forces following a "Death March" from the camp near Wolfratshausen near Munich.

After the war, I searched for surviving members of my family. I was able to find my brothers with the Polish Army in Italy. The three of us did not return to Poland but lived in England for the next five years. In 1951, we decided to emigrate to the United States, where we began new lives in Detroit, Michigan. Later, I opened a coin-laundry. I met my future wife with whom I have two sons. Following my retirement in the mid-1970s, I studied filmmaking.

I decided to push beyond my personal discomfort and pain, by sharing what I witnessed in Auschwitz, not just to myself, but to my father and my whole family.

It continues to be the most intense, and moving experience for me since starting this work, difficult but healing. To learn from that experience, in that place, to have a deep moving experience to take into our lives. To change, so we can finally stop reproducing the same elements, which led to the Holocaust and Auschwitz.

In 1981, I returned to Poland for the first time. In the past decade I have returned each year, gradually renewing my connection to the place of my birth, and dealing with the past through what I call my “process of healing”. This process has taken the form of talking with local people, both young and old, about my experiences and their comprehension of the past in Krakow.

I have guided over two thousand people around the sites of the former ghetto, Plaszow and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps telling them of my personal memories of the Nazi treatment of Jews. I have also volunteered and spoken to young students at many schools in the area about my circumstances. Most of my experiences have now been recorded for posterity on the trilogy of documentary films I have produced: ‘The Work’, ‘My Hometown Concentration Camp’, & ‘Process B-7815’.

I also began writing the guide book ‘My Hometown Concentration Camp’, concerning my life and experiences in the Krakow ghetto and Plaszow and Julag camps. At the same time, following a response to my advertisement in a Krakow paper over forty people responded, mostly young but also including schoolteachers and people who lived in Poland during the war. I decided to found a non-profit association “KRAKOWSKI KLUB DIALOGU BERNARDA OFFENA”. The association has education about the Krakow ghetto and Plaszow and Julag camps as its primary goal. Also to discuss improvement to the site of the former Plaszow camp. Although there are several monuments already in existence at the site, it is now considered necessary to erect permanent displays of information and photographs which will provide the visitor with an improved orientation and understanding as to the events which occurred here.