

## Bernard Organek

Photographed with his wife Jutta

Wartime Experience: Forced Labor in Russia

I was born February 3, 1923 in Gera Germany. My parents came from Poland during the First World War. They met in Gera. My brother Leo was born in 1921, two years later I came along and in 1928 my sister Esther was born.

For the most part the Jews of Gera lived peacefully with their neighbors. During the 1920's and the early 30's there was some anti-Semitism discernible but the problems started with the election of Hitler. One of my uncles was sent to a concentration camp as early as 1933. A second uncle, who was a member of the communist party, fled with family to the USSR. In 1935 my father, who was a communist sympathizer, was warned by a friend in the police department that he would be arrested. He left for Poland immediately. The four of us followed soon after. We had to leave everything behind and were traveling with stateless passports. We were turned back three times by the Polish custom authorities, on the fourth try we succeeded and went to Lodz to join our father.

My father, a skilled textile engineer, found employment as a weaver. My mother worked at home. She repaired and altered clothes. My older brother found an apprenticeship at no pay in a factory. I did the cleaning, cooking and I supervised my sister Esther. In 1937 I started an apprenticeship in a high-end tailor shop. I got paid one dollar a week and the promise of a usable trade at the end of my training. Our apartment contained one room and a kitchen and five people lived in it. In 1938, when Hitler expelled all Polish Jews, our relatives who were still in Germany joined us at our place until they could find living space. Between uncles, aunts, cousins and our grandmother we had an additional 13 people living with us for many weeks. In 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland many of my mother's relatives from Sdunska Wolla (my mother's birthplace) fled to Lodz and stayed with us. At times we had close to 40 people in the apartment.

My brother and I were constantly busy trying to buy food for everybody. The Polish population was extremely anti-Semitic; they made it more difficult for Jews. In November, trying to buy bread I was pointed out to a German patrol as a Jew. They took all Jews, denounced by Poles, to a temporary, so called labor camp, located in the back of some office. They told us "We will teach the Jews to work". We were divided into two groups, one group had to carry the same rocks back. Behind every Jew was a German soldier with a gun, hitting us in the back, yelling faster, faster Saujude (Swinejew). We also got haircuts, on soldier was pulling a bushel of hair and another soldier used a dull knife to cut the hair. This felt like pulling out your brains. The same was done to Orthodox Jews with their beards. I managed to slip away during the night and return home.

The family decided that we should leave. My mother was ill at the time, so only my brother and I left immediately for the Russian occupied zone of Poland. Jews had to wear yellow armbands and were not permitted to use trains. We left the armband off and took a train to Warsaw. We had the company of a friend who was five years older than I was. From Warsaw we walked to the closest border. We hired a guide to take us across the border. Shortly before we reached the border, where we could see the German patrol, he took all our money, watches and any valuables we had. He threatened that if we didn't keep quiet he would call a passing patrol and tell them he had discovered Jews who are trying to cross the border illegally. We made it across without a guide and with many others who also crossed the border. We took a train to Bialystock.

There were about a million refugees in that town. We slept on the street in synagogues or any place which we could find. We had one set of clothes and when November/December came temperatures went to below freezing. Life was hard, but our lives were not in danger. We had to forage for food but nobody hunted us because we were Jewish. So my brother Leo tried to go back to Lodz to help our parents and sister to come to Bialystock. He was caught by the Germans when he tried to cross the border, beaten severely and left in No Man's Land. Within six days there was an accumulation of about 200 people who left German occupied land, but were not permitted to enter Russia. They banded together and rushed the border guards. When they threatened to shoot they just kept walking. It worked. They apparently didn't have the heart to shoot unarmed people who were already running for their lives. So Leo returned to Bialystock alone.

In December a recruiter from a coal mine, located in the Northern Ural Mountains came to Bialystock. We signed a contract for one year and left for Werchnaja Gubacha, the town's name, in the Molotowski Oblast (Permski Oblast). The mine was old and primitive. We had to walk down 1050 meters, about 3500 steps and then walk another 2 to 3 miles to our work place, after seven hours of arduous, backbreaking labor we had to retrace our steps to the exit, turn in our gear, take showers and get dressed. Our workday was anywhere between 10 and 12 hours. There are too many stories, most of them negative, connected to our year in the mine to tell here.

After our contract was up we went to Moskau. My brother worked and studied textile engineering. I worked in a tailoring co-op. At this point we were able to send some food packages to our family in the Lodz Ghetto. After the war we found out that two packages were delivered.

In 1939 the Germans invaded Russia. We volunteered to join the Russian Army, but we were sent to a labor battalion and delegated to build defense perimeters for Leningrad. On the way to Leningrad our train was bombed and past Kalinin the Germans had broken through the Russian lines. So much for building defense perimeters, our unit was dissolved and everybody was on their own. We jumped on any train traveling east, back to Moskau. From there we were evacuated to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. There with thousands of other we lived on the streets. Both

of us had typhoid fever and in our weakened condition it was surprising that we lived to tell the tale.

In 1943, when the Russian Government and the Free Polish Government in exile in London broke off diplomatic relations, the Russian Government required all those with Polish passports to become Russian citizens and have Russian passports. When they caught up with us, we refused to do this and were sentenced to two years in prison. In prison, camp work was hard and food scarce. My trade as a tailor gained us some extra food. I was released on the 9th of May 1945, my brother a couple of weeks later. Again we lived on the streets. We decided to try and go back to Poland and find our family or at least find out what happened to them.

We had no papers, no tickets and were chased by the conductor and police, jumping from roof to roof on the moving trains. When we got back to Poland we found out that our parents and sister were sent to be gassed by the Germans. In addition our grandmother, aunts, uncles and first cousins, more than 30 close relatives all suffered the same fate. There was nothing left in Lodz, except the anti-Semitism of the Poles, so we decided to continue westward into Germany. We arrived in Berlin in 1945 and entered the UNNRA Camp Schlachtensee.

On December 5, 1947, I attended the first post war Hanukkah party of the Berlin Community. At that party I was introduced to a girl, by the name of Jutta Stein. We were married 7 months later on the 27th of July 1948.