

TARNOW

I was born in Poland and grew up in the town of Tarnow. It is situated east of the big city called Krakow (or sometimes spelled Cracow) in southern Poland. It would be easier for you to visualize the location if you would look at a map of Poland. The total population of Tarnow was approximately 70,000, 25,000 of whom were Jewish. The smaller towns surrounding Tarnow had an additional 15,000 Jews. South of Tarnow are the Carpathian mountains where people went on holidays, summer and winter, and where I went skiing. Tarnow was known as a clothing manufacturing town. Many people were tailors. Men and women worked at home for large companies – they would pick up pre-cut materials, sew them into garments and then bring back the finished product to the companies.

The Jewish area was in the center of town but I lived with my parents outside the Jewish area, walking distance to center of town, synagogue, school etc. Since it was very cold in Tarnow in the winter from the end of November through March, we had a lot of snow and there were many times when I had to go to school on skis. Most streets were only passable by sleds pulled by horses. We lived in a two-story apartment building and our apartment was on the lower level. There were eight families living in the building. Our apartment had

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one big bedroom, one living room (where I slept) and a large kitchen. Two families shared one bathroom which was outside the apartments and had no running water. There was running water in the apartment for bathing in a portable bathtub, washing in a sink and cooking. There was no electricity only gas lighting. There was no refrigerator and only two gas burners in the kitchen as well as a wood-burning stove for cooking and another wood-burning stove for heating the living room. Each family could store food items in the basement of the building to keep them cool.

I was an only child and my name in Poland was Romek. I was born in November, 1927. My mother, Lotka Unger, was 27 and my father, Moses Unger, was 31 years old. My father owned a store where he sold and repaired sewing machines, bicycles, gramophones, typewriters etc. On the way back from school I would stop at my father's store and he would show me how he repaired the various items. I still remember how much fun I had. My father had a sister and a brother and my mother had 11 siblings – 3 sisters and 8 brothers. I had about 24 cousins, male and female. I was very close to 2 cousins on my father's side – his sister's children, and 12 cousins on my mother's side. Most of my friends and my mother's friends were Jewish but my father had Jewish and many non-Jewish friends through business.

I started in a co-ed school and in second grade switched to an all-boys, Jewish private school. The hours were from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. For lunch I would either go to my father's store or stay at school and have my sandwich. The subjects were given in Polish (grammar, geography, history, mathematics and language); Hebrew (grammar, language, history and religion); and Latin. On Fridays and Sundays school would be over at 1 p.m. On Fridays and Sundays in the summer I would go swimming in the afternoons in a town pool and in the winter I would go

skiing in a nearby hilly park. In the evenings I did my homework in front of a kerosene lamp.

On Saturday mornings, my father and I would go to the new synagogue and my mother would go to the old, more religious synagogue. Men and women did not sit together in synagogues. On Saturday afternoons, I would play with my friends and cousins. In the summer I was sent to a sleep-away camp for 7 weeks. I liked it very much, however the only thing I hated was that I had to cut all my hair off before camp (this was to prevent getting head lice.)

In August, 1939, after I returned from camp, at the age of 11, my life changed. Poland was mobilizing as Germany was about to attack.

On September 1, 1939, Germany attacked Poland, the Polish army was defeated very quickly and on September 8, 1939, the German army entered Tarnow.

When the German Army entered Tarnow, I remember watching the soldiers through the window. They were checking every doorway as they were coming down the street toward our house. We were lucky they did not enter our house.

Within 2 weeks after the Germans entered Poland, the first restrictions were placed on Jews. Every Jew over age 12 had to wear an armband with a blue star of David. I did not have to wear it until my 12th birthday in November. No Jewish child could go to Polish schools and all the Jewish schools were closed. My parents and parents of some other Jewish children started schools in private apartments with the same teachers who taught at the Jewish schools. Every day classes were held in different apartments and sometimes they even had to switch apartments on the same day if they saw someone watching. Classes had to be very small so that we would not attract any attention when entering the building.

Every Jewish store had to have a star of David painted on the outside of the store and on the entrance to the store. After a short while all Jewish businesses and stores had to have a non-Jewish partner in order to stay in business and then after a short while all Jews were kicked out from their businesses and stores.

My father's store became strictly a repair shop only and as a repair shop, he could keep it open. His repair shop was needed to fix various mechanical equipment for the Germans, such as, sewing machines, bicycles, gramophones (record players that had to be cranked up manually), typewriters and for charging different types of batteries.

Curfew for all Jews was 10:00PM, then later changed to 8:00PM. Jews were not allowed to walk on one side of the three main streets, Krakowska St.(pronounced Cracovska St), Walowa St. (pronounced Vawova St.), Lwowska St. (pronounced Lvovska St.) then later it changed, Jews could not walk on any of these 3 main streets. All Jews had to have special identification and all Jews had to work and have special work papers to show whenever the German police wanted to see them. Jews who did not have proper identification and work papers were known as illegal. They were sent out to forced labour camps and many of them were killed.

Several weeks later, all the city synagogues were set on fire or blown up. However, some Jews still gathered to pray on the Sabbath and holidays in private homes but they always posted a lookout person who would notify them by whistling as soon as he saw anything suspicious.

Starting in 1940, the Jews of Tarnow were subjected to increasingly harsher decrees. A collective fine of half a million zlotys(Polish currency) was imposed. Hundreds of Jews were arrested and many of them put to death. In the middle of

1940, a Jewish section(area) was established in town. All the Jews from Tarnow and the outskirts of town had to move into that area. Judenrat (Jewish committee) allocated people to spaces in apartments. Several families had to share an apartment – one room per family. In my case, we moved in to the back of my father's repair shop as it was situated in that section of town. We had a loft that used to store merchandise and that is where we moved in. People had to leave behind most of their belongings and furniture as they did not have the means to move anything large or the space to place them.

1941 About a year later, a ghetto was established, a much smaller area than the Jewish section established earlier. It was surrounded by a tall fence with barbed wire on top with several gates which were guarded by the Germans. All the Jews , including my family, had to move into the ghetto. My parents and I were assigned to a kitchen of an apartment. A piece of fabric was hung to separate our sleeping area from the cooking area that everyone in that apartment used. Food became even more scarce. My father's repair shop was now outside the ghetto. He had a permit to leave the ghetto to work in the shop. He was still earning some money and was able to buy food and bring it back to us. Most people were not as fortunate. Some soup kitchens were established for those who could not get any food. People bartered their belongings to get some food.

Purges of those without working papers continued. Thousands of Jews were shipped away to death camps and many were killed in Tarnow. The number of Jews was dwindling but those who remained tried to keep a semblance of some kind of a normal life. Then my father's repair shop was closed and he became a chief mechanic in a large factory owned by a German uniform company named "Madrich". It was situated outside the Ghetto so he and other sewing machine operators including my mother and myself as an assistant to my father, were able to go to work under guard.

1943
Later, when the Germans started liquidating the ghetto, about seven thousand Jews were deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp and about three thousand to Plaszow concentration camp, both in Poland.

PLASZOW CONCENTRATION CAMP

Aug 1943
My father, mother and I were taken to Plaszow concentration camp in a cattle train. Plaszow was situated near Krakow which is normally approximately a two hour ride however it took much longer for us. The conditions were terrible. In each car they placed about 120 people. Women were separated from men. The ride took about 7 hours; there were no sanitary facilities, just one large bucket; no water or food was provided; and everyone had to stand as there was no room to even sit down or lie down. There were two tiny windows on each end of the car and it was very difficult to breathe.

The Plaszow Concentration Camp was near Krakow and it was built on a Jewish cemetery and on the adjoining Jewish owned properties. It was encircled by an electric wired fence. The camp was divided into several sections – men's barracks, women's barracks, factory sections and others. As we arrived to the Camp, we were greeted by German officers and Ukrainian guards with barking dogs who forced us out of the train even though we could barely walk. Many who couldn't move quickly enough were bitten by the dogs or shot by the guards. Men were put into a holding pen and then assigned to various barracks. Women were put into a tent and then also assigned to barracks in the women's section. My father and I were assigned to a barrack with lots of bunks – two people per bunk. If you worked in the day shift you slept at night in that bunk – those who worked during the night, would replace you in the morning in the same bunk.

many people from Tarnow were tailors and they were assigned to the Madrich Uniform Company which was moved from Tarnow to Plaszow. The Madrich Uniform Company set up several barracks with sewing machines. My father was picked as their chief mechanic and I was his assistant. Most people were not as lucky. They had to work building roads, moving heavy stones, building barracks, carrying bricks and many other very heavy materials by hand or wheelbarrows. Many people had to walk for miles to a nearby forest, cut down trees and bring them back to the concentration camp. There was very little food but we did not starve as we did later in other concentration camps. We were able to trade some of our belongings for food.

My mother worked as a seamstress in the same Madrich Uniform Company and I was able to see her there everyday. Occasionally I would sneak in to the women's section to see my mother.

Most of the camp guards were Ukrainians in Nazi service, helping the Nazis to kill Jews. German officers and Ukrainian guards would shoot people if they did not report to work. One day, a whole group of us were sent to do a second job after completing our regular work. Some of us, including myself, snuck away. We were caught and lined up to be shot. They started shooting one by one but just as they got to me, another German officer came over to the guard who was shooting and called him away. I was able to run away!

My father, Moses Unger, was highly respected and treated very well by the civilian company officials for his ability to repair the sewing machines and make parts for them that the company could not get. Because of him I was treated well too.

The Camp Commandant, Amon Goeth, was the person responsible for most of the heinous crimes committed in that

camp by murdering people and causing death from overwork. Plaszow was the scene of mass murder of Jews with the Commandant participating. We were all subjected to dig big mass graves where bodies were thrown.

Summer 1944
The Germans started to liquidate Plaszow. At roll call one morning, which we had everyday, rain or shine or snow, they selected a big group of men, divided them into two sections, some were sent to the Auschwitz Extermination Camp in another part of Poland and the others were sent to Mauthausen in Austria. My mother was in a group of women who were selected that morning and sent to Auschwitz. I was able to see my mother for a few moments. We said goodbye to each other and she gave me the name and address of her brother in New York which I was able to memorize and which helped me later. I never did see her again! After the war was over I found out that she was killed in the gas chambers in Auschwitz. My father and I were kept together and taken on a cattle train to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp.

MAUTHAUSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP

After 5 days, under the most inhuman conditions in the cattle car, again no food or water, no sanitation and very little air. There was no place to sit or lie down – we could only stand, squeezed in together, we arrived to Mauthausen Concentration Camp. This camp was situated in Austria not far from a city called Linz. It was created near an abandoned stone quarry 3 miles from the town of Mauthausen in Upper Austria.

At Mauthausen we were greeted by German officers and barking dogs. The German officers were yelling at us to leave the train immediately or else they would kill us. They did kill some people who could not move quickly enough. We were stripped and our hair was cut from all parts of our bodies with some terrible equipment that ripped our skin making us bleed

all over. We were given striped uniforms and shoes with wooden soles. We were assigned to barracks which had no bunks or beds, just a wooden floor - we had to lie on our sides right next to each other, one head first and the next feet first, to fit as many people as possible from one end to the other in 5 rows. In order to get out to the "bathroom" one had to step on people. My father and I were next to each other. We were given only one slice of bread and a bowl of thin soup with very few slices of potato peels in it for the whole day. Occasionally we would get some black coffee. Every morning there was a roll call, no matter what weather. We had to stand for about an hour and be counted.

After roll call, we were sent to the quarry to work. We had to walk down into the quarry which was about 185 steps deep and everyone had to pick up a large stone and carry it up those steps which were known as "The Stairs of Death". The steps were very uneven and it was very difficult to walk up carrying a very heavy large stone. At the top of the stairs, there were German officers looking at the size of the stones that we were carrying and if anyone had a stone that was not large enough, they would throw that person back into the pit which meant death! The stones were eventually carried for a few miles to an area where a road was being built. Thousands of people died from exhaustion or from being thrown down into the pit. Luckily my father and I did this for only about 6 or 7 weeks when, during the roll call, the German officers and a few German civilians asked if there were any mechanics amongst us. My father raised his hand and he was called forward and then I raised my hand and they asked me if I was a mechanic as well. Then my father stepped in and told them that I was his assistant and knew a lot. After that, 300 to 400 people, including my father and I, were sent to St. Valentin Concentration Camp.

ST. VALENTIN CONCENTRATION CAMP

BRANCH OF MAUTHAUSEN

This was a small concentration camp which had only 3 barracks with about 1,400 people next to this huge plant where tanks were being produced by Daimler Benz and other companies. Here too we only got 1 slice of bread, a bit of black coffee and bowl of soup with a few potato peels. Every morning rain or shine or snow there was a roll call - in the winter we froze and some of us froze to death. In this part of Austria it is extremely cold during the winter.

My father and I had different shifts at the factory – sometimes he worked at night and I worked during the day but occasionally we worked on the same shift. My father was liked very much by the civilian managers in the plant as he was able to make for them parts that were very much needed to operate the machinery – something that very few people could do. Whenever we worked on the same shift I could hear his name “Herr Unger” being called very often on the loudspeaker to various sections of the plant to come and help them out. He was always given some cigarettes and some fruit – he would leave the fruit for me next to the machine that I was working on. Because he was liked by the civilian managers due to his skill, he was hated by the people who ran the St. Valentin camp and they would beat him up and kick him whenever they could. They would kick him on his left leg and soon he developed gangrene in that leg. When he could not work anymore he was put in the infirmary in the camp and they would not give him any medication. The civilian managers of the factory kept asking me about my father. I told them that he was in the infirmary where they would not give him any medicines and I begged them to do something about it but they said that they could not do anything as it was not in their jurisdiction. My father died in St. Valentin on December 31, 1944.

I was able to operate two lathe machines in the factory and because I did such good work, I was given ten cigarettes a week by the civilian managers which I was able to trade for food. Some people would give up their one slice of bread for a cigarette! Needless to say, I was very upset when my father was in the infirmary and would visit him every day but I couldn't help him. When my father died I carried his body, draped in a sheet, on my back to a truck which eventually took it to the crematorium in Mauthausen camp.

In February, 1945, I was working on the day shift, the sirens went off and we were taken to a shelter. The allies started bombing. After several hours, when the bombing stopped, we were let out from the shelters and discovered that the entire plant was leveled. Some of the people who worked the night shift were sleeping in the barracks and got killed by the bombs. The German officers asked for volunteers to be part of the "bomben commando" whose job was to dig around the unexploded bombs. Once the area around the bomb was dug up, a specialist would come in and diffuse the bomb. Because it was such a dangerous job for us as the bomb could explode if a shovel hit it, we were offered the same food as the guards who were guarding us. I volunteered for this job in order to get the extra food. We were also sent to residential areas in nearby towns to do the same thing.

In March, 1945, St. Valentin camp was liquidated because the Russian army was coming in from the East. I and all the other people were taken by the Daimler company buses to a concentration camp called Ebensee in upper western Austria.

EBENSEE CONCENTRATION CAMP
BRANCH OF MAUTHAUSEN

We were very lucky to be transported by bus as many people from other camps died on long death marches during the same period. For the first week we were just sitting outside

and sleeping in barracks. We did not get any food at all. We ate grass and the bark from trees. There wasn't a blade of grass left. The Daimler company was building tunnels and caves in the mountains to set up factories. Then we had to move all kinds of bricks from one place to another and load small locomotives with coal which would run into the mountains and caves. Here too we had daily roll calls in the morning and would get one slice of bread and some soup which contained only a few potato peels for the whole day and sometimes a little black coffee.

On May 6, 1945, during the morning roll call, we were told to march to the tunnels and caves but we had heard that Germany was not doing too well in the war, in fact they were losing the war, so we refused to go. We were told to go to the barracks.

We found out later that the plan was to gas us all once we got inside the tunnels.

In the middle of that afternoon we saw Allied tanks braking though the gate and all the German guards disappeared. I was almost 17 ½ years old and I was finally free! I was not afraid anymore of the German officers, Ukrainian guards and the German inmates that were sentenced for life and were in charge of the internal affairs of the concentration camp!

The Allied Forces started cooking rice for us and told us that this was the only food that we should eat, because if we eat anything else we would get sick. Many of us did not listen as we heard that if we would go to the nearby farms we would get some good food and after so many years of hunger we wanted some good food. I and many others did go to the farms and we were given lots of good food but unfortunately we all got very sick. I was put into the infirmary for many days and was given charcoal powder to stop the diarrhea. Unfortunately many of us died from eating this rich food.

ITALY

**I did wind up in various D.P. Camps in Italy.
I lived in Italy for 3 ½ years.**