

## A Daring Escape

### Life in Plonsk

Joe Engel was born into a large family with four sisters and five brothers in Zakroczym, a town outside Warsaw, Poland in 1927. His father owned a small store and luncheonette until Hitler invaded Poland in the fall of 1939. His hometown was near a Polish military base, and when bombing began in the area, his family fled to Warsaw. Conditions there were crowded and tense as everyone tried to find food and housing for their families.

His parents eventually moved them to Plonsk, 60 kilometers (or about 37 miles) northwest of Warsaw where they hoped life would be a little better. But Plonsk had already fallen to German occupation and life was difficult. By December of 1940, Plonsk had between 7,000 and 8,000 Jews, and over 3,800 were refugees from other surrounding areas like Joe's family.



Joe and his brother Peseach in 1938 before the war broke out (photo via Joe Engel Papers, CofC Library)

Six months later in May of 1941, Nazi Germany forced the entire Jewish population in Plonsk into a ghetto, a small section of the city blocked off for imprisoning Jews, where they continued to be mistreated. The ghetto was enclosed along a street of homes and warehouses that were boarded up to the outside. The street entrance was blocked and had an armed guard at all times. Brutal German police

continued to persecute Jews even inside the ghetto, beating people or burning their hair.

In July 1941, two months after the Plonsk Ghetto was formed, the Germans conducted their first of many selections. During a selection, the police would round up a thousand or more Jews from the ghetto, have them stand in lines, and choose groups to be moved elsewhere, giving very little information or time for them to say goodbye to family or to pack any bags. They didn't know where they were being sent or what conditions might await them there.

### Joe's Selection

Joe Engel was only fourteen years old when Nazi Germany forced his Polish family into the Plonsk ghetto. Their family shared a single room with other families. In one of the initial rounds of selection, Joe's parents and oldest brothers were sent to work in different camps. Joe remained behind with his other siblings, continuing to try to find food daily. There was no school and nothing to do for teens and children except to avoid the ghetto police. Some teens would be given small jobs like digging ditches or carrying supplies.

Regular selections continued through 1941 and 1942. Near the end of 1942, Joe stood in the line for selection, shivering in the cold, wondering if getting picked might reunite him with his parents or his brothers who had already been gone for such a long time. When he was picked, he followed the line of men and women as they marched toward the train loading areas nearby.

Nazi officers kept the line moving as Joe and the others selected were quickly pushed into closed cattle cars where there were no seats or bathrooms. People stood or squatted on the floor as best they could, the fear and uncertainty rising with their hunger. The car was closed on the top, but there were small slats along the side, and Joe watched the sun rise and fall again and again. It took them four days to reach their destination. Several in the car where

he rode died on the trip. When the train car finally opened, Joe gulped in the freezing air, anxious to escape the smell of excrement and death. They disembarked at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Joe followed instructions and the lines that stripped, shaved, and tattooed them, finally delivering them to barracks where they would sleep. Without drawing attention to himself, he searched the faces of everyone he saw for anyone he knew, but he especially looked for his parents or brothers. He didn't see anyone he knew.

Life quickly took on a routine: up by 5:30 and marched outside to stand in lines for a headcount to make sure no one had escaped or died in the night. After the count, Joe was given a slice of bread and a mug of coffee or tea that was more water than anything else, unsweetened and unappetizing. Then they would go to work: digging ditches or graves, carrying supplies, cleaning, or anything that needed to be done around the camp in small work details that were heavily guarded. Lunch was at noon and consisted of a kind of watery soup with a few potato peels. The hunger was overwhelming. After lunch it was back to work until dark or whenever the guards decided they were done. Dinner was usually a chunk of dark bread with a small bit of margarine or jam when they had it. Prisoners were sometimes expected to save part of their bread for the morning, but most were so hungry or worried about others stealing it, that they ate it all as soon as they received it.



Auschwitz under snow after liberation, 1945 (photo via ushmm.org)

Joe wouldn't be at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the general population for long. Two weeks after he arrived, Joe followed the men in his barracks outside

to be counted as usual, but he noticed that there were fewer and fewer in their ranks.

"It's typhus," a bunk mate whispered on their way out. "It's everywhere. We won't survive."

Joe had heard of typhus, a disease that spread quickly by the poor camp conditions. It could be treated, but here in Birkenau, like in the ghetto at Plonsk, there was no medicine or real care for those who were ill, so many people died. Due to exposure, Joe was sent to another sector of the camp called Buna to quarantine. He didn't get sick.

One day, as Joe stood in line for the morning headcount, he saw a variation in the way they were inspecting prisoners. It was a different kind of selection— for once they weren't looking for those too sick or weak to work, they were choosing the teens like Joe. After they picked up their coffee and bread, Joe and the others selected with him followed the guard across the camp to another building.

After they lined up, a new guard came forward.

"You will be learning to be a bricklayer to help with the war effort—we need more highly skilled workers to build our encampments and keep up with the demand across Europe. You will follow directions and do as you're told or you'll be beaten."

The teen boys nodded, knowing the threats were not empty. They'd already seen so much violence and death, much of it at the hands of the camp guards.

"Forward!" the guard shouted, leading the front rows inside the building. As he stepped into the warehouse-like building, questions swirled in Joe's mind. The school would be inside? It wasn't warm here, but it was far from the biting wind outside. He felt a shimmer of hope. He'd been bitterly cold each winter since his family had been imprisoned in the ghetto in Plonsk. They did not have warm layers or even socks, and he'd seen men lose fingers and toes to frostbite more than once.

Joe resolved to do everything asked of him at the school, anything to stay inside out of the wind and snow.

In bricklayer's school, Joe spent the days learning the basic and advanced techniques of masonry and construction. Some of the instructors gave basic German lessons at the same time to help with understanding. Joe stayed in the school for six months,

long enough to get him through that first winter.

By the summer of 1943, he was done with bricklayer's school and went out on work details wherever needed to build new barracks or structures in and around the sprawling Auschwitz complex. They worked with other Polish people who were not Jewish but in forced labor units. The Polish people sometimes brought news from the outside, about the progress of the war or other conditions outside the camp. Joe even got selected for a job to help deliver food to those working outside the camp daily. He was still guarded, but he found the driver often slipped him an extra bit of food or bread likely due to his overly skinny body from the conditions inside Auschwitz. Joe gobbled any food up as quickly as it was offered.

Most of the Polish workers were treated marginally better than the Jewish prisoners, so many were afraid to say anything, but by January of 1945, rumors began to swirl around Auschwitz that the Allies were getting closer to the concentration camps.

### **A Daring Escape**

Word of the Allies' approach set off a chain reaction inside Auschwitz. The Nazi soldiers were determined to clear the camp before Allies arrived, and trucks and trains were being loaded with any supplies or materials they thought would be needed as they moved deeper into German territory.

One morning after the head count, Joe's block was marched straight to the waiting trains, the steam rising across the cloudy sky. Joe had worn everything he'd collected in his time at Auschwitz. It wasn't much, but it was more than he'd had when he arrived a few years earlier in that horrid closed train cattle car. The train cars this time had open tops.

"At least we'll be able to breathe," Joe whispered to another young man next to him.

"Sure, if we don't freeze to death first," came the reply.

The train car was once again packed full, and Joe noticed the guards taking up spaces on the front and back of cars, their guns at the ready.

Two days into the trip, several men lay dead on one end of the train car—from starvation or cold, Joe didn't know. But as the train kept chugging across the countryside one night, Joe and a friend began to

plot.

"The snow is so deep here— we could jump out the top and hide in the snow until they pass."

"And go where?" his friend asked.

"Anywhere but here. I don't want to die on this train," Joe said. "We've got nothing to lose."

His friend nodded. "As soon as it's dark." They agreed.

As the sun set, Joe and his friend stayed close to the edge of the train car, hoping the nearest guard was too sleepy to see them climb. When it was so dark they could barely see their hands in front of their faces, they shook hands and braced their hands and feet on the side rails of the car.

"Now," Joe whispered, his hands and feet flying up the train car. At the top, the wind whipped around his hair and face, but he jumped as far as he could away from the train, landing deep in the snow drifts. He heard his friend land nearby along with the rat-a-tat of gun fire in their direction.

"Okay?" Joe asked, and heard an okay in reply. "Don't move," he said.

The train continued to roll past with shouts from car to car, gunfire raining across the landscape with each passing car of guards.

Joe could feel the cold seeping into his clothes, but he didn't dare move until the train engine had faded long into the night, and they were left completely in the dark and silence.

Joe finally peeked his head up over the snow to call to his friend.

"I'm still here," his friend replied.

"We need to get away from the train tracks," Joe said. They trudged through the snow until they reached the nearby woods where they could follow the train tracks without being seen. Once they'd gotten far enough away from the camp trains, they approached one of the busier stations to ask one of the foreigners there for help.

The man was terrified. "If the Nazis find out I helped you, they'll kill me. We're supposed to report you."

"Please, we just need somewhere to spend the night and get dry. Then we'll leave," Joe promised.

The man helped them and let them spend the night, eating and sleeping more than they had in months.

In the morning, the man told them they had to leave

“Try to meet up with the underground. They will help you.”

With thanks, Joe and his friend headed back to the wooded areas beyond the city.

They did find a group of people working against the Germans in the wooded areas of Poland, but the group they met were wary of Joe and his friend at first. It was hard to know who to trust. But soon, they were running missions for the resistance, sabotaging trains and post offices, anything to slow the German war effort. Joe and his friend helped for two months until the Allies arrived in March of 1945.

### After Liberation

Joe returned to his hometown of Zakroczym in Poland to find nothing left of his family there. He didn't know who had survived. From there, he headed to a displaced persons camp in Germany to try to get in touch with any of his family or friends who might have survived. Everything took longer than it should have with so many people displaced and looking for transport and supplies.

While there, Joe was able to connect with a distant cousin who was in the U.S. Army stationed in Germany. His cousin helped him start the paperwork to come to the United States permanently. By 1949, Joe was headed to Charleston, South Carolina via New Orleans, Louisiana.

At first things were extremely difficult as he learned English and tried to learn several different types of trade. He was able to meet up with a few of his siblings who had also survived the camps and war.

Eventually he settled permanently in Charleston and opened a dry cleaning business where he worked until he retired.

Joe Engel never forgot his experiences of the Holocaust and was instrumental in advocating for the Holocaust Memorial erected in Charleston, South Carolina. He wanted to make sure the gener-

ations that followed would not forget the way hate and prejudice had killed millions of people like Joe during World War II. Even in retirement, Joe would sit on a bench in Charleston with a sign inviting others to come talk to him about the Holocaust. His enduring message for students and anyone who stopped to talk to him, “Be kind to one another.”



Joe Engel at his aunt's house in Charleston, 1949 (photo via Joe Engel Papers, CofC)

### Sources:

Engel, Joe. Interview. SCE-TV and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1990.

Joe Engel Papers, 1938-2006. College of Charleston Library. Digitized 2007-2010.

# Joe Engel

## Teacher's Guide

If you haven't taught first person survivor testimonies before, we highly recommend reading [this guide](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

### **Before you read:**

1. Define the Holocaust.
2. What is a first-person testimony or account?
3. What role do first-person testimonies play in understanding history?

### **Questions to think about as you read:**

1. Where were Joe and his family forced to live once the Nazis took over?
2. When Joe got to Auschwitz-Birkenau, what was he required to do and why was he grateful to have been selected for it even though conditions were still hard?
3. How did Joe escape the Nazis?
4. What did Joe do until the Allies liberated Poland in March of 1945?
5. How did Joe get to the United States and what was difficult at first?

### **Final reflection:**

1. What will you remember most from this survivor's story? How does it add to your understanding of the events of the Holocaust?