



**Testimony of Aron G.
AJC New England Diplomats Seder
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My name is Aron G.. I grew up in the small Polish town of Szczakowa. I was one of 9 children from a deeply religious Jewish family. At 3 years old, I was learning with a Rabbi in a small basement room. Like other religious Jews, I wore a kippah and long sideburns. When I got older, I was sent to public school. There were only seven Jews in a class of 65 students. Every day I ran home to escape attacks from anti-Jewish bullies.

In July 1939, I became a bar mitzvah. In Jewish tradition, this meant I had become a man. However, my childhood truly ended two months later when the German army rolled into Poland. One day the whole town was told to gather to see the hanging of my friend Aron Diamant. He was asked if he had any last words and I heard him say the Shema. "Hear o Israel. The Lord our God. The Lord is One." Then he was dead. He was executed because he illegally purchased coal from a Polish man, who was also hung.

By winter, it had become difficult to get basic provisions. We needed milk for my sister and little brothers. My family was desperate. Even though we knew it was illegal, early one morning I went with my two older brothers to purchase milk from a Polish farmer we knew. On the way back, we were caught by Nazis, who brutally beat my brothers.

My father, older brothers and I were regularly being taken from our home at night and put to work shoveling snow and repairing roads for the German army. Shortly after, they were sent to work camps. I remained with my mother, three sisters and two younger brothers.

One day the Germans advised all Jews that we had two hours to gather whatever we could carry and move to the newly created Jewish ghetto. Before leaving, we were ordered to move our furniture outside, so our neighbors could take what they wanted. In the ghetto, we were squeezed into a tiny room that we shared with three

other families. We took turns sleeping on the floor, but nobody cared because we were starving. All I could think about was my next piece of bread.

I was assigned to work in a bakery and one day a kind Polish woman let me steal some bread. I ate the whole loaf. I think this saved my life, because soon after, the Germans announced a selection. My mother told me to wear adult clothing to help me look older. We stood in line and I was directed to one side. My mother was sent to the other with my younger siblings. I will never forget watching my four-year old sister, Rivka, thrown onto a truck like a piece of garbage. I never saw them again.

I was sent to my first camp, a fertilizer factory. The place was toxic and some of the weaker among us died. Over the next four years, I was sent to eight other camps. We were starved, beaten and literally worked to death. One day in 1944, I saw American bombers overhead. I hoped that they would bomb the German anti-aircraft guns that were kept next to our camp. Then, we would all die. Only the thought that my parents might still be alive kept me from suicide.

The last of *my* nine concentration camps was called Gerlitz. In the mornings they would take us on long marches to work sites. Sometimes they would keep us overnight and we would spend the night in a barn. We lay on the ground without blankets and used one another's stomachs as pillows. One day I woke up and found that the guy under my head had died. Sadly, the first thing I did was take his shoes.

I knew that I was also dying, so I decided to bring myself to the infirmary. Either I would be shot or allowed to gain my strength to work another day. I used the opportunity to sneak into a kitchen near the infirmary and steal potatoes and soup, which I traded for bread. This saved my life, because with the Russian front moving closer, the Nazis sent us on a death march. Of the 6,000 who left camp Gerlitz, 2,000 died.

We were finally liberated on the last day of the war: May 8, 1945. The only person in my immediate family to also survive was my sister. After a year in Poland in our hometown, we made it to a Displaced Persons camp in Austria. Three years later I came to America and started a new life in Boston. I worked different odd jobs and eventually opened a retail business, which I still go to every day. In 1971, my wife Martha and I married. She is here with me tonight together with our only daughter and two of our three wonderful grandchildren.

America gave me a family, a future and my freedom. I know my good fortune and I am grateful.

This has been my journey to freedom.