

# SIGMUND “SIGGY” BORAKS: STUDY GUIDE

## BACKGROUND

Siggy Boraks was born on July 25, 1925, in Wielun, Poland, a city near the German border. Jews arrived in Wielun as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Jewish cemetery was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (after the war not a stone remained). In 1921, 4,818 Jews lived there (43.6%). Poles and ethnic Germans comprised the rest of the population. Siggy’s parents were Chaim and Golda Boraks. Chaim was a Polish soldier who was wounded and lost an eye fighting the Red Army at Warsaw in August 1920 (‘Miracle of the Vistula’). Siggy’s sister Basha was born in 1930. The family lived at #10 Kaliska Street in Wielun. Chaim Boraks was a barber, as was his brother Gustav.

## WORLD WAR II

Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. The Germans arrived in Wielun that first day. As Siggy tells us in the documentary, he had no idea that this would be a war against the Jewish people.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Siggy's parents cited the lawful behavior of German soldiers during World War I. Before Hitler and the Nazis took power in 1933, Jews in Central and Eastern Europe admired Germany – and feared Russia.

The Jews of Wielun were ordered to wear the Star of David armband, an initial stage in the Nazi annihilation process. Chaim Boraks, along with other former Polish soldiers, was arrested prior to Polish Independence Day (November 11). These men were deemed capable of inciting a demonstration to mark the anniversary. A few weeks later, Siggy, his mother, and his sister were expelled from their apartment by Polish police collaborating with the Germans. They were sent to Cracow and were reunited with Siggy's father. The family was next deported to the Czestochowa ghetto and assigned to a Jewish woman's apartment. In the documentary, Siggy complains that the woman "forgot she was Jewish" and refused to let the family inside (until ordered). The crowded conditions in the ghetto frayed nerves and added to the tension.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** The German assigned Siggy to work on the railroad. He received a 'green card' as an 'essential worker.' The 'green card' would later exempt Siggy from Nazi deportation to Treblinka.

## DESTRUCTION of CZESTOCHOWA GHETTO

On September 22, 1942, at the start of Jewish holiday *Yom Kippur*, the Nazis began the 'liquidation' of the Czestochowa ghetto.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** The Nazis frequently launched their 'actions' against the Jewish people on Jewish holidays – to satiate their cynicism and to catch Jews in an unguarded moment. The Nazis always struck with lightning speed and overwhelming terror.

Jewish resistance groups in the ghetto were caught off guard. The Jewish masses were ordered onto trains and told that they were being 'resettled' to work camps. Rumors of the mass deportations from the Warsaw ghetto had reached Czestochowa, but few people imagined that a death camp (Treblinka) was their destination. How could they? There was no precedent for that. Besides, they had no choice.

## NAZI COLLABORATORS

In Czestochowa as elsewhere, Jewish policemen, trying to save themselves, assisted the Nazis. They played a major role in the rounding up of Jews. They knocked on the doors of Jewish apartments and ordered the inhabitants onto the street. The Polish police also assisted the Nazis. In the documentary, Siggy says that he saw a corpse resembling his father in a death pit. He thought that he recognized his father's '*trench coat*' (it sounds like he says '*French coat*').

# TREBLINKA and NAZI DECEPTION

The Jews of the Czestochowa ghetto (40,000), including Siggy's family, were sent to the Treblinka death camp, located about fifty miles north-east of Warsaw. To deceive the victims, the Nazis disguised Treblinka, making it appear like a rural train station (with time tables, directions, and a clock – all painted on the 'station').

*See: The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary, edited by Alexander Donat; and Into That Darkness, by Gitta Sereny.*

**KEY TEACHING POINT: Deceit and deception were integral parts of the Nazi annihilation strategy. The victims were fooled. Their fatal reasoning? "The Germans need us to work."**

Gustav Boraks (Siggy's uncle) was assigned to work as a 'barber' in Treblinka, cutting the hair of women before they were gassed. Hair, like all Jewish possessions, was bundled up and sent to Germany.

Though a barber, Chaim Boraks (Siggy's father) was blind in one eye and of no 'value' to the Germans. With his family, he was sent straight to the gas chamber (disguised as 'showers').

**KEY TEACHING POINT: The Nazis were mass murderers *and* mass thieves. They - and their collaborators - profited handsomely off the murder of Jews.**

In her book Into That Darkness, Gitta Sereny recounts her conversations with Treblinka's commandant Franz Stangl. He had been arrested in Brazil and extradited to Germany. She asked him, "What did you think at the time was the reason for the exterminations?" He answered bluntly, "They [the Nazis] wanted the Jews' money."

"You can't be serious," she said.

"But of course. Have you any idea of the fantastic sums that were involved? That's how the steel in Sweden was bought."

"But...they weren't all rich; 900,000 Jews were killed in Treblinka – more than 3 million in Poland altogether. There were hundreds of thousands of them, from the ghettos, who had nothing."

"Nobody had nothing. Everybody had *something*. That racial business was just secondary..."

"If the racial business was so secondary, why all that hate propaganda?"

"To condition those who actually had to carry out these policies to make it possible for them to do what they did."

## REVOLT at TREBLINKA

Gustav Boraks participated in the revolt at Treblinka on August 2, 1943, and escaped.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** The revolt at Treblinka was a **stunning act of resistance**. Jewish slaves also revolted at Sobibor

death camp (October 1943) and at Birkenau (October 1944). In addition, Jews resisted deportation in many ghettos, not least of all in Warsaw. In that ghetto, several hundred Jewish fighters revolted against the Nazis on April 19, 1943, and fought against overwhelming odds until May 8<sup>th</sup>.

Gustav fled the Nazis and their collaborators (including local peasants) and was sheltered by a Polish woman. She risked the Nazi imposed death penalty for anyone caught helping Jews. Gustav and this woman were married after the war and moved to Israel, where she didn't tell anyone that she was Polish.

## BLIZYN LABOR CAMP

After the 'liquidation' of the Czestochowa ghetto, Siggy was sent to Blizyn labor camp near Radom, Poland. The camp originally held Soviet POWs. Eight thousand perished there. In March 1943, five thousand Jews and Poles were imprisoned there, including one thousand Jewish women. Prisoners suffered from Nazi cruelty *and* from huge rats. Food in the camp was minimal, disease and terror were omnipresent. Siggy almost perished from typhus. The prisoners worked as tailors, cobblers, and cabinet makers, producing goods for the German war effort. Siggy worked at a quarry. As he relates in the documentary, he was nearly executed as punishment for the escape of his 'bunkmate' – an example of the Nazi policy of collective punishment.

For accounts of Blizyn, see: Mira Ryczke Kimmelman's memoir, Echoes from the Holocaust; and Irene Shapiro's memoir, Revisiting the Shadows.

# AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

In late July 1944, Siggy was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau (near Cracow) in Nazi-occupied Poland (the documentary incorrectly says he was sent there in January 1944). Auschwitz I was the original camp (formerly a Polish cavalry base), and one gas chamber was located there. Auschwitz II, a few kilometers away, was called Birkenau (reference to birch trees), where four large gas chambers were located. German factories (I. G. Farben and others) were built nearby to exploit the abundant slave labor; these factories were targets of Allied bombers in August and September 1944.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Auschwitz-Birkenau was a death camp *and* a labor camp. 1.4 million people from every European country, including 1.1 million Jewish people, were murdered there. The Nazis sought to destroy *all* of the Jewish people – the ‘biological substance.’

Siggy received his tattoo number *B-2030* in a building known as the ‘Sauna.’ The prisoners no longer had a name but became ‘numbers.’ The prisoners were deloused and given ill-fitting striped uniforms and wooden clogs.

See: *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, by Filip Muller; *I Escaped From Auschwitz*, by Rudolf Vrba; and *Auschwitz: True Tales from Grotesque Land*, by Sara

*Nomberg-Przytyk.*

## **SONDERKOMMANDO**

In the documentary, Siggy describes his 'work' in the *Sonderkommando*. This 'special commando' worked in the gas chambers and crematoria. They were forced to participate in the murder and cremation of fellow Jews (and others). *Sonderkommando* members were almost invariably murdered by the Nazis, who didn't want any witnesses of their crimes to survive the war.

*See: We Wept Without Tears, Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz, by Gideon Greif.*

## **DEPORTATION of HUNGARIAN JEWS in 1944**

In the spring and summer of 1944, 500,000 Hungarian (and Romanian) Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was the most 'active' period in the history of the camp. Railroad tracks and a special 'ramp' were constructed within the Birkenau camp to 'facilitate' the destruction process. The victims didn't know that mass murder lay ahead. They were told that they were being 'resettled' in order to 'work.' They were totally deceived by the Nazis. As Siggy tells us in the



documentary, he worked at one point on the 'ramp' at Birkenau and whispered ill-heeded warnings to the arriving people. Siggie witnessed the 'selection' process conducted by Nazi doctors, including by Dr. Mengele. People incapable of work (young, old, sick, handicapped, mothers with children) were sent directly to the gas chambers (disguised as 'showers'). The young and healthy were 'selected' to work (with life expectancy of three months). For a time during his imprisonment at Birkenau, Siggie worked in the 'water commando.' In the documentary, he says that prisoners in the 'water commando' included a Warsaw policeman and two Catholic priests – reminding us that non-Jews were also imprisoned at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Siggie retrieved some food left on the 'ramp' and was caught by an SS guard. He ordered Siggie to "go to the wire," signaling his intention to shoot Siggie for 'attempted escape.'

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** When prisoners approached the electric wire, they were instantly shot and killed on the pretext that they were attempting to escape. Most prisoners who approached the wire wanted to electrocute themselves and end their miseries. However, such was the will to live (even in Auschwitz-Birkenau) that relatively few people committed suicide.

## **'EVACUATION' of AUSCHWITZ- BIRKENAU**

In November-December 1944, as the Red Army approached from the east, the Nazis evacuated the remaining prisoners to Germany and blew up the gas chambers.

**KET TEACHING POINT:** In the attempt to erase the evidence of their crimes, the Nazis themselves were the first Holocaust-deniers.

In snow and bitter cold, Siggy was sent (in an uncovered cattle car) to one of the Kaufering labor camps near the town of Landsberg in Bavaria. Kaufering was typical of the labor camps that dotted Nazi-occupied Europe. According to Siggy, the conditions at Kaufering were *worse* than at Auschwitz-Birkenau. After a 'death march' from Kaufering by way of Augsburg to Dachau concentration camp near Munich, Siggy was liberated by American troops on April 29, 1945. He had been a slave of the Nazis for over four and a half years.

## POST-WAR

After the war, in Frankfurt, Germany, Siggy met and married Margot Neuburger, a young German-Jewish girl. Arrested by the Nazis when she turned fourteen, Margot had been a 'forced laborer' during the last two years of war. As Siggy tells us in the documentary, he befriended a young German named Kurt in Frankfurt. They got along well until Kurt discovered that Siggy was Jewish. Siggy subsequently discovered that Kurt had been a member of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the mobile killing squads that had roamed Russia and Eastern Europe. Siggy concludes, "This war was more about civilian people than anything else. You know, I couldn't do nothing that my parents were Jewish. What could I do about it? I was born."

See: "The Good Old Days" The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and

*Bystanders, edited by Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess; and Ordinary Men, Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland, by Christopher Browning.*

In 1950, Siggy and Margot immigrated to New Orleans, where they raised two daughters and two sons. Siggy worked as a janitor, a service station attendant, a lens grinder, and an optician. Siggy and Margot joined the Deutsche's Club, where he occasionally found himself talking to old Nazis, and the New Americans Social Club, which comprised Holocaust survivors in New Orleans.

Margot became president of both clubs. She died in 1994. After Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in August 2005, Siggy moved to Florida.

# SIGGY BORAKS: GLOSSARY

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Define the following glossary terms and explain their relevance to Siggys story:

1. Yiddish –

2. November 11 –

3. SS –

4. Ukrainians –

5. Polish police –

6. Jewish police –

7. 'Resettlement' –

8. Treblinka –

9. 'Green card' –

10. Yom Kippur –

11. Blizyn –

12. Auschwitz-Birkenau –

13. 'Ramp' –

14. Sonderkommando –

15. Kanada –

16. Dr. Mengele –

17. Kapo –

18. 'Selection' –

19. Treblinka revolt –

20. Kaufering –

21. 'Death march' –

22. Dachau –

23. Einsatzgruppen –

# SIGGY BORAKS: KEY QUESTIONS

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions using information and quotes from the documentary and study guide:

1. Describe Siggy's life in Wielun, Poland, before World War II, including information about his family.



2. Describe Jewish attitude (as Siggy explains it) towards the Germans *before* World War II.

3. Describe the first months of the war in Wielun. What happened to Siggy's family?

4. Describe Siggy's living conditions in the Cracow ghetto.

5. Describe the Nazi 'action' of September-October 1942 in the Czestochowa ghetto, and Siggy's last moments with his family. Where was his family sent? What Nazi deception was employed?

6. What was a Nazi-issued 'green card'? What 'job' did Siggy have? What role did the 'green card' play in Siggy's survival?

7. Describe what happened to Gustav Boraks (Siggy's uncle) and to his family after they were 'evacuated' from the Czestochowa ghetto. How did Gustav survive the war?

8. Describe what happened to Siggy at Blizyn labor camp when another prisoner escaped.

9. What was Auschwitz-Birkenau? Describe the arrival of victims at Birkenau and the 'selection' on the 'ramp.' What did Siggy whisper to arriving Jews? How did they react?

10. What was the *Sonderkommando*? Describe Siggy's experience in the *Sonderkommando*.

11. Describe Siggy's encounter with an SS guard at Birkenau, after Siggy was caught with food left on the 'ramp.'

12. Who was the young German named Kurt? Describe Siggy's encounter with him after the war.

13. What did Siggy do after the war?

14. What is Siggy's opinion about the existence of God?

15. What is Siggy's message to young people?

