

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Archives

Oral History Interviews of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center

**Interview with Naftali Laks
December 6, 1989
RG-50.002*0039**

PREFACE

On December 6, 1989, Naftali Laks was interviewed on videotape by Bernard Weinstein and Patricia Wildenhorn on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

Summary of the
Interview with Naftali Laks
December 6, 1989

Naftali Laks was born on June 1, 1922 in Zmigrod, Poland. He had five younger and older sisters. His father died when he was thirteen. When the war broke out, he walked 60 miles toward the border, but was stopped by the Germans and put to work on bridges. In the summer of 1942, 60 percent of the population was liquidated. Naftali worked on a sanitation committee to clean out houses. Then all the boys over the age of 16 were rounded up and sent to work on the railroad. He was able to remain in contact with his family. The town was liquidated in 1943 and he and his sisters were sent to Plaszow, a concentration camp in Poland. Plaszow was liquidated in the fall of 1943. They were then sent to Skarzysko-Kamienna, a concentration camp in Poland. The conditions were worse there, but he survived with the help of his sisters. Between 1944 and 1945, he had short stays at several camps, including Buchenwald and Flossenbergl, concentration camps in Germany. In May 1945, he was liberated from Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria. In August 1945, he went to Czechoslovakia and found out his sisters had also survived. In November 1945, they began a long and difficult journey to Israel. He lived in Haifa Israel from 1952 to 1959. Naftali came to the United States in 1959. He married in 1961. His first wife died of breast cancer in 1969. He remarried in 1972. His second wife is also survivor.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

1

**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Naftali Laks
December 6, 1989**

01:03:00

Grew up in a small town near the Czechoslovakian border in Zmigrod. Town was very rundown. Synagogue was one of the three oldest in Europe. Jews were sheltered there during war. It was built in the 16th century. The whole community was very old. People struggled to make a living, about 2000 people total.

01:06:00

His father bought skins from peasants. Mother had to supplement the family income by baking. Six children in family. He was the only boy. His hebrew teacher was Austrian. He also taught mathematics. He had been in the Austrian army. He also taught writing. Prepared Naftali in math.

01:09:00

School was a nightmare. Nine Jewish boys were always beaten. The non-Jews threw rags and other things as well. Wearing a yarmulke was always a provocation. Even teachers showed prejudice. Teachers were not very good in hebrew schools.

01:12:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

2

He had some interest in Jewish history, but he had no opportunity to complete his education. He could not get a certificate. It was hard to get a job. Had dream of Palestine but could not fulfill it. Father died when Naftali was thirteen. Family knew his death was imminent.

01:15:00

Father was deeply religious. Never did anything against halachic law. Naftali's only happy memories were of holidays. He did not even have electricity when he was growing up. Winters were very harsh.

01:18:00

Father's sister and her family shared a house with them. Another sister lived nearby. This sister's husband was blinded as a result of a pogrom. He never wanted anyone to know of his handicap.

01:21:00

There were distant relatives in the United States. People who were poorer were ashamed to seek help. Sister worked in bakery. She gave money to mother. Another sister became a dressmaker. Labor was very cheap.

01:24:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

3

Most poor people in the community lived all week on potatoes. Only on the sabbath could you eat more lavishly. Used to keep milk and potatoes in the cellar. They had no refrigeration.

01:27:00

Never hungry, though he dreamed of eating chocolate. Knew what was happening in Germany in the 1930s. He would read the papers when they were a day old. Bakery got mail. Father had a sister in the United States who occasionally sent money and clothing. News from Germany provoked fear, especially after the Anschluss.

01:30:00

But no one had imagined what would happen. One sister left for the United States in 1938. The wife of father's brother took her in their illegal Aliyah to Palestine. But you needed 600 Zylts. Second sister's boyfriend went with parents to Palestine.

01:33:00

Outbreak of war took them by surprise. Saw sky blackened by planes. Industry was being bombed. Friday, the day war broke out, was market day. People were confused. They listened to the radio but learned nothing.

01:36:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

4

People thought of leaving. Naftali and his sister's boyfriend walked about 60 miles, but the Germans caught up with them and they were forced to work on bridges. He hurt his hand and was allowed to sit on the sidelines. Returned home.

01:39:00

Germans took away the young men as Prisoners of War. On Rosh Hashannah, they weren't allowed in the synagogue. The SS later came and burned down the house of study. In some towns, people were burned alive when synagogues were torched. Still many believed things would not be so bad.

01:42:00

The SS came into houses asking for gold. People were taken out to do menial work, such as snow shoveling. Had to repave roads. It was clear from the beginning that Jews were being selected for special treatment.

01:45:00

People realized things were not good. On one sabbath they told us to report for work. Those who couldn't or wouldn't work were beaten mercilessly. A few were shot trying to escape. One Jew who was in jail for bringing in cigarettes was brutally killed by a young SS man.

01:48:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

5

This SS man rode a horse and inspired fear. He went to the Russian front. At this time, Naftali's whole family was together. But Germans started taking young men to another town for forced labor. One young religious man had his earlocks cut. Naftali had pleurisy.

01:51:00

He remembers the Aktions of the summer of 1942. Polish working battalions dug graves outside of town. People fasted and prayed as if in preparation for death. Taken to a soccer field. People sent over 60 were sent to one side.

01:54:00

His mother was taken but miraculously she was sent back. People were taken to the grave site where they were presumably shot. Sixty percent of the population was liquidated at this time.

01:57:00

It was a hot July day. Germans were drinking beer and eating. One Doctor Gens was particularly brutal. He demanded money. Ordered synagogue destroyed.

02:00:00

Jews had to do it. His father's siblings were to be shot in the forest. Everyone left had to have documents. Naftali was on sanitation committee. They had to clean out houses. He was told by the head of Gestapo that he was lucky he was tailor.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

6

02:03:00

They had to stand outside in the heat bare headed. One man, a liquor dealer was to be shot before they learned he had liquor. He thus had mortgaged his life for a little longer.

02:06:00

The Aktion wiped out or severed families. It was "terrible". To hear the tears of survivors. Most people wept when they returned home. The day after the Aktion, the synagogue was demolished.

02:09:00

The next day, all the boys (161) had to go to the soccer stadium. 150, Naftali included, were sent to Plaszow. You had to give away your money.

02:12:00

Had to work on the railroad. Was still in contact with family. Had to carry the steel railroad ties on his shoulders. It wasn't so bad compared with other places. A Polish woman near the railroad gave them food in exchange for payment. Meanwhile his town was liquidated and his sisters came to where he was.

02:15:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

7

Sisters hid during the Aktion. They heard the cries of those who were taken. Jewish Police had to call. Mother and sister Esther were taken. Remaining sisters managed to hide. Youngest sister was taken off train by a Policeman in Tarnow. She was 17 and he raped her. She later got job with the Volksdeutsch.

02:18:00

Sisters who escaped couldn't hide horse and wagon. They walked eighteen kilometers to the railroad station, hiding along the way. Managed to get to the Polish woman and stayed with her. Golda, the youngest sister sent a postcard and Miriam, one of the middle sisters brought her to where they were staying, since the address was included on the postcard.

02:21:00

Someone helped him get his three sisters into the camp. They were the only ones who escaped. At that time, Plaszow wasn't run by the SS. The youngest sister worked as a maid to the commandant. Other sisters worked in kitchen. Naftali was envied because his sisters were with him.

02:24:00

Sister got Naftali a job in the tailor shop. This was in 1943. A typhus epidemic broke out. One of his friends died. Naftali and two of his sisters came down with it. But the youngest sister did not. She took care of them. Naftali remembers being delirious.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

8

02:27:00

Miriam suffered terribly for quite a few weeks. In Plaszow, Ukrainian guards used to pull people out at night and kill them on the pretext that they were escaping. Ukrainians were the SS and extremely brutal.

02:30:00

The camp electrician was killed on the spot; one of the stable boys was killed by the same head guard, Müllor. Müllor thought of himself as the "King Of Camp". Eventually Naftali had to go back to work on the railroad.

02:33:00

Plaszow was liquidated in the fall of 1943. The unfit were killed, beaten, or intimidated. Sent to Karzysko-Kamienka, three camps, ABC. He was sent to "C". He had to fill cannons with explosives. Some had to work with acid, which they couldn't wash off.

02:36:00

Conditions were worse here than in Plaszow. Kapos were terrible. Sometimes selections were made. Polish foreman were beating people to death. Everyday people died. Food was bad. Sisters were in camp "A". They sent him bread. This enabled him to survive.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

9

02:39:00

Naftali's group worked seven days a week. He wanted to see his sisters. German supervisors let him have a day off. Paid Kapo with bread to take his place. The head Kapo (Jewish) beat him and put him in jail so he couldn't go.

02:42:00

Other times he was able to go. The food given to them was the same they gave to the pigs. In 1944, there was a selection in anticipation of Russian onslaught. His nerves couldn't take the tension of the selection.

02:45:00

Sent to Solejow to work on fortifications. Many Jews who tried to escape after the Skarzysko were killed by Poles. Conditions in Solejow were very bad. Those who didn't finish work were deprived of food and beaten, Naftali was one of them.

02:49:00

Some people were too weak to get up in the morning. Two months in Solejow; he was sent to Czechochovia, where he repaired tanks. Got a hernia. From there he went to Buchenwald. from December 1944 to March 1945. Got to Buchenwald on Christmas Eve. Jewish Kapos were liquidated.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

10

02:52:00

His cousin (also named Naftali) was there with him from there to Leipzig and Flossenburg. In Buchenwald, political prisoners ruled the roost.

02:55:00

In Buchenwald they shaved you from head to toe. You were immersed in a strong burning substance. Uniform in Buchenwald consisted of striped pajamas.

02:58:00

In Buchenwald, they woke them up at 3 AM. Washing was an ordeal because it was so cold. Everyone had to register.

03:00:00

Remembers a Polish Foreman at Skarzysko who always carried a stick to intimidate and beat prisoners. He enjoyed power over other defenseless people. Remember names of some of his tormentors.

03:03:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

11

Didn't do hard work in Buchenwald. Only one day he did work in the quarry. Many bombings. Prisoners cleaned rubble from bombings. You were lucky if they sent you because you might find food. Remembers a German woman gave him a root vegetable. Her daughter chastised her for helping the enemy.

03:06:00

Saw American Flying Fortress. Joy mired with terror at seeing planes. Always wondered why camps weren't bombed or the railroad tracks leading to them. Remembers bombing of Aachen always wondered if they would survive.

03:09:00

Last days worse than in Buchenwald. Tells of arrivals of the tens of thousands of death camps survivors. Political prisoners annoyed that these survivors didn't try to escape.

03:12:00

On February 27, 1945, they were transferred to Flossenburg. Told there that blankets were contaminated with lice. Had to melt snow to drink water. Germans tried to put a factory in the forest to replace those that had been bombed.

03:15:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

12

Had to carry concrete blocks up steps. Had a hernia, and couldn't do it. Hit by a Ukrainian guard. Even though prisoners like Naftali were needed, their lives meant nothing to their captors.

03:18:00

Germans still thought they could hold back allied troops in the Austrian Alps. On April 20th, he was in Mauthausen and evacuated. The camp was near the factory. When allies came, they destroyed the factory.

03:21:00

Prisoners had to clear the area of evergreen trees that had fallen. Remembers that some prisoners made matzoh on Passover 1945. The seder in Mauthausen was an occasion for crying and mourning. The decision was made not to eat bread on Passover.

03:24:00

Naftali ate potato peels and vegetable skins on cattle car. They had virtually nothing to eat once doors of trains were closed for 48 hours. They traveled, crossing into Czechoslovakia. People collected bread to feed themselves. Some who'd finished quickly tried to get bread from others so hungry were they.

03:27:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

13

Once British Spitfires started to fire on the train. When the attack was over, Naftali was so hungry he ate grass. He was beaten over the head for this. In Flossenburg, there was no infirmary. Bodies were cremated. Naftali got to Mauthausen 11 days after the beginning of the journey.

03:30:00

Had to walk up a hill to the camp with his cousin. A woman along the way gave them a potato. Overheard that Jews in the group were going to "disappear" Here, too many people snatched bread. That was a given. But in the morning, they tried to get more. Had to take shower and walked around naked. Conditions were terrible. Naftali's cousin collapsed and died. He had been strong and only in his early thirties. A few days later the Americans came.

03:33:00

Mauthausen was liberated on May fifth or sixth. Naftali was there for about a week. Crematoria weren't working. Corpses were stacked on top of one another. On saturday they were liberated. On sunday he tried to go outside to get some potatoes to eat.

03:36:00

They knew they were liberated. But they were too exhausted to rejoice. Thinks the America soldiers were no longer shocked by what they saw. Germans were detained to bury the dead. American soldiers forbade prisoners to leave. Americans gave them bread, they same bread they gotten from the Germans. This was of very poor quality.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

14

03:39:00

Naftali was in hospital. But when released, he had difficulty walking. Once he was quartered with a Polish prisoners who tried to hit him. While he was in the Hospital, Russians took over the hospital. Wanted prisoners to go home. But he didn't want to go back home.

03:42:00

In August, he went to Czechoslovakia. A young man he knew died of Tuberculosis after liberation. Naftali went to Bratislava. Informed that his sisters were alive and waiting for him.

03:45:00

Very embittered that Jewish soldiers and sailors did not speak to him. Wanted to let his sister in the United States know that he was alive. Felt grief that there would be not trace of what happened. Even in victory, one felt a sense of helplessness. In 1945, there was no more illusion about getting home.

03:48:00

The new freedom was difficult because it was hard to make decisions. You needed basic things, such as clothing. When he learned his sisters were alive, he wanted to be reunited with them. Czechs were kind and hospitable.

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

15

03:51:00

He heard Jews were being killed in Poland but he wanted to be with his sisters. He went to Czestowowa to look for his sisters. Inquired with the people at the Jewish committee. He was informed that they were in a Kibutz in Danzig. He could not get on a train, so crowded was it. Traveled from Lodz to Danzig between railroad cars.

03:54:00

Had to stay awake so that he wouldn't fall between cars. When he got to Danzig (actually a town near Danzig), he went to the Jewish committee and found his sisters on a kibbutz. Planned to go to Israel.

03:57:00

Disappointed that they didn't have a home, but they got used to the Kibbutz. Left in November after studying Hebrew in preparation for going to Israel. Had to travel with sisters back to Czechoslovakia where they got Greek papers.

04:00:00

Went to Carlsbad, then to Germany (Wittenburg). Found an uncle and cousin in Metz. In march of 1946 they went to Austria, then Innsbruck, through alps, to Italy, Brenner Pass - Murano)

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

16

04:03:00

From Murano to Milan to where they could get to passage to Israel. But because of the unfortunate circumstances of illness and death of close friend in the Kibbutz the boat left without them.

04:06:00

Got to Palestine finally in 1947 with a different group. Everything including identities was clandestine. Finally got on one boat, then on another. Journey was terrible.

04:09:00

The trip took ten days. They encountered a storm. He was sick most of the way. Provisions had to be gotten rid of because of lack of refrigeration and because they didn't want british to get them. Many trying to swim to the shore were caught by the British.

04:12:00

Went to Haifa. Then transferred to Cyprus. Then in 1948 to a holding camp. From there he went to a Kibbutz. After independence, he went to the army. He lived in Haifa from 1952 to 1959. He then came to the United States.

04:15:00

USHMM Archives RG-50.002*0039

17

Came to the United States because he could not continue in construction for physical disabilities. Also he wanted to settle down. His sister was here. Married in 1961. Wife died of breast cancer in 1969. He remarried in 1972. Wife number two is a survivor.

04:18:00

Wife suffered many hardships and losses in her family. Went to Israel too and arrived in the United States in 1947. Father who came to the United States before the war settled in Plainsfield, New Jersey.

04:21:00

Lived in Brooklyn. Moved to New Jersey when married his second wife. When he got out of the war he was not religious. But in the time reverted back to it. Returned to religious observance when his children were growing up. Didn't want them to "get lost". His children are very religious

04:24:00

Both children have high standards of morality. One son is working on a Ph.D in Physics. The younger is studying computers. Naftali feels he belongs to a world that has disappeared and that story must be told.