

Berg, Max

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1 Videotape

Recorded May 1993

Abstract

Max Berg was born in Staraya Rafalovka, Poland on January 1, 1927 or 1928. He had two brothers and one sister. His father was a butcher. There were about 1500 Jews in the town and two synagogues. He went to a Polish school. When the Nazis took over Poland, life became hard. When the town was split between the Germans and the Ukrainians, looting began as the Ukrainians stole from the wealthy. When the Germans took control they looted and raped.

After a month, the Nazis began to collect Jews from other towns and bring them to Rafalovka. It was 1941, and Max was fourteen years old. Six months later, a ghetto was created. The Nazis used a loud-speaker to tell them to come to a circle and bring their expensive items – money, gold, silver – but no packages. They were told they were going to Germany to work and would be well paid, and were to march in groups of 150 to the train in Rafalovka, but instead were taken to a big ditch that had been dug by the Nazis. Most of them were killed. Max was the only member of his family to survive. He spent three years hiding in woods with partisan groups. Max's job was to dynamite trains, railroads and bridges.

After the war, at the age of 17 or 18, Max went to Bucharest and received medals. He threw the medals away, shaved his head and dressed in rags to pretend to be from a concentration camp to get away from the Russians. He then went to Austria, and later to Italy. He was in Italy for two years and worked the black market with American soldiers. He came to the United States in 1948. He first worked as a dishwasher, and then as a butcher. After a year and a half, he was drafted into the Korean War, even though he was not a U.S. citizen. He was taken to Fort Belvoir but was sick, so he was sent home. He opened various stores, restaurants, and bars in the Washington, DC area. He later got into real estate, purchasing hotels and participating in business construction projects.

Max got married and raised three children. Max feels that he survived due to luck. His interests now are cars, and antique sculpture and paintings.

Tape 1

- 1:10** Max Berg was born January 1, 1927 or 1928 in Staraya Rafalovka, Poland. This was Ukraine/Poland. From 1919 the town was in Poland, and in 1939 the Russians took over. There were approximately 1,500 Jews in the small town.
- 2:30** Jewish life was good; there was freedom under President Marshal Piłsudski . When he died, Nazi Ignacy Mościcki became president in 1937 and Jews were forced to wear badges.
- 2:40** Max had two brothers and one sister; he was the third child. The town had two synagogues and all of Poland was religious. His father was a butcher with his own business. Other Jews were blacksmiths, storekeepers and teachers.

- 3:58** He went to a Polish school for several years. In school the language was Polish. There was little anti-Semitism at this time.
- 4:35** From 1939 to 1941, when the Nazis took over Poland, the Russians sent people who had money or a store to Siberia. Poorer people were left alone, but children had to work after school.
- 5:40** In the Ukraine life was hard; the family lived in a small two-room home. Their father tried to make a living and they had a garden to make things easier. All of the children helped out.
- 6:39** When the oldest brother was sixteen or seventeen years old he took up the blacksmith trade. By age nineteen he was married with a child. Max's sister sewed. There were no universities, and to complete elementary school was a big thing.
- 7:15** When Rafalovka was split between the Germans and Ukrainians, the Ukrainians began taking from the wealthier residents, and looting began. The Jews were paid to work on farms. Max's father no longer had his business but worked for others. The Russians did not require Jews to wear a star.
- 8:30** The Russians let the Jews live freely, with little discrimination. The Jews had no idea what was happening in other countries as a result of Nazi rule. They had no newspapers.
- 9:20** The Germans came in 1941. They took over the country in one or two days. The Nazis looted and raped girls, especially the Jewish girls. People tried to hide the girls in attics and other places. The Ukrainians became animals. There was no law, no one could tell the Germans no. Max's sister was hidden by a Ukrainian friend. All of this happened as soon as the Nazis were approaching and the Ukrainians left.
- 10:49** For a month people stayed in their homes, and then the Nazis began to collect Jews from other towns. Five to six families were put in two-room homes. Max was fourteen years old in 1941.
- 11:25** Everyone was afraid. The Germans said they would take the Jews to Germany to work and would pay them well. There was still hope. Six months later, in 1942, a ghetto was created. Each person received ten ounces of bread and one potato. Every month they were given less food and they were starving. One day the Nazis used a loudspeaker to tell everyone to form a circle and bring their expensive items – money, gold, silver - but no bulky packages. Once the circle of people formed, they were surrounded by machine guns held by Poles, Ukrainians and Nazis.
- 13:14** The Germans took 150 people at a time and split families up. The Jews thought they were marching to a train, a railroad, about 30 miles out, still in the town of Rafalovka. Instead they were led to a big ditch outside of town that the Germans had dug. The German soldiers wore swastikas but Max did not know if they were

Gestapo or SS. A few Poles and Ukrainians helped. People were already dead in the ditch. They were told to undress and bundle their belongings and lie in the ditch. Children from three to three and a half years old had their heads smashed into a high beam pole. The dead children were thrown into a separate ditch.

- 15:30** People in the ditch were machine-gunned. Some people were not hit, the bullets were random. There were twenty to fifty layers of people in the ditch, and those not killed by bullets suffocated. Max was not hit and survived, and after dark he crawled out. Five people crawled out.
- 16:29** He hid in the woods and the lowland swamps. He stole clothing from a nearby house. In the woods he met Russian POWs and went with them. Two months later they had grown to a group of about a thousand. Approximately fifty were Jews. The Russians in the group were high-brass military and educated. There were also some soldiers. They remained in hiding in the thick woods, slept in small time periods, and kept moving. Food consisted of mushrooms etc., whatever they could find in the woods.
- 18:40** The first group of Russians he met included about twenty people. They attacked two German soldiers and took their rifles and ammunition. They moved onto other Germans. After killing the Jews, the Germans had begun to pursue Ukrainian gypsies, and more people escaped to the swamps. Max's group tricked the Germans into the swamps. This went on for three years.
- 19:47** The first group of partisans was called Malinko, named after the Jewish man in charge. Malinko was a Russian from a town about twenty miles away. Their mission was to go to a small town and kill collaborators. Trusted townspeople told them when the Germans would be in town to take kettles and pigs from the farmers. The Malinko group ambushed the Germans. They covered the road and hid in groups until the Germans were in the middle of the road, and they cornered them. They took the ones still living to a camp, took their ammunition, rum, and vodka, and killed them. Max was fifteen years old and spent three years with the partisans.
- 21:50** Max began to dynamite railroads and bridges. Four or five men would go with him. He was young, thin, and small, so no one paid attention to him. He could get close to bridge columns and dynamite them. He used kite string to dynamite when trains were near.
- 23:10** By this time they knew what was happening to the Jews in the world. They did not think the Germans could be defeated, and Max felt that one way or another he would be killed. He wanted to kill as many Germans as he could.
- 24:00** The partisan group was liberated after marching to the Carpathian Mountains in Romania, in the region of Bucovina. They knew the Russians were coming. Max was once captured by the Germans while dynamiting. They brought him out naked in a blizzard to shoot him but he escaped. After escaping he found another group of partisans to join. To fit in you had to volunteer to do things and he was a

mean kid by then. He became that way after the Nazis. He had been raised not to fight.

- 27:01** All of his family had been killed. There were two to three thousand partisans in the mountains of Bucovina. They were in the Alps and ambushed a group of Russians mistaking them for Germans. They had radio communications and knew the Russians were coming close. The Russian Army liberated them.
- 28:41** After the war, Max went to Bucharest. Once before that, when his group was surrounded, German planes bombed them until there was nothing left, but no one died. They had horses and slid down the mountain with ropes. The Germans would see a bonfire and bomb. After the bombing they went back to the mountains.
- 30:00** Max did not go to Germany with a group, he never saw concentration camps. The group stayed in the mountains and woods close to railroads. His assignment was to bomb railroads and not let Germans through. He never saw Jewish movements on trains, he saw only trains that carried German soldiers and he had to try to stop them. Russian Army informants provided them with information on German train movement, and other groups from the woods also sent word.
- 32:30** After liberation, Max went to Bucharest and was decorated with medals. He stayed three to four weeks then shaved his head, got ragged clothes and pretended to be from a concentration camp. He threw his medals away. He then went to Budapest. His health was good – he was seventeen or eighteen years old. From Budapest he went to Austria. He pretended to be a camp survivor to go to Budapest; he could not get away from the Russians otherwise. At the border in Austria, he talked a patrol into letting him in by giving them his gold watch. From Austria he went to the Italian border. There he received money and food. The U.N. had housing and sent him to Torino, Italy, an industrial city where Fiat was located. This was near the French border. He stayed for two years and worked the black market with American soldiers. He came to the United States in 1948. He had distant family but came alone.
- 37:00** In the Washington, D.C. area, Max worked as a dishwasher for a relative. For six months he made \$15 a week. He went to an Americanization school to learn English. His rent was \$6 a week and he would eat a ten or fifteen cent can of sardines for dinner. He spoke Italian, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian. Morey Schouk, a friend who owned a liquor store on 13th Street took him to DGS Wholesale Grocery to meet people. There he met Charlie Baron, who hired him as a butcher for \$50 a week. The butcher shop was at Central Avenue near Benning Road.
- 39:54** He changed his name twice. In Italy he changed it the first time. The Polish quarter was closed to U.S. entrance and he bought another man's papers for ten thousand dollars. This man's name was Aaron Berkowitz and this was his first name change. He entered the United States as Berkowitz. No one at this time had birth certificates. His first name (family name) was Max Guz and once in

America, on the advice of his teacher in Americanization school, he changed it to Max Berg.

- 42:35** After working as a butcher for one and a half years, he saved three hundred dollars and bought a store on Nichols Avenue near Saint Elizabeth. A woman's husband had died and he purchased it from her. Charlie Baron lent him money to buy it. He took in a friend as a partner. Then he was called into the Korean War even though he was not a U.S. citizen. He went to Fort Belvoir and was sent home, sick. He sold the store and made \$12,000, each partner taking \$6,000.
- 46:10** Some foreign third or fourth cousins had a supermarket near Capitol and Stadium and he bought the store for \$62,000 using his \$6,000 as a deposit. He could not pay the difference and lost his money. He went back to Charlie Baron and they became partners for two years. They opened another store six months later at 15th and Fuller. A French woman from the Spanish Embassy came in to buy stockings and she and Max became friends. She sent a lot of embassy business to him. A man named Walker had sold this store to Max and had purchased a bar and did well in Prince George's County. When Max saw this he sold the market and opened a bar/restaurant in 1954.
- 49:55** By this time Max was married and had a child. Jack Klebes owned a restaurant that Max bought. Business was not good and Max put an ad in the newspaper for rock and roll musicians. There were two musician unions – past Thomas Circle was the Kaufman white union, on the other side was the Harris black union. Max tried black musicians first, and fifty people showed up in response to his ad. His black dishwasher, Bob Hearn, helped him audition musicians. Five hundred tourists packed the bar. Max saved his money and got uniforms for the musicians, and he had four bands working for him. He handed out flyers at colleges, and he had lines two blocks long waiting to get in.
- 53:40** His bar was the Ritz, and he bought out Benny's on 14th street. Later he bought a strip club called Tinkerbelle, and turned it into a bar. He owned four places on one square block. He sold more beer than anyone in the country. He opened more bars, one in Norfolk, and had twelve in total.
- 54:45** He bought his home in the 1960's where Jews lived near Riggs Park. He befriended the builder Bernie Jeffery. Bernie had no money to build so he and Max became partners in 1961. Max bought sixty lots of land from Jerry Whalmer in Wheaton, and purchased more lots in Lelandale. He worked in his night clubs and construction for ten years, and began building apartments in Norfolk.
- 56:50** In 1972 or 1973 he bought a home in Ocean City. Bobbie Baker was in jail and Max bought his motel with carousel for 2.5 million dollars. He built the first high-rise there for twenty million dollars in 1973. He also built the Irene condos in Ocean City. He built Harbor House in Norfolk and also built in Charlotte, N.C. When the gas shortage hit, Max lost a lot. After the shortage, he went back to building, and was involved in the construction of Tyson's Corner and other projects in the D.C. area.

- 58:20** Max met his wife in New York and got married in 1952. They had three children and sent them to Hebrew schools. At the time of the interview, in 1993, they had a son who was forty, another son who was thirty-five, and a daughter who was thirty-one. They lived like American Jews.
- 59:40** Max feels that his survival was due to luck: it 'was my number'. He kept in touch with only one of the partisan members who was from a different group. He was his brother's friend and wound up in Canada.
- 1:00:10** He has no memorabilia or medals. He never went back to Europe. He did not think that he would survive, or that the Germans would be defeated.
- 1:01:27** The partisan missions would take place when they heard the Germans were coming into towns to take food and Max's group would be assigned to ambush the Germans. During ambushes Jews would be killed, not by Germans but by the Russian and Ukrainian members of the partisan group. Once the Jews figured this out, on the next mission they did the same thing back – killing Russian and Ukrainians. The group leader was Jewish. They had good communications when trains would be moving, in time to stop the trains. Ten or twelve people would go and then find one or two Jews dead, killed by Russians and Ukrainians. There was minor anti-Semitism in the partisan group.
- 1:04:20** The Germans were a common enemy. Stopping trains to the frontier was the main assignment. Before the Nazis, there was no segregation in the community. Anti-Semitism was not found in Italy after the war.
- 1:06:01** Max became a U.S. citizen in 1954 or 1955.
- 1:06:20** His interests now are cars and antiques – especially antique sculpture and paintings. Twenty or twenty five years ago he bought an old broken statue for \$25 or \$30. His wife noticed the John Rogers name on it and the date from the 1800s. Max contacted the Smithsonian and had it appraised at Columbia Road for \$2,500. He has collected such pieces ever since.
- 1:08:22** Max never had a bar mitzvah. His family died and he can't remember their faces, only bodies and features such as hair. He never searched for his family, because he knows they were all killed in the ditch. He went back to his home town Rafalovka on partisan missions. There he walked the town freely and never saw his family. His family had lived next to the Klezmer musicians who lived near and dated the Jews.
- 1:10:37** Once, when he went into town on a mission, he saw a blonde woman walking in a haze. He took her back to camp and saw her later in Washington. He knows her son and sees him weekly. She had been hidden in an attic for six months and then joined the partisans. She cooked, as women did, and washed clothes. Women did not fight.

1:12:15 There were a few dozen women in the group. There was no social structure, no one got married. He does not recall anyone having children. It was not a normal society – but three years on the run – until liberation in 1945.

1:13:51 Max considers himself lucky; he has a good marriage and nice kids. He was successful – life was like a roller coaster – he took the good and bad, ups and downs. He learned to handle the bad times and is stronger now. He is proud that he did so much with little or no education. He is recognized in his community.