

Gendelman, Isaac
RG-50.029*0014
1 Videotape
In English

- Abstract:** Isaac Gendelman was born in Rokitno, Poland (Rokitnoye, now in the Ukraine) on November 17, 1925. He was the only member of his family of seven to survive the Holocaust. His upbringing and life involved strict religious observances in a town where anti-Semitism was quite prevalent. When the Russians occupied his town, ghetto life was better than when the Germans took over in July, 1941. Life became very harsh and food was scarce in the ghetto. As the Nazis began rounding up Jews for deportation, Isaac escaped into the forest, where he lived for two years, mostly eating potatoes and moving around to avoid capture. Following three years in the DP camp, Bindermichl, in Linz, Austria, Isaac was able to immigrate and live with an aunt in Washington, DC. He married and had a family. He has remained in contact with a friend who was with him in the forest.
- 1:00** Isaac was born on November 17, 1925 and raised in the Polish town of Rokitno (Rokitnoye, now in the Ukraine). In 1939, it had a population of 7,000, of whom 3,000 were Jews. The family consisted of the parents, Asher and Hannah, and five children. An older sister was married and had a young son and there were two younger siblings. The whole family, except for an older brother, was in Rokitno when the Germans arrived. Isaac's older brother escaped to Russia when the Germans invaded. Isaac states that he was probably too young to escape (almost 14) at the time of the occupation.
- 2:45** He didn't see Jews killed right next to him, but most Jews were taken away in freight cars or shot in the shul, where the floor had a foot of blood. He ran into the woods and luckily a bullet did not hit him. He saw about thirty Ukrainians marching with bayonets pointed toward the Jews. Jews were brought to a certain place on orders of the Judenrat which received orders from the Germans. Even sick people were brought on stretchers. He states that he didn't know what was going on, but saw freight cars nearby.
- 4:48** Isaac describes life in his town before 1939. The Jewish community was very active and productive with two orthodox synagogues. His home was near the old synagogue. He belonged to several Jewish groups (Hashomer Hatzioni, Betar) and went to meetings and Oneg Shabbats. His town was very Zionist and he was part of Keren Kayemet. The lifestyle was not of rich, very few were rich. It was a Jewish life with Shabbat observed, most people going to shul, and most stores closed on the day.
- 6:45** There was much anti-Semitism and Isaac lived in a setting almost like a ghetto before the war, with some streets mainly for Poles and others mainly for Jews. Most Jews were involved in businesses: tailors, shoemakers, restaurant owners. Many Poles shopped in these stores because the Poles were not in commerce. There was a large glass factory in the town, one of the largest in Poland, and the

Poles worked there. His father had a grocery store and sometimes gave food “on the book” until people were able to pay.

- 9:00 Life was quite strict. On Friday evening, the rabbi would walk the streets to be sure that all stores were closed. Much respect was given to the rabbi. There was one Jewish cemetery near the town. Isaac was not able to walk through the town to visit his grandparents and had to go around it because the Polish boys would beat him up by throwing stones and hitting him with sticks. Isaac notes that Jews were like second class citizens. The Poles were always against the Jews. This left him with a bad taste growing up. He couldn't go to bathe in the river alone because the Poles called the Jews names and could drown them; they only went in a group of twenty. This behavior was shown by the youngsters, not the parents, but Isaac feels that the children had been taught to hate the Jews, and he cannot forget this.
- 11:25 Polish people broke into Jewish homes and took things immediately after the deportations began. They felt that Jews were living in their land. Before the war, there was a President, Piłsudski, who spoke for the Jews. When he died the new president was anti-Semitic and changes occurred: kosher slaughtering of animals was very limited, only a certain amount was allowed and that was not enough. Each year, leading up to the war, things got worse.
- 13:30 Isaac describes life in his town prior to the occupation. In 1939, the Germans invaded Poland while the Russians occupied the eastern half of Poland. Isaac recalls a large Russian tank and the soldiers marching into his town, but there was no fighting with the Polish soldiers. Isaac's family was glad to see these Russians who were friendly. In fact, they felt somewhat liberated, even though they were not communists. Although there were no stores for Jewish people anymore because the Russians did not believe in private ownership, nobody was hungry. They were not upset because they had suffered so much under the Polish government. The war continued and the Russians occupied his town until June 1941 when Germany declared war on Russia. There was a lot of bombing then. Germany pushed Russia out and then Isaac's town was in German hands.
- 16:38 The Jews had to comply with German rule. Immediately a Judenrat was organized and had to supply whatever was asked for by the Nazis. The situation became horrible, and Isaac heard that the Germans were killing Jews in Warsaw and Krakow, although his town was very far from those cities. It was about 15 km from the Russian border.
- 17:42 Anti- Jewish Laws: As soon as the Judenrat was organized, the Germans ordered all Jews to wear an armband with a Star of David. For four months, they wore the armbands until they were ordered to wear 8 cm patches on the left side and on their backs. This identified Jews and kept them from traveling anywhere. Jews were ordered to move to certain streets from all over town. German and Polish police greatly assisted in these moves. The Judenrat had to supply certain items to the Germans. For example, 100 pairs of boots were demanded and the Jews had to go to a nearby town to purchase these boots. If they were not supplied, 50 Jews would be killed. All animals, including cats

and chickens, were taken from Jews. Probably about 80% of the Jewish families had a cow for milk and cheese since it was not easy to shop. The Germans demanded all copper and brass handles and pots; a Jew could not own a brass samovar to make tea.

- 22:25 In the ghetto, food was very scarce; the Germans only allowed each person a slice of bread. After a few months, the situation became worse as food was used up and hunger began to be common. Isaac recalls that his father was on good terms with a Ukrainian he had grown up with; they smuggled a few grains of wheat. They took the wheat into a basement and ground it with two heavy stones. Someone had to watch at the window and signal if a Pole or German came near because this grinding made some noise. It was hard work, pulling 300 pounds of stone for a pound of flour. Things were so bad that Isaac's mother picked weeds, boiled them, and made patties for food so that they would survive.
- 23:51 Isaac recounts ghetto life from 1941 to 1942: the Germans sent them to work digging trenches and moving stones. A guard always watched. If they did not work as required, they were hit with a gun. Isaac was a child of fifteen at that time. Once Isaac's mother left the ghetto to get food from a Gentile friend; she was caught and beaten quite badly. The Germans demanded that 10 gold rubles be given for each Jew in the town. Isaac recalls a rainy day on which all Jews were called to the synagogue. The rabbi and the gabbai went to the bimah, upon which was placed a mita (something for carrying the dead since they had no caskets) and black candles. Everyone was told to come up and swear that they had no money or gold; this was a way to collect the money that was continuously being demanded by the Germans.
- 26:43 Isaac describes the deportation. From time to time the Jews were taken to a field to be counted. One day they were ordered to be at a certain market, close to the railroad. Isaac's family tried to stay together, but men and women were separated. Some Ukrainian police pointed guns, indicating that they would be killed. A lady living with Isaac's family saw what was happening and began shouting, "Jews, run! Escape!". At once, everyone ran. Shooting came from around the marketplace and there was blood everywhere. Isaac ran towards the woods escaped from the gunfire. He hid with some gentiles. Things were so bad that gentiles were often afraid to hide anyone because their houses could be burned and they could be shot. By the next morning, Isaac was 20 km from his home, thinking that his family had been killed. He states that he had never been away from his family, and that the situation in the forest was very bad with no clothing, no food, no shelter, and cold temperatures. Chaim, a friend of Isaac, who now lives in Florida, is the only witness to this experience. They would leave the forest to beg for food or dig up potatoes from gardens. People would tell them to give themselves up because they would not survive. Isaac relates that their determination to survive was great and they would not give up, despite the cold and hunger; they would run from one village to another to find one or two potatoes to survive another day.
- 32:04 In the forest, Isaac met Jews, but knew that they could not be in large groups, and that he would be less noticeable as an individual or as part of a small group.

Isaac and a friend would go into potato fields at night. Isaac talks about a bag he had which was about 2' by 12' and how he used it to collect potatoes, as a blanket, and as a shawl. Sometimes, he went deeper into the forest, looking for small fires in which to bake the potatoes.

- 34:40 Isaac relates that the “older” Jews, aged 30-50, did not want the younger children with them. (See note at 44:00)
- 36:20 Isaac points out the dangers of going into villages for food. Peasants had been told that the Germans would give them 2 kilos of salt for each Jew they turned in. Isaac states that he went into Polish villages rather than Ukrainian ones because the Poles were more trustworthy and were also suffering from the German occupation. Sometimes he would beg for food or take it from a horse’s bucket.
- 39:00 Isaac tells of a time he and his friend had stolen some potatoes, and then heard footsteps and German being spoken. While hiding, they heard the Polish farmer say that the Jews were gone. They took a back road and crossed a small river. When they went into a house to ask for clothes, a man with a rifle said he was taking them to the Germans. Because they cried and begged, as did the farmer’s wife, this Ukrainian farmer released them, and gave them dry clothes.
- 44:00 Isaac describes another forest incident in which he had left ten children at night to look for food, but the children were killed during his absence. He felt guilty about this, and wondered why God was doing this to him, or to his seven-year-old brother and nine-year-old sister. He states his belief in God, but questions the murders of his parents who had done nothing wrong. Isaac now deals with these questions with his grandchildren, and says that he can explain a little, but never forgive or forget; he feels it is important for Jews and gentiles to know what was done to the Jews.
- 48:19 Isaac describes life in hiding in the forest: he was very thin, weighed about 70 pounds or less, and very cautious, almost like an animal. Living in the forest made him very aware of small noises, such as a branches breaking or a bird moving. This alertness continued for a couple years after the war. He tells of one incident in which 300 Russian partisans captured him and his friend, but they thought they were Germans (because they wore Nazi uniforms) or Ukrainian police, and probably anti-Semitic. His heart was racing until the partisans finally revealed themselves. To hide themselves, they dug out and created a sort of small mountain near a road where Germans were searching for partisans.
- 54:49 In early 1944, things became a little easier. Isaac says that farmers told them that the Germans were retreating. He began to have a little hope of surviving, but states that only 3%-4% of the Jewish population of his town survived. Getting food continued to be very hard. The partisans gave them food and occasionally some protection.

- 56:17 Isaac describes living in the forest as “pretty bad”: he found a soldier’s helmet and used it for food, bathing, washing his shirt, anything; his left shoulder was badly bitten by lice. Conditions were very dirty.
- 58:00 Isaac relates his trip back to his home town, Rokitno. He and his friend told the Russian authorities that they wanted to enlist in the army to fight the Germans. For two days they were fed and clothed and then told to go to their town to register for the army. The 40 km trip was difficult on the small supply train that they found because some “independent “ Ukrainians (“Bluebuffis”) derailed the train and began shooting with machine guns and rifles. Isaac thought his life was at an end as he saw a Jewish woman being killed with an ax, but he and his friend rolled onto the snowy ground and escaped. During the remaining 14-15 km journey to his town, Isaac notes that he lost his friend and when they met again, his friend could no longer walk; although Isaac was very weak, he dragged him part way toward a small house in which a kerosene lamp was lit. The lady in that small house gave him milk and straw on which to rest, and after an hour, his friend also found the house. The next morning, Isaac and his friend went into his town. Only three or four Jews were left. They found their homes burned. Isaac speaks about walking down the streets and visualizing the people who used to live in each house. He tells how awful he felt for having survived with no family left.
- 1:07 Isaac states that three doors from his house he met a couple who used to sew and sell clothing and he was taken into this house, but soon became ill with typhus and spent three weeks in a hospital, unconscious much of that time. He speaks of how he felt and that he knew he could not stay in Rokitno because of family memories. He didn’t know where any of his family were buried, but heard that his father had been shot while trying to hide. He says, “Life was miserable right after liberation.”
- 1:09 Isaac relates that he went to Germany and had to serve in the Russian army, working on railroad supplies for a few months. He had heard that one could go to Germany to connect with organizations in order to go to Israel.
- 1:11 From Germany, Isaac talks about going to Hungary with an organization, Ezra, to go to Palestine. There were 5,000 Jews in a school. While in Hungary, Isaac was among six men who were selected to help organize different groups from the concentration camps to go to Palestine, but the English would not allow entrance. He felt that it was an honor to be chosen for these jobs. In doing this work, Isaac wore a Red Cross armband and taught the people some useful words in Greek or Italian or other languages to match their “new” but false passports. Some of these groups were able to enter the British Zone and to get closer to Italy, but because there were so many refugees entering the zone, English soldiers suggested talking with the Russians.
- 1:16 Isaac tells about his time in an Austrian DP camp, Bindermichl, in Linz, Austria. The six Jews were warned by some Russian soldiers that British officials were looking for them and they left for an Austrian DP camp where there were 3,000 Jews. The conditions are described by Isaac as being not too bad in terms of food and making friends. However, as he states, “the door

wasn't open to Israel," and he stayed there for three years. He met an American G.I. and they became friends. He visited him in California 30 years later. This soldier, Sam Rund, received packages every couple days. Isaac knew he had an aunt in DC, but did not know her last name. This aunt had visited Isaac's family in 1935 and took his grandmother back to the U.S. with her, but the grandmother returned to Poland after two years, and was killed by the Nazis. Through a cousin in Argentina, Isaac was able to connect with his DC family. He came to the U.S on January 17, 1949. His aunt sent him packages with shirts and cigarettes that he was able to trade or sell.

- 1:21 Isaac describes his feelings about immigrating. He felt at home and was warmly welcomed by his aunt and cousins, but was very unhappy about what had happened. He relates going to school and needing time to adjust.
- 1:23 Isaac speaks about adjusting to life in America: his aunt bought him whatever he needed. He lived with them for four years and they taught him many things which helped him become "American." They took him to a doctor. He attended an Americanization school and met other refugees. He began working part time and then full time; met his wife and had two children, and began to forget some of what happened.
- 1:26 Isaac shows and talks about many photographs in his home: old family photos that the aunt had preserved, a photo of the aunt; these are very precious because he had no photos with him when he escaped from the Nazis. He shows a painting of a forest done by his friend Chaim, in which he depicts the "thick forest for hundreds of miles," just as it was.
- 1:31 In response to the question of adding anything to his oral history, Isaac says that it was difficult to go over his life story, but that he did it for his grandchildren and their children so that they would know what happened. He states that gentiles should also learn how wrong the actions of the Germans were. He is thankful for the opportunity to tell his story.