

MILCHBERG, Irving
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Abstract

Irving Milchberg was born in Warsaw on September 15, 1927 to a large, very comfortable family.

When Germans occupied Warsaw, his father was barred from his wholesale housewares business. The father dug ditches for anti-tank holes, and also worked in a lumberyard. Germans confiscated all furniture in their apartment, and beat the father and uncle while they carried the furniture downstairs.

Relocated to the ghetto, Irving repeatedly escaped, stole food, sold it outside the ghetto, and brought home a bit of money and food. He was caught often and beaten.

On July 22, 1942, signs were posted, listing people who had to report to the square. Then the Germans brought in Ukrainians, and told them to start killing people, Irving says.

Irving saw his father shot dead. People stripped all the clothes off his father's body. The next day, when Irving was outside the ghetto getting food, everyone was taken from the ghetto. He felt he was going crazy, and hid in the attic.

At the end of 1942, Irving joined with other children, and coordinated Jewish teenage orphans. In May 1943, he was a runner in the ghetto, and carried explosives. In November 1943, he became a runner for the Polish army underground. In May 1944, when he was 14 years old, he hid a seven-year-old boy by persuading his landlady to let the boy live with them.

Irving was the only member of his entire family to survive. He went to a DP camp, but had such difficulty gaining permission to enter another country, that he returned to Poland. In 1948, he applied to Canada, and eventually lived in Nova Scotia, Toronto, and Niagara Falls. He became a watchmaker, married, and has two adult children.

"I hope humanity never has to prove how good it is, and that we never have to be at mercy of others," Irving concludes.

Time-coded notes

:00 Irving Milchberg was born in Warsaw September 15, 1927. His family lived in a five-story apartment building with 220 Jewish families, totaling 2,000 people. His two sisters and maternal grandparents lived with them. Ten branches of the family lived within walking distance. No one is left of his mother's or father's family.

:28 Before the war, Irving led a regular life. He went to religious school, and belonged to Zionist organizations. His family was very comfortable.

His father was a wholesaler of housewares. Six close relatives lived in the same apartment house, and other relatives lived nearby.

There were three synagogues. In spring and summer, children listened outside the synagogues to Torah readings.

4:04 Irving went to private Jewish community school until grade five. He learned Polish, math, and sciences. After lunch, he studied religion. On Saturdays, he reviewed lessons with his grandparents.

When the Germans came, his father could not go to his business. Children were educated in their apartment house.

6:48 He had no contact with Polish children. All his friends were Jewish. The janitor was the only Pole in the building.

7:24 Irving personally did not experience anti-Semitism, but heard a lot of talk about it. Jewish businesses were boycotted. Poles were allowed to scream and holler at Jews, but not hit Jews.

The Jewish market near their apartment building was attacked by Poles. One 15-year-old Jewish boy hit a Pole. Police imprisoned him for two and a half years in a reform school. His parents lived across hall from Irving's family.

10:42 The Milchbergs had a good family life. They talked a lot about Zionism and Socialism. There was full-bloom life in the apartments. People could join whatever group they wanted. There was a communal feeling. Everyone knew each other.

12:07 The area they lived in had 16,000 people within one and a half blocks. Germans closed the area, and claimed people had typhoid. Everyone was brought to a steam bath to be sprayed.

Warsaw and surrounding area had one million people. The city of Warsaw had 350,000 Jews.

13:35 On Saturdays and holidays, all businesses were closed.

14:46 When the war started, nobody believed the tragedy that would come. Germans started bombing and shooting in Warsaw. The Polish army used Jews. Irving's father dug ditches for anti-tank holes. There was no water or electricity.

Irving's mother kept saying that Germans would treat them well, like they did in World War One. During that war, Irving's grandfather did a good business with Germans.

17:06 When the Germans came, they brought truckloads of bread and cameras. They took pictures to prove that they were feeding people.

All of a sudden, Poles started beating up Jews. Germans took pictures of the beatings.

Bombs destroyed most apartments, and residents used blankets to cover windows.

20:49 Polish police started grabbing Jewish males to clean up streets.

Irving began to hear about Jews in small towns being burned in synagogues.

A month later, Germans organized a Jewish committee for self-government. The committee organized registration, and provided workers. Everyone was hungry. There were no jobs. Life became very difficult. People went to work, and some got shot. Irving heard increasing stories of cruelty.

23:46 Some of Irving's relatives lived in a building where Jewish males were called down and were shot.

Germans came to Irving's apartment and picked up the furniture. They made his father and uncle carry furniture all the way downstairs as they were being beaten.

26:10 Apartments were very cold because broken windows could not be replaced. There was no electricity. They used carbon lamps. He still remembers the awful smell and the dirt all over people.

27:23 There was no protection. Suddenly businesses were taken. Poles wore German armbands, and could do whatever they wanted to. If you complained, the SS came in. Germans said there was typhoid, and closed buildings.

The situation became progressively worse. Russians occupied part of Poland. Irving's relatives tried to go to Russian area.

- 31:30** In 1940, the Jewish ghetto was established. Many Jews felt relieved to be in ghetto, and thought the wall was a protection. His relatives came back from Russia, and said it was terrible.
- 31:43** Jews gave partnerships of business to gentiles. But once Poles took businesses, they got rid of the Jewish owners.
- 32:34** Warsaw was divided into three sections: Germans lived in nicest part, Poles lived in the next-most-desirable areas, and Jews got the worst housing. It was very crowded. Twelve to 15 people lived in one room, like sardines. Irving still remembers the smell of straw mattresses. Irving's family had one little room and a kitchen. His grandparents lived with them.
- 35:24** Irving's father got a job in a lumberyard. Everyone tried to sell worldly goods.
- 36:13** In 1941, hunger, typhoid, and other illnesses took terrible toll. Hunger was the most terrible thing; it was constant. All people talked about was what they used to have before the war.
- 36:42** Along with 15-20 other boys, Irving would run out of ghetto when gates were opened. Life became cheap. Hunger was more important than life. Many times Irving was caught and beaten up, but he was able to bring a little food back to the family. His mother kept a laundry kettle on the stove, and whatever food anyone had, they put it into the soup. Everyone shared.
- 40:20** Irving felt like he was supporting the entire family. He sold stuff outside the ghetto, and brought food back to the family. He had to get home before curfew.
- Germans gave everyone cards for small piece of bread. But people starved anyway, and bodies were left in street. There was no nourishment for the sick.
- 43:04** 25,000 young Jewish men were taken to build camps.
- 44:28** Irving continued to steal and smuggle stuff to sell.
- Irving put himself on the line. He felt like a supporter of family, and got to know people outside the ghetto.
- 45:35** Germans started moving Jews from Warsaw ghetto. Irving heard a lot of news about Jews in small towns being cleared out, and chased from place to place. The situation became increasingly worse.
- On July 22, 1942, announcement placards were placed in the ghetto. They listed people who had to report to the square. The people were told to prepare for a journey, and were promised bread and marmalade. Then, the Germans brought in Ukrainians, and told them to start killing people.

Irving's father was still working. Germans would pick up workers at the ghetto's gate. Irving would slip out with his father, and continue smuggling.

Jews were being killed during the day, but after 6 PM, the killing stopped. It was so systematic – like a regular workday.

One day, Irving was coming home with his father, and a German pulled his father out of line, and shot and killed him. Irving ran home to tell his mother. When they went back to find his father's body, they saw that people had stolen his clothes off his body. His mother paid to have father's body taken out of the ghetto. They learned later that all dead Jews were dumped into a big hole.

55:35 The next day, after his father's murder, Irving went out with a group and they continued to smuggle.

56:47 When he got home, his mother, sisters, and grandparents were gone. The apartment was destroyed. Everyone was cleared out of the building. He was devastated. He went to *umplatz*, but everyone had been shipped out. Then he hid in the attic, and felt he was going crazy.

59:20 At the end of 1942, Irving decided to go over to the Polish side. He joined up with other children and became coordinator of Jewish teenage orphans.

59:45 He discovered that an aunt was still alive in ghetto. He visited her for a few days. In middle of January, Germans resumed grabbing people. Irving hid in attic filled with one and a half feet of feathers.

1:03:10 In 1943, just before Pesach, Irving returned to the ghetto to try to find an uncle, but could not find him. Jews there gave him shelter.

1:03:38 Fighting broke out in the ghetto. Irving became a runner, and carried bottles filled with explosives. On May 2, he was taken with 3,000 people to a station. People were starving.

1:06:06 Outside the ghetto in Warsaw, Irving met his non-Jewish friend who had a grocery store, and was also a teacher. He helped Irving.

1:07:17 In August of 1943, Irving went into the ghetto. Polish boys chased him. He broke his leg. He went to another non-Jewish friend, who took him to a Polish doctor, who reluctantly took him in and set the bone. Irving stayed a few days, but then had to leave.

Irving returned to the grocery store, but had lost his job. Then he went to a Warsaw bazaar and met 22 Jewish boys who had been part of his smuggling group. They became like family.

1:11:41 In November 1943, he became a runner for Polish army underground. He also sold cigarettes.

1:13:25 In May 1944, when he was 14 years old, he hid a seven-year-old boy, and persuaded his landlady to take him in.

In May 1945, Polish army underground sent him to another place. He left the little boy with the landlady.

1:14:40 Irving stayed with underground group until a month later, when Poles returned from Russia, and were very anti-Semitic. They said the remaining Jews had to be destroyed.

One night when Irving was on watch in the woods, he left the group, and walked 15 kms to a small village. He found a few Jewish friends. Warsaw was not yet liberated, but one could go into empty apartments on the city's outskirts. Irving and a friend stole possessions from apartments and sold them.

1:17:07 The hardest thing to understand was that the Poles who had helped Jews and children were ashamed, not proud.

1:19:16 Irving and three other boys went to a building resembling an orphanage, but it was empty. They were alone. After Warsaw was liberated, they got together and consoled one another. Irving was able to get into a DP camp.

1:20:19 He went to an ORT trade school, resumed learning Hebrew, and took a course to become a dental clinician.

Jewish agencies tried to get DPs into Palestine. But it was very difficult to get into any country. So Irving returned to Poland.

1:23:52 In 1948, he registered to go to Canada, which let in 1,000 young people. He went to Sydney, Nova Scotia, where he worked in an ice cream factory for \$12 a (six-day) week.

He learned watch making, moved to Toronto, and then to Niagara Falls in 1951. Life was very good. He made friends, and felt a sense of belonging. He married, and had a son who became a physicist, and a daughter who is an architect.

Life is good, but Irving misses his family who died in the Holocaust. The Milchbergs created a Jewish home, and belong to a synagogue.

1:26:48 "I hope humanity never has to prove how good it is and that we never have to be at mercy of others."