

GATENIO, Joseph
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Mrs. GATENIO
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In Greek

Abstract

Joseph Gatenio, born in Thessaloniki in 1929 to an observant, middle-class family of four, describes life in Thessaloniki's large Jewish community; the German invasion of 1941; the forced labor camp to which all Jewish males aged 18-45 were sent in July 1942; and deportation to concentration camps that began in March 1943.

Of the 1,000 people in Joseph's transport to Birkenau, only ten survived. Joseph is the youngest Greek survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

He relates his older sister's attempted suicide, and his participation in the orchestra at Birkenau, where he was called the "small Greek." Orchestra members help him survive.

The SS occasionally made the orchestra play while the SS beat other prisoners to death. He recounts many other examples of brutality by the SS and the capos. One capo beat 2,000 men to death with a shovel.

Joseph describes appalling conditions in the many camps where he was transferred -- Henkel, Sachsenhausen, Ohrdruf, Sachsenhausen (again), Neubrandenburg, Ravensbruck, Ludwigslust.

He describes his liberation by American soldiers in May 1945. Joseph joined Russian liberators, and wandered through Europe for a few months. He returned to Thessaloniki in December 1945.

Joseph says his guilt feelings become stronger as he grows older. He has recurring nightmares about his experiences in the concentration camps.

However, Joseph says he is an optimist; he survived because he wanted badly to live.

Joseph's wife (name not given) interpreted his Greek interview, and gave her own history: Her father was deported from Thessaloniki and killed. The Red Cross had intervened with Germans on behalf of his pregnant wife, who gave birth on April 1, 1944. The mother hid in the hospital until a Nazi collaborator betrayed her. She was executed in Thessaloniki in October 1944.

The mother had asked a nurse to save the baby. The nurse's Christian family reared the girl in Thessaloniki. They did not baptize her, or tell her the circumstances of her birth and Jewish family until she was 12. Mrs. Gatenio says this caused her a difficult psychological battle.

Tape 1, Side A

- 000** Born in January 1929 in Thessaloniki, Joseph Gatenio's happy, middle-class family consisted of his father, mother, and a sister who was eight years older than Joseph. The father was a music lover who owned a very respectable men's clothing store. Joseph studied accordion, and his sister was fluent in French. The observant family lived in an all-Jewish neighborhood, with extended family and friends. One-third of Thessaloniki's population was Jewish. The Germans entered the city in 1941. Joseph describes his 1940 bar mitzvah "with fear of the Germans."
- 074** There were no problems for the first year and a half after the German invasion. But occasionally Jews, including his father, would be taken to the Gestapo and asked for money. An alarming event occurred in July 1942, when all males 18-45 were sent to a forced labor camp. This event was followed by more orders requiring Jews to wear the yellow star, and also to move from the city's center to a ghetto. The surrounding neighborhoods were subsequently fenced in. As a youth, Joseph says did not sense any danger; he was too interested in girls.
- 169** Deportations began on March 15th, 1943. Deportations occurred neighborhood by neighborhood. Jews were assembled at an area called Baron Hirsch, close to the railroad station, before being put on trains. The deportees were told that they were going to Krakow. Joseph's family had left their house in January 1943, and moved in with relatives in another neighborhood. The family was deported on June 1, 1943. Joseph says that even as he boarded the train, he did not feel any danger.
- 197** A devastating event for his family came when a number of Jews became German collaborators. One of them fell in love with his 22-year old sister, and by blackmailing the family, married her despite their objections. The collaborator expected to avoid deportation with his bride. However, when she tried to board the train with her family, he took her back out. When she tried to commit suicide by cutting her wrists, the collaborator boarded the train with her, expecting that the two of them would be saved through his collaborations with the Germans.
- 243** The journey to Birkenau lasted seven days. The train conditions were horrible. There were no toilets; people had to use barrels. His family was taken to an SS wagon. His father, who had hidden money in the lining of his coat and other places, was searched, and the money was taken.
- 306** Only when they arrived in Birkenau did Joseph feel the danger they were in. As soon as they arrived, they were ordered to form two lines. Mengele and German officers made the decisions. Joseph's 52-year old father was sent to the line of the young and strong. Joseph ran to join him, and they let him stay. His mother and other people were sent immediately to the crematoria. His sister was sent to work and her husband, the collaborator, was killed. Joseph never saw his mother or sister again, and his father lived only for six months.

- 377** Joseph became a member of the orchestra at the camp, thanks to Michael Assael, Joseph's accordion teacher, who conducted the auditions. Joseph never played the accordion, but he was given the job of polishing the brass instruments, carrying the chairs (stools) and musician stands, and occasionally playing the cymbals. He was known as the "small Greek." Orchestra director Copka, a political prisoner from Silesia, beat Joseph. The orchestra played marches to and from work. Marching made it easier for the Germans to count the prisoners. The rest of the time, the orchestra members were given light work. Joseph did not go with them. Mainly, he did the cleaning and washing for Copka, who had tuberculosis. Various members of the orchestra helped Joseph by giving him extra food. He mentions Lucille Weinthop, whom he loved very much.

Tape 1, Side B

- 00** Joseph also mentions Monsieur Lux (ph) and Levine also helped him. Levine, a German Jew, was an excellent musician, who also repaired the German's watches. He was known as "the mechanic." The orchestra was ordered to play for Polish Christian prisoners, who received packages from home, and would give food to Jewish prisoners. Michael Assael shared this extra food with Joseph. Musicians were sometimes ordered by the Germans to play jazz or other music. Sometimes, the SS would make them play while the SS were beating other prisoners to death. Joseph describes how shocked the prisoners were at first, then how accustomed to the violence they became. After a year, in 1944, the Germans insisted that Joseph leave the orchestra. Through the intervention of Monsieur Lux, who became the head of the orchestra, Joseph was introduced to a capo who assigned him easy work in the *Weberei* ("weaving") commando, and he was able to get extra food. Joseph was moved to the women's block.
- 070** Joseph recalls a special performance during Christmas for German officials. From what he read after the war, he thinks that Himmler was among the officials. There were numerous rehearsals, and new striped uniforms were issued for the special performance.
- 109** Joseph was included in many selections. The first was in the summer of 1943. After the *appell*, prisoners were told to undress, spread out, and stand at attention while German officers inspected them, and selected people for the gas chambers. Selections occurred every ten to 15 days. Once, an entire block was killed. However, orchestra members were exempt. In a selection before Yom Kippur, 70% of the camp's Jews were killed. Despite being very thin and weak, Joseph passed the selection. Those selected were taken, naked, to an empty block, where they waited for two days, and were killed the night of Yom Kippur. Two prisoners from Thessaloniki, Alberto Yom Tov (ph) and Daviko Bardo (ph), were saved from the selection by a capo.
- 200** After Joseph was removed from the orchestra, he was assigned to *Weberei* in the women's work area across from the crematorium. He witnessed the bombing of the crematorium by Greek Sonderkommandos from Thessaloniki. Things were worse there, but Joseph learned survival tricks: how to steal and avoid beatings. Though he was younger than the friends he made among new arrivals, Joseph helped them to survive.

- 240** Joseph describes his arrival in Birkenau. He was attached to his father, and they were approached by the “*chef de block*” #19, Israel, a Jew from Poland. He told Joseph’s father, “You are not going to live, but I guarantee your son’s life as long as I live.” Joseph and his father were separated. Joseph’s number was 124423. Of the 1000 people in Joseph’s transport, only ten survive; nine men and one woman.
- 281** These are the names of the camps where Joseph was imprisoned, in order of imprisonment: Henkel, Sachsenhausen, Ohrdruf, Sachsenhausen (again), Neubrandenburg, Ravensbruck, Ludwigslust.
- 289** Joseph was transferred to those camps after he was taken from Birkenau in October 1944. He went from camp to camp by freight train, with 120 people to a car. Several prisoners died during these transports.
- 291** He was liberated on May 2nd, 1945. The day of this interview was the anniversary of his liberation. From June 1943 to October 1944, he was in Birkenau. From October 1944 to May 1945, he moved from camp to camp. Some of the camps were transfer camps.
- 317** Joseph worked in the Neubrandenburg camp, where he did factory work with other young people 15-17 years of age. The living conditions were not bad, but they suffered from lack of food.
- 330** The conditions in some of the other camps were appalling. Large numbers of prisoners died from malnutrition and disease. The worst was Ohrdruf camp, with 4,000 Jewish prisoners. Every week, 1,000-1,500 additional prisoners were brought from Buchenwald. Approximately 40% of the prisoners died each week from exposure, malnutrition, and typhus. Joseph had a contagious skin condition. He was transferred to another camp in January in a train without windows but many holes. The cold was unbelievable. His condition disappeared, fortunately, because prisoners who had it were executed.
- 371** Joseph says orchestra members felt jealousy and antagonism. He comments on some lasting effects his incarceration, like not being able to tolerate the smell of burned meat.
- 390** Orchestra members unloaded and kept the food from wagons that had carried Hungarian Jews to the camp. Joseph says his feelings of guilt are becoming stronger as he grows older. He has nightmares in which he relives his experiences in the concentration camps.
- 436** He describes events connected with his liberation in April 1945. In Ravensbruck, boys aged 15 to 17 were ordered to turn in their eating utensils and extra coats. The prisoners thought that was in preparation for execution. A German officer told them, “I heard that you think that we will take you to the crematorium. I hope we will not commit this crime at the end of the war. God bless you.” They were taken to another camp, where again they expected to be executed. Instead, food packages were distributed, and they were told that they were under the care of the Red Cross, and would be taken to Sweden. They were loaded into large trucks, and taken to the Ludwigslust concentration camp, where they were surrounded by Germans and their dogs.

- 572** They stayed at the camp for ten days until May 1st, when they were transported by train to another camp.

Tape 2, Side A

- 00** After spending the night on the train, in the morning they were ordered off it by the Germans, and were taken to another camp. A square was covered with dead bodies, people who had not been able to board the trains the night before. In addition to the Jews, starving Russian prisoners of war had attacked the Jews for food. Joseph had heard there were some cases of cannibalism. All prisoners were ordered to walk, but they refused. The German soldiers abandoned the camp. At the moment of liberation, Joseph ran to the block and announced in Ladino that the Germans had left. A Hungarian Jew recited a Hebrew prayer, and an old man smiled as he collapsed and died. Joseph, with three other Greeks, walked away from the camp until he saw American soldiers approaching. The prisoners embraced the Americans, who gave them food. Joseph joined the Russian liberators, and wandered through Europe for a few months. He returned to Thessaloniki in December 1945.
- 088** [The story of the interpreter, a survivor and wife of Joseph Gatenio, name unknown] Mrs. Gatenio was born on April 1, 1944. Her father was 24 years old and her mother was 21 at the time. Her father was deported and killed. The Red Cross had intervened with the Germans to allow her mother to give birth to her. After she was born, her mother asked a nurse to save her daughter; all of their family was gone already. The nurse agreed, and the baby girl was reared by the nurse's Christian family in Thessaloniki. The mother stayed in the hospital where she hid until she was betrayed by a Nazi collaborator and executed in Thessaloniki in October 1944. The Christian family never baptized the girl, and did not tell her of the circumstances of her birth and Jewish family until she was 12 years old. She says it was a difficult psychological battle for her.
- 140** Joseph says he is an optimist; he survived because he wanted badly to live, but he says that it is different for everyone. He shares numerous instances of cruelty by the SS and capos. Afterward, he went to their trials to show them he was alive. One capo beat 2,000 men to death with a shovel.
- 300** In his last days in the camp before his death, Joseph's father was getting weak, had swollen legs and a bleeding lesion on his face. He lived in block #12 where the invalids were housed. Joseph brought him extra food every day, but his condition deteriorated to the point where he was selected for the crematorium. On the way to the gas chambers, through the intervention of a gypsy musician and Levine, Joseph's father was taken out of the line and sent by a capo to the hospital where he died a few days later.