

Summary of phone interview with: Michael Wertman

Date: March 5, 2002

Family/Childhood

Michael Wertman was born Abraham Wertman on August 30, 1928, in Lvov, Poland. He was the only child of Henry and Sara Lea (née Truk) Wertman. At the time of their marriage, Henry was a widower with two sons from his first marriage. Henry was in the wholesale dairy business; he received the raw product by train and had a dairy where he made cheeses and other dairy products.

Although Henry attended Jewish services and was quite knowledgeable about the Talmud and Jewish studies, he was not strictly observant. Michael describes his father as liberal and says his mother was even more liberal. At times Sara Wertman was too liberal for her husband, who accused her of being a socialist. Michael went to the Polish public school. This continued even after the Russians entered Poland, but Ukrainian language studies were added to his school's curriculum. Michael's education stopped at around the sixth grade, after the Germans occupied the rest of Poland.

Michael's parents divorced around 1937. His mother remained in Lvov but could not afford to take care of him, so Michael continued to live with his father. Michael's father remarried sometime before the war broke out.

Forced into the Lvov ghetto

In late 1941, Michael, his father and his stepmother were forced into the Lvov ghetto along with other Jews. (*N.B. Toward the end of the interview, Michael mentioned a stepsister, Helen, born to his father and stepmother in 1941. I did not ask whether she was born before or after they entered the ghetto.*) His oldest stepbrother had been taken by the retreating Russians and would never be seen again. His second stepbrother, Moishe (now George), had been sent to the labor camp of Winniki, outside of Lvov.

In the ghetto Michael and his parents shared a large house with several other families. At first Lvov was an open ghetto. Michael's father was very entrepreneurial and was able to do some trading in jewelry and other goods on the black market in and out of the ghetto. Henry Wertman had even managed to get a work permit from the black market. So while their living conditions had changed for the worse, the family was not starving. Michael was allowed to bring food prepared by his stepmother to his stepbrother George in Winniki. He recalls entering the labor camp and seeing the men working in the stone quarry.

According to Michael, the Ukrainians were very active in policing the Lvov ghetto and were responsible for several pogroms against the Jews. He says that Ukrainians were strongly nationalistic, with a leader who was also anti-Jewish. Michael recalls seeing random shootings and public hangings.

False papers

In his many business dealings, Michael's father Henry had contact with a Polish businessman name Jan Zaremba, from Warsaw. Henry decided that Michael might have a chance to survive if he could get a false Christian identity. This is because Michael was blond and blue-eyed, and he spoke Polish without a Yiddish accent. Somehow, Henry managed to get Michael a false birth, or baptismal, certificate. (It was written in Latin.) The name on it was Mieczyslaw Wereszczyszyn (pron: MYEH-chy-swav Veresh-CHY-shin). This was in spring of 1942, when Lvov was still an

open ghetto. Henry gave Michael the false papers, some money, a gold coin, and the address of Mr. Zaremba in Warsaw.

Flight to Warsaw

Michael, about 14 years old at the time, traveled to Warsaw by train. Near Lublin, Germans stopped the train and ordered everyone off. As they sorted the passengers, Michael was included with the Polish men to be sent to forced labor. They were kept in a staging area overnight and in the morning sent to showers to be de-loused. Because he was circumcised, Michael was frightened that he would be discovered as a Jew. The men seemed to take pity on the young boy and when the German guards had their backs turned, the Poles told Michael to "Run!, Run!" And he did.

Michael was able to catch the next train headed to Warsaw. He recalls a woman on the train watching him suspiciously. Suddenly she said, "Cross yourself!" Fortunately for him, he knew how to make the sign of the cross.

Arriving in Warsaw, Michael recalls seeing placards warning that anyone hiding a Jew would be punished by death. He found his way to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Zaremba. Mrs. Zaremba's classification as a "Volksdeutsche" made their life a little easier and was useful in Mr. Zaremba's business dealings with the Germans.

Michael thought he would be staying with the Zarembas. However, Jan Zaremba secured him an apprenticeship in a leather goods factory, where Michael and the other young apprentices both worked and lived. The factory was owned by a man named Konarski, who often went on a drinking binge lasting several days. (M.W: "But that's another story.") Mr. Konarski's common-law wife, Lucyna Skórko, often ran the factory. They did not know Michael's true identity.

Factory hours were long and the journeymen demanding. The woman in charge of the young apprentices (Lucyna Skórko?) would shoo the boys off to confession and Sunday Mass. Michael read the Catholic catechism. He and one of the other boys would pretend to go to confession, slipping into confessionals that they knew had no priests in them.

During this whole time, Michael had no contact whatsoever with any of his family. His birth mother, Sara, had left Lvov just before the Germans entered. Apparently, she returned to her birthplace, Tarnogród.

Michael lived in constant fear of being discovered because of his circumcision. He would see round-ups on the streets of Warsaw in which men and boys were ordered to drop their pants. On the streets there were posters with instructions on how to identify a Jew. The posters carried photos of various physical features supposedly distinguishing Jews from aryan. In 1943, at the time of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Michael heard the explosions and saw the smoke.

Michael befriended a family named Bozyn, who lived just outside the city of Warsaw and who were friends of the factory owner, Konarski. He developed a crush on Danka Bozyn, who was two years older than he. Michael often visited Danka on his day off. One day in 1944, while Michael was visiting Danka and her family, the Polish uprising began and he could not get back into Warsaw. He stayed with the Bozyn family as they fled from village to village with the other refugees, all looking for food and a safe place to stay. Michael recalls seeing the Allied airdrops – "hundreds of parachutes falling, carrying food and goods for the fighters" – and missing their mark. He remained with the Bozyn family until liberated.

Post-war

After liberation, Michael would not return to Lvov because it had been annexed by the Soviets. Instead, he went to Lublin, where he had an uncle and where a registry for refugees had been established. In Lublin he found his father, stepmother, and their little girl Helen. (M.W: "How my father managed to survive is another story.") He also was reunited with his stepbrother George. Almost all of his father's family had perished. Michael says that all his childhood classmates and campmates also died. He figured that his birth mother, Sara, did not survive. There was no listing of any survivors from her town of Tarnogród. Michael subsequently learned from a cousin that his mother was killed in a mass shooting. She was about 38 years old when she died.

In an effort to get re-established, Michael and his brother George wound up in western Poland, in Legnica (Liegnitz), near Wrocław (Breslau). Here they tried to open a store; but times were chaotic and latent anti-Jewish feelings remained. The brothers felt there was no future for them in Poland; so they left for Germany, with hopes of going to the United States or Canada. Munich had the largest displaced persons camp for those hoping to emigrate.

In Munich, Michael got a job with the International Refugee Organization, where he was put in charge of hardship cases (e.g. expectant mothers) of those trying to emigrate. He had his own apartment. His father, step-mother and their daughter Helen also went to Munich.

Emigration to Canada and the U.S.

In 1949, Michael's father Henry got a sponsorship enabling him to go to Vancouver. Michael followed him in 1950. Michael met his future wife, Ethel, a Canadian, who was in nurse training at a big hospital.

Having been forced to leave school in the sixth grade, Michael now took college preparatory courses (from an institution named Sure Pass?). He graduated from the University of Saskatchewan and was awarded the Governor-General's Medal for high scholarship honors. This was followed by a fellowship to Yale, where he earned his Master's degree. He wanted to live in the United States, where some of his mother's family had moved before the war. In 1955 he and Ethel moved to New York. The couple has two daughters, both of whom are urging him to write his memoirs.

Photos/Objects

Michael has childhood photos, which he will bring to the interview. Right after the war, he discarded his false papers because he was afraid that having two identities would work against him as he was trying to emigrate to North America.