

Morris Sternberger

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Abstract

Morris Sternberger was born July 15, 1928 in Kostroma (?), a small village in the Carpathian Mountains, Czechoslovakia, which became part of Hungary during World War II until 1944 when it belonged to the Soviet Union and now it is part of Ukraine. His father was a custom tailor and owned a lot of land and a big house but they had no electricity and used an outhouse. They had workers to farm the land and kept the produce for themselves except sold the fruit. They made their own honey, cheese, butter, gefilte fish and wine. Morris had two older brothers and a younger sister. He attended both public school and Cheder. The village did not have a doctor, a newspaper nor did anyone own a car. In spring '44 all the Jews of the village were deported to Warsaw and then by freight train to Auschwitz. When Morris realized that he was selected to be gassed, he ran to the side with his family. About two weeks later, he was taken to Ober Schlazer (?) with his father and brothers where they built railroad tracks. A second time he was saved when they called the names of the children to be removed and his taller brother answered for him. In February or March, they were placed in open freight cars to Efense (?), Austria and then hiked to the camp. Morris' toes froze and he removed two. Soon the Americans liberated them but his father and brothers died and he was placed in a hospital until September '46. Then he was placed in a hotel and another young man wrote a letter to his relatives in the US for him. He found out his sister and other relatives were in the US and tried to get a visa. He had TB so bribed a friend to take the x-ray for him and soon President Truman permitted immigrants under 18 to enter the US without a visa so he claimed to be 17. He worked for a short time in NY and went to Denver to recuperate from TB. Later he succeeded in the fabric business, got married and had children.

Summary

00:00 Morris Sternberger was born July 15, 1928 (today is his birthday) in Kostroma (?), a small village in the Carpathian Mountains, which belonged to Czechoslovakia. When his parents were born, the village belonged to Austro-Hungary. After World War I the village went to Czechoslovakia, during World War II, the Hungarians took over and in 1944 it belonged to the Soviet Union and now it is part of Ukraine. His parents spoke Yiddish and Hungarian. When Czechoslovakia took over, Morris went to Czech School and learned Czech and the Russian alphabet. They are both in Cyrillic. Everyone was Ukrainian except for the Jews. They were close to the Ukrainian border. No Poles lived there though it was just 25 miles from Poland. There were about 12 Jewish families. They had no electricity. The outhouse was about 40 or 50 feet from the house. They had a big house. His father was a custom tailor and owned a lot of land. All the Jews in the

Saxon area around them owned land and had people farm it for them. Morris' family paid the workers well so they wanted to work for them. His mother served them a good meal when they arrived and at 10 or 11 he would bring a pitcher of milk to the workers.

05:00 The workers only came in the spring and at harvest time. They grew apples which were harvested in the fall. His father's father had planted lots of apple trees so in the fall they would fill up a freight car. They grew Yonatan apples. Morris was surprised to see them in the US. They kept some apples for themselves and wrapped them in newspaper and placed them in big boxes. He does not know why they were wrapped in that fashion. They made a large hole in the ground to have carrots and beets for Pesach. They had fresh vegetables in the spring. They also grew potatoes. They had areas to plant that were 50 feet wide by 100 feet long. They had cows so made butter and cheese. They ate fish which they caught themselves. His brothers caught them, cleaned them, dried the small ones and made gefilte fish and herring. They were very independent for food. They had chickens and an ox. They only sold fruit. They made black wine from plums and honey as they had 10 or 20 boxes of bees. Morris would run to see where the bees settled. They would put on a net to put them in boxes which gave them enough honey for a year.

10:00 His mother prepared the food. She was very intelligent. His mother, Julie, was interested in books. She was from a village that was 10 miles away. Her father baked bread. They visited him at Pesach. There were four children in Morris' family. Two would visit the grandfather one holiday and two the next as it was too much for them to care for four children at one time. Ludvik or Levy was the oldest brother, then came Alex Schlomer (?), Morris was next and his sister Laura was two years younger than him (but taller than him). Everyone in the family was tall except for him. His father's family came from Poland. His father's brother was sent to a Yeshiva in Poland. His parents did not speak much of their childhood. The family was religious but not strict. Morris is strictly kosher and goes to shul but his family was more religious. The village had a nice synagogue and mikveh. He does not know who built it.

15:00 On Fridays they took a hot bath. Morris attended Cheder early in the morning and at eight AM went to public school. He returned home and went to Cheder until 6 or 7 PM. At Cheder they studied Torah, Chumash, Gomorrah and German but not Hebrew. The King was good to the Jews so they studied German in the old-fashioned script. Their teacher would stay with each family about 2 or 3 weeks for the season and then he went home. Cheder was in a separate room in the shul. The public school had Ukrainian children, Jewish children and Czech or Hungarian children of the policemen depending on which country they belonged to. The school teachers spoke Hungarian as they were from Ushgar (?). There were about 400 to 500 people in the village and everyone knew one another. He played soccer with Ukrainian children but sometimes they threw stones at

him. He was closer to the Jewish children. Occasionally the Ukrainian children would call them names, especially at Christmas.

- 20:00 The Ukrainians were Russian Orthodox. Everyone, including the peasants and gentiles, were farmers. The Jews had stores. His father had a tailor shop. There was a shoemaker. Everyone had land which was unusual for Jews who mostly lived in cities. About 60% of the Jews were related to one another. The Lefkowitz family came from Poland and had 12 children. They lived in a chicken coop at first. No one could own the forest but they could cut down trees. They had a contract to cut them down and bring them to the train station and became well-off. One family had a grocery store. Each family celebrated the holidays alone except for Purim when they held a children's play at his uncle's barn. One he rolled up his pants and played a girl and they rolled down. He was a happy child and went fishing in the summer and skiing in the winter.
- 25:00 It was about 10 or 20 steps from his house to walk up a hill and ski down to the house. It was beautiful country. His cousin, Abraham Adolf, who was a college graduate, had a radio. Morris' father did not attend college. They mostly spoke Yiddish and some Hungarian, especially to cousins who spoke Hungarian. He never saw a newspaper until he came to New York City. He got information when his mother visited a big city. Two cousins (one was his uncle's son) had a radio but no one in the town owned a car. If a car came, everyone ran behind it as it was a big event. The road was dry and dusty. There was a butcher store who sold meat to the Army. The butcher's son had a motorcycle and it would be a big event if he gave Morris a ride. Morris liked history and was somewhat interested in school. The outside world seemed thousands of miles away. The people were self-sufficient. He never went to a doctor until after the War. He was sick as a baby and since there was no doctor, the Rabbi gave him another name, "Moshe." He visited his grandfather in Stavnee, closer to the border.
- 30:00 His uncle, who lived there, owned a sawmill and would fill a freight car full of lumber and get paid. Morris visited Berezina, a nice little town. The train passed near his house which was close to the station. The house was built by the Markowitz family from the US who realized it was not their lifestyle as there was no electricity and an outhouse. They moved to the big city. It was all on one floor with many big rooms. One room looked like a bar. Morris' family was related to the Markowitz' family. They had a Sukkah attached to the house to celebrate Succoth. There were three sides of grass and a thatched roof open to the sky. It was made of metal and wood. Their dog was kept outside except for winter when he came inside to warm himself against the stove. Morris was five years old when Hitler came. His parents would whisper to each other as they did not want the children to get upset. He knew that Hitler did not like the Jews. His parents liked Franz-Josef.

- 35:00 The Czechs were nice. Trucks and soldiers on horseback were going to the Polish border so it was the beginning of the War. Life changed after Passover in 1944. A drummer announced that all the Jews must go to the synagogue. His parents did not tell the children anything during the War. They might not have known that Jews were being killed. People who returned from large towns might have known. After they got together in shul, they went home and packed up and the next day they went to the station. They were taken to a brick factory in Warsaw where they stayed for two to four weeks. Everyone was sad and then they were taken to a freight train to Auschwitz. When his father saw the chimney with smoke, he told the children that things won't be too bad as there were factories where they would work.
- 40:00 When the War was over, they would all go home. They were taken to a yard where there was a large building. The men were separated from the women. They all had to undress outside and keep their shoes. Then they entered the building where there was a Nazi officer with a cane and a little ax which he pointed to the direction they should go. His older brother was 20, his middle brother was 18 and his younger sister who was a head taller were all told to go to the right. He had to go to the left with the old people and children where there was a guard walking up and down. The guard wanted to get the burgundy shoes from an old man who said, "Brachen" (I need them). The guard responded that where he was going, he would not need them. This made Morris realize that things were not good in his line. When he saw the guard pass by him and his family starting to leave, he ran and caught up with them. He was barefoot with no shoes.
- 45:00 They remained in Auschwitz for ten days or two weeks and then taken to another camp, Ober Schlazer (?). They did not work and got fed once or twice a day. Since then, when he goes to a shoe store, he looks for a burgundy shoe but has never seen one again. At Schlazer, there was a big mountain and were building a city inside it with floors where you could get lost. There were three or four floors and different sections. Morris, his father and two brothers worked outside building a railroad station for smaller cars that could get up the mountain. They made railroad tracks. They wore a striped prisoner's uniform which they were given earlier in the large building in Auschwitz. They worked about two months and one morning they called the names alphabetically. Morris is "S" at the end. His father noticed that the taller people returned to the mountain and the short people stepped out. Of the brothers, only his name was called as he was the youngest.
- 50:00 Possibly, the building company complained that there were too many children as they were only calling children's names. His father saw the taller went back in line and the shorter ones stayed. Morris' older brother responded for him and since he was taller, he went back in line. They were happy that the Russians were coming. One morning they heard artillery and his father thought it was about 30 or 40 miles away. The next morning they marched all day in the cold and some prisoners fell out. At night they were put in a barn and they were given soup in the morning. There was a lot of pushing and a Nazi hit

Morris with his cane and he saw stars but wanted the soup. Later Morris felt something warm on the back of his neck as he was hit on top of his head. He still has the scar. They walked to a freight car. It was February or March. They were placed in open freight cars and it was very cold. His father saw the Czech Tetra Mountains with people on the top. He told them to holler for bread and Morris grabbed one but everyone jumped on him and he just got crumbs. His father told him, "Do not fall asleep or you will freeze. When they reached Efense (?), Austria, they got off the train and walked.

55:00 His feet burned like fire on the snow as they were frozen. He was in terrible pain. When he got to the camp, Morris did not have toes on one foot as he ripped them off because they were hanging. The other foot was not so bad. His foot was blue from the ankle and pus was leaking. The Americans came and liberated him. The Germans were saving their own lives as they did not want to go to the front. That is when his father and two brothers died and he was sick. They were placed in barracks. His father died immediately and his brothers died later. The Americans put him on a stretcher and bandaged him. He was placed in a hospital with German soldiers for a day or two. The German nurses ignored him.

60:00 A school in Austria was made into a hospital. The American doctor told him that he would cut his foot off the next day. All the doctors came to see the dozen beds and saw him crying. The doctors decided not to operate though it would take a long time to heal. He remained in the hospital until September '46. The hospital was in the town of Goisen and was for people from concentration camps. The foot was blue and had pus. There were no x-rays. He walked on his heels. He had a little feeling in his foot. He got pleurisy and they gave him a long needle which was painful. He had seen his mother and sister in Auschwitz. In 1946, a Jewish organization, Bad Gaston, took over some hotels in Austria.

65:00 He was placed in the Hotel Solcen with guys in the late 20s and 30s. They talked about America and he said that he had relatives in America. One young man requested all his information so he could send a letter for hm. A month later he received a response that his sister arrived in the US. After the War, she was taken to a children's home in Sweden. His uncle received a visit from a man from Yonkers. When they got off the train, his mother was separated from the others. Morris did not talk much to his sister about his experiences as it makes them cry. She was 14 in the camp. Morris had TB and had to take an x-ray so he would not be allowed to go to the US.

70:00 He offered all his belongings except for \$5 if another man would take the x-ray for him. President Truman announced that 118,000 immigrants under 18 could enter the US without a visa. Morris got papers indicating he was only 17 so was permitted to go to the US. He boarded the ship with his \$5 and saw a man with oranges which he had never seen. He told the man he would give him \$5 for three. Later he found out that 10

oranges cost \$1. He enjoyed the oranges. He was sent to Munich and then to Hamburg to board a troop ship. They slept on double deck bunks. His sister had sent her photo and he was excited to see her. He bought a suit and she recognized the suit but not him as he was taller. He grew after the War at ages 17 and 18. First he went to a house in the Bronx where they investigated his aunt's home and he was permitted to go after a week or two. His mother's brothers and sister from Kostroma were in the US.

75:00 His eldest uncle was drafted after the War into the Czech Army and died. When the uncle was 18, he went to the US. Morris was sick when he reached the US and spent a year in '48 or '49 in the National Jewish Hospital in Denver. There was no medicine for TB at the time so he just rested in bed. He returned to NY and his uncle had a job for him and two other guys from the concentration camp. They wanted to open a lady's belt factory in NY. Morris had completed 8th grade at age 14 and attended night school to learn to write and speak English. His uncle took him to a lady's factory where he was given a sewing machine but he found it terrible work so quit after a week. His uncle thought he was lazy and did not want to work. A Jewish organization sent him to Denver. They paid his airfare and hospital care. The hospital was for the poor and had a saying, "None may pay who enter and none who can pay can enter."

80:00 The Tiergist Restaurant on Queens Boulevard gave him a job along with a bag of sandwiches. It was a big company with 100 employees. He spent a lot of time at the restaurant at night. He did not want the sewing machine but took orders for amount of material and replaced the person in charge who left. He was paid \$150 a week. Morris lived at his aunt's. His mother had four brothers in the US and the aunt was boss. If she had \$20, she would give it to him. She lived in Brighton Beach. Morris met his sister in Coney Island. His sister bought a two-family house along with the brother-in-law's cousin who was her good friend. At Christmas time, Morris got orders and a big present, bottles of wine so a cousin said, "Let's make a party." Esther was married with two children. He needed \$3,000 for business and only had \$2700 and Esther gave him a box with a check inside for \$230. When Esther got upset, she requested \$250 and double interest.

85:00 With his partner, Morris sold fabrics to chain stores including Neisner's which had 200 stores. They made \$200,000 to \$300,000 a year. Someone with a million dollar business on Broadway came to him and his partner and together they opened up "Fabric and Finding" in Rochester, NY with 90 employees. Morris never returned to Europe but went with his wife a few times to Israel. He never thought of returning to Europe. He did not tell his story to his children as it makes him cry. Now, he is making this interview so they can see it when they want to. This is his first interview. His son-in-law typed up a few things. His grandchildren did not ask him about his Wartime experiences. He locked it up. Morris lived in the same barracks with his father and brothers. People would say, "There goes Sternbergerson and his three son." It was unreal to see a father

and three sons in a concentration camp. His grandchildren are good kids. They go to Hillel. He will show his frozen toes on his left foot.

90:00 (Morris removes his shoe from his left foot and shows the little and big toes are missing.)
He explains that he was hungry and did not feel the toes, so snipped them off. His foot was frozen up to the ankle and pus was coming out of the ankle of the right foot so they thought of amputation but did not perform it.

91:00