

David Wolnerman

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Abstract

David Wolnerman was born May 9, 1927 in Manchiavow (?), Poland, a small town with just one main street, to a family with an older brother, Abraham, and two older sisters, Gertrude and Bluma. The family was poor as lived on his father's earnings from selling flour bags. They lived in his grandfather's apartment house with other relatives. They had no electricity and bought water at two cents a bucket. His older sister and brother worked in a print shop. Gentiles worked in the town's coal mine. His father had asthma and since there was no medication, he died at age 47 in '39, six months before the Germans took over. The war started up September 1, 1939 and the family went to a nearby town and soon returned. First Bluma and Abraham went to a work camp and soon David followed. David was unskilled so he was always assigned manual labor. He tells of the many camps that he was in and the many things he saw including prisoners being hung, one prisoner killing another for taking his own son's bread, prisoners drinking their own urine and a Russian cutting off flesh from a body to eat later. After six months, David went to a second camp that was also in Obershlazen. His mother was too old to work as was 47 or 48 so she went into the crematorium. David was 13 and said he was 18 to Mengele so he survived. In Auschwitz sometimes he worked in the ovens. Then he was at a camp near Breslau for a year before going to Oberammergau and from there to Theresienstadt. He got Typhus from lice when he was cleaning up Warsaw and after he recovered, he returned to Auschwitz. He did not know that his sister was in Auschwitz the same time as he was. Dachau was his last camp and General Eisenhower liberated him. His brother died in a camp and his older sister, Gertrude, died two weeks before liberation. David tells how after liberation he got sick from eating American Army food and nuns nursed him back to health. He shows his chai necklace that a Jewish Army Captain gave him 70 years ago. For four years he lived in an apartment in Germany and met his future wife, Jennie, in a DP camp. A year after liberation he found Bluma in a DP camp. David married Jennie in 1949 and had to wait five years to come to the US because he could not find any relatives to sponsor him. He learned the printing trade at a friend's company in Cleveland. He and his wife had two children and she died a few months ago. David has spoken to school children and sold several hundred of his books at \$16 a book in Texas.

Summary

00:00 David Wolnerman was born May 9, 1927 in Munjayoff (?), Poland near the German border with the same name. He had an older brother, Abraham, born around 1918 and

two sisters, Gertrude and Bluma and David was the youngest. His father's name was Pinchas and his mother, Chana. Munjayoff was a small town near Sosnowiec (?) and Bengen (?). It just had two streets, one doctor, one policeman and one car. It had one main street and he knew almost everyone. There were about 1,000 Jews and 1,000 Christians. There were a few small Steibel Synagogues. His family was religious as they did not work on Saturday. All the Jewish stores were closed on Saturday and they went to synagogue. His father died in '39, six months before the Germans took over.

05:00 The family was poor. His father barely made a living. He bought bags from flour and sold them, was a peddler. He walked out-of-town. He went to bakeries and stores to buy the bags. He came from a large family. David had one set of grandparents, his mother's parents. His father came from Krakow. David does not know if he served in World War I. Their town was always changing from German to Polish to Russian. His mother spoke fluent German and Yiddish and a little Russian. Their town was not part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Finally, the town was Polish. His mother had two brothers and one sister and they lived in the same house with the grandfather. The grandfather was the Mayor though he could not read or write. He collected taxes and was a drinker. David's uncle, his mother's brother, also lived in their house.

10:00 The grandfather was not well-off but made a living. He had a good name, Abraham Nyer. He had a milk cow and made butter. David helped churn the butter. There were two rooms in his house: a bedroom and a kitchen/living room for the six people. It was the grandfather's building and he gave it to them. They lived in town. They had no animals. His mother kept the house clean. They had no electricity and used a wood and coal oven to cook. Six months before the war, they got electricity – one light bulb. They used it instead of kerosene which you filled up the container and lit it with a candle. There was no fireplace and no plumbing. They bought water at two cents a bucket. That was too heavy for him so he bought a half bucket for one cent. About three gallons make a half bucket. They did not take showers, but took baths. The men went to the city on Friday to take a bath.

15:00 There were six rooms in the building for three families and the uncle lived in the attic which had a low ceiling. They lived on the first floor. His house was old and made of stone. It was next to other houses. It was built in the 19th century or earlier. They would put sand near the windows in the winter so the cold air does not come in. They had a round coal stove for the winter in the middle of the living room. His mother cooked on a coal stove. They could not bake in their kitchen so went to the bakery on Fridays to buy challah. Sometimes they baked a cake. He liked his mother's food. She cooked for six people about one and one-half pounds of beef so he was lucky if he got a bone with meat. David got plenty of bread with sugar on the top. He seldom got butter as his grandparents sold it. They would buy one or two eggs at a time from the store. They had a few little stores. On Thursday or Friday he went with his mother to the stores.

- 20:00 His older sister worked in a printing shop where the brother was a Foreman and made 25 zlotys a week. All the siblings were close. They did not sit at the table until the parents did. His father was very Yiddish and needed the daily paper. He read the Forwards which you can get in the US in English or Yiddish. His father could read Yiddish as he went to school. His parents were very dear and old-fashioned and David is the same with his children. His wife is the same. She was five years in a concentration camp, also from Poland but he did not let her write her story as she was too sick. His parents brought up the children to be respectful and presentable. In Poland, everyone knew each other so your family name was important. He was 13 when he went to the concentration camp alone so he could be saved. They had wooden floors which they had to keep clean as it was a small house. The mother's brother and his children lived in the same house.
- 25:00 They had one school for both Christian, Catholic and Jewish. There was one hour a week of Hebrew, one hour of Catholicism and one hour of Protestantism. David was permitted to leave or stay for the other religions. He was 11 and 12 does not remember. He never went into church until after the war. Before the war, there was strong anti-Semitism. Boys and girls were together in the same class. He had Gentile friends in school and acted like a fighter but never had a fight. When Hitler took over, things changed. They liked some Jews but not all. His grandfather collected 50 cents for taxes so was not popular. It was a coal mining town where the mine was owned by the French government. Jews did not work there as they would be ashamed. If they were hungry, the Jews would not beg as the parents had too much pride. It was mostly Gentiles who worked the coal mine. His older sister was tough and got a job for him as an engineer to sweep the streets instead working in the mine as the rest of the Jews did during the war.
- 30:00 Few Jews had a farm. There was one radio in town which the whole town listened to the soccer games through an opened window. Few residents were rich with silver or gold to borrow from the one wealthy person. There was no bank in the town. The only bank they had was for water. There was one doctor who owned the one car and one policeman. He was a good doctor. If you had a headache or a cold, he put cups on your back as there was no medication. His father had asthma and since there was no medication, he died at 47. He was in the hospital for six months before he died. Every day, David walked the four miles to the hospital in Sosnowiec with a jar of soup his mother made for his father. His father smoked the cheapest cigarettes so he got asthma. His father was alone when he died. They had to bring him home the same day and placed him in the living room to be washed so they could have his funeral that day.
- 35:00 There were special people who did the washing for no charge. They wrapped his father in linen and placed him in a coffin with no nails. Then he was buried. They received a phone message from the Post Office that he died and was brought home by horse and buggy. He spoke to his father about his swollen feet. The swelling had gone to his heart. There were no private rooms in the hospital. It was a stone building with one or two

floors and no elevator. David would visit his father daily after school. The older children were working so were the bread-winners. They did not have a horse and wagon so his father sold his bags by foot. David never tasted a hot dog or a banana until he came to the US. He did not know how to eat a banana so ate it with the skin.

40:00 Recently, his eye doctor told David that he cannot take a shower for two or three days after his cataract surgery. He said that there was a time he did not shower for five years. There was a bathhouse for men which had a sauna with steps and you hit yourself with a branch and then took a shower. He saw it as the children were permitted in free. David says he tells the truth but others may exaggerate. He feels that lying is like stealing and this is what he taught his children. David did not finish 3rd grade but is good with a pencil. He does not have a computer. His two boys would give him one. You can't find a boy better than Michael. He is special from his mother. David lost his wife a few months ago. He is from Gary, Indiana. His wife helped the Mayor get elected and the Mayor never forgot it and inquired whether she needed help. She baked sponge cake for everyone. They were married in 1949; married for 67 years. She was an old-fashioned mother.

45:00 Poland was anti-Semitic before the war. There were no Black people so it was bad as Jews were the only minority. David was too young so did not experience the anti-Semitism. He did not have real close Gentile friends as they were only friendly in school. The teachers were not Jewish but were nice. A couple hundred people came to his father's funeral as his father was very likeable. He was religious but did not wear payas (sideburns) as was modern. David has a grandson who is a Rabbi in Canada. David knew about Hitler but not about Auschwitz though it was five miles from his home. The town Jews were too poor to go to America or Palestine. They had no family in America so it took five years to come here. His older sister, Gertrude, died two weeks before liberation. She educated herself and was good-looking. She dressed up nice as their mother said it was more important to look nice than to have food. David believes his parent's marriage was arranged.

50:00 David heard political talking that Hitler was the best speaker in the world like Dr. Mengele was one of the best doctors in the world. Twenty-one million people died, six million Jews and the rest Gentiles, homosexuals, Gypsies, and from experiments. David saw Hitler in his first camp. David had to clean up the snow for soccer. He was in Oberschlazin (?) which was nearby. He was in 10 to 12 camps including Birkenau, Auschwitz and Theresienstadt. Nobody knew that things were so bad in '39; maybe the elder knew. The war started up September 1, 1939 and the family went to a nearby town as thought it would be better. His father died around April '39. One person from his town went to college as had money.

- 55:00 His family members were intelligent but had no money for college. They returned home from the nearby town and remained and told David to go to a work camp so his mother would be safe. In '39 he saw the Germans on motorcycles and had German Shepherds which killed a dozen people. They were not permitted to go to synagogue so gathered at home and the people were killed by a German soldier with a dog. School was closed when the Germans arrived. When the war started, David went to a small camp nearby. His brother continued working for a short while and then went to the camp. Those who could work were taken to the work camp. Those who worked the coal mine lived at home. His sister was in a printing company that the German owned and was lucky as she lived at home. David was the last one to go to work. They needed 100 workers and told him that if he went by himself, his mother would be safe.
- 60:00 Bluma and Abraham were in the camp. The people were promised that if they went to the camp, the parents would be save. They presumed that eventually, they would come home. That was the last time he saw his mother. His brother died in a camp. Gertrude died two weeks before the Russians took over Auschwitz. His mother was too old to work as was 47 or 48 so she went into the oven. David was 13 and said he was 18 to Mengele so he survived. Abraham disappeared. Around November '39, David went to Obershlazen, a small camp near Breslau. He was there for six months. It was further north, near Auschwitz. There were 120 people in the work camp.
- 65:00 Then he was put in a bigger camp. David dug trenches. Some were skilled such as shoemaker so were given different work. He had no skill and did not lie except to Mengele on his age. He was treated better than in Auschwitz. He got a bigger piece of bread. It was like a prison with barracks and guards and he could not leave. Some prisoners were put into the crematorium and he went to a larger camp. Some prisoners were older and some were younger. Some died in the first camp as they were richer and used to better conditions and more food. He did not get much soup at home. The French, Dutch and Italians died as they were cold. The Poles were always cold so they were used to it. He did the same work in the second camp that was also in Obershlazen. In Auschwitz he did some work in the ovens. He always did manual labor. He was 13 and handed out water, sand and stones.
- 70:00 The Germans took over Breslau and he was outside the city in a camp for a year. Then he went to Oberammergau in Bavaria and from there to Theresienstadt near Czechoslovakia. He got Typhus from lice when he was in Warsaw. They had little water to wash. After Warsaw was bombed in '43, David was in a labor camp nearby and his job was to clean up Warsaw. Then he returned to Auschwitz and went to Dachau in '44 or '45. There was nothing left standing except for the jail. Once a week, they would go to the jail to kill the lice. His job was to separate the stones and rubble into one pile and the steel into another. They found a few Jews hiding near the chimney as it was cold. They were either hung or sent away.

- 75:00 Some of the Polacks he worked with came from home in Warsaw but they would not give him anything. They asked for gold and he spoke Polish but it did not help. There were 900 in Warsaw to clean up and they needed 1,000 workers so they took 100 Polish citizens. Auschwitz had thousands of people. They cleaned the Ghetto when the Russians were coming. Then he walked three days to Auschwitz and remained until the Russians closed it. Then he went to Germany. He did not find any bodies or materials in the Warsaw Ghetto. He was sick so taken away. He lay on straw full of lice. There was no medication and no bread. There was a man lying next to him for two weeks before he realized he was dead. David could not walk when he left the Warsaw barracks for the dying. The Germans were not allowed to kill the prisoners as the Russians were getting close. He had to work three days though half-dead. There was no water so some prisoners drank their own urine.
- 80:00 He made no friendships at camps as the prisoners just wanted his bread. They did not talk about being free, their family or politics. He did not know the day as never saw a paper. He hid his bread so it would not be stolen. The prisoners had nothing to help each other. He did not think of his relatives or the war ending. He spoke fluent German though Frankfurt and Munich had different dialects. Oberammergau was a small camp without a gas chamber. He just tried not to get hurt as those who did, died within three days. He performed the same work as in the labor camp.
- 85:00 The concentration camp was bigger. He loaded a little train with sand and stones in Oberammergau. He met Jews from many countries; also Mafia, Gypsies, Jehovah Witness, priests and homosexuals. He wore a blue and white insignia indicating Jewish. The Capos had to show their strength to get more food. Some of them were killed after the war as they were bad with the prisoners. He was not afraid of the other prisoners as they were the same as him. He once saw a father steal a son's bread and was killed by the prisoners who saw it.
- 90:00 As they entered the concentration camp, they would hear music broadcasted; also they started work to music. If he had a job, he got more bread. He did not know what occurred at Auschwitz when he first entered it. He worked in Birkenau in the ovens. He wore Dutch wooden shoes. There was a big pile of dead people. He took their pajamas and shoes and gave them away. The Russians cut pieces of the dead bodies and took it home to cook. His brother's friend said he was castrated without an anesthetic. Some tall good-looking females were taken for Dr. Mengele's experiments and died. If you were blond and blue-eyed, they would have you take your pants off to see if you were Jewish. At Birkenau, he saw a big stack of dead people and took their jacket and shoes. He got off the train at Auschwitz to broadcast of music. He was not required to undergo another selection as had passed with Dr. Mengele.

- 95:00 He saw older people going left so thought it the bad line. When asked his age, he replied, "18." He does not know why he was so smart at 13 to say he was older in 1940. His first job at Birkenau was to sleep near the ovens and push in the corpses. He worked with Konos who had to push in his own parents
- 100:00 David's brother's friend explained castration to him. After a few days at the oven, David switched to other jobs although after a while, he did not think about it. His work was to place cobblestones on the street, and load and unload cement on trucks. He thought this work would be easier. They received uniforms without trying to match the size to the person. They got a pajama and a hat. He thinks he should have save his. A stripe was placed in the middle of their scalp so if they ran away, they would be easily found. David shows his number on his forearm, 160344 that he would tell his girlfriend is his phone number. He would add: $1+6=7$, $7+3=10$, $10+4=14$, and $14+4=18$. Eli Wiesel was also in the concentration camp and his number also added up to 18.
- 105:00 Men were separated from women with wire and sometimes electrified so some committed suicide in Auschwitz. He found out about his mother as if she came to camp, she had no chance as too old to work. Later he realized that Auschwitz was close to home. Before Gertrude went to camp, she got him a job to sweep the streets in the city. She was sent to Auschwitz. He was there 1 and ½ to 2 years. In '43 he transferred to Dachau. It was the last camp and General Eisenhower liberated him. He thought his sister would survive in Auschwitz as she was strong but she got sick. When he was there, he did not know that she was there. He worked at the Jewish cemetery on Gainshon (?) Street in Warsaw. It was beat up with headstones missing as they took them away.
- 110:00 It was used for storage. Some stones had engraved writing. There was storage for the stones and steel. It looked like a warehouse. He had to straighten it out. Some stones remained. It was across from where they hung people. Usually there was smoke going. They did not get black chicory coffee until they viewed the hanging body for 24 hours. There would be a hanging if someone ran away. A Greek fell in love with a Polish girl and he was hung. It was hard to watch. The girl was not caught.
- 115:00 He was in Warsaw after the Ghetto. He was in a barracks in a brick building and was on one of the top ones near the ceiling. It was most secure for your bread. If you placed the bread between your clothes, it could be stolen. He was careful not to get hurt and no one stole from him. He survived as G-d wanted him to. He got over typhus and had to work. He went outside three days and the Russians were coming closer. The Mayor did not allow anyone to kill the prisoners. The Left and the Polish made an uprising. It was rumored that 100,000 Polacks got killed but he did not see it. He went by train to return to Auschwitz. There was no water so people drank their own urine. It took three days to get there. They would throw out the dead bodies. It was all men.

120:00 It was August '44 but he did not know it as had no calendar. The prisoners did not talk to each other. He listened to his oldest child. Forty-seven years later he met a man he had met after liberation looking for a relative. The man was 15 years older than him and asked him, "What do you do if you get bread and get killed?" The answer is, "Eat it." The man was "Daniel" and he also had numbers that added to 18 and explained it to him. Daniel lived in Canada and had a kosher butcher shop and he recognized David by his voice. He explained the numbers and the Catholic Nuns saved his life by giving him beef they got from the soldiers. There was no hospital after liberalization. It was amazing. They were 30 miles from Munich. The nuns took him to the Decem-Amercy? Convent and cleaned him up.

125:00 They gave him five spoonfuls of oatmeal and then six spoonfuls the next day and seven the following day. Then they gave him one slice of bread and he asked for more. He went to the nuns every day and they asked for cigarettes. Nuns must sleep with their hands outside their blankets. He went to them for five years for meals – breakfast, lunch or dinner. They gave him food and he got married there. The nuns wore white hats and were very strict. Now the Florida nuns from Africa come to see him. The head nurse from Hospice called him every Friday and wish him, "Happy Shabbos." He retired to Florida. It was cold in Des Moines so he moved to Florida. Michael got them a condo as his wife needed help. She walked four to five miles a day but Jennie would sit down and rest. He saw her deteriorating with dementia.

130:00 For six months he fed her three meals a day. For three months, he had her all day from breakfast to dinner. Then Michael flew them to a condo with a maid for the night. David saw a Russian airplane coming to Auschwitz. There was some rebellion in the fall of '44 and people got killed. He was marched out for three days and took a train to Dachau. He sold several hundred of his books at \$16 a book in Texas and gave a copy to the interviewer. They were liberated April 27 or 28 '45.

135:00 Dachau had a smaller crematorium. It was one of the first concentration camps in the world. It was made for the Mafia, homosexuals and political prisoners for the Germans. There were no ovens and no work. He worked in Mildorf and slept in Dachau. He lived in underground bunkers near Dachau. He worked on the railroad and streets in Mildorf wearing a striped uniform and wooden shoes which were good in the winter. He worked off and of in the crematorium. Sometimes the crematorium workers were gassed as did not want them to know much. When the soldiers ran away, the prisoners tried to run away and had to return as they were caught. He was alone and returned.

140:00 Three days later, the Americans took over. Outside the camp, he saw Americans coming in open jeeps. He ran over and they came with guns and took everything away and cursed. A Captain was wearing a Chai (Hebrew letter denoting 18 for luck and means "to life"). The prisoners grabbed cans of food off the jeep and took them away and then

returned them. The Captain was Jewish and heard David curse in Yiddish so took out his Chai and asked David to read it. The Captain said that David and the other prisoners were the first Jews he saw and gave them lots of food. Many died from this food as they were not used to it. He realized that he was free as the Germans were not in control. The Captain gave David the Chai.

145:00 He wore it over 70 years. Later David worked for the soldiers by giving them water. Jews wear the Chai. David's philosophy is, "Believe but do not forget, forgive but do not forget." The persecutors are no longer alive and now the Germans are close to Israel. David does not blame those who cannot forgive. His brother's friend was a top believer. After the war, David was walking in Munich and saw his brother's friend. They recognized each other.

150:00 The friend was dressed up with a suit and tie. At home, he dressed as a Rabbi. David asked him what happened and he replied, "He does not believe in G-d. Where was G-d when Hitler threw in the kids? What did they do wrong?" David replied that he had typhus with no water, no food and no medicine and he is alive so believes in G-d. This was a miracle. He saw American soldiers and got food and got sick and was with the nuns for a week in the hospital. Afterwards he lived privately but visited the nuns. There was a curfew so had to be with farmers as the soldiers said he cannot stay in the street. He stayed in their attic.

155:00 The farmers were nice as they were afraid of the soldiers. David was close with the nuns. The German government gave him an apartment and he lived with a few boys who were liberated from Dachau. He lived in Decen-Amercy (?) and stayed in the apartment for four years. He lived there five years altogether. He visited Feldafing (?) DP camp as his sister lived there. He found his sister a year after liberation as someone saw her and told him. She was in Feldafing but he did not know it. She was in many different camps. She worked in a textile factory in Germany. She did not know what happened to David, his brother or the other sister. David did not return to Poland as there were big concentration camps there – Auschwitz and Birkenau. He thought of going to Israel, American or Australia. Israel and Australia were a longer wait so went to America. The Jewish Federation could not find his relatives to sponsor him and he was too young to know if he had relatives in America. He did not attend school after the war.

160:00 In Germany it took a year before the schools reopened and by then he did not think of it. After the war he read in the newspaper that doctors from all over the world said that if someone is in a concentration camp for one year, they would never be the same again. They were correct. David never had a vacation in 42 years and never took a day off. His vacation was to have his boys get an education. He is old-fashioned. He was taught to respect his parents as a young child. They never talked at the table about sex or other topics like over here. He did not learn about it at camps as he was not ready for it. It

took time for him to get back to normal when the war ended. He could never be normal but he got better. He met his wife in a DP camp, Feldafing. They were young and met. They knew each other for six months and got married. She was in one camp and the head of the German fur company loved her and brought her soup and a sandwich every day. They gave her a bike to leave but she did not want to leave her friends. She ate bread with a soldier who could have shot her but did not as she had guts. They both took a chance.

165:00 His wife was Yanko or Jennie Nyler and came from a bigger town, about 8 kilometers from Bengen where David lived, close to Obershlazen. When he worked for the soldiers, he received half their rations. He sold some on the Black Market. If he received a package of cigarettes, he sold it to support himself. David did not get money from UNWRA. He got married before Yom Kippur in October '49, six months before he came to America. In Germany while waiting permission to come here, he contacted his friend in Cleveland who had a printing factory with 2,500 employees. In Germany his friend took over the Hubert Printing Company. He was liberated and spoke fluent English. He told his friend that he wanted to be a Pressman and his friend told the supervisor to teach him printing at the Hugel Publishing Company and he got paid.

170:00 David lived in Cleveland and found the printing industry was more modern there than in Germany with bigger presses. Soon he got a better job. He was at the Feldafing DP Camp which was 10 to 12 miles from Coderat (?) and was mostly Jews. David was kind to customers though did not know the business so succeeded. It was the same thing in Germany. If you are a good neighbor and they treated you nicely, you treated them nicely, too. "Forgive but do not forget." After the war, David talked little of his experiences and the children were too young to believe. They believed when they got older. Children should know what happened.

175:00 In ten years there will be no Holocaust survivors so the 2nd generation should remember. He has two boys: Allen is older and Michael is 10 years younger, both born in the US. He never took them to Poland but he went once. About 20 years after the war, he went to Poland as his wife wanted to go to see Birkenau and Auschwitz. They stopped for five minutes in his town. It is a coincident that both his wife and grandfather's names are Nyer. He does not know if they are related. He has nothing bad to say about the US, only good things because what happened to him and his family could not happen any place else. In Des Moines, Iowa, he speaks to congressmen and senators. He talks to school children. Sometimes they ask about the food and other things they are interested in. Churches donated over \$200 to the Holocaust Museum. He has over 200 letters as his wife used to go to schools and he just started a few years ago. He does not feel he is a good speaker but is an honest speaker. He made the journey from Iowa to DC.

180:00