

May 30, 1991

PHOENIX - HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR MEMOIRS

Mayer Dragon - Interviewed on January 17, 1989 (two tapes)

Tape 1

00:01 Born in Rachuntz (Ph.), Poland. He lived with his two brothers, his father, his mother, and his grandmother.

00:02 After one year in a public school, he went to a Jewish school, which was like the public schools, except they taught Hebrew in addition to Polish. He was taught in hiding, because Jewish schools were illegal.

00:03 He remembers one time when the police came to the school and confiscated all of the books. He still knows a little Hebrew. His father worked as a capmaker.

00:04 His father also had a small fishing business for sale as well as for personal consumption.

00:05 After grade school, his father wanted him to work in the house, but he didn't want to, and he went to work in a hardware store instead. His employers there liked him because he was so honest.

00:06 His father taught him to be honest above all. At the hardware store, he was paid a salary, but he was working more to keep busy than to make a salary.

00:07 He remembers the Germans coming in 1939, when one day, around breakfasttime, planes came flying very low overhead.

00:08 The Germans were bombing nearby, and he knew that the war had started.

00:09 One day, a German came into the hardware store, and demanded pocketknives and lights, but the store didn't have any.

00:10 When he told the German that they didn't have what he wanted, the German pulled a gun on him. It was the first time he knew how scary it was to have a gun pointed at him. He describes how the Germans took the rabbi away, and the villagers thought that the sky was going to fall.

00:11 The Germans forced the villagers to come out of their 00:12 homes and perform tasks such as sweeping the streets.

00:13 One night in Nov. 1939, the Germans chased all the people out of their homes. They put the women in the synagogue, and the men in the Beit Medrash.

00:14 The Germans passed around a tallis, and told the men to put all of their money into it.

00:15 They desecrated the synagogue, and cut open the tfillin. They kept everyone in the synagogue all night long.

00:16 The Germans took the four most beautiful women in the village, put them on the bima, made them strip naked, and then raped them. In the morning, everyone had to take with them what they could, and gather near the train.

00:17 The Poles stood by and smiled as the Jews were sent away.

00:18 The Germans forced the Jews to go over the river on a pontoon bridge, because they wanted to make the entire area Judenrein, 'free of Jews.

00:19 The Germans told the people that they could not go back over to the other side of the river. He and his family took the train to Warsaw on Dec. 11, 1939.

00:20 His father knew a rich business associate in Warsaw, but the associate could not help them because his business had already been taken away by the Nazis.

00:21 He lived as a tenant in an apartment in Warsaw.

00:22 He went to work for the Jewish Committee in Warsaw. The Warsaw Poles would hire Jews, because they did not want to hire Germans.

00:23 He worked at jobs doing things such as cleaning cars and shoveling snow.

00:24 One day during the winter, a German came to where he and his father were working chopping ice.

00:25 The German beat the hell out of his father with an iron 00:26 bar, and punched Mayer in the face.

00:27 The German threatened to throw them both into the frozen river, but for some reason he changed his mind.

00:28 The pay they received at these jobs barely gave them enough money to eat.

00:29 He describes stealing coal from the Germans to sell for extra money.

00:30 He stole gasoline as well, even though he was risking death by doing so. Once, he was caught, but a German who liked him saved his life.

00:31 The Germans sealed up Warsaw in 1940.

00:32 He once saw a man collapse and die of starvation in the street.

00:33 He snuck out of the ghetto and went to live with relatives in a town called Poinsk, where for some reason, the Germans still hadn't come.

00:34 Eventually, things got bad in Poinsk, and he went to a nearby town called Molovert.

00:35 In Poinsk, his younger brother worked for a farmer who treated him poorly.

00:36 His older brother went to a different town called Chechharov (Ph.), and only joined the family later. He describes that he snuck out of the ghetto simply by taking off his yellow star and risking getting caught.

00:37 He had snuck out of the ghetto with two other men.

00:38 People fed him bread on his way to Poinsk.

00:39 In Poinsk, he lived with a family and worked with his brother.

00:40 He tells the story of the family they lived with who had chicken, and how his father (who eventually escaped from the ghetto) cried when he saw the meal.

00:41 His mother came later. When she finally arrived, he didn't recognize her because she was so thin and wrinkled.

00:42 His whole family eventually moved to Molovert, and lived in ghetto conditions there.

00:43 He continued to work for a rich farmer just outside of Poinsk, and he had plenty of food to eat.

00:44 This Polish family was very good to him, particularly one of the sons, who was a priest.

00:45 He later saw the priest in Auschwitz, where he was a political prisoner.

00:46 The priest at first didn't recognize him.

00:47 The priest told him that the Nazis had killed his brother and taken the farm. He thinks that the priest eventually died in Auschwitz.

00:48 Back to Poinsk - He wanted to go back to Molovert because he felt that something was wrong with his family. When he got back,

he found both of his parents with typhus.

00:49 At this time, the Nazis were taking sick people away.

00:50 So he took his parents and hid them in the attic in between some packing crates.

00:51 He took off his parents' clothes, and they were both covered with lice. He cleaned them both up.

00:52 There were times when he thought that it might be easier to let his parents just die, but he saved them both.

00:53 He got typhus as well.

00:54 He went back to work, this time building highways near Molover.

00:55 Then the Nazis started liquidating the ghettos and making the "selections."

00:56 The SS would come on Monday mornings and pick up whoever wasn't working. The SS would then dig a hole, line up five people at a time and shoot them. One of his brothers was shot this way.

00:57 One day, his mother was selected.

00:58 His other brother went with her, because he said that where his mother went, he would go. They were both killed.

00:59 His mother knew somehow that he would live. She used to say that "Mayer will live and tell people." He was left in the ghetto with nothing.

01:00 He was put on train, and he knew that he was going to a camp.

01:01 They knew about the camps, but they didn't want to believe it. They thought that they were going to die. They were in the train for two or three days without food.

01:02 They pulled into Auschwitz, got off the train, and those who couldn't walk or were weak were taken straight to the crematorium in trailers. But he was a husky man, and he got to work instead.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

00:01 & 00:02 Same as last two minutes of tape 1.

00:03 Mayer and his cousin who was with him faced Mengele and got to work.

00:04 He relates the incident of a man who tripped in the mud when pulling a trailer of people going to the crematorium. He was picked up and put in with the group going to the crematorium.

00:05 One of his cousins died shortly thereafter from diarrhea.

00:06 One day, the Nazis asked for people around ages 17-22. He went with about 300 others. A Gestapo guard made each man run a ways, then turn around and run back. The guard then chose around 150 people. They were taken to a place known as Building #7.

00:07 In the building, there were two large rooms and a smaller one. In the smaller one, there was a man named Orshevsky, a prisoner who was also the "block leader."

00:08 The Germans made the 150 people mix mortar and lay bricks all day during the freezing winter.

00:09 Every day during the winter, a wagonload of corpses would come in of people who had frozen to death during the day. In the spring, the 150 worked outside with civilian bricklayers that the Nazis brought in.

00:10 As time went on in the camp, he could do a little better for himself because he knew people. This meant that he might be able to get some food.

00:11 Once, he traded his shirt for some bread.

00:12 He was able to gain access to the things that the Nazis took from the incoming trainloads of prisoners, so he would trade clothes, whiskey, and even gold and diamonds for bread. He would trade with the Poles, who despite being prisoners, could get access to some things that Jews could not.

00:13 He had acquaintances so he could sneak around and get food.

00:14 Once, his cousin got caught with a bowl of soup that Mayer had given him.

00:15 Mayer thought that he was dead for sure.

00:16 He was taken into an open room where there were three men sitting naked. this was wintertime and it was freezing. He was told to take off his clothes and sit with them.

00:17 Each hour, a German came in and threw a bucket of water on them. Then they were made to roll on the floor in the water while they were whipped.

00:18 He came down with a massive fever as a result of this, but he was fine the next day, and he never had to go to the hospital.

00:19 Mayer tells of his friend whose number was called one night and he was taken away.

00:20 He then tells of another friend who was given 25 lashes with a chair leg for having made a bed improperly.

00:21 The Friend walked away with a grin, so the Nazi brought him back and gave him 5 more lashes. Mayer's friend said that he had to go to the hospital because of the wound. Mayer didn't want him to go.

00:22 His friend disappeared for a week.

00:23 A week later, he saw his friend in the hospital windows calling to him. He looked good and healthy. The next day, he was taken to the crematorium.

00:24 Mayer talks about the block leader who bragged about killing 100 children.

00:25 In Oct. 1944, the Nazis made the prisoners march out of the camp because the Russians were getting closer.

00:26 They marched for seven months.

00:27 People who collapsed on the way were instantly shot.

00:28 He doesn't remember eating on the march. They gave them 00:29 nothing, and by the end, he could barely stand.

00:30 One day, the Germans put all the Jews on a train and they travelled all night. The knew that they were going to a crematorium in another camp, but they didn't really care anymore.

00:31 They passed some Jews in a village near Terezinstat who were still living like people, and they cried.

00:32 That night the Red Cross came in.

00:33 Mayer relates the unsanitary conditions at Flossenberg (another camp stopped at along the way).

00:34 Mayer was hoping to die because it was so cold on the march.

00:35 He was sure so many times that he was going to die, but 00:36 each time he lived.

00:37 At a tent city that they stopped at, Mayer met four of his friends.

00:38 His friends had blankets to keep them warm. At this camp, they worked digging tunnels and laying bricks.

00:39 The Nazis threw dead bodies to their dogs.

00:40 Before they finally arrived at Terezinostat, they stopped at Buchenwald, and they could hear the guns from the armies.

00:41 After the long march and the train ride, Mayer was finally liberated at Terezinostat.

00:42 Outside the camp, there was a hospital with medicine. But 00:43 Mayer didn't stay there long. He was sent to a DP camp in Germany called Landsburg. He stayed in the DP camp for almost five years, and he met his wife there.

00:44-end of tape 2 In 1950, Mayer came to America with his wife and son. He worked for many years in Chicago, and he now lives in Phoenix.