

Transcript of Interview with Michael Kopiec

on 11/22/88

Note Taker: Martin Marcus

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Note: The coded numbers that would have indicated location within this transcript were not present on the tape. Thus, the reason for their absence.

The experience of listening to Mr. Kopiec's life; the pain and agony he endured, the remarkable courage which he was able to retain throughout his ghettoization, and his initiative to survive during his time in a number of concentration camps, has been an experience that has been much more than an educational exercise. This is an interview, that if not in full, should be viewed by those whose interests delve farther than the normal Holocaust experience.

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Tape 1. It was in Russia, April, 1942 when I arrived in the Ghetto. There was a fence but you were free to move about. There was my mother and my five sisters. I cared for them. There my mother told me how my father was taken away in 1941 ~with nine other r ~ citizens of the town. They were taken to T~ff (Sp.?) and he was shot there.

You were suppose to have identification in the ghetto. I didn't have one. To get one I had to work. I was taken six miles outside of the city to build a German Airport. There were a couple hundred men and fifteen to twenty girls. It was a horrible place. When you tried to go to the bathroom at night they were shooting people. The graves were already dug. A German Pilot took one of the women. She couldn't resist. Someone saw it and reported it. All girls were ordered to be destroyed. I begged for mercy on my knees to the chief engineer. This was the first and last time in my life I would go down on my knees and beg. Engineer said to me, "I can't do anything." The girls were shot. To make a long story short, out of a couple hundred men, only fourty returned back to the ghetto.

When I returned to the ghetto my brother and five sisters were gone. My brother went to the Chief of the Gestapo, Commisar Mach (Sp.?) It took alot of courage. He was a man. He said, "Please let

my family stay." He was told that he and his four eldest sisters could stay but my mother and my twelve year old sister must go. They decided to all go together. They knew where they were going, "I live with it ... if you can call it life." I was married the twenty-fifth of May. Permission was needed from the Gestapo for a marriage ceremony. Lived in parents house with wife. Her brother had a pass. He was able to walk around the city freely without a policeman. He was forced to walk on the street not the sidewalk of course. One day he had a pound of white flour. The Commisar of the City and the State, I can't remember his name but he was Romanian, forced him to open his sachel and discovered the flour, took out a gun and shot him. This was the day when I met my wife first. She was only fifteen. The new Chief of Police was rough to her. I simmered him down. This was my hometown. He was a newcomer. There was an outbreak of Typhoid Fever. I caught Typhoid Fever but as you can see I lived through it.

Question: Did you have any medical attention ? Yes, there was a hospital. They used doctors but they could do very little. There was no medication. My wife came and visited me at the hospital. Instead of staying away, she came to the bed and kissed me. She said we love each other, you're not going to give me any infection. (Laugh) I recovered in the Fall.

Middle of Summer, 1943 - They took a group of people. Me and my wife included. Sent us away to a place, a camp, called Shimeah (Sp.?). There were five or six thousand Jews in this Camp. The

most horrible camp any human being can imagine. "Parents had seen children killed. Children had seen their parents killed. Wives, husbands. Husbands, wives. Brothers, sisters. Sisters, brothers. Executions. I took the executions. I can't explain. I am sorry for those people because I was not afraid." One night a Thursday I remember a man he was number thirty-nine. Question: Do you have a tattoo number Mr. Kopiec ? Sure. (He rolls up his sleeve and shows it.) He was number thirty-nine. He had a wife and a beautiful little boy, Ramos. He was two and a half years of age. A day before we were to go to Auschwitz. It was a Wednesday. I went to the barrack to visit my wife because we were separated in the camp. In the next bunker to my wife was this man's wife with her little boy, Ramos. And as I'm talking to my wife and this man's wife also the little boy said to his mother, "Mommy you won't give me to the Germans." And it stuck me in the heart like a knife. I felt pain. A terrible feeling of hatred and helplessness. Next day Thursday - They got us all straightened out. The men and women were separated. They took our boots. They left us with socks, shirts, pants. Nothing else. They brought us to the train and to Auschwitz. I'm not going to talk about the train. It was told a thousand times already. I jumped out of the cattle car. I was like a wild animal. There was an alley with S.S. They were carrying shovels in their hands. They were beating everybody. You had to run fast to get away. If you got hit and broke something like a leg or an arm you were sent straight

to the gas chamber. So I got through. And there was a Dr. Fischer and Dr. Menegele. But the man was Fischer. An S.S. stance. He asked me how old I was and I told him. He asked me my profession and I said carpenter. I am a carpenter like you are a pilot. (To Interviewer) This way. If there was an older man, to the group who went to the chamber. The first thing I wanted to know was if my wife was with me and when I came into Block One where they prepare you, I went to a Kapo, a French Man and I asked him, "How do you go about finding out if your wife arrived here in Auschwitz?" He turned to me with a face like an S.S. and said to me, "wife, husband, brother sister, parents, they all go to the chimney." At this moment if I would have had a gun like I have now, I would have shot him on the spot. What he told me was the truth but the way he said it tore me apart. To him it was a joke. He got twelve years when he came out of the concentration camp. The process started. They gave us a number on the left forearm. They gave us wooden shoes. People were dying on their feet ahead of me. They were walking dead. They were in shock from hunger, cold, beatings, from hard work. I ceased to exist as an individual. I put it all in my mind as a historian. Just to remember. And there was alot to remember. I can't describe it. People were dying like flies. They brought in from Greece four hundred Jews. They were like giant gods. Big and strong. Three months they were gone. Their bodies did not have the nourishment.

A man arrived in Auschwitz. In Birkenau. His name was Mole. (SP.) He was known by the secret service of France, Great Britain, and Russia. The Russians said they would hang him and they did. But this particular man saved my life twice. I lied to him once. He brought me out of Birkenau out of Firstengrubar. (Sp.) It was a coal mine. I worked in the coal mine. I learned how to drill and pack dynamite and the German bosses let me do the work. They brought me food. But it didn't do me any good. I was disappearing. My eyes were in the back of my head. I knew I was going to die. I had to do something. As it happens, they came from another camp, also a coal mine. They needed carpenters, painters, and electricians. I am a carpenter. There were two brothers. One was a block leader. The other was a scribe, a secretary. Both had very bad names. But I had nothing to lose. So I went to the scribe. And I told him a lie. I told him I had a wife on the Aryan side with a two year old son. And I had a reason to survive. Would he have mercy and help me get away from this camp to go to the other camp. I was an excellent carpenter. He looked at me and he took me. I went to the new camp Guiltagruber (Sp.) There were fellows who knew me before. They walked around me and looked at me. They said is it you. They couldn't recognize me. I went to work in the carpentry. I got good. I was alright. And before I knew it, I got dysentery. I got to be known in the camp. It was a small camp. There were a couple hundred people there. Five hundred or so. The doctor his name was Kovach (Sp.) took me in to

the hospital. Every Thursday the ambulance painted green came and picked up the dead ones and the sick ones and brought them to the gas chamber at Birkenau or Auschwitz some still alive. Dr. Kovach (Sp.) and a bunch of other doctors took me out every Thursday in a blanket to the Dead House because the S.S. never went in the Dead House. When they went away, they brought me back into the hospital. There were two boys. One was a a Kalfacto (Sp.) to the Lager. He was a man who was known in the history of the concentration camps. His name is or was Ludwig Vall (Sp.) I got befriended with the one who was the Kalfacto (Sp.) to him. They were two friends. One was fourteen the other sixteen years of age. When they went out they brought in medication from the outside. And they saved my life. And I promised if there was a chance in a million I would save their lives. And I did. I threw them off that train. And I jumped off myself. After they took everyone off the train and shot them all. From the five hundred men in that camp, only twenty five suNived.

Question: Were you being transported ? Did you not know where you where you were going ?
Yes I knew. This was the death march we had in the winter of 1945. We were going to Germany. We couldn't go through because the Russians had cut the line. So they had to go through Czechoslovakia to get to Germany. They also had to go through Poland to get into Czechoslovakia. Good thing I knew my geography. As soon as they hit the first Polish station Genwoff (Sp.), I turned

and I said, "boys." They were scared. They were young kids. I threw them off physically. It was sunlight and there was snow. And I was about to jump. There was a Jewish man. I wish all Jewish men were like him. His name was Schnuzal. (Sp.) That is all I can remember. He was a professional wrestler. He came to me and said I am an older man. Let me jump ahead. It was an illusion. The train was taking a curve. He thought it was slowing down but it was going just as fast. He jumped and he survived. I jumped after him. I got knicked in the arm. They were shooting at me. I saw the caboose just from the side. I was lying flat in the snow. I got the kids and we went into a small forest. I was bleeding and I didn't realize it in all the excitement. I laid down on some tree branches. We made a bed. The two boys laid on me. They had coats on, I didn't. I probably passed out. We were cold. We couldn't take it, so I took them into a village. Into a farmer's house. I told them we just needed to rest and when it was light we would go. But when it got light, I told them the truth. You send us out and you'll be shot because you let us in your house. I blackmailed them. I had no other choice. Anyway, he was a good fellow. We stayed there until the Russians came. When the Russians came, I went to a city called Glaiwitz (Sp.) It was the city where my wife was born and raised. What a crazy idea. Maybe she was there. But she wasn't. The Germans were still there. They were fighting house to house with the Russians. The Russians had to take it the hard way. After the Russians took Glaiwitz, (Sp.) I took my boys with me there were other ones who came and we went. I came into Glaiwitz

first. I was wearing my strips. And two Russian officers stopped me from a house. I was walking in the middle of the street. They were still fighting in the street. They called me over and said to me are you crazy walking in the middle of the street. I don't worry. I just came out of Auschwitz. They asked, "why do you walk with the stripes ?" I told them I hadn't anything else. They took me into a house, opened up closets full of clothing. I chose what I needed. Packed it into two pieces of luggage. Then I left. I was stopped by some Russian soliders. They asked me for my papers. I didn't have any. I told them I just came out of Auschwitz. I showed them the number. They said the S.S. had numbers too; It did not mean anything. The S.S. had their numbers here (pointing to his underarm.) They were naive and arrested me. They took me to a mansion where the mayor used to reside. I was the called the Wrattthouse (Sp.) They put me in the basement with other prisoners. There were Frenchmen, Ukranians, Russians Germans. No food nor water. I sat on my luggage. At midnight the Russian Commidant comes in. "You're going to be shot, You're going to be shot, You're going to be shot." The shooter was a Jewish Captain from Kalcajuize (Sp.). He was a handsome man. But in his eyes was the sorrow of the whole world. There was a small alley. He had them walk, he followed them and shot them in the head. He did the same thing the S.S. and the Gestapo were doing. No difference. I asked him what was going to be of me. I told him I just got out of Auschwitz. He wanted to know if I was really a Jew. They asked me to make a prayer in Hebrew. I did. "What a shame, what a

shame." They took me upstairs. They had a dinner table a mile long. They wanted me to eat their food. I couldn't eat it of course because of the fat. He asked me what I wanted to do with myself. I said I would like to work in what you call today the K.G.B. He said this couldn't be done because I wasn't a citizen. I told him I wanted to get back at those bastards for what they have done to us. He asked me if I could use a gun. I couldn't tell him I was in the Russian army because Stalin gave the order that everyone be shot who was taken prisoner. They gave me a gun, a pistol. There was a portrait of the last mayor hanging on the wall. I took the gun and shot it to pieces. They gave me a chance. He gave me a letter to go to Katowitz (Sp.) and to report to somebody. I didn't know this somebody was the chief of the Polish Secret Service. A Jew. He was a Captain in the Polish army. The highest a Jew could in the Polish army was a Captain. If you wanted to go higher you had to change religions. He took me in. I wasn't interested in the Polish government, I was interested in my interests in paying back the Nazis. I did . I was made the chief of one division in Benjeen (Sp.). (Pointing to the camera) This can bring me trouble. I found a family who had housed a Jew. He was a rich manufacturer. They killed him. I found out by accident. I saw to it that the father, mother, two sons were hanged. I didn't hang them but I saw to it. And a grandmother. Five. A co-worker thought for one Jew five Pollacks have to die.

Question: Did they house a Jewish family and turn them in ?

No. They killed him for his money. I found out because one of the

boys was wearing a jacket. Well cut. Good material. Where does a boy like this get a jacket like that. I touched the lapel. In it there was money. I asked him where he got it and he told me that a Jew who was living in his house gave it to him. This was a lie of course. And I started asking questions and I found out they buried him by a river. They threw him in the river first. They put him in bags, but were afraid in the summer when the water went down he would come up. So they buried him by the river. Another case. A Jewish woman was walking in the street. She was Polish, her husband was German. They were called Fulstoyich (Sp.) Her husband was an S.S. who fought. He was not in the camps. She was walking her dog with a whip. This woman had an armband. The woman started beating the Jewish woman. She was screaming and her husband came to the window and said to the woman what are you doing? You have no right to beat her. I found out, I had her hanged. It gave me satisfaction. If I had pictures I would look like this. (Showing large smile and a big face) Not from food because I could eat very little. No fat. I drank one half water and one half milk. It wasn't easy. But what I could do to pay them back, it made me happy. I found my wife. She came back. I can't describe it. It was very emotional. I took her to Glaiwitz (Sp.). I didn't want to stay in Benjeen (Sp. - Benspork 'Sp.' in Yiddish) because if the Polish underground found out I had a wife, they would have shot her. I got an apartment for her in Glaiwitz (Sp.) and I kept my mouth shut that I had a wife. I used to go on duty and then come back to my

wife. One day she said to me, "You have to stop. They're going to kill you. Now that we have found each other, we have the right to live. If you don't listen to me I'll commit suicide." And she wasn't joking. I took a vacation and I escaped to Czechoslovakia. It's unbelievable how I got there. In a general's car and wearing a general's coat I drove across the border. They saluted me. They didn't stop the car. I went to the Jewish commentary in Czechoslovakia. I went in and I spoke Hebrew to them and they spoke Czechoslovakian. I walked out, slammed the door behind me, turned to my wife and said, "the Jews they haven't learned anything." They thought they could get away from being Jews. You can't forget no matter where you are. China, Russia, anywhere. You are a Jew. You are concerned with your brothers and sisters, your own and Jewish affairs. In the first place, you are a Jew. In the second place, you are a Jew. In the third place, you are a Jew. This is the way I see it. The way I think. The way I feel. I am not a shaken Jew. I am not an afraid Jew. I live in the most anti-semitic state surrounded by Goyem who hate my guts. But this doesn't bother me the least.

Question: Where did you go with your wife after Czechoslovakia? We went to Prague. I had Russian money and German money. I went to the Hotel Ambassador. I took out a thousand Ruples and put it on the table. I said I needed a good apartment and some food. All they had in the restaurant was potatoes with some sauce. No meat. He took care of it. I gave him a thousand Ruples though. We were there for two weeks.

From there we went to Carlsbad. (Sp.) One part was occupied by the Americans and the other by the Russians. I wanted to go to Germany. We got on a bus and we came into Svigal and Saxonia Saxon. (Sp.) I got a room for myself and there were two girls with us who were looking for their husbands. One found her husband with my help in Sydney, Australia. He was re-married but when he found out Regina was still alive he broke it of came to Munich and brought her to Australia. The other woman, I don't know what happened. The two boys were with me all the time. I did not leave them. One of the boys had two brothers in France in the wine business. They were alive. He went to them. The other stayed with me. In Svigal, (Sp.) there were Americans. One day the Americans were leaving and the Russians were taking over. In 1945 where were you to go with a pregnant wife. You couldn't get an apartment. I stayed on. I saw group of Russian soliders. The Commadant said, "All civilians out. This hotel is going to be taken over by the Russian armed forces." I told him we were Jewish people. I have friends upstairs. We have just come out of Auschwitz. He asked me, "Where did you learn Russian?" I said to him, "I was with Russian P.O.W's. I learned to speak with them. I can read and write Russian too." I became his interpreter. I kept my apartment. And I had food. In Svigal, (Sp.) there was a Jewish camp for girls. They wanted to go home but the Russian Commandant didn't want go give them papers because he did not want to use the trucks and gasoline and

things like that. So I falsified the papers. And I brought them home. One reason I did not go home, you can never say 100% that everyone wasn't alive but I was pretty sure. But I knew one thing for sure. If I went home, I would have gone crazy. In every corner, rock, and pebble it would have reminded me of the past. I have a hell of a time living away from it as it is. I knew my limitations. I could not go back home if you can call it a home. My wife had a son. He's here. He's a doctor. He's successful. He's a millionaire. I'm proud of him.

Question: Is he the only son you have ? No. I have another son. He's in Chicago. I also have a daughter. She is married to a doctor also. I also have another daughter in New York. All of them have good educations.

Question: When did you finally come to the U.S. ? I came in 1950 with my two sons. One was four years old and one was a little less than three. Michael, His name was Mendel and Gary, his name was Golac (Sp.) It was hard. I had a hard time learning English. After five years of being in the U.S. I let my remaining relatives know I was here. They were sisters of my Father. Three and cousins. And I met those people. My aunts they all are dead. They were in their 70's when I came here. Slowly, I arranged myself. My wife's father had an eye clinic. It was taken because he was a Jew. He could not hire any non-Jewish nurses, so he trained his daughter. When she came to the U.S., she got her license and worked at the Coney Island Hospital in New York

for twenty years. I worked as an X-Ray technician for sixteen years and I made money. When my son was in his last year of medical school, we felt that the world was ours. And my wife got sick. Cancer of the Lungs. She passed away. I was proud of every second I spent with her. She felt pain and she knew she was going to die but she never complained.

Question: When did you come to Phoenix ? I came to Phoenix in 1982. I retired in 1979. I couldn't work mentally after I lost my wife. I didn't want her to die. It took me awhile to function. And I'm not the same man I was.

Question: Do you always carry a gun ? Yes, all the time.

Question: Is that for self-protection ? Of course. And for the protection of others if they're Jewish. If they are not Jewish, I don't care what happens to them. My desire is to go to Israel. I'm talking like Tevia from Fiddler on the Roof. But I can't part from my grandchildren. They are going to grow up Jews. I am not going to give Hitler the satisfaction. My family is my life. They are what keeps me alive. The S.S. always used to say to me, "it's a shame you are a Jew." I never answered. The guy who knocked my teeth out. A Hungarian sargeant. An S.S. He did it because my coat caught on fire and he beat the hell out of me after. I walked around for two weeks and I didn't know who I was. The S.S. shot at me. I was no push over.

The guy who beat me up. I knew that he had a girlfriend. I returned and I shot him in the belly. And for two hours I stood there and made sure no one came to take him to a doctor. He died the hard way. But my brother and sisters and my mother, they died the hard way too; in the gas chamber at Triblinka. I am thankful that God has permitted me to survive. I never hid. I was always visible. I had a destiny.

Thank You Mr. Kopiec that is all we have time for. Thank God.