

-TITLE-ABE SALEM
-I_DATE-NOVEMBER 20, 1989
-SOURCE-HOLOCAUST CENTER PITTSBURGH
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-GOOD
-IMAGE_QUALITY-GOOD
-DURATION-1 HOUR 50 MINUTES
-LANGUAGES-ENGLISH AND YIDDISH
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-

00:00:00 Introduction of Abe Salem by Rosalind Kent at the Oral Documentation Project of the Holocaust Center in Pittsburgh, 11/20/89.

00:01:00 Abe was born in Warsaw on Dec. 3, 1919 and was the oldest of seven siblings in a strictly Orthodox family. The father was active in the Schul and the children all went to religious schools.

00:02:00 The sons went to Ceder and then to Yeshiva. Abe was a student of Talmud.

00:03:00 The father had a leather accessories shop (that carried materials necessary for shoemakers, etc) and the mother helped out in the store.

00:04:00 Even before the war the Poles would not socialize with the Jews. There were only business relationships. Anti-Semitism was common.

00:05:00 He left the Yeshiva and went to live with his grandfather and got a job in a leather store. He was about 17 and did not make very much money.

00:06:00 He described the family business...

00:07:00 Described daily life at home, where mother started cooking at 5 a.m. and also worked in the shop.

00:08:00 It was a well-organized Jewish community and every Jew was obligated to make a financial contribution so the community could take care of their own poor.

00:09:00 The Jews took care of their own. He recalls one incident of anti-Semitism when a Polish soldier thought him too arrogant and smacked him in the face.

00:10:00 Jewish life was tolerable in Poland until Hitler. There had been limited anti-Semitism. The Poles were sensitive to the public response they heard from the American and British communities whenever there was a pogrom, so things never went too far out of hand.

00:11:00 Abe was politically active in the Jewish community. He followed the Jabotinsky movement when he was about 18, and later the Chalmutz movement. He was interested in any movement that was concerned with rescuing Jews.

00:12:00 Heard Jabotinsky speak to a crowd of some 8,000 Jews in Warsaw (1938). Jabotinsky warned of a cataclysm coming.

00:13:00 In Abe's opinion there were 3 groups of Jews. Some turned to religion, some to Socialism and some to Zionism. He turned away from religion.

00:14:00 He turned to Zionism as an answer to the Jewish condition. At Jabotinsky's rally there were many Communists and Bundists there that tried to interrupt Jabotinsky.

00:15:00 Jabotinsky's response was that in 5 years he would (God willing) come back to Poland...if there would be someone (Jewish) there for him to come to. Some of the wealthy Jews in the audience thought Jabotinsky should be locked up in a crazy house.

00:16:00 He heard a speech made by a man who used to work for Franz Joseph in Austria. The man, a Jew, was named Wolfgang Wiesel. This man told the Jews in 1938 to buy guns and take up target practice. Everywhere he tried to speak he was jailed.

00:17:00 Saw Wiesel in 1943 and he told Abe that everywhere he tried to speak his warning he was jailed.

00:18:00 Abe described Poland as a feudalist country that was not responsive to new ideas for social change. The country was run by the Church and a small aristocracy. The clergy might say that the

troubles the Poles experienced were because of somebody's bad behavior.

00:19:00 Described social conditions in Poland for the Jews; 10% rich, 40% struggling, 25% beggars, and 25% fell between the cracks.

00:20:00 Some Jews were already struggling and going to soup kitchens. Abe's family did okay. He was active in the Chalutz movement which was preparing people to do physical work (carpentry, plumbing, etc.) to prepare them to move to Palestine.

00:21:00 After the war broke out the Chalutz leaders fled from the Gestapo to the free city of Vilna.

00:22:00 Rich and influential Jews fled from both the Germans and the Russians to safety in Vilna.

00:23:00 Abe was aware of the situation in Europe re: Czechoslovakia (1938) because he listened to German radio broadcasts. He tried to leave Poland by registering for permission to emigrate as a worker to any country that might accept him.

00:24:00 He tried to get an exit permit from Brazil, Canada, Venezuela, Argentina, South Africa, etc., but never heard from any of them. His younger siblings were not trying to leave. They were too young and they also did not appreciate the danger.

00:25:00 Knew about the German deportation of Polish Jews from Germany to Zbonszyn. He was sent by the Chalutz movement to recruit young adults for the movement. The Jewish Joint sent food and the Chalutz recruits looked for volunteers.

00:26:00 The Poles did not want these Jews and refused to recognize them. Zbonszyn was a "no man's land".

00:27:00 These Jews were considered people with no country.

00:28:00 The Poles finally accepted these people after being pressured by the US, France and England. These countries had made assurances that these Jews would not be a drain on the Polish economy.

00:29:00 Abe was sent to help organize the young adults but most people resisted his efforts on behalf of the Chalutz. The recruiters were only able to enlist only about 150 of the 8,000 Jews there.

00:30:00 When the war broke out, Abe was in Warsaw. He realized there was war when the Germans bombed Warsaw, especially the Jewish areas of the city. He used this analogy for describing the futility of Polish resistance; it was like a little boy (Poland) fighting 5 grown men (Germany).

00:31:00 Indiscriminate bombing included strafing civilians fleeing on the highways. For food he went to a bombed out pickle factory. Services (water, electricity, gas) were bombed out. He slept on the street.

00:32:00 Aerial bombing went on for 4 weeks. People survived by cutting meat from dead horses.

00:33:00 The Chevra Kaddisha cared for the dead and the Jewish community organized to provide social needs and children services.

00:34:00 Then the troops marched in and the Germans grabbed Jews for work details and harassed/made sport of them.

00:35:00 A German threw Abe out of a third story window and he injured his head in the fall. Fortunately he fell onto some building supplies (bags of sand, etc) so he survived the fall.

00:36:00 Went to the Jewish hospital but fled when he knew the Gestapo was coming. Met a friend from the Chalutz and they decided to flee to Vilna.

00:37:00 Three times he went back and forth from Warsaw to Vilna...by train and by foot.

00:38:00 Went to Vilna the first time to try to get to Palestine. The Chalutz sent him back to Warsaw as a messenger/courier.

00:39:00 He carried sealed envelopes/packets to the kibbutz in Warsaw. The most active Chalutz group in the occupied area was in Warsaw. From Vilna the Jews had contact with the US and Palestine.

00:40:00 The 4th time back the Russians arrested him for crossing sealed borders with papers written in Hebrew.

00:41:00 He had been promised to be among the first Jews to go to Palestine. That was the expressed purpose of the Chalutz movement.

00:42:00 He was interned by the Russians and had no contact from

anyone from the Chalutz. He and other detainee were moved from place to place until he ultimately found himself in a Russian labor camp. His job was to cut wood.

00:43:00 Was with the Russians for a year and a half, until 1942. The Polish government made a deal to get their citizens released.

00:44:00 The Russians had designated him a "social danger element." On his transport there were some 8,000 people in Russian custody.

00:45:00 Was informed by a Russian Commissar that now Russia was at war with Germany.

00:46:00 The Commissar told the prisoners that now their supplies would be decreased and work would have to increase due to the war. For extra food Abe stole oats from the horse he worked with...until the horse died. (1941)

00:47:00 The Commissar later came back to give the Polish prisoners clothes for their release. Abe did not want to stay in a cold climate so he got a false birth certificate which would allow him to travel to the area of Tashkent, near the Chinese border.

00:48:00 Once he almost got caught when someone noticed a mistake on the papers indicating they were fake. He left the papers and ran.

00:49:00 It took three months to get to Tashkent.

00:50:00 Abe told one story about how he and some friends saw a woman on the train with lots of food which she would not share. They knocked out the light to create a blackout on the train and then stole her food.

00:51:00 The woman accused them but they had eaten the evidence and thrown away the food sacks.

00:52:00 Got food by stealing and conning others, including trying to trick waitresses.

00:53:00 In Tashkent he slept in the park. He got a job working

all day for a bowl of noodles. Payment for work was in food.

00:54:00 Was completely cut off from the German-occupied area. Abe met a man who had lost his family in the Ukraine and this man gave Abe a job in his bakery.

00:55:00 He learned of the events regarding the fate of his family; Yom Kippur, 1942, the Priest in the town Vengilov (ph) read a letter to the townspeople saying the Jews were about to be eliminated. The Poles were told to guard the way (a 17 mile walk from the town to Treblinka).

00:56:00 The Poles were promised a premium for catching run away Jews. Seven Jews attempted to run but 2 were killed. Five survived (some were still alive even when Abe made the video).

00:57:00 In 1946 Abe heard the fate of his family. He had returned to Poland from Russia.

00:58:00 After the war he met former Chalutz friends.

00:59:00 He was asked to go to Breslau to help look for Jewish children that survived with Polish families. They were to ask for, buy, or steal the children back.

00:60:00 The Chalutz set up a children home. They tried one hour to smuggle the kids to Czechoslovakia, then to Marseilles, then to Israel (Palestine).

01:01:00 He worked in a group of 5 people and there were other groups doing the same thing. The group got financial help from the Jewish Joint.

01:02:00 The Jewish Brigade (British troops from Palestine) was in Czechoslovakia and they helped smuggle the children.

01:03:00 One woman tried to sell back Jewish twins for an exorbitant amount of money. The Chalutz team tricked her by giving her paper money which she could not read. While she went to the bank to check the amount of money, the kids were taken.

01:04:00 The Jewish soldiers helped by taking the children in their jeep. Abe's group was in Breslau.

01:05:00 In 1946 there was a pogrom in Kraków. The group in

Breslau wanted to fortify the children's home in case there would one day be a pogrom in Breslau. They got guns, electric fence/gate, bars for the windows, and a working telephone.

01:06:00 One day a group of Poles came to accuse the 6 men and 3 women who ran the home (there were about 400 children in the home) of stealing a Polish child. The Poles accused the Jews of killing the Polish child to use his blood to make matzah.

01:07:00 The police were called and they searched the premises. When they found nothing the crowd accused the police of taking a bribe from the Jews.

01:08:00 They evacuated the facility overnight. Abe's job was to help prepare the children for transport. Others collected the kids.

01:09:00 He told about caring for the children. He went on collecting more children.

01:10:00 Children were transported in secret, covered trucks. "The Rescue Children" they were called. Border guards were paid off to allow passage.

01:11:00 The Germans had taken 8,000 Greek Jews to Warsaw (to help cover up the number of Jews killed in Warsaw). Some 3,000 of them died but 5,000 went back to Greece. The Chalutz kept their passports.

01:12:00 In Poland it was not safe for Jews. There were pogroms. Efforts were made to get as many Polish Jews into Germany so as to pressure Germany to get the Jews into Palestine.

01:13:00 The passports from the Greek Jews were given to Polish Jews to get them into Germany. The passports were used again and again.

01:14:00 They had tricks to fool inspectors, like never speaking in Yiddish but only in Hebrew.

01:15:00 He did this until the end of 1946. He started having trouble from the Polish secret police and was accused of stealing Polish children.

01:16:00 Abe referred to an organization of Polish Jews in Tashkent that held a memorial for the 1st anniversary of the Warsaw

Ghetto uprising.

01:17:00 Abe met his wife in 1945. She was his friend's widow.

From 1942 until 1945 he worked in a bread factory in Russia.

01:18:00 He worked for the Aliya Bet (illegal Aliya) and his bosses were Messrs. Zuckerman and Greyeck (ph).

01:19:00 He reiterated the Aliya Bet link to Marseilles & to Palestine.

01:20:00 He worked for the Aliya Bet until 1946 and then went to Germany.

01:21:00 He was the only one from his family to survive. After the war some of his friends tried to return to their homes but were killed by the Poles.

01:22:00 The Poles wanted to scare the Jews out. In Russia about 400 thousand Polish Jews survived but they fled Poland for Austria, Germany, France & Italy.

01:23:00 From the end of 1946 until 1949 he stayed in Germany. Then was brought to the US by the Joint. Went to Evansville, Indiana. There were no other survivors there. Had a conflict with a Rabbi there over the idea of recognizing Hitler as the force behind the establishment of the State of Israel.

01:24:00 Once was offered a job to sing at a funeral, but it wasn't a Jewish funeral.

01:25:00 Described the funeral...

01:26:00 Got another job but had a falling out with his employer. Abe's father was 40 when he was killed, his mother was 39 years old.

01:27:00 Got a job singing in the synagogue, especially for memorial services.

01:28:00 Is a believer in Kahane and his message.

01:29:00 He follows the news in Israel. He is anti-liberalism.

01:30:00 He supports his own people, is pro-Israel.

01:31:00 Abe spoke about his little sister; how she once asked him

why the Germans would want to kill her since she was such a good, well-behaved child.

01:32:00 Repeated the ages of his parents at their deaths and said he was 20 (at about that time). He is optimistic about the future.

01:33:00 Young people today are smart; they don't want war. They want peace. He is still religious today, but he cannot justify "judgement." He told a story of his own childhood...

01:34:00 He had asked his Rabbi about Abraham's willingness to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice. How could a merciful God do this? The Rabbi told young Abe to pay attention to the rest of the story...

01:35:00 At the last minute the Angels came to save Isaac. Abe asked, "What if the Angels are late?" The Rabbi said the Angels are never late. As an adult Abe saw this was not true...the Angels were late to save the Jewish people. Now we should pray that the Angels never come late.

01:36:00 **Sang a song about a young Jewish girl named

01:37:00 Ruchele. She was a lovely three and a half year

01:38:00 old, a source of pride and joy to her family.

01:39:00 She was killed and put into a pit with other bodies.

01:40:00 **Abe sang another song about there no longer being

01:41:00 Jewish children playing in the grass and snow of

01:42:00 of Poland. This song was written by Joseph Papernikoff

01:43:00 **Recited a poem by Yitchak Katznelson. The poem

01:44:00 speaks of the significance of the Warsaw uprising

01:45:00 and how this experience is not an isolated episode

01:46:00 in Jewish history...that this struggle continues

01:47:00 in Israel, in Argentina, in Paris, etc.

01:48:00 In 1942 a small congregation in Warsaw posted a sign that said "My people, don't give up." It was put up by Reb Motel Breslava.

01:49:00 This same man once said to Abe that every generation that has destruction, also has redemption. In Yiddish Abe said, "Until the redemption will come my soul could disappear." (approximate translation)

01:50:00 He told this story to set the stage for the continuation of Katznelson's poem, which Abe recited in Yiddish....
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