

Piorko, Elias
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Abstract

Elias Piorko was born in Zambrow, Poland, on May 15, 1919. He attended cheder until age 16. He participated in Zionist organizations which influenced him to join a kibbutz in Slonim (later Belarus), Poland, at age 19. While trying to return home, the Russians imprisoned him with a sentence of five years of forced labor. He experienced long hours of hard labor, hunger, cold, and loneliness. Some Russian Jews were kind to him. Elias was in four labor camps before he was liberated and given a work permit along with 15 rubles.

This second file begins when Elias was liberated, and he has difficulty obtaining work due to his lack of ID and weak physical condition. The Jewish Committee assists him with travel to a kibbutz in Poland. From there he escapes to Czechoslovakia, then Austria and ends up in Italy for four years where he meets his wife. They immigrate to the U.S. in 1950, settling in Washington, D.C. where they eventually buy a store with the help of loans from friends. Until his retirement, Elias worked in the Hecht Company during the day and afterwards helped his wife in the store. They have a total of four children and eight grandchildren.

File 1

00:00 Elias Piorko was born in Zambrow, Poland on May 15, 1919. His father was Moishe and his mother was Sima (?). He had two sisters, Rima and Chaya Zelda and two brothers, Chaim and Gabriel. Elias was the youngest in the family. He lived in a house in a mostly Jewish town with a population of 30,000 people. His father bought livestock, mostly cows, by going outside of the city. His mother did not work. He entered a Jewish school at a young age with only boys and was led by a Rabbi. Elias left school at age 16, around 1935 or 1936. He played soccer and basketball and belonged to two Zionist organizations (Hashomer Hatzair and Hapoel). He attended their meetings where they sang and danced and went with them on trips outside of the city. He was not athletic but enjoyed playing sports and also enjoyed reading the newspaper. He thought himself a good student. His aunt and uncle Shlomo, his mother's brother, were very religious, which influenced the family to attend synagogue.

05:00 In general, his only contact with non-Jews was when he played soccer. Sometimes the Polish boys fought with them. Elias spoke Yiddish at home and knew some Polish and Hebrew. His father was strict. Elias was six or seven years younger than his youngest sister. In 1937 when he was 19, Elias went to Slonim, a kibbutz in Poland as he desired to go to Israel. After he left school, he did not work but was active in organizations where he learned about Slonim. No one from his city went with him. He took a train to get to the kibbutz which consisted of about 20 men and women his age. He worked at cutting wood for lumber and after work would ride a kayak on the lake.

- 10:00 He wanted to move to Israel because of the pogroms and war was expected. After a year and a half at the kibbutz, he returned home for a visit and found the city was burned by the Germans so the war had started. The Russians occupied most of the city. Elias' house was burned down and the only street existing was his uncle's so the family moved into the uncle's house. The synagogue across the street from Elias' house was also burned down. His family told him to return to Slonim so he did so. With a friend, Elias walked all night and met a young man and a young woman returning to the kibbutz. The train was not running because of the airplanes' attacking, but a farmer gave them a ride in his wagon for 20 kilometers. Then they saw a train carrying wood with a passenger car so they rode in that for 25 or 30 kilometers. It stopped when an airplane attacked it so Elias ran into the forest with the other passengers. A bus came along and they asked for a ride but were refused so they got on the ladder in the back with the luggage.
- 16:00 Elias and his friend spoke Yiddish and when the driver heard them, he stopped the bus and let them in. There were families in the bus escaping from Lomza headed for Slonim. Slonim was a beautiful place with trees and a lake. It belonged to Poland and was occupied by White Russians and Jews. It was the end of 1939 when Elias reached his kibbutz, and they all ran into the forest. He felt the war was over as the Russians took over his part of Poland. He was 20 years old at the time and did not know about the Germans. They reached a kibbutz in Vilna where they spent a few months and he was able to obtain a position cutting wood as he knew grades of wood.
- 20:00 Elias wanted to return to Poland to see his girlfriend. He was told that if he went to the border, he might get arrested so should say that he wants to go to Poland. Elias and his friend were arrested at the border because they found an address of a Jewish Latvian in his friend's pocket and thought they were both spies. They were taken to the forest and beaten and in the morning taken to the border where the Russians placed them in prison. Elias had no ID papers on him. There were about 20 other Jews in his cell and they all slept on the wooden floor with no blankets but were given food. The cell had small windows. They and the other men were scared. It was so hot that they just wore their pants and were taken to the yard for air.
- 25:00 In Noshar (ph) (25:47) he was asked his name, and they wrote it on a document indicating that he would be imprisoned for five years, and Elias signed the paper. He did not know what was happening with the Germans. He and his friend were taken by boat to a prison in Kotlas (25:33), White Russia with no warning or explanation. He was there for about two weeks and went to other camps with Russian names Izhmii Uchtii (ph) (27:28) and Comer Escer (27:39). Short people lived near the labor camp. First he built a factory of wood and then he carried out bricks. He wore his own clothes the first year. Then he was separated from his friend.

- 30:00 The Russians started building a road, and he helped but knew no one. The road was for trains and others built rails and many died. The prisoners were watched by guards with dogs. (Side B) The prisoners were hungry and if they saw a potato they would try to take it but the dogs would attack them. At this time, Germany attacked Russia. Elias ate grains and mushrooms to stop his hunger. He did not get sick from eating them as did the other prisoners. When summer came, the factory that he helped build sank. He did not have a prison number. The clothes that he received later were all the same as the other prisoners consisting of cotton pants with ties and a jacket and had no numbers.
- 35:00 Those prisoners who tried to escape were killed. Elias did not make such an attempt as he felt it would be impossible in the snow. He learned some Russian and made an effort to speak to the Russians. There were about 100 to 200 people in his earlier camp. He worked with sheepskin as he thought he would be able to eat some of the meat. Elias worked in a camp with women who picked cranberries in water, and he succeeded in eating some. Before the war, one could get money and buy food in a store, but it was no longer possible at this time. Because he was Jewish, a Russian/Jewish female doctor put him in the hospital for a month for rest from working from dawn to dusk. He mostly slept and witnessed patients dying.
- 40:00 The physician recommended he eat the head of the fish to treat his eyes. He was not sick but was weak. Elias was in a total of four camps. He was in the third one, Comez Sabia (ph) (41:15) for the longest period. In 1941 he was in Petroga (ph) (41:25; 41:43) near Mainz (ph) (41:51) where he was liberated. His brigade went on strike as they did not want to work. Two members spoke up for all of them. They were not punished and went to another camp. There was a lot of snow at the site, and they first built tents for the guards, and the prisoners slept outside near the fire. A few days later they built a tent for themselves. For insulation, they placed branches on outside of tent, cover with snow, and put water on it to freeze to make tents warmer.
- 45:00 The prisoners got fed in the morning before work and in the evening upon their return. Once a week they had to take a cold shower with liquid soap and women cut their hair. They waited an hour in the cold room until they were given clothes. Once the shower was out-of-doors, but he did not get sick. If one made over their quota, they were given extra bread but Elias did not push himself over the quota. Someone had a newspaper so he knew there was a war and was hoping it would end soon. The newspaper was useful in making cigarettes. Elias did not know what was happening to the Jews. One day, the Russians in his brigade were playing cards and one of them lost and had no money (bread) to pay so they killed him. The prisoners cut wood to make a fire to keep warm inside. Elias sat by the window to see the guards play cards and watch if they were coming in.

50:00 The Russians asked him about Polish thieves. He talked about getting liberated. Once he saw a prisoner on the tracks trying to get his foot cut off by a train so he could go to the hospital. In 1940 he wrote his family and received a letter from the magistrate that someone wanted to buy his house, but they could not sell it as they knew he was living. Elias had no knowledge of his family's situation. A Russian Jew arranged it for him to replace a Russian prisoner who was a tailor. He was able to do so as he had learned a little tailoring from his brother-in-law's family. He was given work sewing patches and was given soup in the kitchen and tobacco. Then he was sent to another camp about 30 or 40 kilometers away. Elias had been in four camps: the first one was where the factory collapsed, the second where two prisoners escaped, the third was Petroga where his brigade had a strike, and the fourth where they built a road. The snow was high with green grass under it. He wore galoshes.

55:00 No one was given sufficient food. If he carried bread with him, it got frozen. Soup was served in the morning and evening, and nothing in the middle of the day. The cook gave them horsemeat when the horse broke his foot. On the First of May, May Day, everyone got meat to eat. Once people came with horses and a sleigh to collect wood so Elias said he knew horses and got the job to use them to pick up the wood. He placed so much wood on the sleigh that the horses couldn't move.

60:00 After three days he told the assistant that he wanted to escape as the job was too hard. Elias had volunteered for the job as he thought he would be able to eat the food that the horses were fed. He was let out of prison when the war ended and was given a work paper directing him where to go. He had no idea that the war was about to end. It took him all day to walk the six or seven kilometers into the city which he did all by himself. He was given 15 rubles and reported to work where he was directed to sleep in the horse stalls. He wanted to go home but had no papers.

63:00

File 2

00:00 Elias was happy when he was liberated and wanted to go home but was given work papers so that he could get a job in the nearby town. After a month, he was sent to a physician to assure that he could work as he was very weak and slender. They said that everyone must work in Russia but since he could not, he was given a ration card. He worked a little in the farmer's market where he heard someone speaking Yiddish. The speaker sent him to a tailor who gave him a job. Since he was not skilled at tailoring, he was put to work at placing lime between bricks. Elias got sick from the food there and went to the physician who said he would place him in prison if he could not work. Some Jewish-Polish men gave him cheese and vegetables. Then he met a Jew who worked in the Black Market with a Russian partner.

- 05:00 The Jew (Caesar?) gave him money. Soon the partner was called into the Army, and Elias was asked to replace him despite his lack of money. His work consisted of supplying sheets to Army bases. Parties and drinking were common among the Russians, and his partner thought that Elias should learn to drink. His partner got him a room, and the Polish committee obtained a watchman position for him working in a store from 10 PM to 6 AM. He earned some money and started drinking, but neither he nor his partner got drunk. He went to the police station to obtain an ID and was arrested as he had no Polish or Russian papers and wore a jacket similar to the German prisoners. He was soon let out of prison and registered and had someone write a letter for him to the Polish Embassy stating that he was in the Polish Army.
- 10:00 It was New Year 1946, and he got off work as a watchman and partied for three days. When he returned to work, the police arrested him for stealing clothes from the store. Elias said he worked all night, and no one broke in, and they found a knife in his pocket. He requested they contact the Polish Committee, and he was let out of prison. Then he was permitted to go to Warsaw so he went by train. It took four weeks to get there as the train stopped during the day in cities. When he reached Warsaw, a young man asked him to go to the kibbutz. From there he took a train for 120 kilometers and a truck to his city. Although Elias arrived dressed like a Russian soldier with sheepskin pelts, he was recognized and was told where to find his cousin. He was scared to go to his house as the Poles still killed the Jews. After three days, Elias returned to Warsaw.
- 15:00 Elias' father had died before the war. He did not know what happened to his mother. The Germans had killed his two sisters; one with one child and one with two children. The sister with one child had a husband in Argentina. Elias' uncle died young and his aunt had children so the sister took care of their store. His aunt had built a house but when the Russians came, she was scared to go in. Elias' cousin said his brother is in the U.S. His cousin lived in Lodz and came to sell his house. From Warsaw, Elias went to a kibbutz in Vagsler (ph) (16:19) and went over the border with four people as the guard was paid by the Israeli government. He crossed over to Czechoslovakia and took a train to Prague where he stayed in a Red Cross camp with a swimming pool. From there he was sent to Bratislava for about a month and then, along with many others, to a kibbutz in Vienna for 5 weeks. Then Elias went to a camp in Wegscheid near Linz and then by train to a kibbutz near Milan, Italy.
- 20:00 From there he went to a military camp, Yatica (ph) (19:38) which was nearby. His work consisted of going to Genoa to obtain items for his kibbutz in Tyrone (?). Egyptian Jews took him by boat from Genoa and back to Milan. Elias met his Italian wife in Milan who already had a son. Elias was in Italy for a total of four years. Tyrone (21:20) was near Naples. Elias' friend went to Israel and wrote him and told him that it is a hard life there. Therefore, when he registered at the Commission and said he has a wife and child, he indicated that he desired to go to the U.S. They were sent to Bremen, Germany, where

they took the ship, General Hershey, to New York. They arrived on Rosh Hashanah 1950. He was looking for his cousin and people from his hometown, but his papers indicated that he should go to Washington, D.C. After two days in New York, HIAS got him a train ticket to Washington, D.C., and Elias was told to call the Jewish Agency upon arrival.

- 25:00 A woman picked him and his family up and took them to a room near Kennedy Street, and soon they got an apartment at the Himmelfarb Apartments. They were given a one-bedroom apartment, and Elias started searching for a job as a butcher or a tailor in Silver Spring. Later Elias had another son and two more children. The apartment manager knew Italian, and Elias (had a knowledge of Italian) got a position as a tailor. After two years, he asked for a promotion as he only made \$45 and did not get it so he quit. Soon he got a position as a tailor at the Quantico Marine Base. They lost the contract but the union got him another job. The new shop was closed so Elias looked for a business. Himmelfarb rented him a home for \$35, and Elias worked for the Hecht Company. He bought a grocery on 16th Street, but the building was sold so he borrowed from the Chesed (28:48) and from Himmelfarb and bought another grocery in Silver Spring.
- 30:00 He continued working for the Hecht Company until he retired ten years ago. His wife took care of the grocery, and Elias worked there every day after work. When Elias lies in bed, he thinks of his experiences and feels lucky that he lived through the camps. (Side B) He does not want to remember his experiences. He feels that it was lucky that his mother convinced him to leave his home. The family was butchers. They were not strictly observant but kept the holidays. He is able to read the siddur so attends services and keeps Chanukah. He recalls when he had to eat grass and mushrooms. He would get sap to eat from the numerous trees by scratching them. Elias said that the bread he was given in the morning, he would keep for later. They ate potatoes along with the skins.
- 35:00 He recalls when he and his partner were shot near the border. His friend went to Israel. Elias tells his children about his experiences. He has eight grandchildren and three children here and one in Florida. He came to the US with nothing and wanted a down payment for a house so he borrowed \$2,000. The Chesed (36:42) loaned him \$1,000 for his first store and friends gave him \$500.

37:00