

**ISAIAH HENIG**  
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Interviewer: Esther Toporek Finder

Tape 1 Side A

His name at birth was Yeshiah Henig and he was born May 15, 1915, in Szydlowiec in central Poland. The road from Cracow to Warsaw ran through his town. It was a small town with only about 6,000-8,000 Jews and they made up most of the population of the town. The Jewish community was active politically, intellectually and socially. His family had a business; his father had sold sugar and flour wholesale to bakers and grocers. Isaiah had his own little business after his father's death, in 1935. Isaiah was not much of a businessman. He had a younger brother and sister. His mother did not help with the business. As a child he went to various schools and got to study Talmud in the Alexandria Academy near Lodz.

Even before his father died he moved away from the study of the Talmud because this study would not be marketable. His religious training would be the equivalent to having a master's degree. The family was observant; his father had his head covered and his mother wore a wig. As a young man he wore ear curls and his mother cried when they were cut off: one was cut off by accident so he had to have the other cut off. At home they spoke Yiddish but he also spoke Polish well. There was no friction between Jews and Gentiles before the war and he never experienced anti-Semitism. He dealt only with other Jews, except for one Christian friend. It was possible to live in a "Jewish World." As a young man he was a Yeshiva student and did not have time for much else. During the 1930's the Jews in his town knew a bit about what was going on in Germany. They read the Jewish newspapers; these papers gave the news and the perspective of the newspaper reflecting their particular religious philosophy. He was about 20 when he decided to leave religious study. That was around the same time his father died.

In his town there were Jewish criminal goons who could stand up to the Polish people. There were a few Jewish criminals who would not tolerate abuse of Jews. In another town Jewish young people stopped a pogrom by fighting back. There was no democracy in Poland but it was

a beneficial dictatorship. The chief rabbi and chief priest would both be members of the ruling council in the town. One thug pulled the rabbi's beard and the thug was killed the same night. He thinks it was done by members of the Bund. There was no friction between the religious Jews and the Zionist Jews. Often members of one family went in different political/religious directions. One of his friends was a communist. While they were friends he wore earlocks and he did not see why they could not be friends together. He brought this friend home and he was welcomed in the Henig home even though the boy was not religious.

The Poles were told by their priests that the Jews killed Christ and that the Jews were preventing the 2nd Coming of Christ. This fueled anti-Semitism. Jews tried to leave Poland because of poverty but they did not fear a German invasion.

His draft status indicated that he would have to report in case of war. When the war began, his military unit had already left. When the news came out that the war began, he did not know where to find his unit. A wave of German soldiers passed through and then a second wave of older Germans came and began confronting Jews. Jews were forced into labor, fines were imposed on them, a Judenrat was established. Poles were prevented from going to school or libraries. Doctors and other Polish intelligensia were taken away. In the very beginning, the Polish anti-Semitism temporarily disappeared. The Nazis went after both the Polish and the Jewish intelligensia. Ukrainians helped the Germans. Isaiah left Szydlowiec. He hoped that if he worked for the Germans they would not hurt his family. His brother was 7 at that time and his sister was 16. He was taken to an ammunition factory. The Jewish workers were locked up and could not go home. If a worker got sick, it was a death sentence. At first the Jews got very bad food but the Germans began to feed them better when they realized that the Polish workers were disappearing little by little. Then the Germans needed Jewish labor.

#### Tape 1 Side B

The first camp he was in was near the Vistula [River]. He was among a 1000 laborers taken in the summer of 1940. Their job was to build up the Vistula. The Jewish council in his

town bought back the boys from their home town. He was only in this camp for a few months, until the Germans shot one of the Jewish men.

When he got out of this first camp he went home and tried to go back to normal life. The whole community was a ghetto. The people who ruled his town were elderly German military men, not the SS. The ghetto was not enclosed; Jews could not go out but Poles could go in. There were only Jewish police guarding the ghetto but nobody left because there was no place to go. People began to die from hunger, including a baker in the ghetto. He got a job tanning leather, which was prohibited. He sometimes slipped out of the ghetto to get the skins to tan the leather. If Jews were caught outside the ghetto, they could be shot. Jews had to wear an armband. Once he was arrested but a wealthy Jew saved him. He doesn't know exactly how he came to be saved. He continued to work tanning because his brother was so thin and needed food. Two years were spent in the ghetto. In the fall of 1942, he left the ghetto. During the years he was in the ghetto, conditions got progressively worse. People were dying like flies.

He was taken to Staharowice (ph) to labor in an attempt to save his family, although he believes he was fooling himself. At the camp there was typhus, which he also contracted. Those with typhus were collected in one place and then shot. That was the first year in the camp. The second year the prisoners were treated better. After he was shipped out of the ghetto, the ghetto was liquidated with those remaining Jews being sent to Treblinka. Some Jews were left behind to clean up the ghetto. There were 4 remaining ghettos in the area and some Jews, who had been in hiding, went to those ghettos. In the camp, his work was in the warehouse. He was to supply parts for the machinery when the machines broke. The chief of this warehouse was a Pole, but Isaiah did all the work. Some of the good materials in the warehouse were sent to Germany. The remaining materials were left. He could take a sock, unravel it, and then trade the thread for food. This extra food helped him to survive.

While in the ghetto the Jews heard stories about what was going on elsewhere, but they did not want to believe these stories. They did not know about mass killings. The living conditions at the camp were horrible. They slept on straw sacks that were full of lice. The first year the food was bad but the 2nd year the food got better. He did not see executions himself. There were still

some people from his home town. He was in this camp for about 3 years; Sept, 1942 until about July, 1944. Then he was transported to Birkenau by cattle train in an open car. In the open car they had fresh air. Many of those in the closed cars died. When they arrived at Birkenau there was no selection. They were taken for a march and they thought they might be killed but they were turned around and taken to a factory. There were Jewish workers that operated the camp. He traded his watch for a loaf of bread. He was tattooed: A19152. This was the number he had in Buna. In both Birkenau and Buna they got food enough to survive. They were marched from Birkenau to Buna. Buna was a big place with lots of barracks. There were thousands of people there. They slept in three stories [bunks]. In Buna he did not work but he was shipped out to another place; Lauerhute. This was a small camp with a small factory. There were less than 1000 people. They worked 12 hours a day. This camp was a satellite of Auschwitz. He did not witness any executions there, but there were selections. He worked building cannons; the housing of the ammunition. He did not work with the powder. He was in the camp for about 6 months and he was then shipped to Mauthausen then to Hanover.

The prisoners did not know much but they knew circumstances were changing because they were bombed. Those prisoners who went through the death march passed through his camp. He himself was not on the death march. He was transported by closed cattle car to Mauthausen. The dead were buried. Prisoners were given food, including fats. He was then sent back to Hanover.

## Tape 2 Side A

Conditions were bad in Hanover; the town had been bombed and there was not much food. Every night there was a bombardment. The prisoners had to walk from the camp to the town where the factory was. Every day prisoners died. Dying people were put into the washroom to die. The commandant was a murderer and kapos killed freely. Prisoners were marched to Bergen Belsen. Previously others had marched along the same way and there were dying prisoners left from the earlier march. His commandant collected those people and killed them. The march lasted about 3 days. When he arrived at Bergen Belsen it was night. In the morning there was an appell.

There was cannibalism in Bergen Belsen. Prisoners were not given any food. The women might have gotten some food. There was food in the kitchen in the camp but anyone who tried to run and get the food was shot at. The majority of those that tried to get food were shot. Then, if the person wasn't shot, other prisoners would take the food away. He would run to the kitchen and secrete food in various parts around his body; some food in his slacks were not seen by others so he had food. People who cannibalized the dead were eating diseased flesh and died anyway. At Bergen Belsen he was not with friends. There were mostly Jews with him in Belsen.

In July, 1944, he was in the Lauerhute camp. In the winter, during the time of the death march, he spent a week in Mauthausen and then went to Hanover. He was in Hanover for quite a while; maybe 3-4 months. He was in Bergen Belsen for a week or 10 days. At the end he heard there was poisoned bread. He waited to see other people take the bread first. Prisoners killed each other in Belsen. The SS didn't care. Bodies were just laying around. Just before the English got there the Germans tried to have the bodies buried. He did not want to work burying the bodies so he hid in a pile of bodies to avoid the labor. Every 2-3 days he would run for food. He was lucky he was not shot.

The British liberated him. The British hanged some of the camp guards. He had no feeling when he was liberated; he was like a stone with no tears. The British tried to treat them well but the food the British gave killed the prisoners. He took some of this food but was afraid to eat it. A father and son from Kielce wanted his food and he did not want to give it to them because he felt it was dangerous to eat it. They ate it and were dead the next day. The British did not want to let the Jews out for fear that they would spread disease. He was sent to barracks that had housed German soldiers. There were Jewish organizations helping, including the UNRRA. He did not have any contact with his liberators. The British buried the dead and did not ask the prisoners to help. The Germans in the area were forced to help bury the dead.

After the war he did not even try to find relatives. He already knew his family was dead. Clothes were returned to the ghetto after the Jews were killed. He did not know how the Jews were being killed, but he knew they were being killed. He did not know about the gassing until he got to Birkenau.

He stayed in the DP camp at Bergen Belsen until he came to the US. He met his wife when she came to visit her cousin in Bergen Belsen. They married in 1951 and came to the US shortly thereafter. After he became an American citizen he went back to visit twice.

He admits there was anti-Semitism in Poland before the war. After the war the Germans claimed they did not know what had been happening in the camps. Bergen Belsen was near a street and there were 10,000 bodies piled up and still the Germans claimed they did not know what happened in the camp. Some bodies were burned in Bergen Belsen.

He and his wife wanted to go to either the US or Israel. They tried to make money, either legally or illegally. He opted to go to America though he thinks that was a selfish thing to do; he should have gone to Israel and to fight for Israel. He was aimless after the war.

## Tape 2 Side B

Their son was born in the US. None of his relatives, except for one cousin in Canada, survived. One uncle died of starvation, along with his whole family. Isaiah helped his immediate family but he couldn't help the other relatives. His mother, Sara Rivka, was religious and good-hearted. She gave some of her food to her niece. When he came to the US they went to Wooster, Massachusetts. They got some help from the Jewish agencies. They didn't want money, they wanted a job. His wife got a job working for the navy. They learned English. He tried to buy a chicken farm but he sold it and lost money on the deal. He worked for General Electric and did whatever he was asked to do.

He thinks that one reason that helped him to survive was his small size; he didn't need much food to survive. There were many stories of survival. When he left the ghetto his mother gave him some money and some jewelry. It was taken away from him by another Jew in the camps. He had a pair of shoes in the camps but they were taken away from him when he got sick. When he got well, he still didn't get shoes so he had to go barefoot or in rags. He didn't get shoes until clothing from the dead were shipped back and he got shoes then.

He worked on a lathe in Lauerhute and made a mistake which could have cost him his life. He was lucky because the supervisor only slapped him. Another supervisor could easily have killed him. He tried to help save the life of another prisoner by giving away some of his food, but the man died anyway.