

Isaiah Henig

File 1 of 2

November 22, 1996

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Abstract

Isaiah Henig was born as Yishiah (?) Henig on May 15, 1915 in Shlivoyetz (?) in Central Poland. He studied at a Talmud school until he turned 20, around the time when his father died. Isaiah took over his father's sugar and flour wholesale business but did poorly. He did not experience any anti-Semitism until the Germans occupied Poland. Isaiah was happy to work in a factory for the Germans as he thought it would help his family. He was let out of the factory and joined his family in the ghetto. After two years there was a roundup and Isaiah was taken to Starharvisten, a work camp, where he helped build munitions for the Germans and his mother and two siblings were sent to Treblinka. In July '44 he was taken by cattle car to Birkenau and sent to a satellite camp, Buna, where they did no work but got shipped to other places. He traveled to Larhitzn (?) by truck where he helped build cannons. After six months they were sent by closed car to Mauthausen where half the men died on the transport. Upon arrival in Mauthausen, they cleaned up and were given food. From there 50 people went by cattle car to Hanover (?) and all survived. He witnessed many prisoners going through his camp on the death march.

This part is about Isaiah Henig's experiences from his time in Hanover to living in the US. Near the end of the war, they were marched from Hanover to Bergen-Belsen where he was placed in the Men's Camp where no food was distributed. He survived by sneaking every few days to the kitchen to obtain food and return without getting shot by the Germans. He claimed that others attempted to survive by resorting to cannibalism. He was liberated by the British who gave the prisoners their own rations which killed some of them. Isaiah was careful with the food and remained in the camp where he met his wife. They got married in 1951 and immigrated to the US, settling in Worcester, Massachusetts. First he bought a chicken farm but was unsuccessful so went to work as a mechanic for General Electric. His wife worked and they had a son in 1958. He has since returned twice to his hometown. Early on he knew the truth of what happened to his family as his father's clothes were returned the day after deportation. Isaiah says that he still mourns all his lost relatives.

Summary

00:00 **Tape 1, Side A** Isaiah Henig was born as Yishiah (?) Henig on May 15, 1915 in Shlivoyetz (?) in Central Poland on the road between Krakow and Warsaw. It was a town of 68,000, 70% were Jews. It seemed to be an intelligent, lively community with diverse parties, opinions and organizations. There was a library and a Yeshiva for the

middle class. They were mainly business people. His father had a wholesale sugar and flour company and he sold his products to bakeries and small groceries. After his father died at age 35 after intestinal surgery, Isaiah took over the business and did poorly as he was young and not a businessman. His younger brother and sister and his mother did not help with the business. Isaiah attended Jewish School and Academy and after he graduated from the public school, he was sent to Alexandra (?), a bigger town, with a Talmud school. He graduated from Talmud but never used it. He could not make a living from it as it required a Master's Degree.

- 05:00 It would have been intense study. He took a nonreligious program as thought he would go to France but there was no money for it. Isaiah's family was very observant. His father wore a yamaca (head covering) and his mother wore a sheitel (wig). One day, the barber accidentally cut off one of Isaiah's long peyus (sideburns) and he had the other cut, too, so his mother cried. He spoke Yiddish at home and sometimes spoke Polish as he had studied it. He had some non-Jews as friends but felt that Jew and non-Jews were separate tribes. They did business together without friction until later. He did not experience any anti-Semitism as he grew up with Jewish friends and business partners. He did have one Christian friend who favored Hitler. He had no free time as a Yeshiva student.
- 10:00 He realized things were not good in the 30s but could not foresee how bad they would become. He knew of the persecution in Germany. The Police Commander was a Jewish Communist and was let go. The German-Jews were mostly better Germans than the non-Jewish Germans. He did not see any Nazi problems but heard about it on the radio and read about it in the newspapers. The Zionist, Bundist and Socialist newspapers were tolerated. Isaiah stopped attending Yeshiva when he turned 20, at the time his father died. Before the German invasion, he saw little change in his town but saw Polish mobs in other towns. The Poles were afraid of the Jewish Goons who fought back.
- 15:00 The Goons were criminals and revolutionaries. There was a pogrom in a nearby city and some of the Jewish youngsters fought back and went to jail. Once a week the peasants came to sell their merchandise and the town expected a pogrom the next day. The Jews went into the street with guns the next day and no one hurt them. Poland was not a democracy but a dictatorship. The Chief Rabbi and a priest were on the City Council. When the Rabbi left the meeting, a non-Jew pulled his beard and the non-Jew was killed. There was no friction between the orthodox and the fighter. In one family, there could be a Bundist and an orthodox, each with different beliefs.
- 20:00 Isaiah befriended a young, non-religious Communist and brought him home. His mother was surprised but welcomed him and the young man frequently visited. The non-Jews believed that the Jews killed Christ and the priest announced that there cannot be salvation as the Jews are holding up the 2nd coming of Christ. It was felt that the whole

world has the blessing of Christ. War started when the Germans marched into Poland without being stopped. Before this event, the people wanted to leave due to poverty, not anti-Semitism. Isaiah was placed in the Army Class A where one must report in time of war but they had sufficient soldiers and did not need him.

- 25:00 His unit left without him. There were plaques on the houses but no orders. He felt that Poland lost the war in the first hour. They were not afraid of the Germans. He stood on the highway where the Germans marched, standing with his father's friend who wore a beard. A soldier motioned that he would cut the friend's throat but nothing happened. The soldiers were 40 and 50 years old, not SS, but treated the Poles like dogs. They made the civilians clean toilets and took their money. The Jewish Council taxed the Jewish community according to their means. The Poles were not permitted to attend school. All the schools and libraries were closed down.
- 30:00 The doctors and intelligentsia were taken to concentration camps. The Fireman used Ukrainians as drivers. They helped keep watch so the Jews could not run away. They rounded up the Jews. The Poles were happy to get rid of the Jews as felt they had everything – houses, businesses and factories so now the Poles will own them. Jews were caught in the factories so Isaiah left but was caught. He eagerly went as thought that if he worked for the Germans, they would not bother his family. He did not realize that they would not spare his 7 year old brother and 16 year old sister. No one protested when the Jews were killed.
- 35:00 Isaiah went to Starharvisten (?), a nearby ammunition factory. He thought he would be able to visit his family but he was locked up. Conditions were horrible; food was leaves and a potato. If you got sick, it would be a death sentence. Later conditions improved. The Poles disappeared and the Jews were treated better. They had Jewish doctors but people were afraid to go to the hospital. **Tape 1, Side B** The first work camp he went to was Yrizefro (?) in the Summer of 1940 with about 1,000 young men. They built up the Vistula. When one of the young men was killed, the Council paid off the Central SS in Lublin and brought them home. They were from his town and several others.
- 40:00 The Council went by limousine to the camp and the young men left by train. They received written permission as Jews were not permitted on trains. Isaiah went home. He felt that during the time the ghetto was closed, all the Germans, not just the SS, were cruel. The Polish people entered the ghetto for trade. The Jewish guards were the only police inside the ghetto. The residents tried to continue working as they were hungry. His uncle and a neighbor who was a baker, both died from hunger. Everyone tried to sell their belongings to obtain food. When Isaiah's mother changed his brother's clothes, he was surprised to see his brother's ribs so he tried to sell leather skins but almost got killed.

- 45:00 Isaiah wore a Jewish star on his clothes. The Germans took him and his friend to a big factory where Mr. Eisenberg (?) was the German Commissar and owner. He and his wife were good people and helped them and let them leave. Isaiah and his friend took the wagon with their merchandise to the factory. Isaiah had learned tanning leather through his friends. He remained in the ghetto about two years from Yom Kippur '42 until he was taken to Starharvisten (?). Conditions grew worse and worse. There were the dead all over the streets and the synagogue. People, including the Chevra Kadisha (Burial Society), cared for the dead without pay.
- 50:00 There was a roundup and Isaiah was taken to Starharvisten. Thirty-five people were killed with a bullet to their head. He suffered from typhus. During the second year, no one got killed and he had more food as worked in an ammunition factory. After Isaiah left the ghetto, it was liquidated within three days. His family was sent to Treblinka. The Jewish Commander was left to clean up the ghetto. They created four ghettos and tried to flush out those hiding in the woods. Shilovitz (?) was one of the four ghettos. People were taken away and were killed. Isaiah worked with others in a warehouse where they made ammunition for the Germans. He supplied parts for the machinery.
- 55:00 The Jews' belongings were sent to the camps and to Germany. If socks were found, they used the threads as food. They did not believe what was happening at the concentration camps. They knew that people were shot but did not know about mass killings and crematoriums. Isaiah got typhus from the straw sacks that he slept on that contained lice so he would sleep on the boards. He did not witness any executions in the barracks. When the Camp Commandant shot 35 people, he did not see it. When he had typhus, he had a high fever so went to the water spigot to drink. The water was not healthy and he heard a man tell the doctor to let him drink as he is going to die anyway. He was there about 2 and ½ years from September '42 to July '44 and then deported to Birkenau by cattle train.
- 60:00 One can survive more easily in the open cars than in the closed cars. They had fresh air but no food and felt the rain. A friend died and when he arrived at the camp, he was sent to work at a factory to build ammunition. People cried when they were marched to the crematorium but were sent to a factory. Upon arrival, he was given a bath and clothing. The Jewish guard asked for his watch and told him he was going to die. Isaiah refused to hand it over and the next man said he would give him a loaf of bread for his watch and did so. He was not tattooed with a number but was given a number, A19152, in Buna (?).
- 65:00 They were marched to Buna where he got food so could survive. Buna was a large place with thousands of people who slept in buildings with layers of barracks. People did not work in Buna but got shipped to other places. He traveled to Larhitzn (?) by truck. It was a small camp, less than 1,000 prisoners with a small factory. It was a satellite camp of Auschwitz and they were fed sufficiently to survive. There were no executions here

but selections were made. They built cannons using a big lathe which they filled with powder. This was the housing of the ammunition and it was sent elsewhere for finishing. After six months he was sent to Mauthausen and then to Hanoven (?). They did not know the Russians were coming but knew the war was ending as planes were bombing.

70:00 It was winter when they marched to this camp and they slept outside in the frost and no one died. He witnessed thousands of prisoners marching through his camp on the death march. Many camps were liquidated. He was sent with 100 men in 10 cattle cars. Half the men died as the cars were closed and they arrived in Mauthausen. They cleaned up and stayed a few days and 50 people went in a cattle car to Hanoven (?) and all survived. The trip took many days and the Army needed the cattle cars but gave it to them. They were given portions of bread and fat in Mauthausen. The living conditions were good. The prisoners built the cannons and were sent in a cattle car with only 50 prisoners to Hanovan. The trip took 3 or 4 days.

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File 2 of 2

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Summary

00:00 **Tape 2, Side A** Isaiah Henig discusses his time in Hanover where there was little food and it was bombed out so his factory (where they built cannons) roof was covered with a blanket. Even though some prisoners got killed, he was happy during the night bombardments. The camp and factory were just outside Hanover and they walked back and forth between them. Some of the prisoners died while walking so a wagon went along with them to pick up the dead were piled up. The sick were left to die in the wash rooms. The SS killed many people including German couples. The Commandant was a murderer and did not care if the Germans killed one another. When the Americans were on their way, the prisoners were marched for three days to Bergen-Belsen. This was the "death march" whereby the prisoners were killed if they could not keep up. Prisoners from other camps were also marched to Bergen-Belsen. Some prisoners lay dying and were not killed. When the English arrived, they hung the Commandant.

05:00 At the morning appel (stand up for attendance, etc.), the newly arrived prisoners asked the others about the conditions who responded that there was meat as cannibalism existed. The women were given some food but none were served to the men. There were two camps, one for men and one for women with a kitchen in-between. Some people ran for food and were machine-gunned. If 10 ran for food, 4 may return and other prisoners may snatch their food away. They would rob the kitchen for kol rabi vegetable. Isaiah would hold some food to his chest and had other food tied to his trousers. They would

take away the food he held to his chest but not that in his trousers so he had enough for two days.

- 10:00 The Jewish prisoners did not eat flesh; those that did eat it would die. He made a friend at the camp which was 80% Jewish. Earlier in Lauhitin (?) he was friendly with those who were 16 to 18 years old. When asked to clarify dates and names of camps, Isaiah replied that he was in Lauhitin in August 1944 and liberated in April 1945. He went by cattle car during the winter from Lauhitin to Hanover where he stayed two to four months before going to Bergen-Belsen for a week or 10 days. It was rumored that the bread was poisoned but it was stolen anyway. The Russians came and gave them two loaves of bread but one was stolen from him.
- 15:00 People were cut to pieces in Bergen-Belsen. The prisoners cut anyone they wanted as there was no commander and the SS did not care. It was an inhumane place with a Slovak kopel (barracks leader). Bodies were laying around. The English came close and wanted Isaiah to help move the dead bodies. He felt the work too hard so he hid under the bodies. The English caught his friend who had to drag the bodies to the women's camp where he was given food. Men either died or used cannibalism to live. Every two or three days, Isaiah would run to steal food as was not given any and was lucky that he was not shot. When the English liberated them, the prisoners were given food. The Commandant gave a Jew a ride through the camp before he was hung by the English. Isaiah recalled having no special feeling when he was freed though he heard one man cry. The British were not careful and fed their rations to the freed prisoners which killed them. The freed prisoners were now permitted to go to the kitchen. Ruchel from his town worked there and gave him a dish of good food but Isaiah knew what was proper to eat. One prisoner asked for the food and was told that he would die if he ate it but he ate it anyway and died the next day.
- 20:00 They did not realize that field rations could kill them. The prisoners were not let out of the camp due to the fear that they would spread disease. Anyway, they had no strength to leave. Isaiah felt that if he was let out that he would kill the Germans but he could not even walk. Some of the prisoners were transferred to the German barracks and others transferred to new barracks where they got food from UNWRA and Jewish organizations. The British tried to bury the dead who smelled so they had the German burghers do the work. Isaiah remained two weeks before being transferred to the new camp. By that time, he already knew what happened to his family. When they were in Staravsten (?) 50 people were deported and their clothes were returned so knew what happened to them. He recognized his father's clothes and realized what must have happened to his mother and sister.
- 25:00 When he was in Burkenau, he knew the prisoners were killed and smelled the gas and flesh so learned about the gas. He knew 5,000 gypsies were killed. He realized that there

must have been a crematorium near Starhavsten as the clothes came back the next day. Isaish lived in a single room in Bergen-Belsen until he came to the US with his wife. While studying in Munich, she visited cousins in Bergen-Belsen where they met. They got married in '51 and at the end of the year came to the US. After he became a US citizen, he returned twice to his hometown. He had no interest to return immediately as did not want to speak to the Polacks who thought that the Jews killed Christ.

- 30:00 While in Bergen-Belsen, Isaiah traveled to Munich, Belgium and other places. In Bergen-Belsen people claimed they knew nothing of what went on though the camp was open. People could not go near Auschwitz as it had mines to prevent them. Bergen-Belsen had a street at its end so people could go in and out. People claimed they knew nothing despite 10,000 bodies laying around. Isaiah did not feel like shaking hands with the Germans. The crematorium in Bergen-Belsen did not work so the bodies were piled up. He knew that he desired to leave Germany but did not know if he should go to Israel or to America. Many people went to Israel. Without his family, he had no idea what to do. Nothing interested him. Later, he made money by dealing legally or illegally. He had no aim in life. A Jew in the Consul permitted the Ukranians to go to the US but not the Jews. The Jew's father wished him dead so then he permitted the Jews to enter the US.
- 35:00 Isaiah went to him for a visa and was refused. He did not want to go to Israel as his friends got killed there. Now he feels he should not have been so selfish and gone, too. Isaiah's wife could not follow her profession as a pharmacist in either Israel or the US. They became accountants. His son was born in the US. Except for one cousin in Canada, Isaiah mourns for all his lost cousins, aunts and uncles. His uncle died from hunger but Isaiah could not help him as he had to help his mother and his sister.
- 40:00 Isaiah reminisces and speaks about Sula or Sarah Rivkah who was good hearted and helped her sister's daughter. His father left money that helped the town. Isaiah said he could not lie so could not make money. He still remembers his family. The Jewish community help him adjust to the US. He arrived in Worcester, Massachusetts and they gave him \$20 a week and offered \$30 to his wife but she wanted to work and would not take charity. She found work and Isaiah bought a chicken farm but lost money on it and had to give it up. Then he went to work for General Electric where he maintained machinery. Sometimes he worked overtime. People knew his past and did not question him about the Holocaust.
- 45:00 Isaiah's son was born in '58. In Starharvisten they were given soup and talked about how long the war would last—perhaps six months or a year. The bigger people could not last on just soup but Isaiah lasted for two years. He had friends from Talmud Torah who were Rabbis. One such friend was a leader in the camp and saw that Isaiah was strong from the soup. There was a girl in the camp who sometimes brought him food and ran

away. He would throw out the straw in the barracks and his clothes as they were full of lice.

50:00 The Chairman would get a better place to sleep. It was winter when he was in Mauthausen and he would take a bath or hot shower in the cold and survived. When he left, his mother gave him money. She divided her jewelry among the four of them. When he reached Starharvisten he had to take a bath so left the jewelry with a Jew who returned it but later it was taken away from him. Isaiah recalls that people wanted his rich uncle's gold. He made a pocket for it and someone stole it. The uncle went to a leader who had the gold returned. The uncle kept 1/3, gave Isaiah's mother 1/3 and the thief got 1/3. Once the Jewish police took away Isaiah's shoes as he was sick and someone else could wear them and go to work. When Isaiah recovered, he did not get his shoes back so wrapped his feet up in rags. Later he took shoes from the dead so he could work.

55:00 He tells that he made a mistake at work and the German supervisor slapped him but did not report it as was a decent person. He would have been killed if the Commandant was told. His friend was in the transport from Lauhiten (?) to Mauthausen and died along the way. He said he was happy to die and Isaiah should not cry for him. His friend was 19 or 20 and felt that he had suffered enough. In Starharvisten Isaiah helped people. He sold stuff from the warehouse where he worked to the tailor who sold it to Poles and made deals. Isaiah got soup and bread in the factory. Some dying people said to give food to other people but they died anyway.

61:00