

RG-50.120 #09 Tape 1 of 4

Ezra Ben-Gershom

- 1.02; 1.03-10.8                      Start. Family Background: He was born [as Feinberg] in Wurzburg. [shows photo] Germany, in 1922. He spent the first 14 years of his life in Heilbron, then in Cross-strehlitz in upper Silesia, where his father was a rabbi. He was the youngest son, with two brothers and a sister proceeding him His father had a Ph.D with broad general education, as was typical of German Jews. The children studied Hebrew and religion at home and synagogue but discussed in German. They identified with that culture, while living as orthodox Jews.
- 1.09-1.42                      He describes the initial signs of anti-Semitism and rise of Nazi power in his town and grammar school in the early 1930's. Jews' initial reaction to Nazi propaganda was as too 'undignified' to pay attention to. Religious Jews, more isolated and involved in their beliefs were slower to become aware and alarmed than Zionist/secular ones. He describes the different trends under these conditions. Real awakening came only around 1938, with people disappearing and the Kristalnacht riots.
- 1.48-2.16                      High School in Berlin. In 1937 he was sent to Berlin to study in a Jewish high school while living with a Jewish family. Restriction on Jews increased but he was able to roam the city on his bike in search of his chemistry – hobby materials and describes benign reactions to 'such an unusual interest for a Jewish boy'...But witnessing the riots of 1938 [krystalnacht], and an encounter with Gestapo interrogation shook him up.
- 2.13-2.30                      His father was detained briefly in Sachsenhausen Oranenburg [list was provided by Jewish councilmen]. His parents then moved to Berlin, hoping to arrange emigration. One brother was already there in semi-hiding in Nazi-like attire [shows photo]; another brother in forced labor in Posen.
- 2.31-3.25                      Zionist training group in Stacekelsdorf. To protect him, he was sent to join a group of young religious Zionists – who were training in agriculture preparing to emigrate to Palestine. ['Hachshara' training] in Staeckelsdorf, about 70 km west of Berlin. He spent about 20 months there [1939-41] working for German farmer [who were pleased to get free labor and gave them off Sabbath!] They were in relative protection, isolated from war and all other news with limited contact with their families. He describes his personal mixed involvement with group and its ideology [also on Tape 3, 5.32-5.42]. In May 1942, the group was ordered to prepare for transport [Umsiedlung] – not knowing where. He left them, tearing off his yellow star in the train.

- 3.26-3.40 Life in Berlin under cover. Upon his arrival, he did not register with the Gestapo. He changed residences constantly.
- 3.49 His 'registered' parents were deported soon after his arrival. He describes their gathering with other Berlin Jews – in the synagogue, and his and his sister's last meeting with their mother. One brother and his fiancée, sister, had permits to live in Berlin thru war-effort jobs. They arranged for his false identification papers.
- 4.00 He and sister moved to live with elderly non-Jew, shoemaker [an acquaintance of his parents].

END OF TAPE

Ezra Ben-Gershom Tape 2 of 4

- 4.06-4.50 Describes his typical days in hiding: roaming through Berlin's public places, museums, subway ['envied crocodiles; safety in the zoo'...] He managed to avoid attention through a combination of his Aryan look. His parents furniture were meanwhile moved to the ---- shoemaker's apartment [including the Jewish books!] But life there [1941-1942] became a riskier with Berlin: heavy bombing and visits from the shoemaker's soldiers-sons. Hunting for safe place was most consuming; physically and mentally.
- 4.24-4.33 Elaborates upon his thoughts and philosophy at that time and keeping the faith.
- 4.55-5.00 Describes 1942 Passover in Berlin hiding, heavy bombardment of Berlin and their ignorance of happenings elsewhere.
- 5.04-5.15 Eventually he found work with non-Jewish Social-Democrat engineer to whom he confessed his identity. This man [who didn't trust his own children not to betray Ezra] helped him leave for Vienna.
- 5.16-5-36 Vienna. He describes his trip to Vienna, his impression of that quiet town full of hospitals, Hungarians and smugglers. His difficulties in arranging crossing the border to Hungary.
- 5.36 END OF TAPE
- 5.40 Tape 3 of 4
- 5.42-6.08 Hungary. He describes his attempts to cross the border. Succeeded to reach Budapest in June 1943. Compares this city's liveliness to Vienna's

drabness. He describes the diverse Jewish and other refugee groups. He first hears about the annihilation of East European Jewry and listens to outside war news.

- 6.11-6.28 He describes his work with Polish children in the ghetto and other experiences in refugee-filled Budapest, where he also celebrates his 1944 Passover.
- 6.30-6.38 Escape to Rumania. With the Germans quick approach to the Hungarian border, he – with many others – try to escape to Rumania, where they were caught at the border. This is the first time for him in a detention!
- 6.40-6.59 He describes the diverse Jewish refugee population in this camp [most destined to Palestine] and reflects on his own rather different background. They were released with the help of Rumanian Jewish organizations.
- 7.03-7.008 Trip to Palestine. They traveled by train to Constaza; then on an overload and poorly equipped Turkish boat to Istanbul; then by truck convoy via Syria and Lebanon to Palestine; to be detained as illegal refugees in the Atlit camp. He describes the other refugees and how they differed from him.
- 7.10-7.35 When released, he chose to study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He also participated in the fighting during the war of independence. He describes his reactions to some aspects of the new taste of Israel and explains some of his reservations.
- EPILOGUE Covers Tape 3 of 4: 7.35 to its end at 8.45 and all of Tape 4 of 4. Some of its sections are not audible.

Ezra Ben-Gershon briefly describes the late years of his life and elaborates upon his thoughts and feelings about the Holocaust.

Being disappointed in the competitive and politicized life in the academic world [chemistry] both in Israel and abroad, he finally found satisfaction in the 1960s working as a laboratory chief in a pediatric hospital in Rotterdam, Holland. He established a family and children there which he raised in a Jewish/Hebrew tradition. In 1968 he published his Holocaust memoirs in German. This book was made into a documentary film, 'David'. While in Europe, he revisited Germany and connected with many Jewish and non-Jewish academics, theologians, former refugees, Germans, Soviets and others. Recently, when his grown children settled in Israel and he neared retirement, he joined them there. He continues to be actively involved in educating the world about the Holocaust.

His book was translated into English in 1988 and is currently at the NMH library.