

RG50.120 #097
MAIERCHIK, BENJAMIN

Tape I

- 1.01 Benjamin Maierchik, born in 1917 in Poland, in a town about 200 km northwest of Warsaw, in Wloclawek on the banks of the Visla. 11,000 out of a total population of 70,000 were Jews. The Jewish community was well organized: there was a Jewish gymnasium [high school], hospital, swimming pool, synagogue, orchestra, library, youth movements. All Jewish events centered around the high-school, and officially recognized school. Dual curriculum [Polish and Hebrew].
- 2.59 This was a beautiful spot, with lakes around, of which nothing was left.
- 3.16 Benjamin's father was a self-made man.
- 3.46 Mother had a formal education, and spoke Yiddish, Polish, German.
- 4.14 Benjamin was the eldest of 3 children. Sister was in Warsaw ghetto, Majdanek, and a witness to their mother's execution and their father's ultimate decline. Youngest sibling was Marek, eight years younger than Benjamin.
- 5.36 Father worked in a well known sausage factory, which he inherited from his father. The factory received a gold medal from the czar in 1880, in the exposition of Petrograd.
- 6.02 Father was also active in the Jewish community affairs. Home was not religious, but culturally Jewish.
- 7.07 Young children in the family went to a nursery school whose applicants had to pass an IQ test.
- 7.52 Mother was also active in the Jewish community, especially the nursing home.
- 8.28 Children received a Zionist education, and were active in the Hashomer Hatzair and its camps.
- 10.51 Father was from a wealthy family. Mother's family had all left for America.
- 12.10 Entrance examination to the Hebrew gymnasium allowed him to skip the first grade. Benjamin also played the violin, like his father. Benjamin was taken by father to hear Huberman play in Warsaw.
- 14.14 In the summer, the family left for 8 weeks to the thermal baths. Life was good until the beginning of 1930, when anti-Semitism was felt – mainly by the adults.

- 15.15 With arrival of Hitler, there were pogroms in Poland. One of them also touched Benjamin's city. Father was one of the victims, but he managed to track down the attackers, [who were brought to trial] before seeking assistance in the Jewish hospital for himself. This was in 1933.
- 17.44 Youth got organized in groups of self-defense, and there were street battles. The attackers were gymnasium students under Catholic influence.
- 21.18 Benjamin's uncle lived already in Israel. Correspondence from Poland about moving children to Israel.
- 22.04 Benjamin began studying Engineering to prepare for immigration to Israel.
- 23.13 Bund had great influence in Benjamin's city.
- 25.48 The idea of refuge in Madagascar was talked about.
- 26.41 Benjamin finished his studies in Warsaw . In 1939, during the home visit for Passover [this was after the invasion of Czechoslovakia] father stated that this proved the end of the Polish Jewry. General atmosphere against Jews.
- 29.30 Sister finished commercial school in Warsaw.
- 29.55 Benjamin's attempt to leave Poland for Israel [with the illegal immigration].
- 31.22 Impossible for a Jew to get a job of any degree.
- 34.26 Summer 1939 in Warsaw, it was difficult. War was expected. Only hope lay on France and England [Pact England-Poland].
- 40.03 Preparations for war. Favorable change of Poles toward Jews.
- 41.42 Benjamin was 21. On the second day of the war, transportation was paralyzed. He couldn't go back to his parents' house.
- 42.26 Sunday, Sept.3, England and France declared war on Germany. Masses celebrated by going to British embassy to thank the king. Then also to the French embassy. Their help never materialized. The high Polish officers of the army left Poland. 90% of the Jews who graduated from the gymnasium wanted to be recruited for the army as officers [were not allowed to serve].
- 47.43 Leaving Warsaw under constant German bombardment.
- 51.46 Trying to reach Pinsk, he joined a Polish artillery unit.
- 54.10 Unit decimated almost immediately. Benjamin and his friend escaped.

2.01.53 Fleeing toward Brest.

3.30 Encounter with 3 sisters from Mezerich in the forest. Arrival in Mezerich and connections there. Mezerich was 'no-man's land'.

6.55 Many refugees gathered in Mezerich.

7.57 On Yom Kippur, the Russians entered the city. They were greeted enthusiastically.

9.43 Disappointment at the Russian army.

12.13 Reports from German occupied areas of Poland.

13.13 After a few days, Mezerich becomes part of German occupation. Benjamin left for Brest-Litovsk (Brzesc in Polish).

20.54 Benjamin becomes the head of the mutual aid society there, in charge of the kitchen and of relatives' search.

22.00 Cousin arrives from Benjamin's town, and brings news that his parents [Benjamin's] have left it, on the way to join their son. The parents were helped on the way to Warsaw, by a righteous gentile.

24.42 Benjamin's younger brother – 14 years old – arrives in Brest Litovsk, too.

25.25 Parents never made it out of Warsaw.

26.40 Generosity of Jewish community of Brest to help the many refugees.

27.38 Benjamin worked as electrician of the local train station.

30.27 Benjamin moves to work in Lvov [spring 1940]. Brother Marek moves in with him. One jacket for the two of them. He was 14, Benjamin was 22. Brother's business was to sell playing cards.

32.54 Russians encouraged exchange of populations. Many Poles decided to return to Poland. Benjamin and his brother decided to stay. Russians gave them a choice: either to take Russian citizenship with restrictions, or be sent to camps.

34.46 Benjamin and his brother [Marek] were detained and taken to jail. 3 days later they were taken by train to an unknown destination. Benjamin requested for his brother to be freed.

- 50.00 Arrival in Volgastroi, main city Rybinsk confluence of the Volga, Vologda and Moscow rivers. Greeted by an NKVD Jewish general, Rappaport. The project consisted of uniting the Black, Caspian, Baltic, Murmansk and White Seas with Moscow, to build the main port of the European USSR. The project involved also the building of hydraulic power plants and dams. Benjamin worked in a section of the project with other hundreds of thousands, half whom died.
- 54.01 Refugees were divided into brigades looked over by two soldiers and a dog.
- 55.17 Brought to Turgenievo camp. Benjamin was in charge of the 11th brigade, composed of 70% Jews and the rest Poles. A youngster, 15 yrs old, was also in the brigade.
- 58.07 The camp's bath-house.
- 3.03.00 Description of Russian labor camp. Guards were Ukrainians. Goal: cut forests down.
- 25.32 People started to disappear, from illnesses, killings, drownings, etc.
- 27.34 Trade in tobacco, in the camp.
- 35.21 October, 1940. Attitude toward Poles improved, and after a few days they were taken away to another camp, the headquarters camp in the village of Periboro[?]. This is about 20 km from the city of Rybinsk.
- 36.41 The camp in the midst of an industrial area. The work of the inmates.
- 45.22 Theatre performances in the camp, and orchestra.
- 47.56 Benjamin's new job with better conditions: electrician of the camp.
- 54.54 Another job, in the cement factory.
- 56.30 Women's camp was adjacent to the men's camp. Benjamin's first encounter with Russian women: prostitutes, criminal, Mafiosi, college professors, actors, intellectual elite of the USSR.

TAPE II

- 4.00.00 Russian system of justice.
- 6.09 Women's jobs.
- 7.16 Criminal element tried to rule over camp.

- 14.00 Benjamin's reaction at hearing international news after many months. October-November 1940. Struck by good rapport between USSR and Germany.
- 16.00 Benjamin's working conditions. Contact with non-prisoners.
- 23.00 Friendship with another Jew in the factory, who was in charge of the compressors section.
- 28.32 Accident while fixing high tension wire resulted in severe burns on Benjamin's face and upper body.
- 33.33 He was accused of sabotage against the Soviet Union, to prevent the production of cement. Refused to sign the accusation that was to condemn him to 25-30 years of imprisonment.
- 36.00 Benjamin recovered completely from his burns.
- 37.18 The Poles were taken from the general camp to a secluded section: a ghetto. A new German brigadier was appointed. Benjamin was sent to work in general jobs.
- 39.00 The changes were due to the new situation. Germany had declared war on Russia. Conditions worsened. Jan.-Feb., 1941, 2 diseases were widespread among the Poles: scurvy and night blindness. Treatment.
- 44.05 Malaria broke out. June-July 1941. Nights were sleepless because of the light – no old people were left.
- 47.00 Specifics of work with cut-trees and their processing for wood. Benjamin's accident while working there, far from the camp. Treatment consisted of drinking a glass of fish oil a day.
- 53.03 Signing of pact between Russia and government of Poland in exile. Inmates given the chance to volunteer to the Red Army. Conditions improved. Option also given to travel to place of choice [except for a few locations]. Many wanted to go to Samarkand, Tashkent and other points in Central Asia [80%].
- 55.15 Benjamin's options, for himself, were the army in the Caucasus Valley. One of his ancestors served there under the czar's army. That place was not among the allowed places. They received permission from Moscow, and Benjamin left. Others joined him August 1941.
- 5.00.00 The parting. The message of Boris Davidovich – an avowed communist – to Benjamin; his advice on how to survive the war. Boris' disenchantment with communism, and his belief on Palestine for the Jews.
- 5.35 Upon arrival in Arzamaz, Benjamin decided not to join the Red Army, after all.

- 12.09 Arriving at the Caucasian Valley, B gets a job, playing piano for the railroad workers club.
- 13.53 Place was Eden, sociologically complex.
- 15.25 After less than a year, B found work in the metallurgical industry, as place was near copper mines.
- 19.40 B affected by jaundice; spent much time in the hospital. Upon healing, didn't have a dwelling or a working place.
- 24.57 Men had practically disappeared from the town. B was received very well, and managed to work in 4-5 places at the same time. He also pursued his electric work, privately.
- 27.28 Encounter with Jewish industrial commissioner in the city.
- 31.07 Upon German army's approach to the city, B was mobilized to help defend the city, digging trenches, etc. Curfew was in place.
- 32.17 Nina, the nurse, a Moslem.
- 33.50 Enrolled in Red Army, voluntarily, c. Sept 42.
- 36.17 'Invited' to join the Polish army, on the other side of the Caspian Sea. Arrival in Baku, on the way
- 37.40 Difficulty to get on a ship to cross the Caspian Sea. B succeeds. Crossing very stormy. Destination Krasnovodsk [in Turkmania].
- 40.00 The city. The dire stress, City's importance.
- 47.22 When pact between Poland's government in exile and Russia fell apart, it was decided that the Poles will go to Gran to join the western armies there.
- 51.45 B joins 3 other young men to carry suitcases in the port. Work was very profitable.
- 55.57 B managed to leave Krasnovodzk, in the direction of Samarkand – a few thousand kms away – by hiding on the underside of the train. Many died of hunger and thirst on the way.
- 6.00.00 Arrival in Uzbekistan.
- 4.27 Description of Samarkand.

11.00 Student in the Agronomic School.

15.00 Trouble finding work.

20.00 B finds work.

25.18 Rumors and stories begin to arrive about the situation in Poland for the Jews. This is 1942-43. Stalingrad period.

26.00 Words of appreciation of the Russian people. Cultural life despite it all. Stalin was the Russian's god.

32.00 Mobilization to the Polish corporal by the Russian army, seen as declaration of loyalty to Poland. Many Poles heeded the call.

34.26 May 8, 1943, B's mother appeared to him in his dreams. She 'called' him to enroll in the Polish corps. That was the date B's mother was murdered by the Nazis in Majdanek. B's sister witnessed her execution.

6.38 B's reflections on the Russian people.

6.46 B's Jewish feelings didn't awaken until a Polish colonel in the army called him 'Jid'.

47.00 At one point, a group of Jews asked B to join them to go over the border to Afghanistan. Didn't succeed. Those who passed [?] were immediately taken and executed by NKVD.

TAPE III

53.00 A large number of young people answered yes to mobilize to the Polish army. B's motivation was to fight. They arrived by train, after many weeks, to the shores of the river Oka. The Poles, even the communist and democratic didn't want to accept the Jews. The great majority were sent back by the Polish army.

56.39 B introduced himself as an engineer, of Polish nationality and religion of Moses. The conditions put to him were to change his first name, and his father's name. B refused. Because his profession was essential, he was asked to sign a declaration by which he 'volunteered' to the army. He agreed, and was accepted.

7.00.00 Very few were able to speak Polish. B was sent to an accelerated officer's course.

1.49 First battle was the most cruel, on the border of Russia-Belarus, Lenino, near Mogilev near Smolensk. On October 12, 1943 [the eve of Yom Kippur].

- 2.38 They already knew about the Holocaust, from wounded soldiers returning from the front, etc. On the day of battle, B was put in charge of the artillery in his battalion.
- 4.17 The rabbi Hirsch Zavad. His story in the battalion.
- 6.03 The rabbi's example and influence on the Jewish soldiers fighting the Germans. The Poles said that these soldiers were fighting in suicidal conditions. The battle lasted 2 days, in which 150-160 Jews were lost. Capt. Hibner, a Jew, received a Hero of Soviet Union award for his heroism.
- 8.14 The losses were such that B couldn't even form a watch squadron. There were 1,000-1,200 Jews in a division of 14,000 men.
- 10.46 B was sent to a military academy for retraining, from infantry to armored corps in Rybinsk, same place where he had been a prisoner in camp 1 ½ years before [when he was burned].
- 11.23 Meeting with the camp's Hungarian doctor who had said that no treatment was possible for B's burns.
- 12.43 Camp was now prison for Germans.
- 13.39 Nina.
- 14.15 Among 100 students, B finished first in his class. He was transferred to the first armored corps, where he assumed more and more responsibilities as a commander.
- 15.15 B's corps participated in the conquest of Warsaw; later Poznan.
- 16.52 The story of Jan Zelcovich, one of 5-6 Jews in B's battalion [?].
- 18.50 Entering Berdichev. No sign of Jewish life – cemetery desecrated. Synagogue housed horses. No Jews in Zhitomir, either.
- 20.10 Arrival in Poland. Prior to that, no anti-Semitism in army. Upon entering, Poles considered that army the enemy, the communists. They wanted to be liberated by the western Polish army.
- 22.03 Polish anti-Semitism rampant.
- 22.25 The liberating army [Russian-Polish] mobilized the local Polish youth – which immediately unleashed anti-Semitic actions inside the army.
- 23.57 B protected the Jews in the army.

24.31 The army was 5 km from Majdanek. They saw the chimneys but they didn't know what had happened there.

30.00 Note from a non-Jewish Pole in B's birth place: only sister came back.

35.28 After May 1945, B and the other Jews in the army ponder what to do, as they no longer have a home to return to.

B decides he will go to Palestine.

40.47 Near end of war, B's tank was hit. He jumped out, but was injured by fragments of metal. Supply officer in B's battalion [Pinhas Kaplan], prayed for him. Heavy losses in that battle. B left the hospital and went back to his battalion. On 8 May, end of war, B's battalion was by the Elba. He met the Americans, and among them a Jewish lieutenant colonel. B's reflection on the fact that Jews all over the world fought the nazi enemy.

59.37 On May 15, 1945, B participated in the victory parade with American, Russian and Polish armies near Prague, in Melnik.

8.00.00 After victory, B, who had fled the hospital before his time, fell ill with peritonitis. He was hospitalized in Krakow, in critical condition until June 1946. There was no medicines to help him, and surgery also did not help. B's sister showed up, and helped him greatly.

4.10 B's reflections on the heroism of the victims. His violent disregard for the notion that Jews went like 'sheep to the slaughter'. His opinions about the establishment in Israel, how it regarded the survivors. B's opinions on the ghetto fighters, partisans, and others, who denied participation to those who were not affiliated with a specific youth Zionist group.

19.00 Upon his discharge from the hospital, the pogroms in Kielce takes place.

20.30 B goes to Warsaw, to meet the AKA [which was headed by a communist Jew, Victor Gurosz [?], whose father had been the editor-in-chief of the Moment newspaper in Warsaw –July 26, 1946.

21.18 He offers B to be the Polish governor of the Baltic area. B refused, and requested to be discharged, and to go to Palestine.

23.32 B was brought to Palestine in 1948, by plane, and was declared an expert – to fight in the war o Independence.

- 25.46 Polish Jews – 200,000 of them – participated in the war against Hitler, 500,-- Russian Jews did too; 60,000 British Jews; out of 100,000, there were 10,000 S. African Jewish soldiers.
- 27.16 Without political clout, more than a million Jews participated in the war against the Nazis.