

RG-50.120 #118
JACOB POLITZER 3 Tapes

- I
- 1.00 Born 5 April, 1930, an only child, in Silesia on border of Moravia, 60 km from Cadca and Auschwitz. Family could trace itself 400 years back. Father was lawyer and head of Jewish community of 5,000 inhabitants, 800 Jews. Went to Jewish school. Mother was much younger than father. Had nannies who spoke only German to his Czech, and Slovak he spoke only outside the house. Education in general and languages in particular stressed by family, including English and French. Father had been an officer in Austro Hungarian army. Mother had advanced socialist tendencies. Jewish community was wealthy and modern. Strong Jewish institutions but not orthodox. Jews were part of Czech society. Large extended family - uncles and cousins, up to over 50 people. 1930-39 Czechoslovakia partitioned. Beginning of restrictions on Jews. Mother's leftist politics resulted in her imprisonment in 1940/41. She escaped to Hungary and hid in Budapest. In Feb. 1942 a relative from Bratislava [Slovak Capital] tells father of rumors that local Jews are going to be sent to Poland [Lublin/Majdanek].
- 1.13 Interview recaps to 1939[?] Belonged to youth movement Gordonia Macabee. The other movement was the leftist Hashomer Hatsair. Had strict upbringing, had to earn his own pocket money by cleaning ice in front of Jewish stores. Reinforced his survival skills. Parents traveled a lot. In 1936 they even visited Palestine. Father was offered to buy land in Haifa, but declined... Parents never dreamed of leaving Czechoslovakia. Mother instilled athletics in Yakov's education.
- 1.30 Although Jews knew about Jewish laws in Germany, they still did not believe the war would happen - 1938-40 liberal Czechoslovakia of Thomas Masarik. Until 1942 they didn't believe their life was in danger. Restrictions on Jews came gradually and thus not too threatening at first, in spite of antisemitic incidents and rulings. Heard only of labor camps in Lublin. 1941/42 first escapees from Auschwitz passed by the town, but most Jews did not believe most of their stories. Still no plans to escape. Heard clandestine BBC radio and believed the war would be soon over. False sense the storm would pass over them, in spite of introduction of yellow Jewish star to be worn by Jews. The star made Yakov feel 'special' and different, but not adversely - he felt pride. Considered himself still a Czech of the Jewish religion.
- 1.52 Describes Jewish community and institutions - father was leader of the community - and the fact that after the war everything was destroyed by the Communist regime, including the cemetery. Between the Nazi and Communist regimes, no trace is left of Jewish life in his town.
- 1.56 Talks about his mother's leftist politics and father's membership in the Free Mason movement [local temple]. Yakov had to guard both secrets.
- 2.04 His mother's arrest - he couldn't even visit her in prison. Jews were not free to move around, but they managed the visit when a special emissary came from Bratislava

and warned of imminent transport of Jews to Lublin/Majdanek. Father passed on the information to family first and rest of community. Decision had to be made - the moment of truth - spring of 1942 - to escape. However, no one of his extended family chose to escape. They stayed behind and were all exterminated in different camps.

- 2.13 The escape - talk was still only about labor camps, not extermination. Still, all relatives and most members of community found 'good' reasons not to leave, mostly financial. Town had a false pastoral atmosphere. A handful of refugees from Poland came through town, news did not register. Letters which came from Poland and Germany indicated that 'all was well'. This was part of Nazi campaign and effort to hide the truth of the camps from the world. Just before entering the gas chambers, Jews were forced to send postcards describing the 'positive' conditions in the 'labor camps'... Remembers the hasty preparations for escape. First thing was to remove the yellow Jewish star. Father concentrated the immediate family but, as said before, every single one found a reason to stay behind. So at midnight 5 April 1942 father and son tried to get on a train to southern Slovakia and then to Budapest and join mother who was hiding there. At the age of 12, Yakov says it was the end of his childhood. Had to switch to a freight train [after bribing the conductor], hiding in the engine. Arrived in Budapest without any papers. Jews, Hungarians, in Budapest still had no problems. Met his mother but lived separately. Mother had false gentile papers. Yakov was put in an institution for retarded youngsters as a hiding place, again through bribing the head nurse to hide a normal child. Became the pet of the nurses, and the errand boy.
- 2.38 Describes the ongoing 'industry' and black market of forged papers and bribery. These papers kept his parents alive. Father was caught once and sent back to Slovakia, but managed a second time to escape and returned to Budapest again.
- 2.47 Meeting with father - learned of progress of the war - victories and advances of the Allies, the Russian front, etc.
- 2.51 Meetings with mother were the emotional ones. Mother confided to Yakov that she did not intend to go back to his father. Yakov decided he would stay with his mother after the war.
- 3.00 Beginning of 1943 a new law passed in Hungary regarding kids under 16 - they would have have to be sent back to Slovakia provided they had relatives in Hungary. Father's plan was to present him at the police station and tell he had no parents [lost them when crossed the border] and then would be sent to grandparents. Yakov was sent to a local detention camp for a couple of weeks until grandfather came to fetch him and took him to Mukacheve, to his grandparents' beautiful home, surrounded by love and care, but no direct contact with his parents.
- 3.13 Yakov had to present himself once a month at the Mukacheve police headquarters, apart from this ruling he was quite free. Went to local school and had a normal life of a teen-ager. Still no Jewish star required.

- 3.17 Tens of thousands of Jews in Mukacheve still did not know of events and exterminations in the east [Poland] since 1939. This was his best year.
- 3.26 Hungarian Jews believed Horthy [Hungarian president] would always protect them. Believed the Soviet army would arrive soon, as well as Western allies, and in a matter of months the war would be over. This went on until March 18.1944. Young Jewish men were sent to forced labor, but it was considered by the Jewish community as a necessary and 'bearable evil' - instead of serving in the Hungarian army, Jews were sent to dig ditches and 'help' in defense projects. Hungarian Jews still did not believe Auschwitz was an extermination camp, even when they got off the trains.
- 3.36 Description of large Jewish community in Mukacheve, including first encounter with orthodox Jews.
- 3.40 18 March 1944 - the Germans enter Hungary, and immediately collected all files regarding Jewish alien residents. Yakov's first encounter with SS officer's interrogation of his parents whereabouts. In spite of beatings for 3 days, Yakov does not divulge information regarding his parents in Budapest. Father's attempt to move Yakov back to Budapest fails.
- 3.50 Beginning of transports. Grandfather tells Yakov where he buried the family jewels and gold [in back yard]. Jews are instructed to limit luggage to 15 pounds each. Yakov packs his very valuable stamp collection. First concentration camp [labor camp - brick factory] - Yakov is 'adopted' by a group of young Jewish women who see him as a child who had been beaten up by the SS. A couple of days later, together with grandparents they are loaded on transport Trains. Railroad tracks led right into brick factory.
- II
- 4.02 Description of railroad cars - approx. 100 people to a car. Train had about 30 wagons, i.e. 3000 people to a train.
- 4.08 A stray bullet kills a woman, a Hebrew teacher, sitting next to his grandfather. Body is thrown out of the train unceremoniously. Terror on train - first realization of what's in store for them. Dehumanizing of Jews starts.
- 4.16 Train is loaded 'efficiently' - leaves the station. 'Eichmann's efficiency - a sense of order is clearly exhibited.'
- 4.20 26 March 1944 - arrive in Auschwitz, Birkenau - 3-4 day trip. Still believes they are going to labor camps, children would be going to school. No notion it is an extermination camp.
- 4.26 "Separation" children and women to one side and men to another. Yakov pretends he's only 12 and joins his grandmother. A Jewish kapo tells him to say he is 16 and join the men. Yakov runs over to grandfather's line.

- 4.32 Men over 60 are removed from line. Grandfather was 65. They were all sent to the gas chambers. Selection was done by Dr. Mengele.
- 4.36 This confusion of the different lines actually saved Yakov's life. He is now in a barrack with other men. Never saw his grandparents again.
- 4.42 He is sent to a kinder block. A few hundred youngsters from all over Europe. Because of his knowledge of different languages, Jacob becomes translator for the block's doctor [also a prisoner/Communist].
- 4.50 Outbreak of measles in the kinder block. The infected were sent to the gas chambers. First time he realized this was an extermination camp. Jacob was saved by the German doctor, although he also contracted measles. Was sent to a prison's hospital.
- 5.04 One of Jacob's governesses, Blanca [a Jew] spotted him. She had already a good 'position' in a special barrack named 'Canada'. Jacob was smuggled under piles of clothing into Canada. This block was responsible for dealing with the luggage belonging to the people on the different transports. Jacob joined a 'gang' that asked for different valuables in the luggage [jewelry, etc.]. These valuables were exchanged for food by bribing civilian women in the camp.
- 5.27 In the D lager [camp] Jacob met special order kommando prisoners who worked in the crematorium. Every few months these workers themselves were exterminated, as part of the Nazi effort of destroying any evidence of the killings in Auschwitz. Causes of death were disguised as dysentery, pneumonia, etc.
- 5.38 Dr. Joseph Mengele, chief medical officer in Auschwitz was always interested in 'exotic' diseases and conducted in infamous experiments. One of his assistants was the Jewish Prof. Epstein from Prague. Jacob contracted a vascular disorder which attracted Dr. Mengele's interest.
- 5.45 The Sonder kommando [crematorium workers] told of cases where they recognized members of their own families among the victims they were ordered to exterminate.
- 5.47 Jacob tells of extermination of an entire camp of gypsies - entire families [spring of 1944]. Remembers when entire Jewish families arrived from Theresienstadt and sent to the gas chambers. Used to envy them their special conditions in Terezin - the fact they stayed as family units - until he found out of their end.
- 6.02 The Selections were done in an efficient and orderly fashion on a weekly basis - driven by the need to get rid of as many as possible and empty the camps fast enough to receive the new transports.
- 6.10 Summer and fall of 1944 - slow down of transports from Hungary; Horthy did not allow the Jews from Budapest to be sent to Auschwitz. The ghetto in Lodz was destroyed

and the camp was filled with Jews from Lodz and the rest of Poland. Fall of 1944 - uprising in Slovakia - camp was filled again.

- 6.12 Beginning of Allied bombardments. Tells of praying for the Allies to bomb Auschwitz.
- 6.15 Rumors and news of the Front. Even heard of D day and the invasion of Normandy. Heard also of the attempt on Hitler's life [end of July 1944]. First rays of hope.
- 6.21 Heard of uprising in one of the crematoria in Birkenau. Sense of pride in the special sonder kommando who stood up to the Nazi machine, though they all perished in the attempt.
- 6.32 Tells of a couple of sexual attempts on him in the barracks, but managed to resist them.
- 6.38 October 1944 - rumors spreading that Germans are going to close the camp. Large Selection - Dr. Mengele sends him to the group destined to the gas chambers, then suddenly changes his mind and pulls Jacob out and send him to a group going to forced labor in Sachsenhausen, 60 km from Berlin. They see Berlin bombed out by Allies. The Germans planned to speed up the executions in order to prevent any survivors' stories of what took place in the camps, then to destroy the camps entirely.
- 6.55 An encounter with a german shepherd sends Jacob again to a hospital for 3 months. Although he was sent to a labor camp - he stayed in the hospital [maybe due to his tender age] til January 1945 - due to pulmonary complications.

Describes the Death March - end of Feb. Stragglers were shot point blank . Managed to continue and survive the death march by sheer will power and stamina. After 3 days the march arrived in Gunskirchen - a small village in Austria. Survivors of the march were pushed into a few huts in the middle of the forest - hundreds to a hut. Many of the survivors died there of famine and disease.

III

- 7.05 Humane and caring conditions in Oranienburg, the hospital. Among patients were French and Soviet patients. The hospital was adjacent to the aerononia factory where Jacob was sent to. Winter - 1945 - Russians are advancing towards Berlin. Germans aim at destroying all remaining Jews in order to erase all testimonies of extermination machine.
- 7.18 Medical staff generally took pity on the teenager and nursed him to health, until end of Jan. 1945 - when an order came to send him on a transport to Mauthausen with all the remaining Jews.
- 7.24 Large numbers of Jews arrived in Mauthausen. First signs of German killing machine collapsing. No barracks, only tents in middle of February, no food, no blankets. Many die of hunger, disease and frost. People huddled in piles to keep warm. All saw this as last stop before the 'final solution'. German aim was to ensure that no Jews would

survive the camps so as not to encounter the Allies and tell of the horrors of the camps.

- 7.35 Total famine, disease, typhus, lice - with hundreds arriving every week. This is when Hungarian Jews were finally sent to the camps.
- 7.56 Tells of cannibalism - Jacob saw bodies who were missing parts of their flesh - he assumed they were eaten by some of the inmates. Stayed in this camp a few weeks.
- 8.01 In mid-April the German guards flee and abandon the camp. Jacob and two Hungarian Jews [father and son] decide to escape in the middle of the night. On the main road they encounter a jeep with 3 American [black] soldiers who just left them on the road. Three hours later they arrived in a small Austrian town, broke into a deserted home searching for food. Found plenty and stuffed themselves to a point that the older man, the father, simply dropped dead. American army was already in the town.
- 8.11 Jacob and the Hungarian surviving young man managed to steal a car, fuel and battery in order to drive to Budapest. That car was taken away from them by other, stronger survivors.
- 8.14 American army is starting to organize the survivors. Jacob is sent to a hospital and German prisoners have to take care of the sick, surviving Jews. Stayed the one month in Austria.
- 8.20 Jacob is transferred to the Soviet section in order to go to Bratislava-Slovakia. Takes matters into his own hands and decides to 'hitch' a ride back east. Finds this ride on a Soviet tanks heading East. A few hours later he finds himself in the Hungarian town of Sopron and feels he is 'home'. Here he finds Jewish institutes - he gets ID card and some money. Gets on a roof of the train to Budapest and goes in search of family. Finds an uncle who tells him his mother died and father was looking for him in Czechoslovakia. Mother died while trying to escape Russian soldiers who were going to rape her and other women - one day after they had liberated them!. She is buried in Budapest. Jacob says: 'this is when I ceased believing in God'. Father, in Bratislava, heard from a liberated inmate that his son had died, but they finally met in Bratislava and went home together. Jacob went back to school. In 1947 he took his father to Auschwitz to show him where he spent the war years.
- 8.38 Life in School - antisemitism continues. Students did not care to hear about the war and what happened to the Jews.
- 8.40 1948 - Communist take over Czechoslovakia and Jacob decides to go to Israel. Father wanted to stay in Bratislava. Jacob gets involved helping Jews to immigrate. 12 June 1949 Jacob arrives in Israel. From the port, Haifa, he is sent to Nir Ami kibbutz in the Negev. Left the kibbutz, too much of an individualist to stay in a collective farm.

- 9.03 Speaks in English. The American side of his family is called Pulitzer [like the prize]. Says that because of the war experience, he decided to live where he would never be part of the minority any more. 'Only Israel a Jew can fight for his own life.' Re tells his story in English, in a shortened - 30/40 minute version.