

WOLKOWITZ, Shlomo
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5 Tapes

Abstract

Shlomo Wolkowitz was born in eastern Poland, in the village of Jagielnica (Yahil'nytsya), where half the population were Jews. The family moved to Lvov, where he graduated from a technical high school. He went to Zlochev (Zolochiv), and stayed with his paternal uncle until they were taken with other Jews to a former fortress. Jews were beaten bloody as they entered, but Shlomo stood erect in defiance, and was not hit. Germans fired sub-machine guns at the Jews. Shlomo curled into a ball, while murdered Jews fell on him. The Shema echoed off the walls.

At night, he dug his way out from the corpses. His uncle's family also survived and reunited with him in Zlochev. Soon, he assumed a false identity as a Pole and moved to Voronyaki (now in the Ukraine), a village settled by Ukrainians who had helped in the prison massacre.

He found fulfilling work as a farmer but needed to discover the fate of his immediate family. He sent anonymous letters to them. Eventually, his parents responded, and asked him to return to Lvov. At that time, someone suspected he was a Jew, so he left for Lvov. Shlomo worked in his father's tobacco factory, and taught himself how to forge identity papers.

He had viewed himself as a Polish citizen, a patriot, and assimilated, until the Germans arrived. He never recovered from Polish neighbors' "treason" against him. They called him 'zhid' (kike).

He describes the first "action" by the Gestapo and the Ukrainian police in summer 1942, deporting some 300 Jews, and how his mother and siblings were saved. In autumn 1942, another "action" took the rest of the Jews.

A work camp for Jews was established in Jagielnica. The camp, run by a German Jew, was rumored to be better than others, and nearby Jews paid bribes to enter it. Shlomo maintained the machines, and closely watched the Gestapo. He described testifying in war criminal trials of Tomanek, Kellner, and Bretschneider.

Shlomo escaped twice from the work camp. Ukrainian police caught and tortured him, but he escaped both times. He helped 30 Jews escape from the work camp and hide in a sewer.

Eventually, he joined the Russian army. After the war, he stayed in two DP camps, and later worked in Salzburg with the Joint's escape program, escorting Jews across borders.

He and his parents immigrated to Israel. He got Yad Vashem to bestow Righteous Gentile status on Ludwig Zemrod, a German officer who had helped to the Wolkowitizes. Shlomo worked for an Israeli company in Germany.

Shlomo complains that Israel and the world basically abandoned the Jews during the war.

Tape I

- 1.01 Shlomo Wolkowitz was born in eastern Poland, the village of Jagielnica (Yahil'nytsya), in the vicinity of Tarnopol. His father worked in a cigarette factory and was appointed technical manager. Up to and through World War II, he worked there in the same capacity. Shlomo talks about hardship under Russian rule, the population transfer of Ukrainians to Russia and Russians to the area where he lived.

Shlomo left the village after completing elementary school, and went to study at a technical high school in Lvov. He was in Lvov when the war started.

Shlomo's parents, his younger brother and sister, and his extended family stayed in Jagielnica (Yahil'nytsya).

- 1:04 When war broke out, Germany immediately took over Poland. Because of the secret pact with Russia, the Red Army took over eastern Poland. Despite the NKVK regime, it was preferable to live with the Russians than with the Germans.

The prohibitions, and life during that time, left a painful impression on the young Shlomo.

- 1:08 War started between Germany and Russia in the summer of 1941. Shlomo had successfully completed his studies by then, and he was appointed a tutor to help those who failed the exams.

The Red Army fled in disarray. Heavy bombing on Lvov began the next day. After debating whether to leave Lvov and return home, he and a group of other young former classmates decided to enlist in the Red Army. They were not accepted because of their young age. The group then decided to follow the Red Army, in the direction of Tarnopol and Kiev. Shlomo got close to home that way. The direction they chose turned out to be the worst possible one, as the German bombers attacked the fleeing Russian army.

- 1.14 After four days, Shlomo and his friends approached Zlochev (Zolochiv). They were dehydrated, hungry and extremely tired. A detachment of the Red Army forced them to go back to Lvov, under threat of death. After traveling 5 km, they entered a barn and fell asleep.

- 1:22 The next day, the group tried again to enter Zlochev, and succeeded. Shlomo went to his paternal uncle's house. Two days later, the Germans entered Zlochev.

After a couple of days, all the Jews were told to gather at the town's square to be assigned to work. Shlomo and his uncle decided not to go. None of the organizations were in place in the village and so the uncle concluded that the Germans would not know who showed up and who didn't. While the uncle was in his backyard garden, a German accompanied by local Ukrainians broke into the house and took the entire family to a former fortress that had been used by the Russians as a prison for political prisoners.

- 1:28 They joined the caravan of Jews being led there, and were already surrounded by the Gestapo. The entrance to the prison on a high hill was through a long staircase. On both sides of the staircase stood Germans with wooden sticks. They hit every Jew until blood spilled from the wounds. Shlomo decided he wouldn't cower or show his fear. He stood erect, which surprised the Germans, and they let him pass untouched. At the top of the stairs, he looked around. Inside the fortified walls, there was a vast courtyard full of bodies. It turned out that there were those of the political prisoners, who had been shot, en masse, to make room for the new arrivals. Many Ukrainians who had been suspected by the Russians were among the dead.
- 1:35 The Russians had requested the Germans allow a week to liquidate the Jews, and were given a free hand. The Jews were taken to the prison to take the bodies of the murdered Ukrainians to be given a proper burial by collaborators with the Germans.
- 1:43 The women had been lined up, but by the end of the day, they were let go. Meanwhile, the Germans had surrounded the pit where Jews were working, and had pointed sub-machine guns at them. The message was clear: the Jews were going to be liquidated.
- 1:47 Shlomo looked for an escape, but there was none. He survived the first spraying of bullets by lying on the ground, in a "ball". During the second volley, other murdered Jews fell on top of Shlomo, and covered him. Despite the din of the shooting, the Jewish prayer "Shema Israel" echoed off the fortress walls.
- 2:00 Shlomo, realizing he was alive, but the Germans would probably cover the death field, tried to get up. Twice he lost consciousness. Suddenly, an "earthquake-like" sound caused the sub-machine guns to stop. Torrential rain began, with thunder and lightning. Shlomo thought that the prayers had finally reached God, and salvation was, perhaps, at hand.
- 2:06 Shlomo felt feverish. He dug his way out from under the bodies covering him, and let rain wash over him. Now, the silence was pierced only by the last agonizing sounds of the dying, and night finally came. Shlomo managed to dig himself out from under two layers of bodies. A full moon illuminated the devastation. He thought, "This moon is wasted on all these poor victims."
- 2:12 He decided that it was not yet time for emotional relief. He found a way out through the side of the hill. A few other survivors followed. One of them said he knew the way back to the village (Zolochov).
- 2:18 He arrived at his uncle's house, where all had survived. Shlomo describes the reunion and life there. Shlomo stayed in his uncle's house another two weeks.
- 2:28 Shlomo thought that what happened in the prison was harbinger of things to come. Not many agreed with him. His plans were to live as a Pole, under assumed identity, in a nearby village. Meanwhile, the Germans established their institutions in Zolochov, including the Judenrat.

- 2:31 Shlomo decided to move to Voronyaki, a village settled by the Ukrainian collaborators who had helped the Germans in the prison massacre. He thought he would be safe there. He was “adopted” by one of the few Polish families. There was no doubt that Shlomo, fair-haired and fair-skinned, looked like a Pole. He created a false identity.
- 2:41 Work at the farm was physically demanding but very fulfilling. Shlomo was haunted by not knowing the fate of his immediate family. He dared to send anonymous letters to his parents. Occasionally, he visited his uncle, who was assigned work in a bakery.
- 2:48 After some time, someone suspected Shlomo of being a Jew. Also, he received a letter from his parents, asking him to return to Lvov. Shlomo decided to leave on a truck passing by on its way to the tobacco factory.
- 3:02 He describes leaving to go back to his village.
- 3:08 He describes being detained and tortured by Ukrainian police.
- 3:30 He describes his escape from prison and return home.
- 3:40 He describes police arresting him again but then releasing him, through his father’s connections.
- 3:51 He shows a model of the police building where he was detained.

TAPE II

- 4:04 His father earned a good salary, and he helped the community, Jews and non-Jews.
- 4:06 The non-Jewish population envied and resented the Jews. The town was backward. The Catholic Church exerted a great influence on the population who hated the Jews for supposedly killing Jesus. Ukrainians saw Jews as enemies. Almost 50 percent of the population of Jagielnica was Jews.

- 4:12 Shlomo considered himself a Polish citizen, despite the cruelty of his peers in school in Lvov. His assimilation to the society at large, and his Polish patriotism, came to an abrupt end after the Germans came in. He never recovered from what he thought was treason by his Polish neighbors. They began to point at him, and call him “Zhid” (Kike). He describes anti-Semitism in the Polish population.
- 4:18 Shlomo reflects on the establishment of formal relations between Poland and the State of Israel.
- 4:26 He talks of the Judenrat in Jagielnica: his opinion; how they were appointed; their functions. He mentions names and misdeeds of Judenrat.
- 4:50 He begins to work in the machine department of his father’s tobacco factory, with the blessing of Ludwig Zemrod, a German officer who was appointed as supervisor and who took Shlomo’s father to work.
- 5:03 An idea began to crystallize among the Jewish youth: to change their identities to Polish or Ukrainian ones. Shlomo was in charge of forging the documents. He learned how to do this from an old encyclopedia. Shlomo made a set of documents for himself. However, he never used them because he felt he was in a privileged place of work. The documents helped many Jewish females; but males were not so lucky because circumcision was a final give-away.
- 5:09 The first “action” by the Gestapo and the Ukrainian police was in the summer of 1942. The destination of the first deportees, some 300 Jews, remains unknown. He describes the “action” and how his mother and siblings were saved. Everyone believed this was a once-in-a-lifetime event, he says.
- 5:19 In autumn 1942, another “action” took all the rest of the Jews.
- 5:20 Before the second “action”, Zemrod’s wife came to Shlomo’s house to look for his mother. With Zemrod’s blessing, the entire family was moved to the factory, and provided with housing there. He describes this.
- 5:25 The second “action” was carried out simultaneously in all the neighboring shtetls, in order to keep the news from spreading.

With the second action, Jagielnica became “Judenrein”, and a work camp was established on a soccer field not far from the tobacco factory. The camp was meant for the few Jews remaining in the village. For some reason, the rumor spread that this was a better camp than others: Jews from neighboring villages paid bribes to enter the camp. A German Jew was in charge of the camp. Its population grew to hundreds.

- 5:27 Zemrod hired some Jews in his factory, even though their abilities couldn’t be used to produce tobacco. They provided services (tailors, furriers, etc.) for the Germans. The Jewish work force grew to 30. They asked Zemrod’s permission to sleep in the factory

compound. The request was accepted. The Jews moved into abandoned storage structures. The Gestapo considered this group to belong to the work camp. Zemrod had excellent ties with the village's Gestapo high command because his storage facility contained an infinite amount of cigarettes and vodka.

5:30 Thanks to Shlomo's work in maintaining the factory's machines, he could walk around the compound when the Gestapo officers would come for their vodka and tobacco. He looked carefully and closely at their faces. This enabled him to identify them later during the war criminal trials. Shlomo was also friendly with the compound's Polish armed gate guards, and asked them for the Gestapo men's names, after they left.

5:39 The Jews in the factory were free to visit the work camp. There, Shlomo made friends with a group of youth. They decided it was important to flee. The first order of business was to obtain weapons.

5:40 The factory Jews in the neighboring village were taken prisoners, as was Shlomo's father and others. Shlomo describes the cruelty. Zemrod called the Gestapo commander to free Shlomo's father, who was released and sent back to the factory.

5:51 After this experience, Shlomo sees there is no hope to survive there and his attitude changes.

Shlomo believes that the failure of the Jews during that dark period was to be convinced by the masterful German psychological manipulation.

5:53 Shlomo buys a revolver so he could kill any German who would try to take him away. He always carried the gun under his overalls. His friends in the work camp were also obtaining weapons: revolvers and hand grenades. The strategy in the work camp was to create a diversion in case the Germans came to liquidate the camp, and enable all inmates to escape. Shlomo felt he was in a different position, and could not share strategies with fellow Jews in the factory. He lived in fear that his weapon would be found.

6:00 The work camp is liquidated. Shlomo helps the 30 Jews [implies all its Jews, but in 6:40, he says a few Jews were still working there] in the factory hide in the sewer. He escapes to the forest. At night, he returns to the factory compound to find all 30 Jews alive and well.

6:16 He is confronted by Zemrod, who asks him if he has a weapon. Shlomo denies it. Zemrod suggests he get one for self-protection. Shlomo describes Zemrod as a "good" German.

6:25 Shlomo says he practiced shooting his revolver in a noisy building in the compound. Huge water pumps provide the noise.

6:27 Shlomo uses his pass-key to enter the German living quarters, and listens to Polish news on the BBC. This was the winter before Stalingrad.

- 6:31 He provides the news to others, including Poles.
- 6:35 He talks about difference between the Gestapo and civilian Germans who worked with them and helped them.
- 6:39 He talks again about the work camp being liquidated. Most of the people died there. A few were killed trying to escape. The Germans buried all the victims in a common grave they had prepared in advance near the work camp. He felt it was clear that the fate of the 30 Jewish factory workers was sealed.
- 6:40 Shlomo took it upon himself to keep watch over the gate; He trained his younger brother to observe as well. Kominovsky, a Volksdeutsche supervisor, hinted to them to escape. They hide in a sewer near the factory. The Gestapo declared the factory "Judenrein". They didn't know that a few Jews were still working there. (In 6:00, "the 30 Jews" implies all its Jews.)
- 6:55 In February-March 1944, Germans took over a whole building within the factory compound, and made it into a storage for vehicle parts for the Wehrmacht. Zemrod released Shlomo from maintenance work, and then he worked for the Wehrmacht in the parts building.
- 6:59 He could listen to the news in Polish, in the presence of the two German officers who were very friendly toward him. The Russians were approaching. The Germans suggest that Shlomo and his family to move westward with them.
- 7:03 Shlomo's family decides to steal out of the compound to a neighboring town, Saluvka [not found in *Where Once We Walked* or Internet], to join very close Polish friends. Many people had begun leaving the factory. His family leaves, but Shlomo stays for a couple of days.
- 7:06 Russians enter. When Shlomo's father had said goodbye to Zemrod, the father thanked him and said, "We will meet after the war." (Here, Shlomo weeps.) The next day, while Shlomo was still in the compound, he heard heavy artillery, bombs, etc. Then, after a quiet period, the Russians entered.

TAPE III

- 7:11 He discusses his feelings at the time of liberation. A Jewish Russian soldier asks him to point out collaborators. He sees Dermansky (?) but does not give him away.
- 7:20 Shlomo returns to his parents' house, which a Ukrainian family had taken over. A Russian soldier entered, raped the daughter, and verbally abused Shlomo.
- 7:29 His parents return to the house. The Germans retook the place and the Wolkowitz family escaped to Chortkev (Chortiv). A sister remained in Saluvka.

- 7:33 Russian soldiers ask him to guide them to Jagielnica. On the way, he picks up his sisters and takes them with him. The Germans retake the city and the Russians withdraw. He hides his sisters with Polish neighbors. After a bombardment, a group of disheveled SS men enter. They think he is a Pole and ask him to cook for them. He describes them and what he terms their murderous actions. They stay ten days. Then Russians liberate the city. His parents return.
- 7:52 Shlomo volunteers for the Russian army, and is assigned to the engineer corps, in a unit stationed in the city. Later, Shlomo realizes that his commander, Zazlovsky, is a Jew. The army takes over a large metal factory in Chortkev, and puts Shlomo in charge. The workers, Ukrainians, didn't like being managed by a Jew.
- 7:54 The factory produces replacement parts for Russian army vehicles used on the southern front.
- 7:55 The front stays in place for three months before an order to advance. Shlomo is transferred to "mobile" units meeting mechanical needs. On the way, he stops at Zlochev, where he checks whether the prison's common grave had been preserved. It had not. He asked the town's military mayor to place a marker there, and the mayor promised it would be done.
- 7:58 Shlomo and his unit arrive in Krakow two days after the city had been taken. He asks to be released from the army. Zazlovsky agrees, and Shlomo stays in Krakow. Many Jews begin arriving. He looks for a job.
- 8:02 He shows repatriation papers and is appointed manager of a razor blade factory named Toledo. As part of his job, he goes to Prague to buy stainless steel for producing the blades. He describes negotiations involving black market money.
- 8:20 He is told of a pogrom in Krakow. He contacted the UB Polish secret service, and they detain the perpetrators.
- 8:24 He describes life in a DP camp in Steyr, Austria, in the American zone. People live in the former homes of SS men, who were now prisoners and cleaned the homes.
- 8:29 He is transferred to the DP camp Braunau, where he starts a driving school sponsored by UNRRA.
- 8:33 He moves to Salzburg and joins the "Escape" movement (Bericha) financed by the Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee). He describes their activities taking Jews across the borders. He does that for three years.
- 8:39 He immigrates to Israel after the State is established. He becomes a partner in the Israeli bus company "EGED" and stays there for 18 years.
- 8:44 He works for three years as a representative of an Israeli company in Germany. His

parents arrive in Israel shortly after him.

- 8:46 He describes his encounter with the Zemrod family after the war and gets Yad Vashem to honor them as Righteous Gentiles.
- 8:55 He gives evidence in three trials in Germany: Tomanek, Kellner, Bretschneider. Describes the trial of Tomanek.
- 9:05 Describes the trial of Kellner.
- 9:26 The trial of Bretschneider.
- 9:30 He talks of friendship with a group of German law students, who learn about the Holocaust from him.
- 9:48 He describes his reaction to what he views as the Israeli opinion that the survivors were guilty of going like sheep to the slaughter.
- 9:56 He complains that Israel and the world at large basically abandoned the Jews during the war.
- 10:04 He describes his life in Germany working for an Israeli company. He talks about friendly relations with Germans who were friendly toward Jews and Israel.