

Ben-Dror, Ya'akov  
RG-50.120\*0186  
3 Videocassettes  
In Hebrew

**Abstract:** Ya'akov Ben-Dror was born in Rotterdam, Holland in 1926. His family fled to the outskirts of the city before the Nazi bombardment. On May 10, 1940, the Germans attacked and Ya'akov's family left. Ya'akov smuggled papers on behalf of British intelligence to free France, and on his fifth trip was caught and sent to Westerbork and then on to Birkenau. He was registered as a Jew and as a political prisoner. He became a "pipl." He was transferred to Auschwitz and was put in the Canada Commando. In this position he saw the arrival of many trains to the camp, and the horrid state of the passengers. He was later returned to Birkenau, and was transferred to Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen, and Buchenwald. In 1945, he and the rest of the commando were loaded in a cattle car and moved around to avoid the bombing by the Allies. This was where he was when the Russians liberated him. He worked as a translator and clothing distributor after the war. He returned to Holland and found some surviving relatives. Eventually he left for Palestine, arriving there in 1946 and working with the Armed forces.

1:00:54 Ya'akov (VonHelder) Ben-Dror was born in Rotterdam in 1926. The family kept traditions at home but were not very religious just like three fourths of Holland's Jews. His maternal grandparents were observant. Ya'akov's mother, who suffered from heart disease, died when he was 11. Ya'akov spent much time with his grandparents. He went to synagogue often, sang in the choir, excelled in his studies at school and was sent to the rabbinical seminary in Amsterdam in 1940 when it was impossible to continue in the high school in Rotterdam.

1:02:58 Ya'akov had two younger brothers: Harry (Herzog) who was two years younger, and Arthur who was four years younger.

1:03:47 His family lived in the center of the city, not in the Jewish neighborhood. Ya'akov's street was destroyed by Nazi bombs, which caused a huge fire and killed 10,000 people. Ya'akov's father heard on the radio warnings that Germans were coming and decided to flee with his family. They took their bikes, along with a few belongings, and found refuge at an aunt's house on the outskirts of the city. Ya'akov's family and other refugees found shelter in a big storage room in that house.

1:06:21 Ya'akov's father was a merchant and a journalist for the Rotterdam News, *Pslatt*. He was a socialist and contributed to the party and was active in politics. He represented the Socialist party in the city council and was a journalist in Spain during the Civil War from 1936 to 1937. As a

consequence, the Dutch authorities took away his citizenship papers and he waited for a long time to get them back.

- 1:08:30 When Ya'akov's father was still in Spain, his mother passed away. The children were temporarily put in a Jewish orphanage in Rotterdam.
- 1:09:00 He describes the orphanage.
- 1:10:00 Ya'akov's father remarried and his children were returned home. The children continued in school.
- 1:17:00 Refugees from the east (Ostjuden) began arriving in Holland, fleeing Germany. The Dutch Jewish community was not keen on welcoming as their appearance was so different (they wore kapotas , pe'ot, shtreimels) from theirs.
- 1:28:36 Dutch Jews did not believe the refugees' stories about pogroms, persecutions, etc., until they suffered it themselves.
- 1:33:46 Ya'akov describes the youth movement in Zichron.
- 1:37:18 On May 10, 1940, the Germans attacked. Ya'akov's family left. The city took care of their food and water and, after a few days, they were brought to Den Haag. They were taken care of by the Jewish community.
- 1:45:00 Ya'akov left then for Amsterdam. His younger brothers continued to go to school. Ya'akov's father started a small factory that made kitchen tools from old tin cans.
- 1:55:00 Ya'akov's father had many friends. A close British friend befriended Ya'akov and while he was studying at the rabbinical seminary asked him to smuggle papers on behalf of the British intelligence to free France. In order to do that, Ya'akov had to register as a Hitler Youth and he was given the appropriate uniform. The microfilms to be smuggled were put in a condom, which then Ya'akov inserted into his rectum. He made four such trips to Paris.
- 2:10:06 He was caught on his fifth trip and sent immediately to Westerbork and from there to Birkenau. It was July 1942.
- 2:20:03 Ya'akov describes sport activities there.
- 2:40:10 He talks about his arrival in Birkenau.
- 2:56:45 He describes the work day.

- 3:00:00 He talks about the food in the camp.
- 3:13:49 He describes his transfer to Auschwitz where they put him in the Canada Commando and he went right to work. He observed Mengele's selection. Ya'akov's work was to empty the pantry cars of the arriving trains and bring the products to the SS storage in the camp by the Arbeit Macht Frei gate. The products were never distributed to the deportees. Easy access to food helped later on. The conditions doing that work in the winter was harsh. He describes stealing food, valuables, etc. He talks about his work day and the rest of his day.
- 3:32:00 He describes roll calls and the disposal of bodies.
- 3:36:00 He talks about the selection of people who were already too weak to work. Ya'akov had to transport them to the crematorium. They knew where they were headed and went singing Ha Tikvah (the Jewish national anthem). It was then that Ya'akov promised himself to avenge them. Some of the victims cried out: "Jews, avenge us!"
- 3:40:00 He talks about his loss of faith in God while in Auschwitz.
- 3:47:26 He talks about the "Canada" camp and that it was a goods storage place.
- 3:48:09 He describes the "Czech" camp as the women's camp.
- 3:54:00 Ya'akov recaps the camps he was in and how long he was in each of them. Ya'akov's first camp was Auschwitz and he was there for six months. Then he was taken to Birkenau. It was there that he worked in the collection of the food and materials that arrived in the transports.

## **Tape 2**

- 4:01:16 He talks about Auschwitz between 1942 – 1944.
- 4:03:16 Every transport arrived with its roster of names given by the person in charge of the train to the person in charge of the camp.
- 4:05:13 Transports arrived in Auschwitz, that is, to the ramp that was located in Birkenau.
- 4:12:52 Ya'akov describes his own train trip to Auschwitz.
- 4:29:00 Because of his detention in a Paris jail, he came into Birkenau as a Jew but was also under the classification of political prisoner.

- 4:30:18 There was an underground in Birkenau that recognized Ya'akov's last name. They had been students of his father and knew of his classification as a political prisoner. Those students were mobilized in the camp to register the newcomers. They were responsible for changing Ya'akov's name. When Ya'akov was sent to other camps he wasn't given alternative names or numbers.
- 5:01:57 Ya'akov became a "pipl," a personal assistant to the Kapos. Because of this he was not taken advantage of for sexual favors. His Kapo was a German communist who was much older than Ya'akov.
- 5:10:40 He describes a day in his job as a Kapo's assistant.
- 5:23:55 In the winter of 1942, the Germans ended the "pipl" job.
- 5:24:52 The next day, Ya'akov and twenty other Dutch Jews were taken out of the roll call and sent to Auschwitz. There they were assigned to work in the Canada Commando, already in existence. They were assigned to the night shift. It was a good place to work.
- 5:28:59 He gives a description of the job unloading food that arrived in the transports and taking them to storage.
- 5:58:00 He describes the organization of the commando to greet a transport. He describes a day of that work.
- 6:00:00 He describes the role of each group waiting for a transport: the doctors (Mengele and Hess), the Canada Commando, the SS regiment, the Ukrainian helpers and the Croatians too.
- 6:06:03 He describes the arrival of a train filled with patients and staff evacuated from Aperluser Bos (?), the mental sanitarium in Holland. Many Jews who had been hiding at the mental hospital were sent directly to the gas chambers.
- 6:12:40 Ya'akov describes another transport where all the people had passports and visas to South America in their possession.
- 6:15:00 He describes the arrival of a train from Sosnowiec. When the doors were opened, everyone inside was dead. The few babies who were still alive were thrown by the SS against the train. Ya'akov's commando was in charge of recovering all the corpses.
- 6:26:35 Family members would kill each other for a piece of bread.

- 6:28:00 Cannibalism occurred in a transport from Ravensbruck. Women ate dead people's flesh.
- 6:31:57 After six months in Auschwitz, Ya'akov returned to Birkenau with the entire commando. They were put in Camp B, which they helped build. It was perhaps mid-year 1943. Ya'akov stayed there until October 1944, first in Camp B and then in the Canada camp.
- 6:36:26 He describes the Greek transports. They brought halva in barrels marked "soap". The inmates lived on that for three months. The SS didn't know what it was and left them alone.
- 6:47:00 He talks about the black market with the local Polish workers.
- 6:54:00 He describes the mass graves.

### **Tape 3**

- 7:03:00 Ya'akov fell ill with typhoid fever. His friends carried him to his place of work where he hid in piles of Dutch blankets. He tells a story of an SS student from Vienna named Heinz, who looked the other way while Ya'akov was sick and then also provided him with a bottle of 96% proof alcohol and some pasteurized Dutch milk. Ya'akov recovered from the typhoid fever.
- 7:13:00 He describes the supervision of the SS.
- 7:16:30 Ya'akov was appointed a Kapo's "pipl," to the camp commander's wife.
- 7:19:37 The camp commander's wife didn't know or believe that the killing of Jews was taking place in the camp.
- 7:31:46 He describes a visit of the Mufti from Jerusalem, including the crematorium.
- 7:34:10 He talks about his work on the day shift.
- 7:38:23 They left Auschwitz in October of 1944 and were transferred to Oranienburg.
- 7:42:45 After liberation, when the Russians judged and executed SS who had been in Auschwitz, one of the SS men was Heinz, about whom Ya'akov had testified. However Heinz was let go. Ya'akov was holding a weapon in his hand for the first time in his life. The weapon weighed 32 kg. He killed 72 SS.

- 7:44:20 He describes the selections.
- 7:45:52 Since Ya'akov belonged to the elite commando Canada, they received better food and were not in jeopardy to be "selected" for extermination. But their status also obligated them to do other chores, such as collect all the bodies that were taken outside of the blocks. This they did on Sunday which was their day off.
- 7:47:11 Most of the people who arrived by train to the ramp did not know what fate awaited them.
- 7:47:20 There was a rebellion of one group of women who were taken to a crematorium and ordered to undress. When they refused, a rebellion ensued and one of the women took the weapon from an SS man and killed several. The rebellion was soon squelched. Ya'akov thinks that these were the Jews who already held visas to go to South America.
- 7:48:37 The "Family" compound lasted at most six months in the Czech Camp.
- 7:55:00 Inmates heard the news coming from the front from the Polish workers in the camp.
- 7:57:42 He describes arrival in Oranienburg, the location of a plane parts plant. Their stay there lasted a month. Conditions at the airplane parts plant were more humane.
- 8:01:14 He describes living conditions in Oranienburg.
- 8:03:05 He describes walking to another camp, not too far - Sachsenhausen. He describes work in the Ohrdruf camp from which they traveled every morning in open trucks to the construction site where they prepared grooves for the bombs. They had dug tunnels inside a mountain for that purpose. It was November or December 1944 and very cold. Ya'akov always tried to be in the middle of the truck because the people around the edges would arrive to work frozen and dead. He talks about the desire to survive.
- 8:05:00 The mountain where the grooves were prepared was surrounded by kilometers of heavy equipment trains, railroads, trucks, etc., which the inmates had to move constantly to make room for more equipment brought in from all over Germany. The equipment was there to protect the tunnels in the mountains. The Americans bombed all equipment to smithereens. The inmates were then transferred to Buchenwald.
- 8:12:17 Attempts of new inmates to flee ended when they were caught and hanged.

- 8:13:00 He describes his arrival in Buchenwald where they did not work. The inmates there were housed by nationalities. He found the barracks shared by the Dutch and the French. Leon Blum was on the French side, although Ya'akov never spoke with him. The Dutch inmates would get food parcels from the Red Cross and they shared it with Ya'akov and his group. The others were not Jewish. It was the beginning of 1945.
- 8:16:13 There were groups from which some people were chosen to be transported. They were sent to Mauthausen and shot on the way there.
- 8:18:37 On April 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>, Ya'akov's group was transported from Buchenwald. Among the remnants of the Canada Commando in the train were 5,000 Russian prisoners and the orchestra from Auschwitz. They all knew it was the end. 120 people were crowded together in a cattle car. People began to die from typhoid fever and dysentery.
- 8:21:40 The open car did not protect them from a typically cold April. An open train loaded with fresh produce for the front stopped alongside the train of the evacuees. The hungry inmates managed to get some food, but it was difficult as guards were standing guard with sub-machine guns. Thousands died there.
- 8:24:01 Another train stopped alongside Ya'akov's. It was a transport of women, eating meat. They were coming from Ravensbruck. They had been starved for so long that they began to eat the organs of the women who died on the train.
- 8:25:40 Passing a small train station, they noticed the flag at half mast. When questioned why the flag was hanging that way, they were told that the Fuhrer had died.
- 8:26:17 The train kept on going back and forth trying to avoid the Allied bombing and on May 4<sup>th</sup> they saw themselves surrounded by Russian armored divisions. The Russians were there to liberate the inmates. Out of the 120 inmates on the train car, some 100 died on the way. Another 13 of the remaining 20 died after liberation. Ya'akov weighed 32 kg. They arrived near Terezin. Four people had to remove the 19-year-old Ya'akov from the train. The survivors were taken to Terezin, to the small fortress. They were fumigated and given new clothes and beds. They were fed slowly and after two weeks they were on their feet.
- 8:31:06 Ya'akov volunteered to be a translator. He and other officers toured the villages around the camp looking for hidden SS officers, with the help of Russian soldiers. After a few weeks of this work, Ya'akov was assigned to headquarters where he was in charge of receiving and distributing

clothing to the refugees, and also obtaining trains to repatriate them, when possible. For six months he was in Prague, in the same office as Count Bernadotte, who headed the Red Cross. He had saved many Jews.

- 8:37:00 In September-October, Ya'akov returned to Holland where he found some survivors in his family. He became a supply officer for the Joint and after a few months, he joined a group going to Palestine. Prior to that, he helped soldiers from the Jewish Brigade to locate children adopted during the war by non-Jewish families. Once located, the children were taken to France, to an Aliyat Hanoar compound and from there to Palestine.
- 8:45:16 The survivors of Ya'akov's family were aunts and uncles on his mother's side. No one survived from his father's side.
- 8:50:00 Ya'akov arrived in Palestine in 1946. His was on the last ship allowed into Haifa. They were sent to Atlit, where he was a manager in the post office. They were freed three months later and went – as a group – to kibbutz Mishmarot. Ya'akov immediately joined the armed forces (the Palmach did not want him because he was a refugee). He rose in the ranks of the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) to Lieutenant Colonel.
- 8:58:37 Ya'akov did not tell his story for 50 years.