

Kapitza, Avraham
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Two Videocassettes
In Hebrew

Abstract: Avraham Kapitza was born on June 6, 1925 in the town of Tykocin [Tiktin]. He describes life in Tiktin before and during the 1941 massacre of the Jewish population of Tiktin – including the deaths of his family, and his escape with a friend to the town of Knyszyn. In 1942, he fled again, this time to Jasionowka. He ended up in the Bialystok ghetto, before eventually arriving at Blizyn. He eventually was moved to Birkenau, where he would have been killed because he was infected with typhoid fever, had it not been for a Jewish commander. He was moved from camp to camp, spending time in Sosnowiec and Mauthausen, before arriving at Gunskirchen, where he was at the time of liberation. After the liberation, he ended up near Salzburg, where he married; his family immigrated to Israel in 1949. He revisited Tiktin in 1988.

- 1.00.41 Avraham Kapitza was born in the Bialystok district, in the town of Tykocin [Tiktin], on June 6, 1925.
- 1.1.11 Before the war, the town's population was 75% Jewish. All communication was in Yiddish. Only in school, they did speak Polish. There was a large synagogue built 400 years before the war. It still stands and was converted into a museum. Also, there were many houses of study and houses of prayer. Around Tiktin, there were other Jewish shtetls. What made Tiktin different was that it had existed since 400 years before the war, and it had been bigger than Bialystok.
- 1.4.30 Before the war, and until the death of Pilsudsky, Poles and Jews lived in harmony. In 1933, the Poles started bothering the Jews, at first in small ways.
- 1.5.23 Avraham's parents had three boys and three girls. Avraham was the second oldest of the six. His parents worked hard, growing vegetables for sale in Bialystok. They also bought things in Tiktin and re-sold them at a small margin, in Bialystok.
- 1.7.28 In 1939, the father was drafted into the Polish army, and he returned after the war.
- 1.8.05 Avraham studied in the cheder at first, but in later years he attended a Polish public school half a day, and the other half he spent in the cheder. Then he went to a Yeshiva.
- 1.8.50 Many leisurely hours were spent in the Narew River, which crossed Tiktin. All kids knew how to swim, dive, etc. They bathed in the nude, and there were secluded places for boys and girls.
- 1.9.36 His oldest brother moved to Bialystok when he finished the local school. He went to

study at the ORT school.

- 1.10.17 Although Avraham's parents were not ultra-orthodox, his father prayed three times a day. They were surrounded by more observant Jews, sporting beards and side locks.
- 1.11.26 Avraham recalled going to the mikva with his father and older brother. It was located by the river. There was running water there [which was not the case in the homes], and a steam bath. Women went to that same mikva during the week.
- 1.12.29 Avraham's family went to the tailors' shul; there were many others, according to the professions.
- 1.13.16 Cholent pots were put to bake in the town's bakery ovens. He described the sight and smells when families retrieved them before Shabbat, on the way home from shul. After lunch, kids ran to the river. In the winter, they skated there.
- 1.14.40 Anti-Semitism, which was prevalent before the war, got worse with the advent of the Nazis.
- 1.15.23 He describes Zionism and ties with Israel as well as youth movements.
- 1.17.14 When Poland was partitioned, Tiktin fell under Russian rule [after 1939] and stayed that way for two years. Life was peaceful, and Poles were afraid to openly express their anti-Semitism - for fear of the Russians.
- 1.18.16 His father came back from the war.
- 1.20.50 The communists didn't allow the youth movements to continue to be active; however, they didn't interfere with the praying or with the holiday celebrations. The yeshiva was closed, though.
- 1.22.38 Tiktin had been in existence for 18 generations, and had a reputation for its well-known rabbis and scholars.
- 1.23.22 Avraham's paternal grandmother was handicapped. She broke a leg and it remained broken for lack of medical attention. She walked with a cane. When she fell and broke the other leg, she was in bed until her death, many years later. Avraham was her main caregiver. He believes that the fact that he survived the war and was able to have a family was a reward for having taken care of her.
- 1.24.33 His maternal grandparents lived in another town, 16 km away. Every Thursday the parents would take the children to visit the grandmother there. They went by horse-drawn wagons. He describes going with his father to Bialystok.
- 1.27.25 Wine for Passover was made at home. Recollections of the holiday are described.

- 1.30.00 He describes the work done in the summer producing seeds for sale and in the winter, fattening geese.
- 1.32.34 He talks about his siblings.
- 1.33.15 The Germans arrived in town in 1941.
- 1.36.00 Avraham recollects the first German invasion, two years earlier. There were refugees from the German side of Poland. Life for the Jews began to deteriorate with the arrival of the Germans, who were helped by the Poles. There was murder, cruelty, beatings. People were afraid to leave their homes. It was difficult to make a living. Avraham's family was self-sufficient.
- 1.42.00 Only three Germans administered Tiktin, with the help of the Judenrat.
- 1.47.28 Rumors began spreading about the digging of huge pits on the outskirts of the town. No one suspected annihilation. There had not been killings until 1941, and the Germans were, to the Jews, the good people with whom they had fought together during WWI.
- 1.48.04 The three Germans in town, who had ordered boots and garments from the Jews of Tiktin, assuaged the fears about the rumors being spread.
- 1.50.24 Six weeks after the Germans entered in 1941, all Jews were ordered to gather in the market square. Only those who couldn't walk were spared. Half the Jews went, as they had been reassured prior to this that no evil would befall them. The others fled with their families, but they were eventually caught.
- 1.51.37 The family wore their Shabbat's best. They suspected they might be taken to a ghetto, according to rumors. They also took some food. They closed the house, and went to the market square.
- 1.54.05 Avraham's father sent him home while the 'registration' proceeded. The father decided that maybe they would be robbed in the meantime. Avraham was to watch the house. He didn't want to go, but a friend of his, Moshe Kafka, offered to accompany him. They had walked away about 50 meters when the Germans arrived in force, and encircled the square. Avraham and his friend hid in Avraham's backyard where there were trees and shrubs and from where they could hear the Germans giving orders. Men, women and children were separated. The men were sent on the road toward the pits. They began to sing Hatikva. Avraham could hear them from his hiding spot. The women and children were loaded on trucks and taken to the same place where the graves had been dug.
- 1.58.00 By evening, Avraham and his friend left the hiding place, and found the Polish police impounding the livestock of the Jews, according to a written list. Nothing befell the two friends. They started walking around the town, where there were still

1,300 Jews who hadn't obeyed the orders. The Poles told all of them that their families had been taken to the ghetto, and that the next day all the remaining Jews could be gathered and taken to join them. They decided to do so, not knowing that all had been murdered already! That night, families decided to sleep in groups of 4 or 5; they were afraid to do so in their own homes.

- 2.01.49 At day break, Avraham and his friend saw one of the families getting ready to flee. They decided to follow. The men of that family had already been taken. They fled in the direction of the Jewish cemetery and at the cross roads, a woman demanded that they split. Avraham and his friend went towards the forest where there were other young people whose parents had been taken. Not too long after, they heard shots nearby, followed by agonizing shouts. They understood that the Jews were being killed and thrown into the huge graves that had been dug. Avraham and his friend, Moshe, fled on.
- 2.08.00 Going back to the house, a good neighbor told them to flee on to Knyszyn, where Avraham's grandmother lived, and that she was untouched. That neighbor also confirmed the killing of the 3,500 Jews of Tiktin. When the boys had heard the singing of Hatikva, it was because the Germans had demanded that they sing it, followed by a German song that ended, among other things with, 'the spilled Jewish blood would assure German victory.'
- 2.09.56 Many of the Poles, who were taken to cover up the graves, told the story about the slaughter.
- 2.15.00 They arrived in Knyszyn, where the Jews couldn't believe at first the fate of the Jews in Tiktin. Avraham lived there for nine months. They all wore the yellow patch. Moshe went to live with another neighbor. The boys were afraid to meet because they could have been identified as having fled Tiktin. After a while, Moshe decided to go back home and bring some clothes. He was caught, killed and thrown in one of the huge graves that had been prepared for the Tiktin Jews. He tried to explain why the Tiktin Jews were liquidated, unique among the other shtetls around.
- 2.26.00 One day Avraham woke up to the sound of trucks. He woke his aunt up, and they came out to see that the Jews had been already rounded up. They fled to the home of a gentile across the street, and hid in the straw of the barn. Peering out, they saw the Jews being led to the market square and from there to Treblinka. It happened at once in all the neighboring shtetls. It was summer 1942.
- 2.29.12 The only shtetl left was Jasionowka.
- 2.37.00 Only one German administered Jasionowka, and forced the local Jews to accept the refugees. The Judenrat mediated between the Germans and the Jews.
- 2.38.49 Bialystok also remained intact for the time being.

- 2.38.54 In the thick of winter, in 1942, the Germans suddenly surrounded Jasionowka. The Jews were taken to the train station in Knyszyn, loaded into cattle cars and sent to Treblinka. Many fled the fast moving train by jumping from the high windows of the cars. Avraham convinced his aunt and her friend to jump. All those who could jump, did. Many were killed when they jumped. For an entire week, Avraham looked for his aunt. Then, he decided to go to the Bialystok ghetto. Avraham stayed there for three weeks. Germans carried out 'actions' to gather 20,000 Jews for work. Avraham hid with a family that gave him shelter.
- 2.3.01.20 He described consequences to the Jews who turned over other Jews to the Germans. Avraham fell sick with typhoid fever. He was put in isolation in the hospital.
- 2.10.00 He describes his work detail within the ghetto.
- 2.13.00 He talks of the modest underground in the ghetto, of which Avraham learned only after the fact.
- 2.16.00 In order to survive, there was smuggling of goods into the ghetto.
- 2.19.00 The Bialystok ghetto was liquidated.
- 2.20.43 Avraham and the family hid in a bunker for a while. They heard some shots and understood that there was a rebellion under foot. But it was short-lived. Avraham and his family decided to give themselves up, and left in the next to last transport, together with the ghetto's firefighters. They were taken to the train station.
- 2.23.25 A selection occurred before boarding the train cars: the able men who could work were put in separate cars from the others.
- 2.24.00 People noticed that the train was going in the direction of Treblinka. Fleeing the train was out of question as Ukrainian guards were stationed between cars, and over them. The last car carried armed Germans to liquidate anyone who may have survived on the tracks.
- 2.25.33 When they arrived in Treblinka, the engine pulled the cars with old women and children into the camp. The others were left and he describes the turn of the rail engine. The men were taken to Flugplatz, a camp near Lublin.
- 2.33.51 He worked in Blizyn which was near Skarzysko Kamienna. Hunger and death were prevalent. He describes tricks used to survive.
- 2.41.00 He describes the roll-calls.
- 2.41.57 He describes a day in the camp and its organization.
- 2.56.39 The German commander of the camp was exonerated after the war. He was infected

with typhoid fever, which he contracted from the Jews. The German hid that fact; otherwise the sick Jews would have been summarily executed. Thanks to that German's intervention, when the Jews moved to Birkenau, they were spared a further selection and also Mengele's selection because he said that the Jews worked hard and they were the commander's Jews. No one went to the crematoria. The German's name was Dell.

TAPE II

- 4.02.35 He describes relationships. Avraham says that thanks to the special friends he had at each station, he survived the war.
- 4.08.18 Avraham got his inmate number there, but it was not tattooed, only printed on his clothes.
- 4.09.26 Before Blizyn was liquidated, the children were taken away from their families.
- 4.10.10 1,500 prisoners from Blizyn arrived in Birkenau.
- 4.14.04 He describes his arrival at Birkenau on July 3, 1944, and the processing of the prisoners. This time, the number was tattooed on his arm.
- 4.16.00 There were exchanges with other camps in the area. Those about to die were brought into Birkenau, where they were lead straight to the crematoria, and able-bodied men were sent in their places. Avraham managed to avoid being sent out. After a month, he was sent to Camp I. During that month, they didn't work. It was impossible to find extra rations. There were suicides among the most educated inmates.
- 4.22.00 If the ovens were idle, because a fresh transport had been delayed, new 'fodder' was chosen amongst those already living in the camp.
- 4.23.14 Avraham was 17 by then, but considered himself a child.
- 4.27.14 In the D-camp they already had to work.
- 4.31.20 He describes the liquidation of the gypsy camp.
- 4.34.26 An uprising burned down two of the crematoria. The people responsible for it were chased down, and punished by hanging, beating, etc.
- 4.36.20 Marching music was played by the orchestra of inmates when people went to work, and when they returned.
- 4.40.00 He describes the Sonderkomandos.
- 4.48.00 Avraham saw that he would not survive that camp. Fleeing was impossible. When

people from another camp came looking for a locksmith, Avraham volunteered to become one. He was sent to Camp 3, in Buna Monowitz. All inmates there worked for the German war efforts.

- 4.53.41 Bombings and air raids of the allies were common. The Germans had good bunkers to hide in but not so the Jews.
- 4.54.16 Locksmiths were needed in Sosnowiec, and Avraham and a friend volunteered to go. There were altogether 1,000 inmates there, mostly French Jews. They all worked for the German war machinery.
- 4.55.23 The front approached, and Sosnowiec was bombed. The Germans decided to liquidate the camp. Avraham was there only two months. The Germans loaded all their products on horse-drawn carriages and the Jews served as the horses. It was the month of December. The Jews were under-dressed and undernourished. It was a death march which lasted 13 days. Only 300 arrived. Afterwards, they were transported to Mauthausen, although they didn't know it then. They arrived almost dead. They couldn't descend the train on their own. They were loaded on trucks and brought inside the camp.
- 5.05.12 Mauthausen was a camp for multiple nationalities.
- 5.10.30 The Jews were moved to a neighboring tent camp, where conditions were progressively worse.
- 5.12.39 There was eating of human flesh which was available after a bombing of the camp.
- 5.13.20 He was moved again, this time to the Gunskirchen camp, in the midst of a forest, after a 70 km walk near Austria.
- 5.14.08 Hunger was prevalent. French Jews taught them to eat live snails found on the side of the road.
- 5.16.27 Hungarian Jews, who had arrived before, were 'in charge' of the camp which was surrounded by a fence, where there was an SS man watching every 20 meters. The Hungarian Jews had taken all available spaces in the barracks. The Polish Jews - all skin and bones - had to stay outside. It was April, and it was rainy and muddy. Many died and the corpses stayed there. In order not to lie on the mud, they would drag corpses and lie on them.
- 5.22.00 When UNRRA came to distribute rations, Avraham remembers he was the last one to have a turn at a sardines can. Suddenly, everyone ganged up on him to take the food away, and someone yelled 'the Germans are gone!' That was liberation, and Avraham was left with the can in his hands.
- 5.25.20 On May 5, 1945, American soldiers liberated the camp. Avraham said this was his

second birthday.

- 5.25.55 His group raided the German food storage. When they exited with the food, Hungarian Jews attacked them and took it away. During the next round to obtain food, the opposite happened.
- 5.32.08 The inmates left the camp the next day in the direction of the neighboring city of Bielsk. American soldier threw chocolates, cigarettes, etc. at them.
- 5.32.45 Fearing an epidemic, all the survivors were interned in a German camp. They were disinfected with DDT, which killed the lice immediately. They changed clothes and shoes, laid in bed, and ate food. Many died of overeating, and also of the diet provided to them.
- 5.38.32 Avraham found revolvers among the German belongings. His first impulse was to return to Tiktin, to avenge his family. They requested leave from the Americans, and were allowed to go back home - among the first groups to be repatriated.
- 5.41.24 They had to leave with a Russian organized caravan. On the way, they realized they would not be allowed to go to Poland. They were treated as laborers going to work in the Russian mines, etc. They left the train, and took another one to Budapest.
- 5.48.18 In Budapest, Avraham met survivors from Tiktin, who returned there after the war - to escape only again when the Poles began murdering the returning Jews. So, the next step was to get organized and join a group of illegal immigrants to Israel.
- 5.50.14 They joined a group of religious Zionists, and crossed the border to Austria. Near Salzburg, they were organized into a camp.
- 5.51.00 Many weddings took place there. They stayed there until the winter. UNRRA moved them to other cities.
- 5.56.19 Avraham and a friend moved to an UNRRA DP camp near Salzburg and there he worked as a police officer. He made vodka there and had a little factory. He remembered from home how to do this. Avraham married Masha Rukshin there.
- 6.02.04 In 1949, when Avraham's son was three months old, they registered to immigrate to Israel. They arrived aboard the ship Atzma'ut, in August 1949.
- 6.05.00 In 1988, Avraham went back to Tiktin. His home was not there. He took it very hard. On his return, he had a heart attack and needed surgery. He also visited the mass grave.
- 6.10.00 Avraham never shied away from telling his story. He has also led many youth groups to Poland.