

RG-50.120 #207      3 Tapes  
LIVNI, MORDECHAI

- 1.00.50 Mordecha was born on February 18, 1926, in Prague. Mordecha [M. from here on] was born Max Lieben, heir to an ultra-orthodox family who lived in Prague for a long time. [Interesting story about how family was given the name Liben.]
- 2.39 M's mother was born in Nuremberg, Germany and moved [upon her marriage] to Prague in 1918.
- 3.18 M only knew his maternal grandmother, who perished later in Theresin. All of M's uncles and one aunt lived in Prague.
- 4.00 The family spoke German, widespread custom during the Austro-Hungarian empire, and Czeck was the language of the street and the poor. M's housekeeper spoke Ck with the family.
- 4.37 M's father was a teacher of Philosophy, Greek and Latin in the high schools. He was a popular teacher, well liked by the students but also strict. He was distracted, like the caricature of the absent-minded professor. He was also unique. He was ultra-orthodox, kept all 613 precepts and more, but taught on Shabbat, although he wouldn't carry books or papers on that day, or write. He taught in a public school, on Sztephan street, which had a mix of Jewish, non Jewish faculty and student body.
- 6.00 M's maternal grandfather was prosperous in Nuremberg. He also belonged to an ultra-orthodox family. He wanted to be buried in Jerusalem, in the Mount of Olives. He achieved his goal.
- 10.12 M's family in Prague belonged to the low middle-class. His childhood was happy. All the relatives lived at a short distance from each other, and established their own praying place, in a room in a community building. They were about 20 people. M prayed there twice a day during the week.
- 13.01 M explains why he is not observant today. It has to do with what he saw as a contradiction between the beliefs of creation, and its report in the Torah, and the theories of evolution plus the science that M had begun to acquire. M's family was the oldest one in Prague that was observant, with roots there for at least 2 cnturies. There were also observant families who came after WWI, but M's family felt superior to them.
- 20.26 Children's activities and religious studies. Degree of observance in M's family compelled them to eat at home all the days of Passover, as they couldn't be sure that the chometz was comopletely removed in someone else's home.
- 27.00 Examples of why M lost his belief in God, at age 11.
- 30.00 Relationship to the different languages spoken in the Jewish community.
- 40.00 Antisemitism in Czeckoslovakia.

- 46.00 M's only surviving uncle on his mother's side.
- 48.10 The Jews didn't believe that anything would happen to the Jews in Prague. Therefore, M's father didn't take advantage of an offer to move his family to England, where he also was offered a teaching position in a university. It was 1939.
- 49.49 M was one of three boys in the family. He was bar-mitzvah when the Nazis came to Prague. The other two brothers were older than he was: 15 and 17.
- 50.18 M's father made great efforts to send his older son to Palestine, with the Agudath Israel group. The boy received a certificate, but the family [other than the father] was against his immigration. The father stood firm, and the boy went to Palestine, survived the Holocaust, and was one of the founders of the religious kibbutz Chafets-Chaim. M and he were the only survivors of the larger extended family.
- 51.00 M's father gave his older son a guide on how to behave in Palestine. This 10-12 page wringing included chapters on: how to study Gemorrah and Mishna, in order to go from the simple to the difficult, how to find a partner to study Talmud; a recipe on how to make the shaving solution that father used, a list of Jahrzeits for all the people in the family who had died; a list of secular literature he must read [philosophy, etc.]; a formula to figure out Jewish calendar in case only a Gregorian one was available. The document survives to this day!
- 54.00 During the war, M's famioly was able to send letters to the son in Palestine, through the Int'l Red Cross. They had to be short, and were censored. The correspondence still exists.
- 56.00 The brothe received a special dispensation to travel on a holiday [it was the second day of Passover]. It was given by the rabbi who was also a 'dayan' [judge on religious matters]. The family walked to the train station to bid farewell to the boy. The suitcases had been deposited there on the eve of Passover, because of the 'carrying' prohibition.
- 56.01 It was 2 months after the Nazis came in.
- 57.00 M's father was arrested by the gestapo 2 days after their entrance to the city. He was presumably arrested for having been active in the Jewish community. He was interrogated by Eichmann and returned home - thin, dirty and infected by lice - 5 weeks later.
- 57.44 M's uncle, a well-known doctor in Prague, Dr. Salomon Liben. His main income came from one Jewish family by the name of Petchek. They were the 'Rothchilds of Prague', owners of mines etc. All his other patients, Dr. Liben treated for free.
- 59.00 Fascinating story: In 1938, a movie was produced in Czeckoslovakia 'The White Plague'. It was about a doctor who refuses to kowtow to a dictator. A Jewish actor, Hugo Haas, was supposed to play him. One fine day, the actor showed up at M's uncle's clinic and hold him that he had decided to model the character after him; that he had followed him already for over a week, but that now he needed to see and hear how he

treated his patients. The actor put on a white coat and sat behind a screen, posing as a medical student. In 1945, after the war, M returned to Prague. The movie was playing in the theatres. He had known about the actor shadowing his uncle, but the movie had been banned in Prague, by Hitler. M couldn't believe his eyes! It was as though the uncle was the actor himself, as the actor succeeded in portraying him physically, in the way he walked and talked.

- 2.03.14 Uncle was arrested by the Nazis in March, 1939. The uncle had been a scientific witness in Germany, in a trial against ritual slaughtering of animals. He had testified that it was more humane than the one at non-Jewish slaughter houses. The uncle had researched and published his findings on the matter, which is probably what the Nazis had against him. The uncle was sent to Dachau after great tortures, and before the large masses of Jews were sent to camps. He died there in 1941. No one knows how. A telegram sent to the family announced his death, of a heart attack, and that his body was cremated [anathema for an observant Jew]. The telegram also stated that, for a sum of money, the family can receive his ashes. They paid, and the uncle's ashes [of which no one knew for sure if they were his] was buried in the new cemetery of Prague. The uncle became thus, the only one in the Liben family to have a head stone, and a burial place which was identified with his name.
- 10.00 School life with the advent of the Nazis until the end of 1939, when the Jewish children were expelled from the public schools.
- 17.37 M's Bar Mitzvah, with his full participation in the religious service, a party and many presents. He got some 200 books, bought in the local Jewish book store, who opened a [gift] book registry to the observant kids becoming Bar Mitzvah.
- 22.17 The Jewish community organized a system of education for those children expelled from the public schools.
- 24.17 The family decides to send M to the Zionist school, where subjects were taught in Czech. The ideology of the school, which M began to acquire, was the opposite of M's family's. Not long after M began arguing with his father. M had begun his activities in a non-religious Zionist youth movement, etc. M's father did not agree. M's brother, Rudi, also was infected by the Zionist enthusiasm.
- 27.20 Anti-Jewish laws are imposed. The story of a righteous gentile, Premysl Pitter.
- 39.46 At the end of 1941, transports began taking Jews away from Prague. At the same time, rumors spread about the hardships of the Polish Jews. M's family assumed that the hardships referred to were sickness, hunger, unemployment.
- 41.00 The Czech Jews were sent to Lodz, later to Theresienstadt. The post cards that arrived from there were short, censored, and always contained a request for money. The Jews left in Prague, organized food drives, until the last one was taken [a young couple 15-16 years old].
- 42.42 M had become a Zionist, and knew that immediately after the end of the war, he would

- immigrate to Palestine and found a kibbutz.
- 43.41 M's family was sent to Therezin relatively late, in 1943, in July.
- 3.01.36 Food coupons since 1939. Own limitations because of 'kashrut'. The home production of potato starch for use in Passover, after the matzoh flour factory ceased production.
- 13.49 M's father, both during peac time and after he was fired from his job by the Nazis, saw himself as a social worker. He would receive Jews in need at home, after 2 p.m. Some were refugees from eastern Europe in need of work, or with family or emotionsl problems. Father would point them to the people or instituions that could help.
- 18.12 Father was also a private tutor of Latin and Greek, and at one point organized a group of women [ of M's mother's age] to whom he taught general culture. The group was called "the Middle Ager" [because of the participants' age!]
- 19.00 How M and his youth movement helped the Jews pack their belongings for their trip to Therezin.
- 27.43 The meeting with Freddie Hirsch in Prague.
- 35.14 What was known to the Jews about Therezin, the city. It was a walled city, surrounded by a ditch thast could be filled with water.
- 35.57 When Terezin became a ghetto some new began arriving about harsh conditions there. Some of the correspondence, the official one was censored; some letters were smuggled out and they painted a gloomy picture of the place: hunger, illness [mainly among the elder asnd especially those who had come from Germany].
- 40.00 Speculation about refusing to go to Terezin.
- 48.00 M's immediaste familywas the last to be sent to the ghetto. M insisted in taking his tools with him, a siddur, the section of Talmud they were learning at the moment.
- 50.00 July 4, 1943 - they went by train to the meeting point, where things began to look grim.
- 52.00 Father was never fit physically; the sone were, and th mother was ready and able to do physical work. Grandmother died in Terezin and is buried in a common grave. She died before M and his family arrived.
- 59.00 M's opinion of Edelshtein, head of the community in Therezin.

## TAPE II

- 4.00.59 The family reached Therezin by passenger train. Arrival in Therezin, inspection and room assignments: the father to a men's barracks, the sons to a youth barrack. M stayed there the entire length of his stay, about a year.
- 4.08 In the miling masses, M found many of his relatives and friends. The surrealism was greater between the hours after work and the ..... 5-8 pm.

- 7.00 Food distribution.
- 13.00 Living accommodations.
- 31.14 Work in the ghetto. M tried to work as an electrician, a profession he knew. He didn't manage to get in.
- 32.19 Work as laborer, to move construction materials.
- 37.26 Mother worked as a housekeeper in the youth section. The father didn't work, and he ailed immediastely.
- 39.00 Health services in the ghetto.
- 40.00 Education. M learned Hebrew in the ghetto, an hour a day. 7 days a week, during the year.
- 43.00 Strange sleeping illness that affected girls and women mainly.
- 48.00 M receives a couple of postcards from Rudi Rosen, a friend, who had already been sent to the 'east'. Under strict censorship, Rudio wrote what could pass the consors, but signed as Rudi Namut, which is the Hebrew word for 'we will die'. M and other friends understood that this was a code word, but could only believe that their friend was depressed, perhaps hungry or ill. No one yet, in M's circle, had the information of the reality of Auschwitz. A secon post card, also written in German, the only permitted language, had a few letters in each sentence written diagonally. Put together, they meant 'death by gas'. Again, the friends interpreted that probably were leaks in the gas plant where some of the inmates worked, and that they caused some people their lives. No one, in his sane maind, could interpret the real, and dark message Rudi was trying to convey.
- 51.50 Love stories in the ghetto.
- 5.07.06 M participated in the beautification of the ghetto in preparation for the Red Cross visit. More transports were sent out then, in order to vacate the crowded rooms and making them into rooms for two.
- 12.36 How the observant Jews fared during the stay in the ghetto.
- 16.00 M's last memory of Therezin is the colsing prayer of Yom Kippur.
- 17.26 M was active in the Hebrew speaking circle, under the auspices of the united Zionist youth groups. To attain the letter 'Ayn' for 'Hebrew', in a pin form, was to have reached competency in the language. M received a pin.
- 19.13 He was also active in social work and help to the elderly in the ghetto, also under the auspices of the youth movement. This was done after regular work hours.
- 24.00 The youth discussed the possibility of fleeing the ghetto, but they reached the conclusion that sitting tight gave them the best chances of survival.

- 27.00 The case of one Lederer, who fled Auschwitz and came to Therezin to tell the story. However, the repository of his confidence decided to keep the knowledge to himself, in order not to cause a general panic. [This story, M found out after the war.] The prevalent idea in the ghetto was that those being transported to the east were going to work under forced labor, and that 'there' the conditions will be worse than at the ghetto.
- 27.36 Other type of activities were discussions or lectures in small groups, which enriched their culture. Each group had a moderator.
- 30.52 The little fortress, place for punishing transgressors, from where people did not return, or returned in poor physical condition. The latter were very soon sent in the next transport.
- 33.00 Sighting of German SS men.
- 35.00 Occasional encounters with Czech gendarmes.
- 37.00 The arrival of the Bialystock children. Those sent to take care of them, were not allowed back in the old sections of the ghetto, apparently to avoid the spread of the horrors the children told. One rumor reached the old ghetto: that the children were terrified to get into the showers, that fought off their caretakers with much vigor, and that some of them tried to flee. M and others, being naive and suffering from the 'snobism' of the central Europeans towards those who came from the east, thought that the children had never seen showers in their life, and that they did not have much use for hygiene.
- 39.00 Their knowledge about how transports were organized: origins, age, families, the mentally ill. Personal favor were prevalent, to avoid being sent.
- 49.09 Autumn 1944. M receives order to join a transport of able-bodied men, together with his brother and other friends. The ages were 16-40. Car trains entered the ghetto itself, and in a quiet and organized fashion they were all let in the cars that were sealed afterwards. 60 men per car, with 2 high barred windows. M and his brother bid farewell to their parents - who blessed them like on Friday night - the day before. It was the last time they would see each other. Conditions in the train car, in the dark.
- 53.56 The train arrived to its destination after 3 days. They assumed they were in an open area of mines, of steel plants, and that the fire and chimneys they saw from afar belonged to those plants. Then, M saw the barracks and the double fence. From his work as an electrician he realized that the fence was electrified. There were guard towers every so many meters. They also saw some strange figures, like apes in striped clothes, that were prompting them, howling at them in bad German, to move out of the train.
- 58.00 When in line to go in, one of the old prisoners [the 'apes'] whispered in M's ear: 'make yourself look older'.
- 60.00 When asked how old he was, M said 21 [3 years older than the truth] and he was also

- aked if he was in good health. After saying 'yes', he was sent to one side.
- 1.50 When this group asked an SS man why the 2 groups, he responded: 'you are healthy, therefore going to do harder work'. Until now, no one suspected otherwise!
- 3.00 M's group is marched to the shower, ordered to undress, to hang the clothes on numbered hangers. They were told that the clothes were going to be disinfected and returned to them; therefore everyone needed to remember the number. Afterwards, they were shaved in a brutal way, and sprayed with disinfectant.
- 14.00 Encounter with their cousin, who tells M and his brother the truth about Auschwitz and the chimneys. Also [1] conditions in Auschwitz, in October. The stench is engraved in M's memory, as the lack of respect in communications from the kapos, etc. to their prisoners.  
[1] that then should get into any work detail going out of the camp  
The suicides at the electric fence, the shooting of those who tried to flee. M and his brother were in a group of 4, and helped each other. Work in making blocks of cement.
- 24.06 A work group of about 2,000 is put together to work outside of the camp. M's group gets in. They were going for 3 days in the direction of Munchen, to a station called 'Kaufering'. They were plants to produce parts for airplanes, ammunition, etc. They were 'branches' of neighboring Dachau. The orders came from Dachau. Living conditions there. M was in 'Kaufering 4'. He made a model of the sleeping quarters, which is kept at Yad Vashem. M and the others worked building underground warehouses, where the military equipment was going to be produced. They were huge places. Description of the work. Many died there. M and his group survived.
- 45.09 Make-up of Kaufering 4, according to countries of origin. On Hanukah 1944, M's brother died of illness. A short time later, another of the group succumbed.
- 47.00 Because of the number of ill people, Kaufering 4 was declared a 'sick camp' and all of the ill of the entire network of camps were sent there. January 1945.
- 47.57 Outbreak of typhus, and diarrhea. M was also sick. He recuperated, and on April 24, he was allowed to go back to work.
- 50.26 The other Kaufering camps.

### TAPE III

- 7.00.00 At the beginning of 1945, the situation in Kaufering worsened. Many died.
- 4.34 On the other hand they saw the allied planes going to bomb Munchen.
- 6.32 By the end of April it was announced that the camp is about to be liquidated; whoever was able, was marched to the central camp, in Dachau, to the care of the Red Cross - which had already liberated Dachau. Those who couldn't walk, would be transported there. The prisoners felt that the second option was a trap, to be killed into a common grave. M and his friends chose to walk. Only a few hundreds were alive; thousands had

already died!

- 9.56 On April 24-25, when the order was given to abandon the camp, the sound of the front could already be heard. It was a hard March, through the woods, surrounded by SS, armed men. No food was distributed. They had to drag carts with the belongings of the SS. They slept on open fields. 4 or 5 nights were spent in the same way. Arriving at Dachau, they found out that the Red Cross was not there. The prisoners were marched to another camp, which was indeed in the middle of the front, with bombs flying from every direction.
- 23.18 Liberation by the Americans.
- 26.50 The American army gets organized to help the survivors. M weight 29 kilos!
- 33.51 The survivors get organized according to places of origin, and points of destination.
- 34.31 At the end of May, American transports manned by Czech officers, took any of the survivors who wanted to, back home. They took them to Pilsen.
- 37.00 Return to Prague. M realized he was the only one to survive from the family.
- 40.48 The story of Dr. Peter, a non-Jew who helped Jews even when it was forbidden to him to do so. He offered M work as a counselor of Jewish children after Theresien. He lasted there 6 weeks, because he was educating children in the life of Eretz Israel, while the rest of the counselors, were Czech and gentile.
- 50.13 Trip to Slovakia, Tatras, where he started to work as a counselor to a group that was supposed to emigrate to Israel. Work in Bratislava. Meeting his future wife. Their work with children. Emigration to Israel in May, 1949, with their son [ who died in Israel, at age 5, from infantile paralysis].