

RG-50.120*0261

L E I B B R A V E R M A N

1:00 (start tape 1/5) to 1:16

Background

He was born in Kovno in 1929. Describes a home, including extended family, constantly full of intense political discussions; parents communist-leaning but mostly anti Stalinist – to the point of parents divorce in 1936. Father was medical student but mother equally politically involved and enlightened, with love of theater and opera. Yiddish was spoken at home. Mother remarried Braverman, a physician.(who had been “saved” from the Germans by Lithuanian students so he could work for them burying the Jews they killed, including his own family.)

1:17 to

Some history of Lithuanian-Jewish Relationship: The originally privileged Jews subsequently met with animosity because of their economic success and increased anti-Semitism, while many Jews idealized Soviet Russia which Lithuanians despised. (The 1940 Russian and the 1941 German occupation further split and intensified the negative attitudes of Lithuanian towards their Jews) Small town Jewish families were massacred by locals even before the Germans did it..

1:28 to

First encounter with the Germans, initial impression of orderliness, German arrogance and humiliating attitudes. Some Polish friends were initially helpful despite of anti-Semitic talk. Months before the Ghetto there was already daily struggle for food. His parents kept themselves locked inside. Spent short period in Slovodka nearby, and then returned. to Kovno

Describes fondly his excellent Jewish elementary school and its kind teachers and finding comfort in the library.

1:58 to

Kovno Ghetto

Had to move to an apartment in the “large Ghetto” area – an exchange with an older gentile couple who got their spacious previous one. Describes the one-room structure which housed him, 9 year old sister, pregnant mother and stepfather. Had the baby and lived there for 3 years. Explains why it was a better Ghetto than others. Describes living and working conditions. He worked at time with the “Kinderbrigade”, in fields with access to food, with the Judenrat in charge (Margolis and Luria) and tells (sings) about other “bosses” in charge. Tells about Dr. Elkes. Describes further the transfer of

population between the two Ghettos. The Germans eliminated the “small Ghetto” after two months.

209 to 2:28

Aktzia and Selections also effected the crowding conditions. In August 500 intellectual were taken out to work, then rumored to have been liquidated (including his birth father who idealistically refused the Russians’ offer to escape). During the Selection of the “Big Aktzia” in October, which sent 10 to 12 thousands to the 9th Fort, one Lithuanian had him move to the ‘right side’, thus saving him with his family. Tells what and how they heard later about the fate of those selected.

Tells about how gifted cousin and other family member perished being caught between doctrinaire communist/Russians and liquidating Germans.

2:28 to 3:10

Daily Life in the Ghetto Describes the shifting moods , what they heard regarding outside events, clinging to hope which was essential for survival. Relates assorted incidents they experienced: watching hanging, bartering for food, working occasionally, night school and other classes, sister watching over baby (born there) and mother’s work, stepfather’s weakness, stealing food (even from partisans), reading books stored in the boidem. Selections continued to other places (e.g. Estonia), also saved from captive Ukranians in Jewish police apartment. Yellin (partisan/teacher) provided assignments to children, cultural activities, Yiddishist friends. Describes the black market activities and stealing from those who were absent or killed - although their belongings were supposed to go to the community. Foraging for food inside and outside the ghetto and dealing with the neighboring Lithuanians. His romantic attachment to Sheindele

3:10 to 3:30

The End of the Ghetto and the Children’s Aktzia

The Ghetto was being transformed into three small labor camps. Describes life in the Shanza(?) -- men’s area separate from women and children. On March 27, 1944 they returned from work and found no children, no sibling. Mother sad forever after. His deeply depressed stepfather later committed suicide in Dachau.. As the Russians approached they were loaded onto trains, towards Germany. Many jumped off but he stayed with parents.

3:30 to 4:00

Travels through Camps

Travels through east Prussian. At Shtuthof(?) mother had to leave, Describes separation. Traveled further through Prague (where they received food), Munich, to labor camp Landsberg, some grueling experiences during the ten days there. Describes becoming part of a group of 131 youngsters in his tent -- most from Kovno and under 16 years old. This group, with diminishing numbers, accompanies him till liberation. Wulf Halperin(?) joins them and is helpful. Then moved to Dachau for 5-6 days, Sauna, international prisoners and no Jews. Then again to trains.

4:00 to 4:10

Transfer to Auschwitz

Describes the departure from his very depressed stepfather. Comments on the different moods of kids and adolescents, which help them deal better with difficulties.

Describes the trip of the youngsters' group in cattle cars. Two of them escaped by jumping through windows. One survived.

4:10 to 4:50

Arrival in Auschwitz (July 31).

What they knew before about the camp. Their first two days in Lager A - the quarantine Lager. Disinfectant treatment, then shifting locations because of Dr (Mengele?) orders (possible confusion regarding selection of dwarfs ?).

Assorted stories and experiences for the group of youngsters:

Their barracks # 17/18 with sadistic Block-Elteste "Eddie Gorrila" and "Cripple Oleg". and their cruel beating. Sleeping arrangements -- ten boys per bed. Appell routines; participation of Block-Elteste, LagerFuehrer and LagerSchreiber and their roles.

Observed a 'romance' between Czech prisoner Anna and German Lager Elteste Herman, . Shouts and food thrown across electrified fence.

Describes jumping exercises forced on them .and being beaten for failures. Most of all they feared getting sick, as they would be killed in the hospital. They got new identities with numbers tatoood on their arms.

5:00 to 5:20

Special Privileges to some boys, once Comsomol members, by the Schreib-Elteste and the "German Herman" - possibly connected to underground.?

5:20 to 5:40

Selection by Hight The youngsters group was dwindling. The small ones, i.e. who passed below a horizontally held rope were sent to the crematorium. Not all succeeded in lifting themselves by stuffing bread into their shoes. Some small ones escaped. Elaborates on the overall courage of the youngsters – who, unlike the adults.- were not depressed or afraid of death. Describes encounter with of 'older' inmates, Czech professors, who were now being the guards' focus of mistreatment. They envied the youngsters and were almost willing to kill for food. They said: "we are animals -- you are human"

5:40 to 6:20

Other groups who shared the same barrack for different periods Describes the polish youngsters who prayed with their priest and their relationship with the sadistic

“Eddie Gorilla” ; special privileges and food treats; the defiant behavior of Polish-Jewish Yuzeck(?) which eventually lead to his suicide, while “Gorilla” became less aggressive.

6:20 to 6:45

“Concert” Given by Young Inmates Describes how they were ordered to entertain all the guards and Block Elteste. (Recalls earlier performances) ; how and what topics they selected and the actual performance in which also the Polish group participated. Felt some panic but also an uplifting experience.

6:50 to 7:35 [End of tape 2/5 and start of tape 3/5. at 7:00]

Aspects of Everyday Life: Language, Food, Groups

Describes the many languages spoken at Auschwitz; also yelling and curses. The shifting population in their barrack and frequent turnover. The meager food , though they were not “Museummen”. The uneven distribution of food sometimes enabled getting more by repeated standing in line, but really larger portions occurred only after Selections, i.e. when their number shrunk. Learned to keep bread longer under the tongue to prolong the feeling of food. Did not steal except when working elsewhere. They were morally stronger than others.

Describes the sad parting from the transferred (to Warsaw?) Polish group. Received Yuzeck’s sweater. New Groups of Turkmen in S.S. uniforms were crueler than the Germans, but Russian officers P.O.W. tortured them in turn. The also knifed Eddie Gorilla, who was replaced by a new Block Elteste.

7:37 to 7:47

Denial of Reality in Self-Defense Describes how ,during his work with the Rollwagen , (cart?) he ignored a mothers’ pleas to return her child’s toy, as they were on their way to the crematorium. “Then, my escape from reality -- today, still a painful memory”. Does not recall conscious remorse or longing at that time, only at night screams for mother in dreams or nightmares.

7:55 to 8:37

Transfer to Lager D following another Selection which left only 50 (of the original 131) youngsters. Describes his work there with the Rollwagen and stealing shoes from “Canada” (huge storehouse containing all belongings of those gassed). Also worked outside camp, unloading potatoes. They stole, hid and roasted them, cooperating with others with whom they shared. A Hungarian youngster tried to talk him into becoming a pimp (to a Block Elteste) like himself, and his own ignorance in sexual matters.

8:38 to 8:45

Missions for the Underground As his Rollwagen and cleaning work kept him circulating among the barracks he was contacted by a Kapo and sent on missions to Lager C, to deliver assorted unknown items, usually to the French Barrack and a woman Genevieve. He was proud, but prohibited from talking about it

8:45 to 8:50

December-January, Auschwitz was “malfunctioning” Crematorium not working and bodies buried on big open fires which they could see. Allied bombing the surrounding.

8:50 to 9:00

Birthday Party : Befriended young inmates in French barrack in Lager C who gave a surprise party on his 16th birthday (January 16, 1945). Found out that these Jewish/Polish/Yugoslav partisans were part of French (underground?) group and admired French for accepting all equally. In this party he was praised for his contributions to the underground and “ate better than during all years of war”.

9:02 to 9:23

Evacuation and Death March out of Auschwitz. Following Russian Bombardment, only hospital and “Canada” inmates were left behind, while they were marched out with older Germans (unlike expectations, the former group was liberated first)

Describes the Death March out of Auschwitz, extremely cold January, running 18 hours non-stop; shot by motorcycling SS., many falling along the way. But one older German shared food with him and cursed Hitler. With most of his original group, he was transferred to train to Mauthausen..

9:23 to 9:59 (end tape 3/5)

Mauthausen

Arrived January 21, (one day following a massive escape of Russian POW who worked in the quarries). Describes the extreme cold and all other conditions which were worse than in Auschwitz. Those who worked were more likely to be killed. His wounded feet were barely saved from amputation. They were moved to barracks # 30 with the worse sadistic Austrian Block Elteste who forced mutual beating and extreme physical position. Crowding made sleeping and toilet going almost impossible. Corpses were taken to Appell before crematorium. Crippled Russians were executed. Describes their worsening state of mind. In April, they were transferred to large tents, fed once a day, slept on the ground and full of lice.

Following Russian bombardment in which many were killed, they had meat in their soup, possibly human flesh.

10:00 (start tape 4/5) to 10:15

March out of Mauthausen to Wetz, then Gilstretchen (?) Austria, as the locals watched. Some threw food but the youngsters booed them. Overnight camps with Polish and Hungarian Jews. Huge lines for unevenly distributed Red Cross foods. Much stealing and robbing, but kept sharing among friends. Describes the Hungarian Jews like German guards keeping order. 40,000 prisoners-- daily beating, stealing and death. Starvation to the point of eating the bark off trees.

10:16 to 10:55

Liberation and its Aftermath He escaped with a friend (Leibelle) through a loose fence on May 4, one day before the camp liberation. At point of exhaustion, they encountered British soldiers and were sent to Wetz. Describes their wondering through disorder, begging villagers for food but distrustful. Days of diarrhea from food thrown to them by soldiers.

Hospitalized in Wetz, weighing 28 KG. Alone (friend died later in Linz from Typhoid)... Recovered somewhat.

Describes the vacuum following liberation: suddenly and totally independent, "nobody gives us anything". With some old and new friends became part of informal gangs who foraged for food among Austrian villages, demanding, robbing, stealing and sometimes threatening with found arms. Some sense of revenge though never killing.

Hospitalized again in American Hospital in Linz, fever and suspected TB. German personnel. Describes other youngsters/patients and their inability to deal with food. Learning German by reading a Shakespeare translation. A Canadian soldier wished to adopt him.

10:56 to 11:14

Moving to Russian Side (Uhrfur-Lintz) in Search of Family. Following radio, living on food stamps, befriending others, searching for trains.

Re-hospitalization in small hospital and romantic friendship with young Austrian hospital worker.

11:15 to 11:31

Traveling East. Describes travels by trains crowded with mixed groups, at times on roofs, or waiting in stations; travels via Budapest, Czechoslovakia, Romania and his various experiences en route. Hospitalized again in a Russian hospital-train till recovered. Then to Munkatch, Minsk and Vilna – where he hears his mother is in Kovno.

11:32 to 11:46

Reunion with Mother in Kovno

Describes their sudden and excited reunion. Following liberation, she returned to Kovno from Stuthof and now lived with her communist sister in the sister's elegant house. Found out that all his siblings perished and his stepfather killed himself in the Landsberg camp.

(Also discusses what they knew about the war at that time. Emphasizes the events and views as related to Soviet side)

11:46 to 12:00

Restoring and Improving Life

Describes difficult life conditions in Kovno. Dissatisfied with the mother's servant's role in her sisters house, she is attempting to find independent work. His strongest desire is to study and he is finally able - through a preparatory-class program - to complete his six missing school years in two-and-a-half years.

12:00 to 12: 12

Preparatory School Describes the students and teachers. Like many Lithuanians, they emphasized their own sufferings under the Soviets, but "Jews were rightfully persecuted because they were rich".. He was extremely sensitive then to any trace of anti-Semitism, and it provoked his belligerent responses. At the same time, he shared communist ideals and believed the Soviets suffered the most during the war. He did not talk then about his Auschwitz experiences as it was still too painful.

12:13 to 12:35

His Life: he was extremely busy with his studies, yet naïve in many other areas. Several incidences with teachers alerted him to prejudices and corrupt practices around him. He was reading excessively and obsessed with catching up on missed education. Also describes their poor living conditions, especially after he and his mother set themselves up independently of his aunt. Elaborates on the good and bad aspects of his time in the preparatory school and relates assorted incidents.

12:38 to 12:59 (end tape 4/5)

Medical School, Career and Political Investigations

In 1948, (following a brief law studies in Vilna and marriage to medical student), he returned to Kovno to attend medical school. Difficult period politically with secret police and possibly students-informers. As a Jew, his loyalty was suspect and restriction of some privileges followed (e.g. following graduation, he and his wife could barely be in the same location to practice, or to practice and register in the same town as required) He was supposed to follow orders of Comsomol leadership. He finally ended in Latvia (Vespes?) as small hospital port-doctor.. Describes his experiences there with Russian servicemen and lecturing on sex and Freud – “forbidden” topics..

13:00 (start tape 5/5) to 13:34

KGB Investigations and Limited Choices

Post Stalin time and war with Hungary. (1956-57) – more erratic political pressures.. His listening to BBC provoked KGB investigation and being thrown out of Comsomol. Sent to Riga , and finding different attitude regarding his loyalty at different levels; was re-accepted to party but then resigned on his own. Describes his experiences as hospital-ship inspector and contact with other nationalities.

After three years of the required training he returned to Lithuania. Was caught in the registration/employment vicious cycle. His advance hampered by having a “record at the KGB”. Found minimal job in Vilna and augmented self by lecturing and volunteering.

13:35 to 14:43

The Difficulties Writing and Publishing his Book

In 1948 he started writing a book on Auschwitz , but was unable to continue working on it. Yet he did carry out other literary activities, such as poetry , stories and paper editing, sometimes encountering censorship.

His interest in Israel developed especially following the 1967 war.

Describes the slowly improving living conditions for his growing family and the cultural activities in the Jewish community, especially the theater. After 1952, he resumed writing about the Warsaw Ghetto and encountered both encouragement as well as restriction. His book was written over several years from his memory, as well as that of some of his survivor friends with whom he met regularly in Vilna and later in Israel (names).

(14:04 to 14:07 Claims that the information regarding Vilna Ghetto, Ponar and other happenings was publicly available until 1948, after which the 'Taboo' regarding Zionism and Israel made the topic unpopular.)

Describes in detail the delays and difficulties of getting his book published, because of political/communist pressures. The book was finally published in 1971 with many revisions and "epilogues" which were initially published in papers, and created considerable interest and criticism - again relating to the prevailing political climate in former Soviet block countries and others. (The book was finally written in Russian, then translated to Yiddish, then to English and Hebrew).

14:43 to 14:50 (end of tape 5/5)

Emigrating to Israel

He describes his changing reactions to memories from of Holocaust, and some relief provided by writing his book. He has reservations regarding official ceremonies and prefers more subdued and personal commemorations.

He emigrated to Israel in 1973, because "it is the home of the Jewish people". Does not regret it, although he is aware of its shortcoming.

Translated and summarized by Hava Bonne'

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