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Gecht, Meir

- 1:01:11** Meir Gecht was born in Kovno in 1929. His parents were working people who belonged to the middle class. There was a large Jewish population in Kovno, about one-third of the total population of 50,000. Jews had autonomy, and some held official positions. At age seven, Meir went to a Jewish elementary school. He learned Bible in Yiddish. Education was secular. Meir studied for four years until 1939 when the Soviets invaded Lithuania. From 1940-1941, the education system changed, and Jewish schools were closed. Meir went to another school for fifth grade.
- 1:05:03** Meir's family lived on Ulitza Niamona in Kovno and rented the lower floor of a two-floor house. Meir was an only child. Between 1924 and 1926, Meir's father's very large family immigrated from Kovno to South America because of difficulties in Lithuania. While Meir's father was serving in the Lithuanian Army, he met Meir's mother, who also came from a large family.
- 1:08:06** Religious life. The family was not very observant, although they kept all the holidays and also kept kashrut. His mother was a seamstress, and his father was a shoemaker.
- 1:11:18** Although the youth movements of all affiliations were well represented in Kovno, Meir did not belong to any of them because of his age.
- 1:12:24** Talks about his friends. Meir studied in the school, whose principal was the well-known pedagogue, Reines.
- 1:13:44** Friendly atmosphere changed with the arrival of the Russians in Lithuania. There was no anti-Semitism.
- 1:16:56** Through Meir's maternal aunt Bella, the family learned first-hand about what was going on in Germany. Bella had immigrated to France in the 1920s and started a family there. After France fell under the Nazi regime, Russia and Germany signed a pact by which citizens had to go back to their country of origin. Therefore, Bella returned via Germany to Lithuania with her entire family. Bella told them stories about the war and how they fared in Paris, and how the Nazis caught them when they tried to flee. Meir's family was thus dissuaded from attempting to flee to Russia.
- 1:19:43** Talks about the war beginning and the hatred of Lithuanians against Russians.

- 1:24:00** In some small towns, Lithuanians killed Jews. Some towns had only a Jewish population. Lithuanians picked up Meir's father, and took him to the 7th Fort where Jewish men were taken. He was released when interrogators found evidence in his pocket that he had served in the Lithuanian Army. His father had a medallion from the Lithuanian Army, and therefore they sent him home.
- 1:27:15** For the first couple of weeks after the German invasion, the Lithuanians killed thousands of Jews.
- 1:27:59** A ghetto was established in Slobodka. The family moved there.
- 1:29:10** There were difficult times in the ghetto
- 2:00:00** Life and work in the ghetto. Describes the great "action" on October 1941. Meir's mother saved her small family by changing the line for the inspection. The rest of the extended family was sent to their death in the 9th Fort.
- 2:06:30** The ghetto was reduced after two thirds of the residents were killed.
- 2:06:05** There were ghetto workshops, and Meir's parents worked there. In 1942 Meir began to study in a trade school organized by Jaakov Oleisky, who later became the chairman of ORT in Israel.
- 2:12:21** Describes life in the ghetto.
- 2:14:40** The "Jordan Brigade" had the task of classifying the piles of clothes left after the murders in the 9th Fort.
- 2:22:07** Children's "actions" in 1944 were combined with the murder of many Jewish policemen. Meir was saved.
- 2:23:00** Describes the "malinot" (hiding places) and their fate at the liquidation of the ghetto.
- 2:28:50** Describes a hanging in the ghetto.
- 3:00:45** After the children's action and the killing of the Jewish policemen, people in the ghetto no longer had hope.
- 3:02:01** Beginning of July 1944, all outside workers were brought in. In mid-July the ghetto was evacuated. Meir and his parents were put in the same train car. The trains traveled in the direction of Germany. They were told they were being taken to work camps. They were happy not to be going to the 9th Fort.

- 3:04:19** Describes arrival at Stutthof. His mother and aunt left the train. Meir and his father continued to Landsberg I. After a week, the Germans decided there were too many children in the camp, and that 130 would have to leave. Meir was transported with the others elsewhere. (There were really 131 children.) July 16, 17, or 20 they arrived in Dachau (until then, there had been no Jews at that location). The children were supposed to be cremated, but the crematorium was undergoing repairs. As there hadn't been any Jews there before, the group became an attraction. After a week, not knowing what to do with the children, the Nazis put them on a cargo train and sent them to Auschwitz.
- 3:09:35** By the time they arrived in Katowice, it was clear to the children that they were being taken to the ovens in Auschwitz. (They had heard about them.)
- 3:09:57** Two of the youngsters jumped off the train; but only one survived. Because of the discrepancy in the number that left Dachau and arrived in Auschwitz, they were left at the entrance to the camp. The next day, someone took them into the camp to be tattooed and processed. They were there until Mengele's first selection. Only 15 days had passed since their arrival.
- 3:16:16** Describes his barrack.
- 3:17:00** Meir passed the first selection.
- 3:19:08** Meir worked pushing carts.
- 3:24:19** Meir is selected for the crematorium in the October roundup, but he is taken off the list at someone's request.
- 3:28:52** The approximately 30 children who were left, were taken on the first death march in January 1945. They marched for a day and then arrived in an abandoned camp.
- 4:01:00** Description of the block population in Meir's barrack in Birkenau.
- 4:25:10** Sexual molestation of children who were in better physical shape.
- 4:26:58** Almost no Germans watched them in the abandoned camp. In the evening, a number of prisoners left the camp in order to look for food. They were caught when they went to the food storage of the Germans. The camp was located in the southwest, toward Czechoslovakia.

- 4:28:25** The prisoners were evacuated from that camp, put on cattle trains, and sent to Czechoslovakia. At a large train station, their train was bombarded by the Russians, and seven of the children were killed. Since the cars were destroyed, they were put on open ones. It was January, and very cold. It snowed. After a day's journey, they arrived in Mauthausen.
- 5:00:00** They stayed at Mauthausen until the beginning of April.
- 5:07:00** After bombardment by the Americans, the prisoners were marched 30 to 40 km from Linz to Wels, which was a primitive camp. There was no food whatsoever. The Red Cross would come once a day and throw a few bread loaves to the mass. The young people got organized and protected their hard-fought bread from thieves. The name of the camp was Gunskirchen. They were there at least two weeks. Of those who arrived, 60% died. At the end of April beginning of May, they saw no one manning the watchtowers. The children's group decided to stay the night and leave in the morning. There were six youths who left together.
- 5:16:00** They walked in the direction of Wels, seeing many dead Germans on the way. That's when they were told the war was over.
- 5:18:36** The American Army was on the way.
- 5:18:52** They found refuge in a German house. The American Army took them to German camps. (They were six youngsters altogether, including Meir).
- 5:22:00** The Joint extended help and registered the survivors, among them were the six Lithuanian youngsters. One day, an American soldier appeared and identified himself as the American-born son of parents from Panevezys. He could speak Yiddish, saw their condition, and began taking care of them. He was an army medic, who took care of them for two weeks until they got better.
- 5:24:00** The medic (who was later stationed in the Pacific) asked about the parents of the six. Since none of the six had witnessed their parent's deaths, they still had hopes of finding them. The medic advised them to go back to Lithuania to look for them.
- 5:26:00** The original children's group was decimated after the camp. They were organized into several different groups: each had a different story to tell.
- 5:27:00** The caravan of those returning to Lithuania lasted about two months.
- 5:29:11** Describes his arrival in Transylvania. Where the Russians had erected a transit camp.

- 6:00:40** Describes the Gunskirchen camp in depth.
- 6:02:09** Describes Mark Wolfsohn, the American Jewish soldier who helped the group of six to get well. Leib Zisman lives in New York. He is a building contractor. Kalman, Polish boy adopted by a non-Jew on the way here. The group is not in touch with him. Meir Gecht lives in Holon, Israel. Eliezer Greiss returned to Lithuania together with Meir and found his father in Vilna. He became a sports writer in the Soviet Union, and a well-known author who passed away in 1992. Mordechai Levitan returned to Lithuania with the others. There he found out his father was alive in Munich, and he joined him and they immigrated to Israel in 1946. He lived in Tivon. He was director of sales in the Feldman Company. Daniel Kabinowsky also returned to Lithuania where he found that his family was not among the living (both parents had been killed). He stayed for some time in a Jewish orphanage. Then he was sent with other Jews to Poland, then Germany, and then in 1946 with Aliyat Hanoar to Israel. He is a contractor and lives in Ramat Hasharon.
- 6:06:43** The transit camp in Transylvania was established by the Russians to weed out collaborators (mostly women) from those returning to Russia. The group of six did not have specific jobs. Their stay in the camp lasted more than two months. They made contact with the local Jewish community. This contact was meaningful because the six youngsters were asked many times “Why are you going to Russia if you have nobody there?” The first to defect was Leib Zusman. The second was Kalman. Neither had any one waiting for them back home.
- 6:21:43** Next trip was to Vilna. Going out of the station for a little walk, Meir encountered an electrician from Kovno. After they recognized each other, the man took Meir to his father. His father was liberated from Landsberg near Munich and had arrived in Vilna a little before Meir. He already had a job in a workshop, and a room in which to live. He did not know the mother’s whereabouts. Meir was already 16. He had missed many school years and chose to go to work.
- 6:26:10** The meeting place of the Jews was the Great Synagogue, where the names of the returnees were posted. An uncle posted a notice looking for Meir’s mother. He lived in Moscow and gave his address.

Tape 2

- 7:00:37** Meir and his father updated each other on what had happened to each of them. Much time was spent in trying to locate the mother. She was found in a military camp and released a year after liberation together with her sister.

- 7:05:30** In 1950 Meir was mobilized into the Soviet army. He served mainly in the area of Moscow, where he got to meet his uncle for the first time. He was the only Jew in his unit and did not suffer anti-Semitism. In 1954, He was released from the army. (He had not visited home.) Eliezer Greis was the only friend left from the whole group. There were three or four others from the Auschwitz camp: Yankele Viskardisky, Zundl Gordon, Yosef Papilsky, and Leib Braverman, live in Israel. They would meet once a year on the anniversary of liberation, and that was the extent of Meir's contact with his past.
- 7:16:40** Meir identified totally with the Red Army. The uncle was a devoted communist. After Stalin's death, he confessed his anti-communist feelings because of the abuses committed by the regime.
- 7:20:00** Meets his future wife, a Polish-Jewish partisan from Disna.
- 7:21:19** Meir's wife was a soloist in the Jewish choir established in 1956. Because of the law allowing citizens of Poland to return there, she requested permission to go back for herself, Meir, and his parents. There they would use the transit through Poland to go to Israel. However, the Poles insisted that they settle in Poland and sent the family to Szczecin. There, Meir began to work in the shipyard. After a couple of weeks, Meir traveled to Warsaw where he made a connection with the Israeli embassy. The clerk advised Meir to resign from his place of work immediately if he ever wanted to emigrate to Israel. Meir resigned, and in 1957 they finally received the passports to immigrate to Israel with their twin boys! Meir worked in the aeronautical industry.
- 7:29:00** Intermission
- 8:00:00** Describes differences between the Jews of Lithuania and those of Poland and Hungary.
- 8:08:08** He talks about living under the Soviet regime after the war in Lithuania.
- 8:10:40** "Paccia" was the wooden ship that took them from Naples to Haifa.
- 8:15:00** Meir learned that if he were able to overcome Auschwitz, then no difficulties were insurmountable.
- 8:21:00** Once a year, the ones who survived from the group of 131, meet. The connection between them is as if they were relatives.

Interviewed: July 18, 1996
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