

Tzoref, Meir
RG-50.120*0334
3 Videotapes

Abstract

Meir Tzoref was one of nine children of Chaim Shimon and Sara Goldshmit, whose economic situation was shaky. He grew up near Kovno, Lithuania in Jonava, where the majority of the town was Jewish. As a youth, Meir attended Jonava's Yavneh School and joined a Torah Va'avoda, a Zionist youth movement which was part of B'nai Akiva, and later a Komsomol. Meir later moved to Kovno where he pursued his high school studies and developed his communist ideology. There he worked in a farmers' cooperative and joined an entertainment group, where he met his future wife. After 1939 when the Soviets invaded, life was good for non-Jews, but Jews like Meir had a much more difficult life.

When the Germans invaded Kovno in 1941, Meir was forced into the ghetto with his wife. Meir registered under the name Leon Ginz to avoid recognition as a communist. He describes the ghetto's work, kidnappings, and deportations and the ineffectiveness of the Judenrat. However, in an effort to resist, Meir and others organized an underground movement, built hiding places, tried to join the partisans in the forest, smuggled food into the ghetto, made primitive weapons for self-defense, and worked to unify all of the Jewish resistance groups.

While in the ghetto, Meir's wife gave birth, and they had to find a hiding place for their son. After several failed attempts, his wife had to sneak out of the ghetto and leave her child at a church. She was never seen again. Meir was able to survive the deportations that occurred in the ghetto after the defeat at Stalingrad but was soon sent to Dachau. After being liberated there, Meir was finally able to return to Kovno. He participated in restoring Jewish cultural life and married his former sister-in-law. They moved to Warsaw for a short period and finally to Israel in 1960.

Transcript

Tape 1:

- 1:00:00** Meir Tzoref was born as Mark Lev Goldshmit on April 14, 1920. He lived in the village of Jonava, which was 30 km away from the capital of Kovno, Lithuania. The town consisted of 5,000 Jews and 2,000 gentiles. They practiced new forms of Judaism, but also maintained traditional forms. In the village, there were two libraries, seven synagogues, three elementary schools, a Yiddish school, and a Tarbut school in addition to the Yavneh School. Meir attended the Yavneh School because the Tarbut school was too expensive.
- 1:06:31** Children in the Yavneh school were influenced by the Jewish tradition to long for a national home for the Jews. However, children in the Yiddish school were taught different philosophies, such as international socialism.
- 1:07:26** Meir was one of nine children, and their economic situation was very tough.

- 1:08:08** Meir's father came from a family of rabbis and became the sole supporter of his family at the age of twelve but was later mobilized into the Russian army. He soon met his wife, who was from a farming family. Their families were against the match. Meir's maternal grandfather hated rabbis and communists, who he felt lived by exploiting others.
- 1:10:41** Meir's father was named Chaim Shimon and his mother Sara. The children of the family, in order, were Malka, Avshalom, Meir, Osnat, Avraham, Hirshke, Zevi, Itzele, Bela, and Gitale. Meir's maternal grandparents, Yosef and Feige, and their children Eliyahu, Shmuel, Esther, and Rivka, also lived with his family. The two uncles eventually left for America, and an aunt stayed in Nizhny Novgorod.
- 1:12:14** Meir's father made ovens in which the typical cholent could be made, a craft his father had also practiced. His aunts were seamstresses and ardent communists, who very much influenced Meir.
- 1:15:00** Before Hitler came to power, Meir did not feel any anti-Semitism in his community. Relations with non-Jews were cordial and tolerant.
- 1:16:00** In 1936, there was a failed pogrom where the Jews first attacked those who had come to inflict blows upon them. The "polite" policeman cleared everyone from any wrong-doing.
- 1:23:11** While in Jonava, Meir was active in the Torah Va'avode youth movement of B'nai Akiva. Afterwards, in Kovno, he joined the Komsomol, a Communist youth organization.
- 1:25:00** Meir describes living in a very crowded home.
- 1:27:20** At home, Meir's family spoke Yiddish. With their neighbors, the family also spoke Russian and Lithuanian.
- 1:31:07** In Jonava, most people worked in carpentry.
- 1:33:12** Meir talks of his non-Jewish friends. His father did not know about them because he was very strict about his family's relations with non-Jews.
- 2:00:00** Avshalom, Meir's older brother, was sent to a Yeshiva in Ukmerge. When he came home to visit, he would arrange games for his siblings.
- 2:02:59** Meir describes other activities, like reading, that he and his siblings would enjoy.
- 2:04:36** Meir moved to Kovno to continue his studies in high school and worked in a shop for building supplies. His sister Malka and aunt Esther were already there. In 1939, he studied for his Baccalaureate and for voice development. He married his wife, who was also a musician in the conservatory, in 1940. Meir then started to

work in a farmers' cooperative and drew blueprints for new buildings. He and his wife enrolled in an entertainment troupe for the soldiers in which they participated until 1941.

- 2:10:18** In 1939, with the entrance of the Soviets, the Jews were allowed to take part in that activity.
- 2:12:00** Meir describes the refugees from Poland who began to arrive with horrible stories of torture and more atrocities committed against Jews. Meir was on the committee that extended help to these Jews.
- 2:14:00** Meir sympathized with the communist ideas. He saw that the youth involved in the Zionist movements had nowhere to go because they had no certificates. However, he noticed that with the Russian invasion, the doors to the East were wide open. Even Meir's father in Jonava saw that by cooperating with the Russians in the East, they could keep the Germans away. Meir had a job throughout the entire year now, not just in the summer.
- 2:21:32** Meir describes his life as a performer for the Russian soldiers and the Jews at galas organized by the department of information and propaganda. He was an emcee and his wife was a singer.
- 2:25:02** The material they performed was supplied by the Russians and translated into Yiddish. The shows were organized by the committee for "agitation and propaganda," or the Agitprop, of the communist party. In the smallest part of the program, they did include artistic material by the most famous Yiddish writers, like Isaac L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, and Yiddish writers in the communist party, like David Bergelson, Peretz Markish, and Itzik Feffer.
- 2:27:00** For the non-Jewish farmers, the changes under communist rule were positive. They now received their own parcels of land to work and could send their children to school. Prior to the Soviet takeover, extreme poverty had forced these families to have their children share one pair of shoes and alternate turns for going to school. There was also a noticeable reduction in drunkenness in the town. For the Jews, however, the changes were negative. Those Jews accused of not supporting the communist regime would have their property expropriated by fellow "kosher" Jews and then be deported to Siberia with their entire family. Meir describes the disappointment of the young people as the Russians took these steps.
- 3:00:00** Another negative aspect of the communist takeover was the nationalization of all private enterprises. They had no regard for the fact that the owners of these enterprises had not exploited anyone to succeed and had built their businesses from their own hard work. It was rumored that the confiscated businesses would be disposed for private gain or theft, which did not assuage the uneasy feelings of the youth.

- 3:03:46** Meir describes the devaluation of the ruble and the exaggerated increase in cost of basic necessities. The Jewish community was generally displeased with the regime and hoped for a change.
- 3:05:55** While Meir traveled to perform in the closed city of Palanga, the Germans entered Kovno. On his way back, the Germans had destroyed the train tracks, so Meir instead arrived in Jonava. While on the train, Meir met a group of Lithuanian youth celebrating the arrival of the Nazis, who were on their way to Kovno to take revenge on the communists and the Jews.
Meir describes the road to the Russian border when he is informed that the Russians will not let them in. He returned to Jonava and met the famous Lithuanian hero Justinas, who gave Meir and his wife shelter for a few days. Justinas informed them that a slaughter had taken place in Janova and advised them to hide in a bigger city, like Kovno. Meir describes Justinas' take on the war.
- 3:22:47** Before their marriage, Meir's wife's name was Sonia Burko.
- 3:25:00** Meir describes the walk to Kovno and an interesting encounter with the Wehrmacht, who saved them from some Lithuanian robbers.
- 3:27:28** Meir and his wife entered Kovno, where people of the Jewish neighborhood, Slobodka, had been slaughtered. They were taken in by a Christian resident who informed them of the events.
- 3:28:00** Meir describes viewing the long line of Jewish youth being led to the 7th Fort. One of the children was Meir's brother Avraham. Meir's father was also killed in the 7th Fort.
- 3:30:00** Meir and Sonia returned to their room that was in a building next to a bank. The bank was guarded by a Wehrmacht unit, so no one dared to come in to plunder or kill. A cook of that unit befriended the couple and brought them left-over food.
- 3:34:00** From June 30 to August 12, 1941, Meir and Sonia did not leave their room.
- 4:00:00** On August 12, 1941, their building's gate keeper presented them with the order to leave their room and go to the newly formed ghetto in Slobodka.
- 4:02:36** Meir describes their transfer to the ghetto. The Germans claimed they were protecting the Jews from the plunder of the Lithuanians.
- 4:03:00** When the registration for the ghetto occurred, the registrar, a former Komsomol friend, suggested that they register under a different name so as not to be recognized as communists. They registered as Sonia and Leon Ginz.

- 4:07:49** The Germans began to invade the houses of the ghetto. They would come in the middle of the night, with plenty of fire power, and abduct the young men. They learned to hide in attics and basements where the Germans were afraid to look.
- 4:08:21** The gold and valuables of the Jews in the ghetto were confiscated. If anyone was found hiding an item, everyone in the house was murdered.
- 4:14:00** Meir describes the deportation and murder of 500 intellectuals, who were supposed to do such work as translation, in the 4th Fort.
- 4:20:40** Meir was sent to work in the airport. His wife, who was in an advanced stage of pregnancy, hid.
- 4:22:34** There were many informants among the Jews, like Caspi Serebrowitz who lived outside the ghetto. Feine was another informant, and he was killed by the underground. Meir names five people involved in the underground directorate in the beginning of 1943.
- 4:29:04** Meir describes his work in the airport. One day, at dawn, the work groups were forbidden from entering the camp, and they, with other men, women, and children, were marched in the direction of the 9th Fort, through Kovno's main road. Before arriving at the Fort, they were directed through a dirt path to a storage house where they were ordered to carry two chairs on each of their heads and march another fifteen kilometers to Aukštoji Panemunė. On both sides of the main road of Kovno, non-Jews lined up applauding, celebrating, and singing marching songs. The group's final destination was an auditorium, and then they were marched back to the ghetto. This whole humiliating event occurred after they had worked a long day at the airport.
- 4:32:00** After this affair, Meir and a group of young people he knew from before decided to find a way to oppose the Germans. They decided on ways to prevent the Jews from falling into despair and to dispel rumors of an impending Soviet counteroffensive. They managed to get a radio receiver to find out where the front was in the war. The means of rebellion of this group, though, included suicides.
- 5:00:00** Meir describes the first "aktzia" when his mother and three of her children were taken out to the 9th Fort.
- 5:06:46** Meir discusses the evacuation of the small ghetto and the transfer to the large one. Three families were put together in a room. A rumor reaches the ghetto that the extermination of the Jews would be put on hold, but they must be put to work to help with Hitler's victory, which the Germans reminded them of by making all kinds of gestures.

- 5:15:00** Meir tells the story of the release of his father-in-law from a political prisoner camp.
- 5:17:50** Meir talks about Izzi Rabinowitz who was on the work committee of the Judenrat. Rabinowitz saw how the work certificates, called “life certificates,” were sold for gold or other goods. As a fair man who was dedicated to his fellow Jews, he was thoroughly disgusted by the commerce of the labor certificates.
- 5:20:20** Meir describes a roll call and the selection proceedings of the entire ghetto. Meir and his family were sent to the “right” side and back home. Those people on the “left” were taken to the small ghetto and then to the 9th Fort the next day. Mourning and despair descended on everyone, and people refused to go to work. The Germans thus had to reinstitute kidnappings in the middle of the night to send people to work. Meir was sent to a junk yard of tanks and other metals, which were supposed to be stripped and sent to Germany as raw materials. Meir describes some shocking events that are engraved in his mind. The first was when his mother-in-law decided to trade her only coat for a loaf of bread for her hungry children. After the exchange was carried out, it turned out that the “bread” was cow manure baked in a thin coat of dough. The second event was when a sister-in-law found refuge with a righteous Lithuanian family. She passed the ghetto, arm in arm with her benefactors, only to see her hungry mother and siblings. No one could react to the other because of the danger inherent in that kind of behavior.

Tape 2:

- 6:00:00** Meir’s above recounting of the ghetto occurred after the big “action,” when Jews no longer believed in the value of their work as a way out of the ghetto. By the end of 1942, the underground began to organize and procure ammunition.
- 6:07:02** Meir describes his own involvement in the organization of the underground and the other participants through the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942.
- 6:18:16** Meir discusses the work on his family’s “malina,” or hiding place. It included a library and weapons and was built after the first “action.” However, it was fenced in by the authorities, so the family could not save anything from it and had to build another “malina.” Meir describes the new “malina” and states that it took almost a month to build.
- 6:30:00** Meir discusses the underground’s organization to defend the ghetto by making Molotov cocktails before the first “action.” After it, they realized that this type of opposition would not work, and they would probably have to go to work in hiding in the forests.
- 7:00:00** Meir shares a humorous description of smuggling foods into the ghetto.

- 7:05:17** Meir describes the building of a new “malina” near the center of the ghetto with the goal of having it as needed to hide children there.
- 7:09:00** Eye witnesses reported killings in the 9th Fort to the Judenrat, who forbade them to report their findings to the general population in order to not cause panic.
- 7:12:33** Meir states that the underground viewed the Judenrat as traitors after the first “action.”
- 7:17:00** After the “action,” the underground reorganized. All groups formed a single council regardless of their affiliation.
- 7:20:03** In January, 1942 Meir’s baby was born. A new German marshal came to supervise the work that Meir and others did in the junkyard, and to his credit, he helped Meir’s child survive. Meir shares the story of how his young sister-in-law managed to get some food for Meir’s wife, the new mother. He also describes the baby’s brit-milah.
- 8:00:00** The last two months of the pregnancy of Meir’s wife were spent at home hiding away from the authorities.
- 8:04:15** Meir describes the birth of the baby, named Yakov, and the discussions on the advisability of the brit-milah, or circumcision. Meir also shares that they lost the people who were supposed to hide the baby outside of the ghetto.
- 8:12:25** After hearing that Meir’s baby was born, the new marshal, named Hans, sent many presents of food to their house. However, Hans defended the Jews before the Gestapo and, as punishment, was sent to the front for another six months. On his way back home from the front, he made a point to stop in Kovno and meet with the people who he still knew in the town. Hans even asked Meir how his baby was doing.
- 8:20:47** The black market in the ghetto prospered thanks to the cooperation of the “fence people.” However, the Gestapo replaced these people with a contingent of National Socialist Kraftfahrer, NSKK, after noticing that there were not as many deaths in the Kovno ghetto as in others. Consequently, the smuggling stopped, and hunger took over the ghetto.
- 8:23:00** Meir tells the story of when his sister-in-law was caught smuggling food. She was beaten by the NSKK forces when she was discovered.
- 8:27:00** Meir describes the difficult winter of 1941. The Jews were worked hard, especially on their days off and during holidays. During this period, they were slowly transferred to other places, in non-Jewish neighborhoods, where houses were far from each other. Because of these distances, the Jews could not meet

and organize the defense of the ghetto. Therefore, the objective for them became to try and connect with the outside world or join the partisans.

- 8:32:19** Meir's father-in-law, a baker by profession, arrived in the ghetto and organized a bread bakery.
- 9:00:00** Meir describes the winter of 1942. He and his family began to look for contacts with the outside world. His group guide, David Yelin, looked for help from the Zionist groups. They formed an anti-Fascist underground organization with a mutual understanding that their ideology should not divide them, for as Jews, they all faced the same fate. Support for the organization came from Doctor Elkes, the head of the Judenrat. Additionally, they were able to make a connection with the leadership of Russia. Meir's former high school teacher, Jugris, also made contact with them, for he headed the partisan group in the Rudnicki forests of southern Lithuania.
- 9:05:00** Meir discusses the many efforts made by the Jews to make contact with the partisans.
- 09:09:00** Meir describes raising a baby in the ghetto.
- 09:12:50** In the summer of 1942, the Jews made contact with a group of Lithuanians who would help them. Meir describes how their contact developed.
- 09:16:00** Meir describes the first efforts that were made to find hiding places for the children.
- 9:19:00** At the end of 1942 and into the beginning of 1943, the ghetto entered its first stages of liquidation.
- 9:24:00** Meir describes the Paneriai massacre.
- 9:25:00** Meir discusses the attempt to establish a new partisan camp in Augustova that ended in defeat. Most of the Jews involved were killed in the 9th Fort.
- 10:00:00** Meir describes the fallout in the ghetto after the defeat at Stalingrad. After three days of mourning were decreed in the ghetto for the Nazi victims of Stalingrad, a group of fifty Jews were taken upon their return from work. They were sent to their deaths in the 9th Fort as vengeance for the defeat. Others in the ghetto were also kidnapped and shot immediately.
- 10:05:00** Meir describes the efforts of Haim Yelin to organize groups of youth to leave the ghetto and join the partisans in the Rudnicki forest. Within six months, two hundred youths managed to join the partisans. However, the whole operation came to an end at the beginning of 1944 when Haim Yelin was caught.

- 10:15:00** Meir discusses the fate of his mother-in-law and aunt, who were sent away. Because they were gone, his wife had to stay home and take care of the baby, and the Judenrat took her off the list of workers. Meir talks about how they survived economically in the ghetto.
- 10:19:20** Meir refused to participate in the ghetto's orchestra.
- 10:21:31** Meir describes some of the underground's activities and his role in the underground. He would participate in discussions, encourage its members, and give practical advice.
- 10:27:00** Meir tells the story of the few Jews who managed to escape their work, of burning corpses, at the 9th Fort. He shares how they hid and how the Nazis threatened to liquidate the ghetto if those remaining did not give up those in hiding. Eventually the threat was cancelled.

Tape 3:

- 11:00:00** Meir discusses his worries about how to hide the baby. When they felt that the ghetto was about to be liquidated, they attempted to find refuge for the baby.
- 11:04:00** Meir's wife took the baby out of the ghetto and left him on the doorstep of a far away little church with a note that begged the nuns to save him. She waited in the bushes until the church opened, and a nun brought the baby inside the church. After dropping off her child, she went to her sister who worked as a house maid in a friendly Lithuanian home. She told her sister where she left the baby and to claim and care for child if she did not survive the war. On the way back to the ghetto, the Gestapo stopped her, and she disappeared forever. Meir sank into a depression and felt that there was no way out of it.
- 11:08:08** A month later in June, the ghetto was surrounded.
- 11:14:00** Meir describes the "action" of March 28 when the sick, the old, and the children were taken away from the ghetto, yet Meir managed to hide his baby and his wife. Meir also describes the role of a couple of Jewish policemen who uncovered the childrens' "malinas," or hiding places, in order to save themselves.
- 11:21:00** Meir states that several attempts to escape the ghetto were unsuccessful.
- 11:21:44** The Jews were taken to Stutthof, and Meir's block faced the pits where the bodies gassed with Zyklon B were burned.
- 11:23:59** Meir describes the burning pit and the building where the Jews were killed. He and the others were also given a liquid emetic, a medicine to cause vomiting, because the Nazis thought they had swallowed gold pieces.

- 11:24:00** The Germans used a bucket to collect the Jews' excrements, and they checked it for the gold pieces.
- 11:28:00** In Stutthof, Meir met his brother, who had been in a different ghetto, and his father- and brother-in-law. After a couple of months, they were sent to Dachau, and Meir describes this journey.
- 11:32:14** Meir describes entering Willich (?) in order to get their numbers. They then went on to Landsberg and finally Dachau.
- 11:34:46** Meir discusses the roll call at Dachau.
- 12:00:00** Meir discusses the diet at Dachau.
- 12:06:37** Meir talks of his work at Dachau and the building of an underground factory.
- 12:08:00** Meir describes the Slovakian Jews.
- 12:10:00** A German befriended Meir, gave him work, and brought him food. This arrangement continued for two to three months until the man was ordered back to the forest.
- 12:11:59** Meir states that the work he was doing changed. He also mentions Gershon, the Jew who had access to food and fed many Jews. Gershon also saved many of those who contracted dysentery from extermination by caring for them when they were ill.
- 12:18:00** At the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, there was a quarantine in the camp.
- 12:19:00** Meir shares more about the Slovakian Jews.
- 12:21:00** Meir describes more of his work and the bombardments that occurred while he was at work.
- 12:28:00** Meir discusses the punishments while in Dachau. Five women were hanged in public.
- 12:32:00** At the end of April, the Jews were assembled and admonished to obey the authorities. The camp commander addressed them and stated that he would take them to the Americans. They started marching.
- 13:00:00** Meir describes the march: every person received half a loaf of bread and walked under the supervision of those in charge.
- 13:05:59** Meir describes the Death March.

- 13:13:29** Meir discusses their liberation.
- 13:15:00** He describes the first steps he took after he was liberated and his return to Lithuania. He shares the case of an American soldier, who merited liberating his father in Šiauliai.
- 13:19:00** Meir's group, escorted by Americans, went back towards Lithuania and was transferred to the Russians at the border. The Russians immediately took the youth of the group over to the Army. They also confiscated everything of value that the group was encouraged by the Americans to take from German storage. They were given a handful of sugar and a piece of bread and were told to walk one hundred kilometers to a meeting point. However, they decided to defect and managed to get back to Lithuania undetected.
- 13:23:00** Meir returned to Kovno and reunited with his son, now three years old. They moved to Vilna, and Meir worked in the consumers' cooperative. However, it was difficult to make ends meet.
- 13:26:00** Meir discusses the history of the young life of his child, who inconsolably missed his mother.
- 13:28:40** In 1950, the nun who had hidden the child came to Meir and asked him to release their priest from the NKVD unit of the Russians. A friend of Meir agreed to release the priest, but the friend was later killed under suspicious circumstances.
- 13:33:30** Meir and his friends worked to revive Jewish cultural life in Kovno by establishing a small theatre, by hosting a series of lectures by Markish, Pfeffer, Ehrenburg, and more, and by creating a remembrance corner with authentic ghetto documents hidden in milk cans. They organized all of these activities without outside help or funds.
- 14:00:00** On one clear day, some NKVD soldiers came in the middle of the day, loaded books and documents on a truck, and closed the place.
- 14:02:21** Meir states that speeches against the Jews increased in the first few years of 1950.
- 14:03:41** Rumors began to circulate that the Jews would be deported to cities like Birobidzhan.
- 14:10:10** Meir and a group of friends began to look for ways to organize to avoid deportation and to revive Jewish culture. They managed to establish the group "And now, we are here."
- 14:14:47** In 1956, Meir's new wife, his former sister-in-law, gave birth. Because she was a Polish citizen, they were allowed to settle in Warsaw, where Meir was accepted into Ida Kaminska's Yiddish theater. After four years, they emigrated to Israel.

- 14:16:38** Meir's oldest son refused to enroll in the Polish army. They changed their name to Tzoref.
- 14:19:00** Meir describes his family life in Israel. He continued to work as an actor until the age of fifty.
- 14:23:37** To this day, Meir's nightmares always have to do with finding a hiding place for his son.