

Drori, Chaim
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Two Videotapes in Hebrew
Recorded February 5, 1998

Abstract

Chaim Drori was born near Neresnica, Czechoslovakia in 1930 to an observant family. His father was a Zionist and a Communist. Chaim was one of four children. Only he and his sister Naomi survived the war. In 1944, he was deported to the ghetto of Mátészalka in Hungary. He was then deported to Birkenau and eventually to Buchenwald. He worked in a camp near the Zeiss factory. Chaim became ill and was sent to the 'sick camp' in Buchenwald. He was concerned that he would be sent to Auschwitz, but he was spared. He was finally liberated in Buchenwald.

After the war, Chaim traveled to the place of his birth in search of surviving relatives. He joined the Zionist youth movement Dror-Hechalutz and prepared to make Aliyah to Palestine. The group was going to reach Palestine illegally, but they were intercepted by the British Navy and sent to Cyprus. Chaim lived in a Displaced Persons camp in Cyprus from February to September 1947. He eventually obtained an official certificate and upon arrival in Palestine was sent to a processing camp in Atlit. He settled first in Hadera and later in Hahotrim. Chaim studied agriculture and received a position in the kibbutz. Later, he was sent to Kenya and Zaire as an agricultural advisor. He now has a large family of both adopted and biological children.

Oral History

Tape 1

- 1:00:00** Chaim Drori was born Chaim Fogel in a little town near Neresnica, Slovakia. Twenty percent of the town's population was Jewish. The town was underdeveloped, and what little commerce existed was in the hands of the Jews. They also owned small parcels of farming land.
- 1:02:25** Chaim was born in May 1930 to a very observant family. At home they spoke Yiddish, and in public, Ruthenian. At school they learned Czech, and in cheder they learned Hebrew.
- 1:03:30** His father, Benjamin Ezraha Fogel, was a Hebrew teacher and also taught religion in a public school. Despite the Jewish community's strict adherence to orthodoxy, his father was an ardent Zionist. Chaim's father was also a communist because of the fervor that grew after the Russian Revolution. His father was one of few intellectuals in their village and the only one who received a daily newspaper. He also organized women's study groups. His father is still recognized today in Israel for his work.
- 1:06:54** Chaim's family owned a garden where they grew produce. They mostly fed themselves from the garden but did sell some of their produce. His mother stayed at home and helped with the garden.

- 1:07:23** Chaim was one of four children. He had an older brother Moshe, born in 1926, an older sister Naomi, born in 1928, and a younger sister Yehudit, born in 1933.
- 1:09:13** Chaim describes his daily life in the village.
- 1:11:10** He talks about his grandparents.
- 1:15:40** He talks about his family life and the holidays they celebrated.
- 1:17:10** Chaim talks about school holidays and that his friends were all Jewish.
- 1:20:00** His father had connections with non-Jews because of his communist affiliation.
- 1:26:02** In March 1939, the Hungarians conquered a small area of Carpatho-Russia. After a short while, they arrived in Chaim's village.
- 1:29:00** Chaim describes the Ukrainian school and the anti-Jewish sentiments there.
- 1:32:40** He talks about the anti-Jewish laws in his town.
- 2:00:00** Chaim describes the program of studies in the public school, which included subjects like Hungarian history. The children hated going to school because their teachers were often drunk.
- 2:02:23** In 1939, the standard of living was much lower. It was difficult to obtain some foods, and Chaim's family suffered greatly. They had to make do with much less.
- 2:04:28** He talks about the physical punishment at school.
- 2:05:00** Chaim discusses his siblings' experiences during the two years of Hungarian rule.
- 2:08:37** In August 1941, Jews were evacuated to the East to the area of Kamyanyets Podlisky(?). Chaim was only eleven years old and did not understand why they had to leave. His father was deported, but his mother and the other children were not. They received some news from their father through a letter, but Chaim did not find out about the extermination of the Jews until the Eichmann trial.
- 2:15:00** It became very difficult to find sustenance. The two older siblings managed to get part-time work in Budapest, and the younger sister was adopted by a rich Jewish family. Chaim was the only child to stay at home. He did not receive any more schooling and took any job that he could get. He was about twelve or thirteen.
- 2:17:33** These years were very difficult. Chaim's family received some aid from the Joint.
- 2:21:58** Chaim talks about his grandmother.

- 2:22:56** Chaim's siblings would come home for the holidays. However during Passover 1944, deportations took place in their town. Everyone was home except their father. They were told to get ready to move to a ghetto in three days. He describes packing some bedding and food.
- 2:25:38** The non-Jews cooperated with the army so that no Jews escaped.
- 2:27:03** They were put on trains and traveled about 100 kilometers to a ghetto in Mátészalka, Hungary. They were housed in barns, attics, and other similar places. The village where some Jews lived was a farming community with many vineyards.
- 2:28:53** Prior to the deportation, Chaim's village knew that something was amiss but had no concrete information. Some of the older youth attempted to join the partisans but were defeated. They were all mobilized to work. They tried to flee to the border with the Russians, but the Russians just returned them to the Hungarians. Those people who tried to flee were killed.
- 2:32:57** Chaim talks about hiding valuables before being deported.
- 2:33:56** Chaim and his family spent about five weeks in the ghetto. He talks more about the ghetto and the attic where they lived.
- 3:00:00** He describes the ghetto again. Some people lived in tents in the old Christian cemetery.
- 3:07:00** The first group to be evacuated from the ghetto was made of young people who were taken to Birkenau and became part of the Sonderkommando. The subsequent groups of deportees were larger. They were taken in cattle cars but did not know where they were going. They had a horrible four-day long trip to Auschwitz.
- 3:10:09** Chaim arrived in Birkenau. He and his brother were warned to definitely not go to the left. Both were sent to the right.
- 3:13:06** They were processed into the camp. Chaim was in Camp Z, Block 21. He talks about the roll call.
- 3:16:07** There was a redistribution of people into different blocks during the first four days. Despite the crematoria working at full capacity in May 1944 during the Hungarian Jewish extermination, the people in the camp still did not know what was happening.
- 3:18:00** Chaim recalls the sights of the suicides and the smell of burning bodies. He also describes his hunger and the brutal Jewish kapo who was assigned over him.

- 3:22:00** After a week at Birkenau, they were transported by cattle cars to Buchenwald, where they were temporarily housed in the 'small' camp. Chaim talks about being processed into the camp and the surprisingly humane treatment there. He stayed there for one week. There were about thirty people from his village still together.
- 3:28:20** A transport of about one thousand people, including Chaim, was sent to a work camp near the Zeiss optical plant. They were put to work in the huge factory of the Braback(?) Company, that made liquid fuel out of coal. The plant had about fifty thousand laborers from all over Europe.
- 3:29:56** He discusses the living conditions, the work, and his diet at the camp. They were forced to walk three kilometers to work in their bare feet.
- 4:00:00** A new camp of tents was built at the entrance to the factory, so the workers did not have to walk three kilometers anymore. Many new forced laborers were added.
- 4:02:49** It took two months of hard work to re-build the factory that had been bombed. Production began again. It was the summer of 1944. Many sirens sounded during that period, and non-Jews would go to bunkers under the hills. Jews were sent to an abandoned quarry surrounded by machine guns to await the end of the sirens.
- 4:06:31** In August, the Allies bombed the factory successfully. Many died or were injured, and those injured were sent to Auschwitz and exterminated.
- 4:08:22** The bombardments continued through the summer. A new permanent camp was built for the workers for winter. Chaim talks about how hungry he was.
- 4:09:00** Chaim was chosen, with others, for the 'straw command.' Their mission was to collect straw from nearby, destroyed villages to make mattresses for the winter.
- 4:10:15** Every four to six weeks, there was a 'selection' to get rid of the people who were in poor physical condition. They were ultimately sent to Auschwitz.
- 4:11:00** At the end of the summer, more Hungarian Jews began to arrive.
- 4:13:28** Chaim talks about Sunday activities, including news and lectures. He describes his daily schedule.
- 4:14:54** The people in charge of the different blocks changed.
- 4:18:39** Chaim talks about the hygienic conditions of the camp.
- 4:26:42** It was impossible to flee while in the heart of Germany.
- 4:30:02** There were four Wehrmacht officers in charge of Chaim's detachment.

- 4:34:35** Chaim describes his different jobs in the camp.
- 5:25:36** In the winter of 1945 the inmates worked outside in the freezing weather and had to wear their summer clothes and clogs instead of shoes. Chaim's body began to weaken. In February 1945, the bombardments increased, and the factory was burned.
- 5:28:00** At a selection check on fitness, Chaim was taken to Buchenwald. He was put in the small transition camp with sick people in the 'Death Block.' He believed he would eventually be sent to Auschwitz. Twelve people had to share one loaf of bread.
- 5:31:06** He talks about roll calls and being barefoot in the snow.
- 5:32:46** Chaim was among a group of prisoners taken to the sick block where a devoted Czech doctor took care of them. Around the end of March and the beginning of April, the Allies neared the camp.
- 5:34:05** The Germans gave a notice to evacuate the camp. The doctors hid the sick children in the prostitute block of the 'small camp,' which saved Chaim. The women there took care of the children for a week or two until liberation. Chaim weighed thirty-three kilograms when he was liberated.
- 5:38:37** Chaim talks about how liberation day was accomplished by the underground of Buchenwald. They were the ones who liberated the camp by taking over key positions before the Americans arrived.
- 5:40:00** Chaim stayed for another two to three weeks in the bordello under the care of American personnel. He was put on medication and given a special diet.
- 5:44:43** Many died from typhus after liberation.
- 5:45:38** Chaim talks about the Death March.
- 5:46:40** In the aftermath of liberation, Czech Jews were assigned to a special house where they could be rehabilitated. Groups were sent, according to their choice, to different countries.
- 5:48:49** At the end of May, a group of Czech people with ambulances, mobile kitchens, and buses arrived to take the Czech Jews back to Prague.
- 5:49:56** Chaim arrived in Prague and went to a girls orphanage where he received total and devoted care.
- 5:52:59** Chaim's brother, with whom he spent most of the war, died of typhus in Theresienstadt after liberation.

- 5:53:22** Chaim began looking for family members in their home town. He describes his trip to Bratislava and then to Budapest where the survivors had been gathered in a school and a hotel.
- 6:00:00** When Chaim got off the train, he met his sister Naomi.
- 6:04:09** He discusses Naomi's war years.
- 6:05:32** Chaim and his sister went home together to find family survivors. The trip home took four difficult days. When they arrived they found their house in shambles and treated poorly by the locals.
- 6:07:00** Upon discovering that the USSR was close to annexing Czechoslovakia, Chaim and his friends joined the Zionist movement in their village, Dror-Hechalutz. They decided to join them at their training farm in Hungary with the intention of going to Palestine.
- 6:15:00** He talks about jobs at the training farm.
- 6:16:35** On weekends, they attended lectures and other activities in preparation for their eventual arrival in the Holy Land.
- 6:19:32** Chaim talks about his daily schedule.
- 6:29:00** In December 1945, Chaim developed bronchitis. The entire group left while he stayed behind in the hospital.
- 6:30:00** He was promised that upon convalescing, he would be able to rejoin his group in Prague.
- 6:32:34** Chaim describes leaving Hungary and his journey through the December snow. After two weeks, he rejoined his group in Holzhausen.
- 7:00:00** The group contained 150 young people who were mostly from Carpatho-Russia.
- 7:03:42** Chaim discusses the organization of his group, which included activities and studying, before going to Palestine. UNRRA helped to provide workshops and training in agriculture. The conditions were excellent, and Chaim put on twenty kilograms and grew more than twenty centimeters.
- 7:07:07** The group had to wait for immigration certificates, which were difficult to obtain. His sister had already immigrated illegally to Palestine. Chaim's group also organized to get there through illegal means. The group was named after Hannah Szenes (Senesh) whose mother they had visited in jail. They eventually arrived at kibbutz Hahotrim.

- 7:13:00** Chaim returns to his story about the camp. He describes the relationship between the Hungarian Jews and those Jews, like Chaim, from Carpatho-Russia. There were hostile relations between these two groups in the camp.
- 7:16:58** Chaim describes his return to Germany after liberation and having very uneasy feelings. There were several attacks against Jews, and Chaim discusses how the Jews responded.
- 7:19:11** Chaim talks about the black market and the commerce of American cigarettes. Information filtered to them about the 'avengers.'
- 7:21:26** About forty people organized to go to Palestine illegally. Chaim describes his voyage to Ulm and then to the French port from where the boats left. The Berichah took care of the groups along with help from the Jewish Brigade.
- 7:26:22** When they approached Lyon, the Palmach took over and instructed them on their voyage and arrival in Palestine and how to fight the British. The Palmach instituted a strict military discipline.
- 7:30:00** In February 1947, they arrived in a small port to leave for Palestine. Chaim describes the ship, the voyage, and the crew.
- 8:00:00** Chaim describes the passengers and how his group organized to help them. The ship was called 'Hama'apil Ha'almoni,' 'The Unknown Illegal Immigrant.' He discusses his roll on the ship full of Jews from all over who spoke many different languages.
- 8:05:34** Chaim describes the ship's difficult passage through the Messina Straits and the rest of the journey.
- 8:06:47** The passengers were instructed how to defend themselves from a possible British interception.
- 8:07:00** Upon their arrival on the shores of Tel Aviv, they were "greeted" by British Navy destroyers. The British confronted Chaim's ship and took control of it. Chaim and his group were towed to Haifa, while someone arranged to hoist an Israeli flag on their ship's mast. They were transferred to deportation ships and knew that their destination was Cyprus. A hunger strike was declared that lasted for half a day.
- 8:15:21** They arrived in Cyprus to a DP camp in February.
- 8:17:10** Chaim describes the conditions in the DP camp and his role there.
- 8:19:10** The entire Jewish population and many politicians rallied around the survivors, perhaps out of guilt for having done nothing before. Envoys, including teachers, were sent from Palestine.

- 8:20:00** A month later, another illegal ship managed to break the British siege, and most of the immigrants made it to the Nitzanim shore. Those who were caught, about four hundred people, were taken to Cyprus. Among them were people from northern Palestine and several from the Palmach. They trained the immigrants, which gave them a renewed interest in life. They were busy learning and preparing for their arrival in Eretz Israel.
- 8:23:06** Chaim talks about Menachem Oren who brought greetings from his sister.
- 8:25:00** Chaim mentions an attempt to blow up a British ship. He also talks about life in the DP camp.
- 8:27:00** They were in the camp from February to September.
- 8:29:00** He discusses personal relationships there.
- 8:31:00** Chaim describes the DP camp's organization.
- 8:33:00** Chaim discusses how Jewish holidays were celebrated in the camp.
- 8:34:00** In September, they were told that young people up to the age of seventeen could immigrate to Palestine without waiting for their certificates. Chaim was among them.
- 9:00:00** Chaim discusses leaving Cyprus and arriving in Haifa on the same ship they had traveled on originally. They arrived at the Atlit camp and stayed there for a week in tough circumstances. The camp was a crowded mess, and the youth there misbehaved. Their final destination was in doubt.
- 9:11:00** Chaim discusses his release from Atlit and his absorption into a youth Aliyah institution in Hadera where he studied and worked.
- 9:13:00** 1947 was an important year in the history of Israel because of the November partition. They guarded the place where the UN made the decision on the partition.
- 9:16:00** Chaim participated in the defense of Hadera.
- 9:19:00** He settled in Hahotrim, which was first a military outpost and then a kibbutz. While Hahotrim was a military outpost, the people living there defended it during the War of Independence. After the war, the work on the new kibbutz began in earnest. However, it did not have the means to pay its best workers, so Chaim and the strongest in the group were sent elsewhere to work for a salary. They worked as stevedores, the first 'sabras' to do that work, and competed against the others at being the best. They loaded citrus fruits into ships.

- 9:30:00** The kibbutz allowed Chaim to complete his education by attending special seminars. In 1952 he attended a course for kibbutz administrators in Ein Harod. Upon completion, Chaim became his kibbutz's manager at the 'ripe' age of 23 to 24.
- 9:31:45** Agriculture in the kibbutz finally prospered when it established itself in its permanent site. One of Chaim's dreams was to have a formal education, especially since he was not able to finish elementary school. After working for a few years on the kibbutz, he was sent to study agriculture in the Agricultural School in Rehovot. He succeeded and afterwards returned to his own kibbutz for many years. He was sent several times to Zaire and Kenya as an advisor and consultant. He kept in touch with many people from Africa for years.
- 10:00:00** Chaim talks about his family. He was used to a large family, so over the years he and his wife adopted fifteen children in addition to their three biological children. They all know their parents' Holocaust story, but they do not let it rule their lives. They have seven biological grandchildren and ten adoptive ones, but all of them consider Chaim and his wife Hanka their true grandparents.