

Morgenbesser, Walter
RG-50.120*0337
2 Videotapes
In Hebrew
Recorded February 19, 1998

Abstract

Walter Morgenbesser, one of seven brothers, was born on December 14, 1930, in Spisská Nová Ves, Slovakia. In October 1944, his father was taken away, so Walter supported his family by working for a Wehrmacht officer. Later, he and the rest of his family were rounded up and taken to Auschwitz. He was able to meet up with his mother and father there, but they were all soon transported to Ravensbrueck. When they arrived at Ravensbrueck, a selection occurred that separated the men from the women, and Walter never saw his mother again.

In his descriptions of Ravensbrueck, Walter talks about his difficult work and life there, the punishments for stealing food, and the Christmastime celebrations. He also shares the story of wishing to be sterilized to receive an extra portion of bread, as was happening with the Gypsy children. In March 1945, Walter was transferred to Sachsenhausen, where he experienced heavy Allied bombardment and saw the son of Stalin, a pilot downed by the Germans.

On April 22, 1945, Walter and the other inmates of Sachsenhausen were liberated. Walter, his father, and a companion fled from the Russians and ended up in a refugee camp in Katowice, Poland. Shortly thereafter they went on to Košice, Slovakia, which was where his parents had been raised. In 1947, Walter received a Czech passport with which he immigrated to Israel and first joined Kibbutz Kfar Masaryk, and later Kibbutz Evron.

Transcript

Tape 1:

- 1:00:00** Walter Morgenbesser was born on December 14, 1930, in the village of Spisská Nová Ves, in Slovakia.
- 1:02:24** In October 1944, Walter's father was taken away after the German invasion, and Walter stayed home with his mother. Because he looked like a non-Jew, he was able to find a job cleaning house for a Wehrmacht officer from Hanover named Max Sidel. Walter supported his family by working for the officer.
- 1:07:52** Walter had two brothers named Theo and Eugen, but he did not know where Eugen, the older brother, was hiding. Walter brought leftover food from the officer's kitchen to his family. When his father was detained, Walter's mother begged him to intercede and to try to win his father's freedom. Walter told the German officer he worked for that he was a Jew.
- 1:20:00** Walter's older brother, a doctor, died while in a hospital's surgery room. His father was devastated by the news and freed from the Army, so he could go home and sit shiva.

- 1:25:00** Walter discusses the local Volksdeutsche roundup of the few Jewish families left in the village. They were taken to the courtyard of their village and then loaded onto a truck.
- 2:00:00** The people of this roundup arrived in Prešov, a city in Eastern Slovakia, where there was a Gestapo prison run by the Ukrainian Gestapo. Walter describes the cruelty of the officers and how the prisoners were processed there. They spent three days in the prison.
- 2:12:15** At the end of October, they were transported by cargo trains toward Poland, through Orlov (Orlové ?), for one week. Walter describes the conditions and deaths on the train.
- 2:17:54** Walter describes people dying of thirst.
- 2:18:49** They arrived at Auschwitz.
- 2:22:59** Walter describes meeting his mother and getting together with his father.
- 2:31:38** After some time in Auschwitz, they went back on the train and were taken to Fürstenberg on the way to Ravensbrueck.
- 3:00:00** Walter describes a selection that took place in the big plaza and the separation of men and women, after which Walter never saw his mother again.
- 3:02:17** Walter describes the entrance to the camp and the camp itself. One thousand people were placed in each of the five blocks.
- 3:07:46** Walter's first job was to remove gold from people's teeth.
- 3:10:00** Walter further describes the camp.
- 3:12:00** He gives a very detailed description of the flogging table.
- 3:14:21** Walter shares the names of his co-workers in the shoe workshop.
- 3:18:00** Walter describes the shoe supplies that were taken from the victims and searched for valuables.
- 3:25:00** He remembers witnessing a flogging.
- 3:30:00** The Gypsy children of Walter's camp did not work. They were in their block all the time and underwent sterilization. They received special treatment after the procedure.

- 3:33:00** Walter's father worked in his own barracks with a sewing machine that was brought to him.
- 3:34:14** Walter describes the sterilization procedure.
- 4:00:00** The children who were sterilized received a double portion of bread and were exempted from work for three days. Walter decided he wanted to have the procedure done to receive this extra portion, so he checked with his father. In Walter's family, sex was never discussed, so he did not understand the connection between sex and sterilization. His father tried to persuade him not to have the procedure done, without discussing the "facts." Because Walter insisted on having the procedure, since it was painless and he would receive more bread, his father decided to give him his share of bread. Walter refused the arrangement. They both cried, and the matter was put to rest.
- 4:06:30** Walter describes the Blockältester of his block.
- 4:11:40** Walter describes his work reaping straw, the railroad tracks that reached the Siemens factory, and the trip from the camp to the factory. On this trip, they traveled with the discards of the shoes in order to bury them.
- 4:20:00** He remembers passing the "Jugendlager" and wondering why they were not there. Walter later found out that it was the killing barracks, and that his mother was killed there.
- 4:23:00** Walter describes seeing the women's transports arrive and then talking to a relative who later adopted him.
- 4:28:00** Walter shares the story of the cook who tried to flee but was executed.
- 5:00:00** In January 1945, the children were sent from the shoe shop to unload a train that had arrived with belongings from the destroyed Warsaw ghetto. The items were put into huge warehouses bordering the ghetto's main gate and the railroad tracks. Walter took a beautiful knife he found among the items.
- 5:11:40** Walter repeats the names of the children with whom he worked.
- 5:12:48** A Gypsy Kapo taught the children the song "Silent Night" around Christmastime. Walter describes the Christmas celebrations.
- 5:17:33** Walter describes the festive meal that consisted of noodle soup with horse meat.
- 5:18:53** He describes the punishment for stealing a potato or a piece of celery. They were flogged and had to bite into a horse bone for an entire day, were

buried up to the neck, or had to stand outdoors under a dripping faucet. Walter was hit twice during his stay there. He recollects upon his arrival in the camp, knowing about the gas chambers, and wondering what would come out of the shower heads. Some thought that “human fat” soap would come from the shower heads.

Tape 2:

- 6:00:00** Walter shares a list of names of inmates from his town.
- 6:18:00** Walter describes the education in the camp with the teacher, David Keresh. The Gypsy children were included, but they complained that they did not need to study. The teacher was sent away.
- 6:21:08** The ties between the Jewish children were closer than in any other group. Two-thirds of the children in the group were Gypsies.
- 6:25:56** The only clue the prisoners had of the Allied approach was the sight of thousands of planes.
- 6:28:00** On March 3, 1945, a cold day, the entire camp was evacuated and transported in open cargo cars to Sachsenhausen. They passed Berlin and arrived in Oranienburg. From there, they walked to Sachsenhausen and were put in Block 12. That night, the Gypsy children robbed them of their bread.
- 7:00:00** Walter went to complain to the Kapo, who was a cruel Ukrainian. The Kapo hit Walter for waking him up and he lost consciousness, but was helped by his friends.
- 7:08:11** After a couple of days, they were transferred to Blocks 18 and 19. A section of these Blocks was dedicated to the counterfeiting of sterling pounds and dollars. Another part was dedicated to fixing watches.
- 7:11:10** The prisoners slept on straw spread out on the floor.
- 7:12:00** The neighborhood around the camp was full of ammunition plants. The Allied bombardment was frequent and lasted many days.
- 7:16:34** The Allies dropped fliers from planes that showed the inmates, with detailed maps, where the front was.
- 7:18:50** One of the bomber planes flying over the camp was Russian. It was hit, but the pilot jumped out and was brought to the camp an hour later. Walter saw the pilot, who the SS officer discovered by looking at his identification papers, was the son of Stalin. Normally, Russian prisoners were immediately sent to the crematoria, but the Germans decided to set up a

prisoner exchange for this pilot. When informed of the offer, Stalin replied, "If I have such a son who was taken prisoner, I do not need him." The pilot was sent to the crematoria.

7:20:00 Walter describes hearing Hitler's speech at the beginning of April, and the quality of the camp's canteen. He states that 47,000 prisoners were in Sachsenhausen.

7:35:00 Just before the evacuation, the Red Cross distributed food to the children.

8:00:00 Walter and the other inmates at the camp were liberated on April 22, at 1:30 PM. Walter, his father, and his partner received food from the Red Cross and left the camp, not knowing in which direction they were going. A heavily decorated Russian major saw them and called to them in Yiddish. He noticed the shoes that Walter wore and motioned for them to go with him to get real shoes.

The Russian took them to a store where Walter filled his pockets with erasers. He then took them to the house of a German and demanded a pair of shoes for Walter, but the German complained that he had only one pair. The Russian cursed the German, took out his bayonet, and killed him. Walter, who saw what was happening, fled the house and waited outside. When the Russian, a young man with a reddish beard, was done, he told Walter: "Do you know who I am? I am the son of Kiev's chief rabbi, and what I did to him now, they did to my mother, father, brothers, and sisters. Here in Germany, although I have them, I do not use any other weapons."

The Russian and Walter parted company after the Russian wished them well. Walter, his father, and the other boy continued to walk in the opposite direction of the Russian forces, for they crowded the road with vehicles and ammunition. The German Messerschmitt (planes) came and decimated all of the Russians and continued toward Sachsenhausen. Walter and his company were saved by running into the fields. On the first day after liberation, they had walked about thirty kilometers until they arrived in Bernau. A Russian officer gave orders to have them housed in the city.

9:00:00 Walter discusses the loose ends he had to tie up. He returns to a discussion of January 1945, when he was assigned to unload items from the train that arrived in Ravensbrueck.

9:03:43 After Bernau, Walter crossed the border into Poland at Poznań. He boarded a passenger train and arrived in Katowice. There, he and his companions were taken care of in a refugee camp. Walter does not remember how long they were there. A few days after the official end of the war, they were put on trains and sent to the Ukraine. The trip lasted a month.

- 9:08:16** Walter and his companions arrived in Košice, Slovakia, where both of his parents had been raised.
- 9:15:03** Walter discusses his return home. His father received a certificate to immigrate to Israel almost immediately. Five of his sons had survived, but the two eldest had been killed.
- 9:16:06** Walter arrived in Israel with a Czech passport in 1947.
- 9:17:38** Walter spent his first years in Israel at Kibbutz Kfar Masaryk. With the arrival of thousands of youth during the Exodus, a group of forty was sent to Kibbutz Evron, which Walter was invited to join.