

PRESSBURGER, Otto
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Three videotapes
In Hebrew

Abstract

Otto Pressburger was born on June 29, 1923 in Trnava (now in Slovakia), Czechoslovakia. His father was a leather merchant, and Otto grew up in a financially stable family. He was the youngest of five brothers. The family practiced Orthodox Judaism, but all the children were interested in the Zionist movement. Otto experienced little anti-Semitism growing up, until 1938 when the Nazis imposed prohibitions on the Jews of his town. Some were attacked. In 1940, Otto was sent to a work camp in Trentschin (Trencin, now in Slovakia), but he escaped and returned home where he built roads. In March 1942, Otto's family was separated and sent to different Nazi camps. Otto was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Otto was placed in Block A of Birkenau where he built roads, lived in squalor, and witnessed Nazi guards killing Jews. Otto was sent back and forth between Auschwitz and Birkenau to help erect a school and other camp buildings. He was sent also to Harmeze and Budy for short periods to do construction and other work. At Auschwitz, he was in the infamous Block 11 where people were shot in its basement. He made friends with a kapo named Kozelchik, who helped him and other Jews be safe and get extra food. In the fall of 1944, resistance against the camps' Nazis began to increase. In January 1945, Auschwitz and Birkenau had to be evacuated, and Otto and a few others headed toward Gross Rosen.

They were caught and sent to the camp Muelsen-St. Micheln but eventually escaped, disguised as Czech political prisoners. The men were caught after an American attack and ended up in the camp Litoměřice. From there, they were deported to Flossenbürg, but Otto and one of his companions escaped by jumping from the train. They traveled to the village of Hrádek Králové, where a farmer housed them. He happened to be the head of the local underground movement. The two companions stayed there until the war ended, then Otto returned home and joined a group leaving for Palestine.

Otto arrived in Palestine on April 15, 1947. He had been injured when the British attacked his ship, and had to spend some time in a hospital. Then he was transferred to Atlit, where one of his brothers found him. Otto was reunited with his mother in Tel Aviv. In 1948, Otto joined the Israeli army. He married in 1950. He considers "Auschwitz as a school for life."

Oral History

Tape 1

- 1:00:00** Otto Dov Pressburger was born on June 29, 1923 in Trnava, Czechoslovakia, now a part of Slovakia. He was the youngest of five brothers in a financially comfortable family. The father was a leather merchant.
- 1:02:08** Otto was raised in an Orthodox household. They put on tefillin every morning, covered their heads around the table, went to the synagogue on Shabbat, and observed dietary laws. Otto went to a Hebrew school for five years, then a

municipal high school, and then another Hebrew school. All of his studies were in Slovak, but the schools also taught German and English. At home, his parents spoke German because they had grown up in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

- 1:07:00** Otto reminisces on his experiences in kindergarten.
- 1:11:00** He discusses sports in the framework of the Young Maccabi movement.
- 1:12:00** Otto talks about his friendships in the Gymnasium, and his brothers.
- 1:16:04** Otto describes his maternal grandparents.
- 1:17:00** Otto listened to Hitler on the radio in 1933. His grandfather made comments about the ignorance of the Slovak people.
- 1:18:23** He describes the celebration of holidays at home.
- 1:25:00** His parents were not politically active, nor were they interested in politics.
- 1:28:00** Otto describes their housekeeper.
- 1:31:00** Otto and his family did not experience any anti-Semitism in their community.
- 1:32:00** He describes his mother's and father's occupations and schedules.
- 1:33:55** The children in Otto's family were more Zionistically inclined than their parents were. They made Keren Kayemet Le Yisrael, Jewish National Fund, boxes.
- 2:00:00** In 1938, everyone, including Otto's brothers, was mobilized. Several prohibitions against and attacks on Jews began in his town. In 1940, he was taken to a work camp in Trentschin (Trencin, now in Slovakia), next to Banská Bystrica, to build roads.
- 2:06:32** Because of harsh weather, the camp had to relocate farther east to a new location not far from Otto's hometown. He decided to escape, and succeeded on his second attempt. His father bribed someone locally, and Otto was put to work building roads in his own village. He was able to come home every day after work.
- 2:11:27** Otto's father took a partner as a co-owner in his leather business. Only single men were taken to work, so his parents stayed in the city.
- 2:12:31** Otto describes his schedule in Trentschin.
- 2:14:52** In March 1942, all single men were told to gather at the train station to leave for work in Poland. Everyone was entitled to take 15 kilograms of baggage. They

were taken to a small concentration camp in Sered (now in Slovakia) where they stayed for three days. The commander of the camp was Eichmann's second-in-command Wisliceny, who sent the men to Auschwitz from Sered. Otto was with one of his brothers until the men were separated into groups of three to be sent to the train station. His brother was sent to Majdanek, and Otto never saw him again. Otto remained in Sered for a while longer and briefly met his father and an older brother.

- 2:19:20** His father and brother brought news from the rest of the family in Trnava. Otto's brother was saved by a non-Jewish friend and spared for the time being. He underwent a hemorrhoid operation.
- 2:21:05** Otto and the others were sent on cattle cars toward Poland. They arrived in Auschwitz on April 14, 1942, and were processed into the camp.
- 2:29:23** The next day, these people were sent to Camp A in Birkenau, which was seven kilometers north.
- 2:31:07** Otto describes the bathrooms at the camp. He shares the story of an incident where some younger people tried to steal his father's belt. Otto helped to save certain people from retributions.
- 3:00:47** He describes the forced labor at the camp.
- 3:03:11** Otto describes the camp's kapos.
- 3:04:00** He studied the camp's organization and set-up by watching its guards and the electric fence.
- 3:07:00** Otto discusses his first day of work building roads. He witnessed a Nazi killing a Jew and taking his golden teeth. Eight Jews were executed and their teeth were removed by that evening.
- 3:08:25** Otto describes his meals.
- 3:11:59** The next day, they dug deep trenches, and spotted a group of citizens building a large structure.
- 3:14:27** Otto discusses the cruel games the Nazi guards played.
- 3:15:05** He discovered that bodies were to be buried in the trenches the men had built.
- 3:16:00** The workers received no water. Many had to resort to drinking their own urine because it was so hot that May. The legs of many of the workers swelled, and they could not go to work.

- 3:19:47** Otto's father contracted stomach typhus and died two weeks after arriving in the camp. Later, the men were taken to Auschwitz to help construct a school building. The kapo, a former German army guard and an anti-Nazi, told them that the slower they worked, the longer they would live. Otto met his eldest brother, who had lost his wife and daughter, and was very depressed. This brother died in a work accident the week after he arrived in Auschwitz. In the camp, Otto was placed in the infamous Block 11, which contained the "black wall."
- 4:00:00** Otto was able to save himself from the gas chambers because he understood what the SS men said to each other in German.
- 4:05:31** The famous bunker where people were shot was in the basement of Block 11. Otto, who lived on the second floor, did not know it existed at the time.
- 4:07:00** Otto met his sister in-law who lived in Block 10.
- 4:09:20** In the summer of 1942, the young people were sent back to Birkenau to construct the school. Otto describes its program of studies and the work that occurred there.
- 4:12:57** Otto again saved himself from being put to death because he was too weak, and typhus was prevalent.
- 4:13:59** He discusses the *sonderkommando*.
- 4:22:00** Otto describes the cruelty of the Germans towards the Jews.
- 4:23:24** Some kapos killed the German army's ex-general who was in charge of the camp. He had been sent to Auschwitz because he had opposed the Nazis while stationed in Yugoslavia.
- 4:25:49** Otto describes the gypsy families in the camp.
- 4:27:00** He describes the Russian prisoners.
- 4:29:45** Otto returned to Auschwitz to erect new camp buildings and another school. He describes the block *eltester*, the block leader, who inspected feet in Block 7.
- 5:00:00** In the winter of 1943, Otto spent half his days studying and the other half working on building new blocks in the camp.
- 5:04:00** Otto shares the trick he used to bake potatoes.
- 5:06:00** Otto describes the showers at Auschwitz.
- 5:09:00** He discusses the medical experimentation carried out on one of his bunkmates.

- 5:11:55** Otto was sent to a farm in Harmeze, 15 kilometers from Auschwitz, to experiment on hens and their productivity. Thirty to 40 other prisoners were sent with him. He describes how they stole building materials.
- 5:15:00** He discusses how he and other prisoners organized to steal food.
- 5:25:00** Otto was transferred to Budy where the commander liked boxing, and made them spar every Sunday. The prisoners received bread as a reward.
- 5:30:00** He contracted tetanus and describes the cure and the doctor who treated him.
- 5:33:57** After building in Budy, the prisoners returned to Auschwitz and built chicken coops.

Tape 2

- 6:00:00** Otto returned to Auschwitz I.
- 6:05:00** Otto describes the kapo in this camp.
- 6:07:15** He describes how the Germans acted there.
- 6:07:36** Otto is put to work with horses and a wagon to transport building materials to Birkenau.
- 6:16:36** Otto describes Krammer, the commander of the women's camp at Birkenau.
- 6:19:42** Otto talks about Kozelchik, a Lithuanian Jew, who was a kapo in one of the bunkers and a hangman for the Germans. He protected the Jews, and was cruel to the gentiles.
- 6:20:00** Otto discusses the public hanging of a Jew who tried to escape in view of everyone at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Not only the prisoners, but also Rudolf Hess, the commander of the region's concentration camps, witnessed the attempted escape. Kozelchik managed to sabotage the rope for the prisoner's hanging, and he was spared, until thrown alive into the furnaces.
- 6:29:30** Otto describes how the prisoners traded certain items for more food. He also discusses the level of trust between prisoners and guards.
- 7:00:00** He describes how he and the other inmates "organized" their food in order to survive.
- 7:21:57** In the summer of 1944, there was an uprising in Birkenau's crematorium III. All but two Jews involved were killed.

- 7:23:22** In the fall, the barracks began to come down at Birkenau. The gypsy barracks were first. The remaining building materials were sent to Germany.
- 7:24:28** In the fall of 1944, the Nazis put down a revolt in Slovakia. After this revolt, whoever could flee to the partisans did so, and those people that could not were sent to Auschwitz.
- 7:25:44** Mayer, the Jewish kapo from Berlin, was extremely cruel. He had been a classmate of Hess.
- 7:36:09** On January 18, 1945, the inmates went to work as usual.
- 8:00:00** As they were about to leave Auschwitz in the afternoon, a friendly SS man told Otto to load his wagon with whatever remained in the Nazis storage rooms. He found the rooms full of shoes and blankets. Auschwitz and Birkenau were emptied as everyone left in horrible weather. The roads were filled with other wagons and prisoners on foot. Many prisoners were taken to the train station in Gliwice, Poland. Otto, however, went with four other SS men in the direction of Gross Rosen. The man in charge of this group had to feed the people and the horses, so he sold his new work shoes to the peasants for food. Instead of entering Gross Rosen, they kept going through the Sudetenland.
- 8:10:49** Otto and his group arrived in Karlovy Vary (now in Czech Republic) after three weeks of wandering in Czechoslovakia.
- 8:12:31** The military police caught them there with no documents, and the SS men were all taken prisoners.
- 8:15:20** The Jews were taken to Muehlen-St. Micheln, a camp near Dresden. It was a factory where 3,000 to 4,000 inmates worked to produce Messerschmitts, German warplanes. Many of the inmates died from hunger each day.
- 8:22:44** In February, the entire camp was evacuated to a soccer field, except for Otto and some of his friends who were told to stay. A few others also stayed because they could not walk any more, or they believed they would soon be liberated. These people were shot on the spot, and their bodies were transported in wagons. Otto and his companions refused to leave until they were assured that they would not be shot. The commander told them their lives were not in danger, but said that if they had been Jews, they would have already been shot "for being so sassy." They had escaped detection as Jews because their numbers were tattooed on their chests and hidden by their clothes. They had also exchanged their Stars of David for red patches with "Cz" inscribed, which meant they were Czech political prisoners. They rode their wagons behind the entire convoy.

- 8:30:00** They were placed on a train to Ústí nad Labem (now in Czech Republic; Aussig an der Elbe in German) in the Sudetenland. However, the Americans attacked the station, and only about 70 people survived.
- 8:31:15** They were taken to Litoměřice, a concentration camp 15 kilometers from Theresienstadt. Some work was given, but confusion prevailed. They met the hangman, Kozelchik who had his own room and dressed in civilian clothes. He provided food for Otto and his friends.
- 9:00:00** Someone at Litoměřice, who had been at Auschwitz with Otto and his friends, identified them as Jews. Kozelchik killed this man and advised Otto and his friends to leave.
- 9:04:21** Otto and his friends left on a convoy that was departing for Austria and Flossenbürg. As the open coal train slowed down on its way into Prague, Otto and one of his friends jumped off.
- 9:10:47** Otto and his friend walked to a village, and asked for advice on how to get safely to the front. They slept in the crypts of Christian cemeteries. Otto shares stories of this journey.
- 9:22:18** They walked for two weeks until they had no strength left. They arrived in a village near Hrádek Králové (now in Czech Republic), and decided to surrender to the Germans.
- 9:26:33** The two men found refuge in a farmer's house. It turned out that the farmer was the head of the underground movement for that entire region. Some people wanted to take Otto and his friend to the partisans, but they were too thin. The farmer fed them, and allowed them to rest until May 6, 1945. Otto describes his life in the farmer's house, and his travel companion's strong nostalgia toward his home in Moravia. On the day they left the farmer, Otto's friend was killed.
- 9:31:50** Otto describes liberation day when he was still residing with the farmer. Otto was the only one who knew German, so he helped the farmer track down any Germans they could find. If they found an SS officer, they shot him on the spot. Wehrmacht officers were sent to a concentration point. Chaos lasted for three to four days until order was re-established.
- 10:00:00** Otto discusses returning home after a long trip, and finding strangers in his place. He decided he could not stay there. A group was being organized in Bratislava to go to Palestine.
- 10:14:42** On April 14, 1946, Otto left for Vienna on his way to Palestine. He posed as a Greek Jewish survivor who was returning home. A difficult situation arose when an elderly customs agent wanted to test his Greek skills learned in high school. He spoke a few Greek words to Otto, who answered "Sh'ma Israel." The agent

did not understand what Otto said, and assumed he misunderstood because he had learned classical Greek, and Otto was speaking modern Greek. He was able to continue on his journey.

- 10:16:59** In 1947, he arrived in Belgium after making stops in Austria and Port de Bouc in France.
- 10:23:00** Otto arrived on the Sheyafim coast in Palestine on April 15, 1947 aboard the ship *Theodor Herzl*. The British wanted to take them to Cyprus, and a fight followed over this decision. Three men were killed, and 40 men were wounded, including Otto, who was shot in the leg. The wounded were taken to a hospital in Haifa, while the rest went to Cyprus. After spending some time in the hospital, they were sent to Atlit until December of that year.
- 10:31:45** Otto's brother discovered where he was thanks to the survivors' lists published by the Jewish Agency.
- 10:32:00** Otto describes his time at Atlit.
- 10:33:37** He was able to meet his brother.
- 10:34:00** Otto and his friends in Palestine gave the certificates they had received in their own names to the Jewish Agency. These certificates were given to survivors still in Europe because Otto and the others had made it to Palestine, and had no more use for them.

Tape 3

- 11:00:00** Otto worked as a dishwasher in the camp's hospital.
- 11:02:00** He was transferred to another detention, or transit, camp. The Jews there went on a hunger strike for one week, and after staying for a month, they were liberated.
- 11:03:00** Otto was supposed to go to the Kibbutz Hamadiya, but his colleagues were still in Cyprus. He decided instead to join his mother in Tel Aviv.
- 11:08:26** Otto joined the Israeli army in 1948. He was assigned to a printing press, and has since remained in this profession.
- 11:10:37** By 1950, Otto wanted to stay in the army and get married. His commander Chaim Laskow, who later commanded the Israeli Defense Forces, advised him to move into the newly constructed buildings for immigrants. He chose the block in the newly built Nof Yam, and got married before Rosh Hashanah in 1950.
- 11:16:00** Otto expands on the subject of "Auschwitz as a school for life."