

Messer, Moshe
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2 Videotapes

Abstract

Moshe Messer lived a traditional life as a young Jew of the Polish town Volodymyr-Volyns'kyy prior to the 1939 Russian occupation there. By the end of 1941, the Germans had invaded, consolidated the Jews into a ghetto, and imposed selections for work groups on the Jews of the town. Moshe describes the conditions of living and working in the ghetto until his family decided to go into hiding. Moshe and his family were discovered in their hiding place and were separated. He joined some of his friends and escaped to the forest with the help of a Polish friend. After the war, Moshe was unable to find any relatives in his hometown and went on to Lublin. With the help of Jewish relief groups, he immigrated to Palestine in 1948, where he was enlisted to fight the Egyptian army in the Israeli war for independence. He was later released from the army and in 1953 married and then had three children.

Transcript

Tape 1:

- 1:00** Moshe Messer was born in 1927 in Volodymyr-Volyns'kyy, then in Poland (now in the Ukraine). He was one of four children. His father worked in a flour mill. His town's 6,000 Jews made up the majority of its population, but Poles and Ukrainians lived there as well. Moshe describes a traditional home life, where he went to a regular school and a cheder. He also attended meetings of various Zionist youth organizations.
- 1:16** Moshe talks about reasons for anti-Semitism and specific incidents related to it in his town.
- 1:26** Moshe describes the relationship between Jews and Ukrainians.
- 1:31** He describes his experiences at his regular school and the cheder.
- 2:00** He continues with his experiences at the cheder and elaborates on his childhood and the close relationships of his family in their hometown.
- 2:22** Moshe describes how his family celebrated Jewish holidays.
- 2:26** In 1939, the Russians took Volodymyr-Volyns'kyy, and because many Jews were communists, they were treated well. After refugees from other areas told them how poorly the Germans treated Jews, they preferred the Russians to stay.

- 3:03** The Russians sent all the refugees to Siberia. Moshe's cheder was closed, and he had to study Russian with Russian teachers. Moshe also describes Russian propaganda.
- 3:16** In June 1941, the Germans bombarded the town, entering with their tanks, and the Russian army left. The Germans then imposed anti-Jewish laws in the town, such as Jews having to wear a yellow star. People were caught and forced to join work groups.
- 3:22** Moshe describes how the Germans forced the work groups upon them and killed many people. He went to work in place of his weak brother, and his father hid. As part of the work, he had to load boxes and bombs onto trains.
- 3:33** Moshe describes the Austrian commander of the Wehrmacht, who did not let German soldiers attack Jews.
- 4:00** Moshe talks about how his family managed under the German occupation.
- 4:07** Moshe remembers the time when he and a group of people were taken to a synagogue and thought they would be killed. His mother pleaded with the SS officers to release him, which they eventually did.
- 4:18** Moshe discusses his feelings and state of mind during this period.
- 4:25** The German police was primarily responsible for catching people for work and then killing them. Their chief killer was a man named Miller.
- 4:28** Moshe talks about being ordered into the ghetto. Before going, his father gave their house keys to their Polish neighbor to keep until they returned. Moshe describes what they took to the ghetto.
- 5:00** By the end of 1941, Moshe and his family were still living in the ghetto. He describes their life and the influence of the Judenrat there. The Jewish Police had to provide Jews for work units, and many of the Jews who were selected did not return. Germans and Ukrainians guarded the ghetto.
- 5:06** Moshe describes winter in the ghetto. His father again hid while he and his brother worked.
- 5:13** Moshe introduces the Polish friend, Kowalski, who helped his family.
- 5:13** Moshe and many others viewed the members of the Judenrat as traitors because they would do anything to save their own skins.

5:22 Moshe describes hunger in the ghetto. He also talks about the rumors that circulated about death and destruction in other towns, but they did not believe it really happened.

5:28 Moshe talks about what they heard of the partisans in the forest.

Tape 2:

6:00 Moshe discusses the rumors of the Aktions and the killings in other ghettos.

6:09 Moshe's family prepared a hiding place with their neighbors.

6:12 He describes the chaos that developed when the German and Ukrainian police surrounded their ghetto. He and his family went into their hideout for ten days.

6:19 He describes the conditions of hunger and thirst while they were in the hideout. When he and a friend left once to bring water back, they were told by others about the mass killings taking place.

6:24 His family's hideout was discovered, and they were taken to an assembly area. There, he and his brother were separated from their family and marched towards the prison.

7:00 On his way to the prison, Moshe escaped and hid in an alley. He was caught by a German, but he was able to escape again, though he has a hard time remembering these experiences.

7:18 Moshe left the ghetto and returned to his house. A Polish neighbor decided to help him, but he returned to the ghetto and was caught again. He was taken to an assembly place but again succeeded in escaping.

7:27 After the Aktion, Moshe met a friend who took him to a new hideout.

8:00 Only 1,000 of the original Jewish inhabitants of the town remained after the Aktion. Many came out of hiding and were assigned to a small area in the ghetto, where the Judenrat separated them into two groups - professionals and non-professionals. At the time, Moshe was fifteen and placed in the non-professional group.

8:07 Moshe and four friends went one night to their Polish friend, Kowalski. He advised them to escape to and hide in the forest. He also gave them the name of a peasant woman who hid them and told them about the partisans.

8:12 When their hiding place, a hay loft, burned down, Moshe and his friends escaped to the forest to hide. They made contact with peasants who gave them food and weapons and told them where to find the partisans

- 8:29** They made contact with the partisans, but some of the groups were anti-Semitic. When the Germans retreated, they bombed the forest, and Moshe and his friends marched away.
- 9:00** In the spring of 1943, Moshe and his friends met an advance patrol of the Russian army and were told to march towards Rovno, which was already liberated. They went to Volodymyr-Volyns'kyi to look for relatives but did not find any.
- 9:16** Moshe and his friends went to Lublin, where the Jewish Agency organized groups to go to Palestine.
- 9:19** Moshe discusses what he later heard about the fate of his town.
- 9:23** Moshe describes his life in Lublin and how the Jewish Agency and the Joint Distribution Committee helped.
- 9:26** He talks about being taken by train to Germany to Camp Landsberg, where they were organized and prepared for Aliya, their immigration to Palestine. In 1947, they left for Italy to embark on their voyage.
- 10:00** He continues to describe life in the camp.
- 10:04** The people traveling to Palestine were taken by train to a small port in Italy and boarded the ship, Exodus. Moshe describes the boat and the 4,000 people on it. The Haganah, an underground Jewish paramilitary group, organized them to prevent the British from taking the boat.
- 10:09** Moshe describes the confrontation between the British boats and the Haganah soldiers. The British took them back to Germany, where they stayed for one year. Finally, on May 15, 1948, they were taken to a port in France and then on to Haifa.
- 10:14** When Moshe arrived, the War of Independence was raging in Israel, and he was enlisted in the army. Moshe was sent to the Negev front to fight the Egyptian army, and he remained there until the end of the war.
- 10:20** After the war, Moshe was transferred to Sarafend and released from the army. He lived in Haifa and worked as a cab driver. In 1953, he married and later had three children.
- 10:26** Moshe discusses why he does not want to divulge his past—even to his children.