

**Berger, Alexander**  
**Two Videotapes**  
**RG-50.120\*0347**

**Abstract**

Alexander Berger was born in 1925 in Bratislava, Slovakia. He was one of three children. Alexander attended a Jewish orthodox school even though his family was not very religious. In 1940, the Jews of Bratislava were sent to a camp in Trnava, where Alexander worked for the railroad. He was moved to the camp in Sered in April 1941 and soon after to Majdanek and to Birkenau, where he had a difficult life. His construction unit from Birkenau was then transferred to Auschwitz. Alexander then joined the food distribution center there until he was caught stealing food and sent to a debris clean-up site. While there, he met his sister, and they kept in touch about family; however, he unfortunately saw his brother killed.

In January 1945, Alexander and his sister were separated as they left on Death Marches. Alexander went to Mauthausen and then to Ebensee. He was able to survive in the rough and confused conditions of the camp until May 1945 when the Americans liberated it. He was in poor health and had to spend some time recuperating, but he then made his way to Prague. There, he joined an S.I.T. group seeking revenge on former Nazis and fascists as militant guards of their prisons. Alexander was soon forced to flee, however, because he refused to stop abusing these prisoners.

He finally arrived in Backnang, Germany, where a group of Israelis recruited him to teach them how to use weapons in the town of Merano in Italy. He eventually found his way to Israel in 1948 and joined the Israeli army without knowing any Hebrew. He rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel after serving twenty-eight years in the military. The war still haunts him in his nightmares, and he can not yet share his story with his children.

**Oral History**

**Tape 1:**

- 1:00:00** Alexander Berger was born on August 15, 1925 in Bratislava, Slovakia. He had a sister named Shari, or Sara, who was born on December 31, 1922 and an older brother named Miki, who was born in 1916. His father built theater stages and painted in oil until 1936 when his non-Jewish clients stopped using him. He was hired by Jews as a house-painter, which he did until 1939. His mother was a housewife.
- 1:04:00** Alexander describes his education, which started in 1931 in an Orthodox Jewish school that went to grade eight. At home, the family was not particularly religiously observant, but the Orthodox school was considered better. He continued for another one to one and a half years in an unofficial Jewish school at night. His siblings also completed their education. His brother learned tailoring and voice. He sang in Vienna and was married in 1939. His sister worked for a

short period then was married in 1938 to a successful lawyer and lived in Bratislava.

- 1:07:19** Alexander's family had to move to the Jewish part of town when their landlord refused to renew their lease in 1937 and 1938.
- 1:08:14** In 1940, the city's Jews were evacuated to a transit camp in Trnava, where Alexander began to work for the railroad without admitting he was a Jew. He earned next to nothing loading and unloading German trains that were going back and forth to the front. When they unloaded food, they would steal some and either sell or eat it themselves, for that was the only way to survive.
- 1:09:57** In the summer of 1941, a law was enacted that required people between the ages of sixteen and thirty-nine to go to work. In September 1941, Alexander was taken to the camp, Sered, that was fifteen kilometers from Trnava. Alexander describes his grandparents and extended family, which consisted of forty-two people. His grandparents had divorced because his grandfather wanted to convert from Judaism to save his life. He re-married a gentile woman and survived the war. In 1939, Alexander's uncle, who was the manager of the train station in Bratislava, saved the Orient Express from colliding with another train. However, while signaling for the train to stop from the top of another train car, he did not notice a bridge and was killed. Of Alexander's family, only four other people survived: his sister, two cousins, and he.
- 1:17:38** He describes the cruelty, the food situation, and the maintenance work done at the camp in Sered.
- 1:20:27** Alexander describes his daily schedule at Sered.
- 1:22:53** Alexander discusses relationships within the camp.
- 1:27:00** Alexander had a close relative in England who was a Zionist. He wanted to get Alexander and his sister to England and then to Palestine. However, Alexander's father did not like this idea.
- 1:32:03** Alexander was sent from Sered for Majdanek. On the way, they stopped in Lublin and then Katowice. He counted twenty-eight train cars with 120 people in each car.
- 2:00:00** After five or six days, they arrived in Majdanek and walked to the camp, which took about half a day.
- 2:02:57** Alexander describes Majdanek and his arrival there.
- 2:08:07** He discusses his schedule while at Majdanek. He was assigned to build the other camps.

- 2:16:19** Alexander describes the cruelty in the camp. Because he knew German, he was sent, with others like him, to erect the command post for the Germans in Lublin.
- 2:19:46** Alexander and other inmates collected food discards to add food beyond their rations.
- 2:20:56** Later, they had to dig the defensive trenches between Warsaw and Belarus, 170 kilometers away.
- 2:24:17** The guards from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Ukraine hated Jews more than the Germans.
- 2:24:33** Alexander and the others continued this work until mid-May of 1942.
- 2:26:44** They spent an entire week at the work site and would come back only once a week.
- 2:29:59** At the end of May, they were taken to Birkenau where they arrived on June 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>. They were put in Block 13 and given a tattoo on their chests.
- 2:34:10** In Birkenau, Alexander found all types of people among the population of prisoners. Alfred Olchevsky was the German Nazi in charge of Alexander's block.
- 3:00:00** Alexander describes Alfred Olchevsky and where he lived.
- 3:02:48** The construction crew had to build four crematoria.
- 3:03:34** Among the Russian prisoners in the camp with Alexander was Stalin's son. At the camp, Alexander and others attended a construction school, headed by the instructor Müller. They were there for about six months, from 8:00 to 4:00 every day, until they finally went to work.
- 3:07:00** Alexander describes the organization of the camp in the summer of 1942 and the sadism of Alfred Olchevsky.
- 3:11:17** The construction school was transferred to Auschwitz in December. Alexander went as an instructor and lived in Block 7 and 7A. Alfred Olchevsky was also transferred there as block manager. A new group that had recently arrived from Salonika joined them in the construction school.
- 3:15:00** A Polish non-Jew invited Alexander to work distributing food, so he was re-assigned from construction to food storage. However, he was caught giving more than the appropriate ration to his block-mates and received a harsh flogging and a job reassignment.

- 3:20:00** Alexander describes witnessing his brother's murder.
- 3:25:00** Alexander's recuperation from the flogging took five to six weeks. He was aided by his cell-mates.
- 3:27:00** His next job was to clean up the debris of a former leather processing plant that was dismantled. This work lasted until May 1944.
- 3:28:00** Alexander had a chance encounter with his sister in the German laundry. He worked with her until the beginning of the Death March on January 16, 1945 and could remain up-to-date on their relatives.
- 4:00:00** Alexander describes Block 10, the experiments that were carried out there, and the inmates who underwent these experiments.
- 4:09:00** He describes Block 11, known for the torture done there and its death wall. He also describes Yakov, the Jew, who was carried out from being tortured.
- 4:11:52** He describes Block 23 and 24, the residences of the SS.
- 4:16:26** When the two crematoria were liquidated by the partisans in September 1944, the inmates felt that the end of the Germans was approaching, and they began to organize. Alexander's sister, because of her job, gathered between 8,000 and 10,000 dollars, which Alexander hid in the mattresses. They intended to pay a Slovakian SS to take them over the border.
- 4:22:00** A day before the Death March began, the Germans burned all the mattresses in an attempt to disinfect the camp, and Alexander's dollars went up in smoke.
- 4:27:55** Alexander learned a great deal from the veteran inmates, some of whom, mainly German Jews, were collaborators.
- 4:34:23** Alexander discusses the fate of the Block 6 Sonderkommando, who were liquidated after four months.
- 5:00:00** Alexander describes his girlfriends.
- 5:15:00** He describes the Death March and an encounter with his cousin, whom he had never met. His sister left a day later in the direction of Ravensbrück and then Malchow, a women's camp, where she contracted meningitis.
- 5:21:47** Alexander describes the first four days of the Death March.

- 5:24:07** He arrived in Loslau, where they boarded a train that went through Czechoslovakia to Mauthausen. They had to go by foot for the last fifty kilometers until they were finally processed into the camp.
- 5:28:38** After a week, they went on a three to four day march to Ebensee, where they were processed and assigned to work. By the end of February, they began digging into rock in order to build an ammunition plant. Alexander describes the tough conditions there.
- 5:34:10** By the end of April, they found out that the Americans were only thirty kilometers away. The Germans planned to enclose the 30,000 to 40,000 Jews in the rock already dug, and explode it.
- 5:34:00** A non-Jewish inmate informed the Jews of the plan and advised them to refuse to go to the rock.

**Tape 2:**

- 6:00:00** The next day, the inmates refused to go to the rock. The day after, all the SS troops fled except for the oldest Wehrmacht soldiers in the watch tower. Two to three days before the Americans arrived, these guards fled, and the camp was freed. They waited until May 4, when the Americans arrived.
- 6:08:53** When he was liberated at age nineteen, Alexander only weighed 34 kilograms. He was sent to a sanitarium in Bad Ischl to recover for two weeks.
- 6:13:50** Alexander arrived in Prague after three weeks and then went to Bratislava in search for his sister. He found her, but she was not in very good health.
- 6:16:14** Alexander describes the hostility of the locals towards the survivors, some of whom demanded the return of their property.
- 6:17:12** After his return to Prague, he joined the S.I.T. group of International Camps (?), in the city of Ústí nad Labem in the Sudetenland. This was a prisoner camp for Germans, fascists, and others, and Alexander served as a guard there. He chose to work the night watch, so he and others could seek vengeance on the former SS men. A doctor who had assisted Mengele was among these prisoners. Eventually the Czechs enacted a law that forbade the guards from hurting the prisoners. Committing acts of vengeance gave Alexander a sense of relief from his enormous anger. He was able to use a rifle and a sub-machine gun. However, he had to leave Czechoslovakia because the police were looking for him.
- 6:23:37** Alexander contacted the leader of the Bricha, or the escape organization, in Prague. They helped him to flee the city towards Austria on the same day they made contact. He arrived in Saalfelden near the Italian border and was supposed to go to Palestine from there. However, a group had been caught there, so he was

advised to disappear for some time and go to Germany. He went toward the area near Stuttgart, where he met his future wife, and then back to Backnang, where he worked in the office of the DP camp.

- 6:26:31** Alexander stayed in Backnang until January 1948, when Israeli envoys sought him out to teach others how to use the weapons he was familiar with. He worked for them in Merano, Italy and first trained a group from Etzel that went to Palestine in July. Alexander was mobilized into the Israeli army immediately without knowing a word of Hebrew. He served with the army for 28 years and became a Lieutenant Colonel. He describes his life after the army.
- 7:00:00** Alexander discusses his mourning for what he lost during the war. He has shared his memories with his friends and wife but not yet with his children. He also discusses the nightmares he still has.
- 7:14:18** Alexander talks about how the war changed him and how many times he was in danger of dying.