

BEILIS, Yehuda
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Four Videotapes
In Hebrew

Abstract

Yehuda Beilis was born in Kaunas (Kovno), Lithuania in 1927. His father Eliezer was a medical doctor, but owned a printing shop and real estate. Yehuda's mother Hana was a dentist. Yehuda had two older brothers, Chaim and Yosef. They spoke Yiddish at home. They considered themselves faithful Jews, yet patriotic to Lithuania. The family was very well-off until the Soviet and then German invasions. The family had to move into the ghetto in Slobodka.

They were all rounded up and taken to the Ninth Fort, where Yehuda's parents were killed. Yehuda managed to return to the ghetto, but no one believed his story. He fled and found refuge with an uncle's friend in Slobodka, and then at a farm near the Ninth Fort, where bodies were burned. Yehuda had several close calls while hiding in the farm.

Yehuda eventually returned to the ghetto, where the Betar Zionist movement trained him in sabotage, and he led resistance movements. He saved 22 children from the ghetto, with the help of a priest. Yehuda went back and forth between the farm and the ghetto. The Nazis found him eventually. When they liquidated the ghetto, they transported him to Landsberg. Yehuda found one of his brothers there, and worked hard to save his gravely ill brother.

Yehuda was usually depressed, and at times wanted to die.

Yehuda describes Camp I; Czech Jewish inmates; Kaufering IV – where there was some cannibalism; where French president Léon Blum slept in the bunk next to him; and where some of the Hungarian Jewish intellectuals managed to have a good life.

At one point, Russian war prisoners and Yugoslavian partisans led by Tito arrived at Landsberg. The ghetto's inmates were put on a train, which was attacked by the Allies. Yehuda escaped, only to end up going back to Landsberg. There was much chaos when the Americans liberated Landsberg, including two days filled with acts of vengeance against the Nazis.

After liberation, Yehuda returned to Lithuania, but found no one he knew. His first attempt to immigrate to Palestine was foiled by a Jewish spy who informed the British. Yehuda describes his eventual voyage at the end of 1945, joining relatives in Tel Aviv, working in Haifa, and fighting in the army. He ends by describing his return visit to Lithuania.

Oral History Time-Coded Notes

(Times are given as they appear in the video where the first number denotes the tape number, the second number denotes the minute, and the third number denotes the second.)

Tape 1:

1:00:00 Yehuda was born on February 19, 1927 in Kaunas (Kovno), Lithuania to Eliezer and Hana Beilis. His father was trained as a medical doctor but was not able to practice after the war broke out in 1918. His mother was a dentist. Yehuda had

two older brothers named Chaim and Yosef. They were traditional Jews who celebrated the holidays, but the children studied in a Lithuanian school. Yehuda and his family considered themselves faithful Jews who were still patriotic to Lithuania.

- 1:03:41** His father had the most modern printing press in town.
- 1:05:09** Yehuda's father also owned a large apartment building and eight storage warehouses that he rented out to people. Books and other publishing materials were often stored in the warehouses. Yehuda's family had a cold basement apartment in his father's apartment building.
- 1:12:20** Yehuda describes his Aunt Yeta, whom the Lithuanians considered their beauty queen.
- 1:13:53** He talks about his summer vacations that lasted for three months.
- 1:16:36** Yehuda describes his school and one of his Jewish friends at the school.
- 1:22:00** Yehuda's father was a major benefactor of many people, including the 70 printing press workers under him, the children of the local orphanage, and the milk supplier.
- 1:26:46** Yehuda was a good ping-pong player, so he was taken to play for the Zionist movement Betar. As a member of Betar, he learned about the movement to create a Jewish state, and he began to sing Hebrew songs.
- 1:29:00** At home, Yehuda's family spoke Yiddish. However, his mother wrote poetry in French and spoke Polish with her husband when she did not want her children to know what was happening. His father knew Lithuanian, Yiddish, Russian, and German.
- 1:31:00** Yehuda's brothers Yosef and Chaim were good students at school.
- 2:00:00** In 1940, rumors began to spread that the Soviets were going to take over Lithuanian businesses. Yehuda and his friends had a feeling that the Soviets would completely take over Lithuania. There was also a shortage of food. Yehuda's feelings show a child's perception of an impending invasion.
- 2:06:55** The large houses, like the one Yehuda's family had, were divided up by the Russians, and strangers were placed in them.
- 2:07:59** Yehuda's parents were able to return to their original professions after the occupation. Yehuda's father was a doctor, and his mother was a dentist.
- 2:08:36** All of the local schools were opened to both males and females.

- 2:10:18** Yehuda was appointed by the Russians to become a “pioneer”, like a Boy Scout.
- 2:14:13** Since his parents were working, he and his brothers were sent to a summer camp in Palanga for three weeks. The camp was a “pioneer” camp.
- 2:15:20** The Germans invaded Lithuania, gathered the children, and sent them to the barracks in their camps. The children had tried to flee but were unsuccessful.
- 2:16:33** The Lithuanians turned against the Jews of Kaunas (Kovno). The Lithuanians decided to place women and children in one synagogue, and men in another. They left them there for over a week with little food or water. It was an extremely chaotic situation.
- 2:18:55** Five hundred men were taken out of the synagogue and killed on the spot. The rest were burned inside the synagogue.
- 2:20:33** The children in Yehuda’s synagogue were taken out to work at a stable and given busy work. They remained there for about three weeks.
- 2:22:00** Several refugees had already come over to Lithuania from Germany and Poland.
- 2:25:00** The children of Palanga were tortured and had very difficult jobs.
- 2:29:16** The Lithuanians were in charge of the torture and were considered professional criminals from birth.
- 2:31:50** There were hundreds of children in the stable where Yehuda worked.
- 3:00:00** The children were brought back to Kaunas (Kovno), where their parents were waiting for them. Some of the parents who were communists had already fled to Russia. Yehuda’s family adopted such a child whose parents had left.
- 3:02:52** There were several anti-Jewish edicts and kidnappings of Jewish children.
- 3:05:50** Yehuda and his family were moved into the Slobudka Ghetto shortly after it was established.
- 3:07:40** The family gave their valuables to a friendly priest who had taught Yehuda’s siblings and was a family friend.
- 3:11:10** Seven people moved in with Yehuda’s family in the ghetto.
- 3:13:01** Yehuda describes his life in the ghetto. He managed to escape doing official work, but he did participate in illegal trade there.

- 4:00:00** After the residents of the ghetto were moved into a smaller section, they were transported to working groups. However, Yehuda and his parents were placed in the group that was to be sent to the Ninth Fort and killed. Yehuda fell into a pit of dead bodies and woke up later after smelling the burning lime the Lithuanians had put into the pit. Yehuda faced a painful return to the ghetto because no one believed his story except his friends from Betar.
- 4:20:00** Yehuda fled the ghetto hoping to find a hiding place outside. When he returned, he saw that several Jews were secretly working in building bunkers. Yehuda was working at a fitness place one day when he heard of the “action” inside the smaller part of the ghetto. Several children were taken away during the selection. He decided to flee and found refuge at a restaurant in Slobudka that was owned by a friend of his uncle. Many Nazi soldiers ate there.
- 4:33:00** One day, a wagon driver arrived with a wagon full of bread, which needed to be distributed to the community, and Yehuda offered to help. The wagon driver needed to shine the shoes of his eight children over the upcoming weekend and needed the money.
- 5:00:00** Yehuda met a young laundress at the restaurant and confessed to her that he was Jewish. There was nothing for her to do because she had an older brother, and the restaurant owner told Yehuda not to worry.
- 5:11:00** One night, the young laundress Genya, appeared at Yehuda’s hiding place with her brother. He was willing to hide Yehuda on their family’s farm.
- 5:13:00** Yehuda discusses his strategy to get to the farm, which was near the Ninth Fort.
- 5:21:36** He describes the arrangement of the farm and his life there.
- 5:30:48** Yehuda describes building a hiding place at the farm.

Tape 2:

- 6:08:00** The smoke and the smell of the burning flesh from the Ninth Fort were sensed at the farm, which was five to six kilometers away from the Fort.
- 6:13:00** Yehuda was always in danger when family and friends visited the farm.
- 6:20:00** During Christmas one year, some Jews escaped the Ninth Fort. The Nazis came to the farm looking for them, and that put Yehuda in great danger. Luckily, he was not found.
- 6:24:00** Yehuda received several letters from his family in the ghetto. They invited him to return there to avoid the constant tension he felt in hiding. He accepted and returned to the ghetto where he worked without papers or food rations.

- 6:27:00** Yehuda learned to use weapons while in the ghetto and decided to buy a revolver.
- 6:33:00** The Betar underground appointed Yehuda to carry out acts of sabotage against the ghetto leadership.
- 7:00:00** Yehuda had a connection with a priest and was asked to see if he would hide some children. The priest's name was Yakuvovskov, and he promised Yehuda an answer.
- 7:08:00** In the meantime, Yehuda was given the job of smuggling supplies into the ghetto. A Lithuanian partisan guarded him.
- 7:10:00** The priest finally agreed to hide the children. There were 22 children, and they took up all of the spare room the priest had to offer.
- 7:13:03** Yehuda took the children from the ghetto in sacks, but they had to be put to sleep to make the trip safely.
- 7:17:36** Some Jews collaborated with the Nazis by informing them of the Jews who had removed their patches.
- 7:22:26** On the day that the ghetto children were taken to be slaughtered in the Ninth Fort, Yehuda was advised not to return to the ghetto after work. He decided to escape with a friend, and he returned to the farm. When some Russian partisans broke into the farm one night looking for food, Yehuda identified himself as a Jew. He returned to the ghetto in order to lead the youth who were ready to fight in the forests with the partisans.
- 8:04:00** Yehuda was found by the Germans and taken to the ghetto prison and chained to the floor. The Nazis waited at the ghetto, so they could have a full contingent of men to transport their prisoners to the Ninth Fort. Yehuda managed to send a letter into the ghetto asking for his freedom. He was freed and returned.
- 8:13:27** Yehuda was usually depressed. When it was almost the end for the Germans, they announced the liquidation of the ghetto and the removal of its remaining residents to Germany. People began hiding in the bunkers they had earlier dug for themselves.
- 8:14:10** Yehuda and a few others also hid but were found and placed on trains for deportation. Yehuda tried to flee, but others in the train were afraid that they would be killed because of him.
- 8:15:40** When they arrived at Stutthof, the women got off the train, and the men continued to Camp I of Landsberg.

- 8:17:38** They were forced to work in a plant that built Messerschmitts, German aircraft. One day, they got drunk with whiskey that they had stolen from the Germans. They missed their return to the camp and were severely punished. Because Yehuda survived all of his punishments, he was allowed to live.
- 8:26:50** Yehuda's older brother could not find ways to live better while in the camp and was much weaker than Yehuda. He tried to get food from the Jewish kapos to feed his brother, but he was turned away. His brother, who looked half-dead at that point, was placed in a wagon of bodies to be disposed. Yehuda wanted to die and was very discouraged.
- 9:00:00** Yehuda describes Camp I in Landsberg and how he tried to help his brother get food.
- 9:22:21** Yehuda worked in a hangar building for German war planes. His unit also created a connection between two nearby mountains through a cement construction. They pushed the cement down with a stick, but if they fell in, they stayed there and died.
- 9:27:14** Yehuda shares his positive opinion of the Czech Jews he met.
- 9:32:06** Yehuda describes how sewage was used to fertilize plants.
- 9:34:00** Yehuda talks about losing his wooden shoes and how he got new ones.
- 10:00:00** He discusses how everyone lived in the camp.
- 10:05:36** Yehuda talks about his brother's illness and his own depression. There was a point when he wanted to join the group of the semi-dead being sent to Auschwitz to be burned.
- 10:08:09** Of the 40 to 60 people who were being sent away on a truck, Yehuda was the healthiest. They arrived at Camp IV of Kaufering, which was a punishment camp for Hungarian Jews. Most of the people in this camp were also intellectuals. Every day, eight to ten men died in each of the 40 barracks.
- 10:15:15** Yehuda describes how gold was extracted from the teeth of the dead.
- 10:16:26** Some of the camp's inmates were eating the flesh of the dead.
- 10:22:37** He describes the visits of the Red Cross to the camp.
- 10:30:00** Yehuda gives his analysis of the Jews who managed to have a good life in the camp.

Tape 3:

- 11:00:00** Yehuda describes life in Camp IV of Kaufering and the cruelty of the *blockaltesters*.
- 11:14:10** He describes extractions of gold teeth from live people that were then sold for gold for bread.
- 11:21:00** There was a great epidemic of typhus in the camp. Yehuda describes its effects on him.
- 11:24:15** Léon Blum, the French president, was also in Kaufering and slept next to Yehuda in the bunks.
- 12:00:00** Yehuda was very thin, but he made a connection with someone in the kitchen who fed him well. He tried to collect some goods for others in the barracks.
- 12:06:00** Yehuda was assigned to train the camp commander's dog.
- 12:15:00** Some Hungarian Jews arrived in Kaufering. They were given SS uniforms, and did not want to be associated with the other Jews of the camp. Germans assigned them to remove mines from the front. In the end, they were brought to Kaufering IV.
- 12:18:13** A new "neighbor" from Sighetu Marmăției arrived at the camp. He was a podiatrist and a shoemaker, and was very open about his life and his possessions. He and Yehuda became fond friends.
- 12:20:36** Several Russian prisoners and Yugoslavian partisans of Tito arrived at the camp. They shared their stories of vengeance against the Germans.
- 12:24:29** As the Allies began to close in on the camp, the Nazis began its liquidation by evacuating the inmates. The camp's prisoners had to walk to the train station. Yehuda and his Russian friend tried to be among the last to get on the train, and they were hanging from the train at the entrance to the car. As the cars were being loaded, the Americans began to bombard the camp. Yehuda, his friend, and many others were able to escape to a nearby forest. Yehuda describes how he extracted a piece of shrapnel from his Russian friend's back.
- 12:33:00** No one knew where to go, so a German train guard suggested going back to Landsberg because the Americans were soon going to arrive there.
- 13:00:00** They arrived in Landsberg, but the SS were still very much in charge. It was the eve of the evacuation of the camp, and it was absolute chaos.

- 13:09:25** Yehuda describes the battle the next day and the camp's liberation. He was able to leave the camp on an American tank, but he returned when the driver wanted to take him to a hospital.
- 13:15:31** Yehuda was reunited with his Russian friends, and they armed themselves to search for Germans and seek revenge. They went on this hunt for two days. It was difficult for him to walk on the silk stockings he stole from a German storage unit. Many of the people sought booty from the Germans they caught, but Yehuda wanted only revenge. He contracted dysentery along the way.
- 13:26:00** Yehuda wanted to go back to his village, but his friends convinced him to stay with them and try to get to Palestine. They entered Italy and went through Modena and then Magenta in preparation to get to Palestine.

Tape 4:

- 14:00:00** Yehuda had to get accustomed to living a normal life. Many organizations in Palestine were competing for the youth to join them, and Yehuda was disappointed by this competition. His first attempt to leave for Palestine was unsuccessful because a female Jewish spy informed the British of the plan for the illegal journey, and the British were waiting at the port. This spy was later executed by Jews for her betrayal. Finally, Yehuda was able to board a ship to Palestine from the La Spezia port in Italy.
- 14:06:47** Yehuda describes the difficult voyage to Palestine.
- 14:07:39** Yehuda describes his emotions upon arriving in Palestine at the end of 1945. The British took him and the other passengers to the Atlit camp for one month.
- 14:12:54** Then he went to Tel Aviv to his relatives.
- 14:14:00** He studied Hebrew and enrolled in an auto-mechanic school Montifiori Vocational School. A German-Jewish professor took Yehuda under his wings.
- 14:18:00** Yehuda moved to the Haifa area to work as an auto-mechanic, and befriended the Arab workers.
- 14:29:00** Yehuda served in the Israeli army to seek revenge against the Arabs after they slaughtered Jews.
- 15:05:43** One day while looking for criminals, Yehuda collapsed and ended up in a hospital. He describes his Army service and his work at Solel Boneh, an Israeli construction company that sent him to several dangerous places to do very challenging jobs.
- 15:26:28** Yehuda describes his return to Lithuania.