

Lichtenstein, Yeshayahu
RG-50.120*0359
Two Video Tapes
In Hebrew
Recorded November 25, 1999

Abstract

Yeshayahu Lichtenstein was born in Ciechanów, Poland, in May 1928, to a religiously traditional family. He was one of six children and his father was a merchant. When war broke out in September 1939, the Germans came into town. A night curfew was imposed and a Jewish council was established to supply lists of people for labor and other lists of names for expulsion. In 1941 they were made to wear a yellow patch and, because the schools were closed, he was able to complete only up to fourth grade.

All the Jews in the town were assembled late at night and loaded onto trucks to be taken to Birkenau, where he, his father, and his brother were separated from his mother and sister, who were gassed and burned. He had to do hard labor in Birkenau and was taken to Auschwitz after two weeks. His Blockältester favored him and he was able to get better food.

He worked as an electrician assistant on the electric fences in the Gypsy camp and was treated relatively well. The Blockältester sent Yeshayahu to be trained by German civilians as an electrician outside the camp. He worked in the Gypsy and Greek women's camp electrifying one of the three fences that surrounded the camp. He also worked as a private servant for the SS supervisor of electricians for about a year.

Yeshayahu was in one of two groups sent on a two-week death march from Auschwitz to Mauthausen. After spending three weeks in Mauthausen, he was taken to camp Melk for three months, where prisoners worked in three shifts to build an underground city. After three months, he was taken to Ebensee to build cement walls against air raids in an underground city.

In May 1945, the American army entered and he was liberated. Two weeks later, representatives from different countries came to register people. Soldiers from the Jewish Brigade took Yeshayahu with a group to an orphanage near Milan. From Milan, he was taken with a group to Serevino where he stayed for five months to be schooled and trained. He and over 900 other youngsters were eventually taken by boat to Israel, first to Haifa and then to Atlit. After he received a certificate and was free to go, he went to Kibbutz Hanita for two years with a Youth Aliyah group of about 40 boys and girls. He then went to Tel Aviv and worked in construction. He got married when he was 26 and raised a family of five children.

Oral History

Tape 1

00:01:00 Yeshayahu Lichtenstein was born in Ciechanów, Poland, in May 1928. He was one of six children. His father was a merchant. The family was religiously traditional. He finished fourth grade in elementary school and also went to a cheder.

- 00:01:07** His grandparents went to Palestine early on. His family was supposed to follow, but did not have the means or the time. He describes the anti-Semitism in his town.
- 00:01:10** Yeshayahu describes holidays in the town. The majority of the population was poor. They spent their summer vacations in Vlask in Milawa.
- 00:01:14** He was not aware of concerns at home about the political situation, but remembers anti-Semitic pictures in German newspapers.
- 00:01:17** His family was very poor (shows photos of their home). He talks about his siblings and childhood memories.
- 00:02:00** When the war broke out in September 1939, it was a surprise to them. He describes the Germans coming into town on the first day. His father and two brothers escaped towards Russia but returned after two weeks thinking that the situation had calmed down. One of his younger brothers did escape to Russia.
- 00:02:08** The first two weeks were calm, but then there was a night curfew imposed. A Jewish council was established which had to supply lists of people for labor and other lists of names for expulsion. People used bribes so, in the beginning, only the poorest were expelled. Half the population of 2,500 was Jewish. The Jewish population was assembled at the marketplace and loaded onto trucks. They were told they would be taken to Nasielsk to work.
- 00:02:14** He describes the mood in the town. Seven Jews were hanged in public. Jewish homes and the synagogue were destroyed. Yeshayahu's cousin buried prayer books to save them. He shows photos of the citadel where, during an assembly, a son was told to hang his father.
- 00:02:21** Yeshayahu describes life under the Germans. In 1941 they were told to wear a yellow patch. The schools were closed, so he was able to complete only up to the fourth grade. There was a general atmosphere of fear, but as a child he did know about the larger picture of the war.
- 00:03:00** He describes his Bar Mitzvah.
- 00:03:06** He describes the assembly of all the Jews in town and the train trip to Birkenau on November 7. When they arrived at Birkenau at night, men were separated from women, children, and the old, who were gassed in the showers and burned.
- 00:03:12** Yeshayahu remained with his father and brother. He describes getting a number and striped clothes, and being assigned to a barrack. There was a cruel Kapo and a Blockältester, Isac Greenbel.

- 00:03:18** He describes hard labor in the camp. After two weeks, he was taken to Auschwitz.
- 00:03:24** He describes arriving in Auschwitz and being assigned to Block 16 (shows photos). The Blockältester was a German criminal. His work was to carry rocks back and forth during December and January. The Blockältester favored him and he got better food.
- 00:03:31** In 1943, all the young males were sterilized but he escaped the ordeal (shows family photos).
- 00:04:00** He met one brother and his father in Auschwitz, who told him that his mother and sister had been killed and burned. He was in shock.
- 00:04:05** Yeshayahu describes his daily routine. At 5:00 am they marched to work while the orchestra played. In the evening they returned, stood in the Appel, and then got food. He describes the atmosphere. People were like robots. There were Jews from all over Europe and also Ukrainian prisoners. One of the Ukrainian prisoners broke his nose. There was also a house of prostitution, with female prisoners. Non-Jewish prisoners received coupons to go there.
- 00:04:12** He describes the selections by Mengele.
- 00:04:14** He talks about the black market at camp. Prisoners took things when they sorted belongings of new arrivals at Canada. Then they exchanged items for food and other things which they got from the Volks Deutsche, who worked at the camps, and with inmates from other camps.
- 00:04:24** He worked as an electrician's assistant on the electric fences in the Gypsy camp and was treated relatively well.
- 00:04:33** He had thoughts about suicide. Prisoners often committed suicide at the electric fences.

Tape 2

- 00:05:00** In 1943, there was a rumor that the Germans planned to kill all the Jews. This was the reason the Blockältester sent the young to train as electricians, who were needed. Yeshayahu was taken to work outside the camp and was trained as an electrician by German civilians. He understood later that the Germans did that to save themselves from accusations of genocide after the war, which was coming to an end.
- 00:05:12** He describes his work in the Gypsy and Greek women's camp. The work was to electrify one of the three fences that surrounded each camp.

- 00:05:23** He talks about the punishments in Auschwitz. There were public hangings and a killing wall at Block 10, which nobody survived.
- 00:05:25** In 1944, the nightly selections stopped. He was transferred to Block 16 for electricians. He describes his state of mind as one of confusion and despair.
- 00:05:30** He worked for a while as a private servant for an SS officer.
- 00:06:00** He describes his work as a servant to the SS supervisor of the electricians for about a year. He was not under pressure. He worked in a house outside the camp and would return at night to the camp. He was able to help other inmates and share his food.
- 00:06:12** Groups of prisoners worked at a sausage factory and were able to smuggle sausages to inmates. Jews from Belgium exchanged valuables that they had hidden for food.
- 00:06:18** Two groups were sent out of Auschwitz and he was in one of them. He describes the two-week march. All the older prisoners died.
- 00:06:25** Yeshayahu describes his arrival in Mauthausen and the terrible conditions there. They did not work there and were continuously beaten. He was there for three weeks.
- 00:06:30** He was taken with a group to camp Melk in the mountains, where they worked in three shifts to build an underground city. They had to explode rocks and load them on trucks. He worked there for three months.
- 00:07:00** He describes camp Melk. There were many Hungarians there. The work was very hard and the food was poor. They were guarded by the SS.
- 00:07:10** After three months, he was taken to camp Ebensee. There were 50,000 to 60,000 prisoners in the camp. His work was to build cement walls in an underground city to protect against air raids. They knew that the Russian army was approaching. They were told to enter the underground facility but had heard that the Germans were going to explode it and refused to go in. At night the SS left.
- 00:07:17** In May 1945, the American army entered. They started a field kitchen to feed the prisoners. Those who ate too much died. During the day they went into the neighboring villages and took what they wanted.
- 00:07:24** After two weeks, representatives from different countries came to register where people wanted to go. Soldiers from the Jewish Brigade took Yeshayahu with a group to an orphanage near Milan. He describes the trip to Italy.

- 00:07:27** From Milan he was taken with a group to Cervino where he stayed for five months. He describes his life in Cervino. They were schooled and trained there.
- 00:08:00** He again describes the training in Cervino. They were told that they would go to Israel. He found out that he had a brother and other family in Israel.
- 00:08:08** In December 1945, they went to Magenta and from there the 920 youngsters went by boat to Israel. After eleven days of a difficult passage, they were taken by British boats to Haifa and then to Atlit. After 23 days, he received a certificate and was free to go. He went to Kibbutz Hanita.
- 00:08:12** He spent two years in Hanita with a Youth Aliyah group. There were 40 boys and girls. He describes the training and education he received. After two years he went to Tel Aviv, worked in construction, and lived under very primitive conditions, with no help from his family.
- 00:08:20** He had an operation on his badly broken nose, which could not be completely repaired.
- 00:08:26** He wanted to enlist in the army but failed the physical. He lived with a family and worked hard. He was married when he was 26 and raised a family of five children who are now all highly educated professionals (shows photos of family).