

**ESHEL, Dov (né Altshuler)**

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**4 Tapes**

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**Abstract**

Dov Eshel (Altshuler) was born in 1925 in Vasil'kovtsy (now in Ukraine) on the former border between Poland and the USSR. He grew up in Gussyatin, district of Ternopil' (Ukraine). Gussyatin's openly anti-Semitic population of 3,000 had about 900 Jews. Dov's family was very Zionist, observed Shabbat and Kashrut, but did not go to synagogue except on the High Holidays.

In 1938, an uncle who lived in Vienna but had Polish citizenship was sent to a concentration camp, as were all non-Austrian natives. That was the first the family heard of a "concentration camp". In 1938-1939, the Jews thought the worst that could happen was that the Germans would send them all to do physical work.

Dov's family fled before the Germans invaded and immediately murdered all the village's males, babies to old men. Dov still feels guilty about surviving. Dov and his family were sent to an open ghetto in Probezna (Ukraine). They got word that it would be destroyed, so they escaped to a work camp in Gussyatin. They got transferred to another open ghetto in Kopychintsy (Ukraine) in spring 1942. A cousin and an uncle were killed there.

Survivors from that ghetto and other areas nearby went to Chortkiv (now in Ukraine), where killings continued. Ukrainians murdered Dov's younger brother Yakov. Dov and his parents then went to Tzabarootzka (Zabratówka, Poland), and decided to commit suicide. But first, Dov went to a house to ask for a last meal, and the Polish family hid them. Dov's mother dissuaded them from suicide. In March 1944, the war front advanced, so the family headed back toward Gussyatin. Dov was picked up by the Red Army, and he enlisted. After many requests, he was transferred to the Polish Army. His unit continued fighting until May 10, unaware that the war had ended. Dov participated in slaughtering a village where Ukrainian partisans were still fighting near Sanok, in southeastern Poland. He rationalized that he avenged Yakov's murder.

Dov left the army and lived in DP camps in the German towns of Schlachtensee and Deggendorf on his way to Israel, where he arrived in 1949. He joined his parents, who had emigrated in 1947. Dov credited surviving "as a whole person" to having been with his father, whose goal was to live in Eretz Israel.

## **Tape 1**

- 1:00:00 Dov Eshel (Altshuler) was born in 1925 in the small village of Vasil'kovtsy, but his childhood was spent in the nearby village of Gusyatin, on the former border between Poland and the USSR. Dov's village was in the Ternopil' district (Ukraine). The extended family was separated for many years, due to Communism. Only in 1939, after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was it possible to make contact with the family.
- 03:13 The family was Zionist. Dov attended Hebrew elementary school and a Polish public school. He joined many Zionist youth movements. His father was a liquor wholesaler, and member of the local government. Mother was a housewife. Dov's younger brother Yakov was murdered by a Ukrainian farmer during the Shoah.
- 07:30 900 Jews lived in the village. His father edited a humorous newspaper on Purim and on Passover.
- 08:40 The village had 3,000 inhabitants, the majority Ukrainians and a few Poles, who were the highest class. Anti-Semitism was not hidden. It was worse in the grandmother's village of Tzigane (Żagań, Poland).
- 15:35 A Ukrainian knifed a Jew to death, fled to the USSR, and was never found.
- 17:46 Local Jews communicated between USSR and Ukraine in the following way. They would go for the Rosh Hashanah ceremony of Tashlikh to pray by the river separating the two countries. Instead of prayers, the Jews would shout questions and information to the other side. After a few years, they were informed on, and a wall was built between the two populations to end the exchange of information.
- 18:10 The village where Dov was born had ten Jewish families in a general population of 2,000-3,000 rich famers. The village was known for its fruit. Jews were merchants. Commerce was conducted mainly by trading goods. The basement was cold enough to preserve dairy products.
- 22:59 Jews were also pub owners, shoemakers, tailors, smiths, etc.
- 23:27 The village's annual fair was held on the village's saint's day, St. Anthony.
- 24:43 Jews also owned sweets kiosks.
- 25:35 Teachers and the principal, all were Poles, were openly anti-Semitic.
- 30:07 Some Jews held government positions.

- 30:54 Dov's grandparents' generation was very observant, more than his parents' generation. Dov's immediate family kept the Shabbat and Kashrut, but did not go to synagogue. But during holidays, all Jews went to the synagogue. The only exception was the pharmacist, but he did attend on Yom Kippur. Jews invited the mayor and other important people to the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, and blessings were offered for the government (Marshal Pilsudski then).
- 33:19 Dov was not sent to a "cheder" as were most of his friends, but to the Tarbut school. Children's games were classic ones: soccer in its season; ice-skating on the river and sledding in winter, which was extremely cold. All children played together: Jewish, Poles, and Ukrainians. Summer was spent by the river, which represented the border with the USSR, so it was dangerous. But in a section of the river, the Poles had built a channel to place the wheel of the flour mill, and it was a perfect place for swimming. Most of the swimmers and picnickers were Jewish.
- 2:00:00 Dov spent summer vacations in the Carpathian Mountain, to rest and gain weight.
- 03:19 Children played in a forest that had an abandoned castle.
- 06:13 Dov discusses the Ukrainians' poverty.
- 07:44 Jews in Dov's village spoke Ukrainian, Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, and German.
- 11:50 He tells of plans to go to Israel, during the British mandate, to the youth village in Ben-Shemen. Two older cousins left illegally in 1938 to go to Mishmarot. One joined the Jewish Brigade. In that capacity, he was entitled to bring his parents to Israel. One later brought Dov's parents to Israel as his own parents.
- 14:20 Dov's home was very Zionist. He discusses the case of 12 envoys from Eretz Israel who were stuck in Dov's village after war broke out. They stayed there for weeks until they could secure passage back to Palestine. They had British passports. The family was excited to be exposed to fluent Hebrew spoken by these envoys. Dov's first Hebrew book was *Don Quixote*.
- 19:06 Dov collected stamps. Exchanging them was the Jewish children's sport.
- 20:39 He also rode a bike.
- 21:17 Another sport was watching and greeting trains at his village's station. The trains carried mail, and also theater troops once or twice a year. Only adults went to the theater, and to the Purim ball.
- 24:20 Dov discusses the political parties, and the winds of war. In 1938-1939, Jews in his area thought the worst that could happen was that the Germans would send them all to do physical work.

- 28:43 In 1938, an uncle who lived in Vienna and had Polish citizenship was sent to a concentration camp (as were all those who were not Austrian-born). Dov's family sent him parcels. That's the first they had heard about a "concentration camp."
- 30:00 *Kristallnacht* was interpreted as a once-in-a-lifetime event.
- 31:19 In September 1939, war started after the grain harvest.
- 32:30 Dov listened to the news on his father's radio. The transmitter was put on a window sill, and people outside would stand in front of it to hear the news. Refugees began arriving in large numbers.
- 34:17 His family hid all their valuables in the basement.
- 35:00 Russians entered the village, and Dov's house.
- 3:00:00 Russians, by mistake, took Dov and his father from the house. Although Russians had governed the village for two years, their inhabitants were forbidden to cross the border to the USSR, and vice versa.
- 06:56 Evening Russian courses were obligatory for the adults. Komsomol badges were worn by the youth. Dov's father, because he was a bookkeeper for the government office that supplied the Soviet Army, was protected although he represented the bourgeoisie. The father took the Jewish daughter of a friend as an assistant. He did not know that she had been assigned by the NKVD (a forerunner of the KGB) to spy on him, under penalty of death. The father did not discover this for months.
- 10:49 Children went to Soviet schools. Polish teachers were fired. Film came to the village and also some electricity, through generators. The shows were propaganda, as were "meetings". He discusses the black market.
- 14:29 He mentions deportations to Siberia.
- 15:38 Dov talks about the Russian cooperative stores and their long lines. One village would get shoes for the left feet, and another would get shoes for the right feet, etc.) He discusses hooliganism and the punishment.
- 17:41 Dov's father's store was closed for a long time.
- 20:42 The farmers were ordered to give a certain percentage of their produce to supply the army. Farmers found it was worthwhile to them to work like this. They used the excuse of poor produce. Russians give farmers quotas that they had to fill, from their own fields or by purchasing them from others. Produce included also livestock. Dov's father managed all that.

- 25:00 He mentions good jokes about conditions and shortages then.
- 28:00 Dov's father's main boss believed in Communism.
- 30:00 Dov talks about social life and activities with the children of the Russian elite; studies the Russian and Ukrainian languages; short dabbling in English lessons with a private instructor. There were two good years for the maturing children.
- 4:00:00 The refugees who had arrived in the village before the Russian invasion disappeared after it.
- 03:07 Dov was not allowed in the Komsomol, as his father was a bourgeoisie capitalist.
- 03:55 Until the summer of 1941, life was good for the youth in the village. Everyone tried to find in their family background some kind of appropriate profession, in keeping with the Soviet regime, like a shoemaker, a laborer, etc.
- 04:40 Zionist feelings were hidden, but the hope of Eretz Israel never faded.
- 05:59 Everyone was obligated to march on May Day May 1.
- 10:30 He discusses the newspapers *Yzvetzia* and *Pravde*.
- 11:33 Dov tells about crossing the bridge into the USSR proper, which was forbidden.
- 20:30 From 1939 to 1941, they were totally disconnected from the outside world. Punishments were meted out to those who received mail with a foreign stamp.
- 22:44 For those two years, they didn't know what was happening in Poland. They had no fear of the future.
- 24:33 The Germans invaded the village. The Soviet Army ran away, leaving weapons behind. An uncle convinces family to flee to another village, 6 kilometers away, where the uncle's customer, a Ukrainian farmer, gives Dov's family shelter. There were nine people. The Soviet soldiers who tried to fight the Germans were sent to a church, which they burned down – with everyone inside. Immediately, the SS, with help of local Ukrainians, identified all Jewish houses and executed all males, from babies to old people. These were the first Jewish victims of the Nazis in the area. Dov's family returns to the village after weeks of staying with grandfather.

## **Tape II**

- 5:00:00 Feelings of guilt at having survived, almost the only child in the village. The females who survived were taken to do forced labor.
- 03:33 He mentions the sadistic major in charge of the work camp.

- 04:20 Shaike Langer becomes the Jewish authority in contact with the Germans.
- 05:32 Rumors about “camps.”
- 07:43 He discusses deception of the Nazis, for example, the weather saved a work crew from being sent away.
- 08:23 Second planned execution was of college graduates and professionals. They were to be concentrated in the district city of Chortkiv.
- 11:36 He discusses the end of Shaike Langer.
- 13:26 The mayor disappears from the village, and is substituted by a German officer, Peschel, and a “*folks deutsche sargent*”, Pudelko.
- 14:04 All survivors of Dov’s village, except for ten men including Dov and his father, were transferred to another village, Probezhna (Ukraine). The ten men were in charge of classifying the Russian booty abandoned there, packing it, etc. Dov and the only other young survivor were sent to help a mechanic rebuild old broken Russian vehicles. Dov talks about Russian “illegal” trade and bartering with the farmers for food.
- 19:37 Peschel, a proud Nazi, in conversations with Dov’s father, expressed firm belief that Hitler did not know about the killing of women and children.
- 25:21 Dov describes obtaining food and cooking it.
- 29:39 He mentions the sadism of the Ukrainian police force.
- 33:00 He talks about the fate of the Jews of Vasil’kovtsy
- 6:00:00 The town’s *schochet* comes to seek refuge at Dov’s grandfather’s house.
- 02:32 Dov describes life during the few months the family returned home. Sadness prevailed and memories are shaped.
- 15:00 He talks of milling wheat and other grains by hand; stealing sugar beets; making “tea” from croutons; splitting matches into two.
- 19:13 He describes his father’s temporary jobs for the Germans. The father was asked to arbitrate many disputes among the non-Jews, and he did.
- 23:48 Germans confiscated all fur clothing before the winter – but gave receipts for them.

- 26:21 Women were evacuated to Probezhna in the spring.
- 28:00 Dov felt a strong attachment to his father, but not the mother, who was not his biological mother.
- 28:50 He visits Probezhna.
- 30:50 A regular contact with Probezhna notifies Dov and another person of an imminent “action.” He tells how the news was obtained, unofficially.
- 34:40 When Dov, his father, and the other eight men found out about the imminent destruction of Probezhna, they managed to remove their families and bring them to the work camp in Gusyatin.
- 7:00:00 He tells of slaughter in Probezhna. The few remaining survivors were sent to Kopychintsy, a kind of open ghetto, in spring 1942.
- 04:34 Dov and the other nine men continued working at Gusyatin. They were protected by the Germans who didn’t want to be sent to the front.
- 10:22 Dov’s father had to write love letters to the lover of the camp commander Peschel. Therefore, Dov’s father was always protected.
- 15:25 Peschel gets sent to the front and was ordered to liquidate the camp.
- 16:33 Description of the work camp at Gusyatin at the end of 1942.
- 21:07 They make candles for sale.
- 28:56 Dov and his father leave the work camp for Kopychintsy, about 24 kilometers from Gusyatin. He talks about accommodations in Kopychintsy for 50 family members; Judenrat and Jewish police there; and hiding from compulsory jobs.
- 33:59 The bathrooms had a hidden second roof for escape purposes.

### **Tape III**

- 8:00:00 Dov says that being near his father, throughout all the different traumas, helped him survive as a whole person. His father had a goal, and firmly believed that Israel would come into existence as a country. (Victor Frankl’s theory).
- 09:00 The only threat that Dov and the others felt in the Kopychintsy ghetto was to be sent to the forced labor camp in Kamionka Wielka (Ukraine). Eyewitnesses had reported the camp there. Dov and the other men didn’t know about extermination

camps yet, except for Belżec, but did not know details. Dov talks about his uncle and how he was murdered.

- 13:42 “Actions” began in Kopychintsy. He describes building a bunker for about 50 people under the basement.
- 24:37 Dov saved himself by running to the bunker after the last unexpected “action”. But his cousin, running after him, was killed. Other close family members survive.
- 26:00 Dov talks about the liquidation of Kopychintsy ghetto.
- 26:39 Dov arrives in Chortkiv (now in the Ukraine), district capital and headquarters of the Gestapo, as do others from nearby towns.
- 28:29 The winter 1942-1943 was still spent in Kopychintsy.
- 30:00 Dov’s talks about his romance with Lucie at Kopychintsy. Discusses Jewish police.
- 9:00:00 More about the Jewish police and the Judenrat.
- 06:00 Description of the Kopychintsy ghetto.
- 07:49 Information about the war was always the German version, except for Stalingrad.
- 11:25 He talks of arriving in Chortkiv, where Dov’s father managed to find a house with a bunker. Before settling in the house, they heard shooting. The Germans were murdering the Jews as they were arriving at Chortkiv. Dov’s family went immediately into the bunker.
- 13:00 He describes the aftermath of the “actions” in Kopychintsy. And relates stories by Ukrainian soldiers and villagers who witnessed the killings.
- 15:36 He talks more about Chortkiv and the despair on the day after the killings.
- 17:22 It was the summer of 1943. The owner of an estate nearby, Lusky, managed to convince the Nazis to provide workers for the land, which was almost 30 kilometers from Chortkiv.
- 19:01 He arrives at the Lusky estate barn, where 30 to 40 people were housed.
- 22:00 After a few weeks, the Ukrainian police forced them to flee from the barn. The people hide in the fields, but his little brother disappears, and is killed later by another Ukrainian.



- 30:50 Dov, his father, and mother decide to commit suicide instead of fall into the hands of the Ukrainians. No Jews or ghettos remained nearby.
- 30:58 Wandering in the fields, Dov arrives in the village of Tzabarootzka (Zabratówka, Poland) where uncle had urged the family to flee when Germans overtook the Russians in 1941 and killed almost all the males. Dov hid in the cemetery, while the father went to the Christian man who had sheltered them two years earlier. The father doesn't succeed. A train passed nearby, and they decided that they will commit suicide by jumping under a train.
- 10:00:00 Dov showed photos: Grandfather's house where Dov was born; the family; the younger brother, murdered by the Ukrainian peasant; Tarbut school in Gusyatin.
- 09:00 From the cemetery, Dov saw a farm house and, because the family was going to kill themselves, he convinced his parents to let him go and ask for a meal. He did so, ate, his parents join him, and then they are allowed to sleep in the barn. They slept for 36 hours straight. They decided that death under a train would be too painful, so they were going to request a rope from the homeowners. Before that, the father requests paper and pen to leave an account of their story, and ask that the letter be sent to relatives in Palestine. (The letter is shown on the tape). The letter was written in July 1943. The mother persuades them not to kill themselves.
- 23:00 The Polish family was very religious. They agreed to house Dov's family in the barnyard.
- 29:00 Dov helped the homeowners build a hideout for their boys, to avoid being kidnapped and sent to work for the Germans.

#### **Tape IV**

- 11:00:00
- 03:00 Dov tells about his father's wedding ring. The father tried to give it to the Pole hiding them, to get food for all of them. The Pole said, "Wedding rings are blessed. You cannot sell it." The father kept insisting, and the Pole finally accepted it. Often during the war, he gave it back to the father and said that he had accepted it so that father would stop nagging him. The Pole had hidden the ring to give it back after the war.
- 05:00 In March 1944, the front got closer, with fire exchanges in the area, and then Russian voices.
- 07:46 The Poles asked Dov's family not to come out of hiding, fearing that the Germans would conquer the area again, and that Ukrainian neighbors would find out that the family had sheltered Jews, potential witnesses to their atrocities. After a week, Dov's family left and headed toward Gusyatin, 5 or 6 kilometers away. The

Russian army took over all houses. Dov's family was not housed in their own home.

- 9:20 They were fed by the Russian army. On the day that Dov decided to walk to see his former house, which had been taken over by the Russians, he was picked up. He enrolled in the Soviet Army. Almost all other conscripts were Ukrainians, except for two Jews. The three Jews made a common front to protect each other from the Ukrainians. They headed east to training camp.
- 14:42 Upon arrival in Kiev, they encounter Polish army, under Russian command, going in the opposite direction. Attempt at changing armies didn't work. They arrived in Kaluga (Russia), east of Moscow. At every step of the way, the Jews, there were now four, requested transfers to a Polish unit. The answer was delayed with all kinds of excuses. In the meantime, for two months, the Jews did nothing. When discovered, they were sent to different units within the Russian army. The Red Army had developed a more powerful, heavier mortar, 160 mm, that required seven people to operate. Dov was in charge of aiming it, was good at the duty, and was appreciated by his commander.
- 12:00:00 Dov shows documents and photos of his Red Army service. There was not enough food in the army.
- 03:00 The KGB arrives at the barracks to search for soldiers who had been stealing potatoes from the farmers in the area. Dov was one of them. On that day, he lost his way back to camp. Upon arrival, the KGB interrogated him. In complete shock at being caught, he started talking in Polish. The KGB agents found out he was a Pole and finally he and his friends were transferred to the Polish army.
- 12:58 The Polish army was no longer in Russia's territory but in Poland. A Russian sergeant escorted the five men, now including a Polish soldier who was not Jewish. They were still wearing Russian army uniforms. They managed to confuse the sergeant and lead them in the direction of Kopychintsy to visit Dov's house and find out what happened to his parents. Dov describes the way there; the visit; the Polish army. They walked from point to point without seeing battle, for the most part.
- 13:00:00 The German army staged a surprise attack from the rear. Dov and his comrades in arms did not know how to fight. Two-thirds of the battalion was killed in the surprise attack.
- 03:09 On April 26, 1945, they faced serious battle along Oder-Neisse, the river border between Poland and Germany. So many were killed that the river turned red. The German army retreated. The men encountered a Ukrainian army unit that was collaborating with the Germans. Dov's unit, not knowing that the war was over, continued fighting until May 10. New orders said to not touch local civilian populations. Dov's unit was assigned "clean up" tasks in the Carpathian region, where Ukrainian partisans were still fighting. The unit surrounded a village and

completely slaughtered everyone there. Commanders told their soldiers to deny they knew anything about it. Dov felt he avenged the death of his little brother at the hands of another Ukrainian years earlier. Most of the slaughter occurred south of Sanok, in the southeast corner of Poland, near the Carpathian Mountains. They were there for almost a month. The excuse for the slaughter was that one of their soldiers had been wounded by a villager.

- 17:11 They returned to the permanent bases in the south of Poland in an officers' school. He shows photos of himself in uniform in Katowice.
- 18:30 Dov is sent, against his will, to a course to become the culture officer of the unit. Upon graduation, he refuses to work as such, under the threat of punishment. His job would have been to indoctrinate the soldiers into supporting Communism. He was jailed but was very accepted by the rest of the inmates. Dov was the only Jew, and he was proud and vocal about it. Released from jail, he was appointed the commander's assistant and office manager.
- 22:00 Dov received a letter from his parents, who had been transferred with all the other Poles from the eastern part to the lower Silesia. These towns had been populated by Germans, who were expelled and exchanged for Polish citizens. The Jews fled the Communist regime and joined the Poles. Dov's parents were in Legnica (Poland).
- 24:00 He went on furlough and met a cousin who was serving in the Jewish Brigade. He shows a photo. Dov is convinced to desert the Polish army. He is told about illegal immigration to Palestine. He moved to Reichenbach (Germany) to wait for orders to sail to Palestine. Dov's parents, whom a cousin claimed as his own parents, received legal certificates to go to Palestine. The cousin was entitled to the certificates because he was in the British Jewish Brigade. They arrived in 1947, through Vienna. Dov's exit was from Poland.
- 14:00:00 Survivors were fed and equipped in the DP camp of Schlachtensee on the border with France. Dov met a cousin who was serving there in the American army. Dov was appointed counselor of NOHAM (Noar Chaluzi Meuchad), a group of Zionist youth without regard of political affiliation. When they finally departed for Palestine, Dov looks for his group. Dov arrives in a DP camp at Bergen-Belsen, and witnesses the lynching of a kapo there.
- 14:00 He arrived in Deggendorf, where he finds his girlfriend and others. He was appointed a Hebrew teacher for children. Dov leaves for Munich to study mechanics in the ORT school there. He has an opportunity to travel to Israel in 1949. Dov arrived by plane, an American Dakota, and surprised his parents on the eve of Passover. He felt that he "came home," and never felt like a new immigrant.