

Sid Bolkosky interviewing

THIS TRANSCRIPT HAS MANY PHONETIC SPELLINGS (MISPELLINGS) AND IS NOT VERIFIED. Zero Counter for reference (NO TIME CODE)

00:36

Comes to Czechoslovakia, from a city which became Hungary in 1938. They were three brothers and three sisters. In town they had an uncle and aunt, both died when he was a kid. Cousins left the town before the persecution started.

Population of town was about 3000, less than a third Jewish. His father owned a very small hotel, a kosher restaurant and a beer bottling franchise, and a wholesale liquor enterprise, and owned building of a non-kosher restaurant. They also had an ice-distribution company. They were very much part of the community, but it was gradually reduced to zero when the Hungarians came in. in 1938. They expropriated their liquor license and ultimately their property, their building and land, levied unpayable taxes. Then started agricultural related activities--Angora farming. this was in 1939.

06:37

His father was a veteran of the WW1. Alex went to public school, no Jewish schools. The school day began at 8 ended at 2 or 3, and then they went to Hreder until 6 o'clock, all day Sunday and during school vacations, everyday. Before school he went to shul for services. On Saturday father went over the material they had learned. Little room for play. His father wore a beard, his mother wore a Shekel?. They were a religious family, as most people in their town.

The few non-religious people didn't keep their stores open on Saturday out of respect.

11:11

Friday night dinner. first to services, then dinner started with singing, kaddish. The boys were given their own cups of wine. Washed their hands according to the ritual. Boys were given their own challahs. Then followed festive dinner: appetizer, soup, meat with vegetables, dessert. Throughout dinner a lot of ceremonial singing. Concluded with after the meal grace. After dinner the family would sit and talk. Later his father would relate stories from the Talmud or Torah related items. On Saturday they went over the entire weekly portion of the Torah, they did it twice. Saturday morning to the synagogue. They went to the ritual baths before the Friday dinner. Some people went on Saturday too. Services started at 9 and ended at noon. it was something they looked forward to.

17:28

They were a close family like other families in town. Every

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Friday mother sent postcard to every member of the family. Visited grandparent during vacations. Children were close to each other. Father central figure of authority, mother respected by everybody.

21:13

The community was also close-knit. Orthodox, there was a Jewish community tax; in addition they paid for every fowl that was killed to pay the rabbi and the ritual butchers and the teachers in Hreder. Also money given to the poor. Every Friday his mother went to two poor women with a raw chicken.

23:59

They had neighbors that were non-Jewish. There was no Jewish area.

24:38

Very little anti-Semitism. Had close friends among non Jews. They called him by his Hebrew name. His childhood was devoid of fear. His father told them they were different, they were Jews.

26:40

The first disappointing experience he had was during the first days of Hungarian occupation, they were under martial law. and the soldiers were hostile to Jews. They pulled them by their hair and side burns, sometimes they beat the Jewish kids. The second anti-Jewish law was passed when they were annexed.

31:03

The Free Hungarian troops equaled the SS. They came in first, did some killing and beating of Jews, burning of houses. But Alex saw the regular Hungarian army, not the Free Troops. They housed the soldiers in their hotel and yard. They also housed a Free Troop officer in the hotel for some time. His assistant was Jewish and a distant relative of Alex's. The officer was in private life a school superintendent. had volunteered for the Free Troops of prestige.

36:42

They heard reports of what was going on in Slovakia and Poland. Heard about deportations, but they were not systematic or on a large scale. The general attitude was not to talk about it a lot. didn't talk to the children about it. Cultivated an attitude that it wasn't going to happen to them because Hungary was civilized because there were Jews in government and Jewish newspapers executives.

39:06

The only direct violence Alex experienced was in school ,where there was para-military training for youngsters. Jews had to attend and they were usually beaten up, and the commander didn't discourage it. They also beat non-Jew, it was part of the train-

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ing. Some of their neighbors got into trouble. One family from Poland was deported to Poland, even though they had acquired Hungarian citizenship.

41:46

His older sister got married in 1939 and on her wedding night there was violence. The gendarmes came into the home where the feast was going on, and rounded up all the males took them to the station, interrogated them, beat them up. Their excuse was that anti-Hungarian singing was going on, that they were using the wedding for anti-Hungarian activities. One cousin was beaten up so badly that he left immediately and got himself to London. Thus he was saved. The bridegroom was beaten up too.

44:12

One man they knew was taken to Lublin (Majdanek). He escaped and came home, knocked on the window, but it was the face of the police chief he saw. He acted drunk and disappeared. The family had been deported to Hungary. Alex's parents thought the man exaggerated the tales about his stay in the concentration camp. They couldn't grasp it.

47:49

First persecution was during para-military training. Was told he couldn't come back to school, because there was only a small number of spaces for Jews. Everybody was required a military cap except Jews. Jews were not allowed to wear the same clothes as the other kids. In the end they had to wear the arm band. Then they were no longer allowed to take part in exercises, instead they were sent into the quarry to produce. Father lost his business, could not appeal, was marched to the street with honor guard.

52:13

The family was very anxious when father was in court. Father was very down when he came home. The children senses that things weren't good. They were told to be careful with non-Jews. They knew they were not welcome among non-Jews. In 1940, the first thing was that licenses were taken away, and rationing introduced. Jews got less. Then Jews were totally denied rationed. had to get their own on black market which was illegal. The parents had to use children to get food, hoping that the gendarmes wouldn't check the children.

55:56

When he was 14 years old, he went to do farm work to get food. At 15 Alex plus his older brother did dyke work which earned them extra rations. Some families were jailed for having food in their house.

57:14

Were put in the ghetto 1944. In 1943, Jews were already re-

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stricted from travel. In late winter 1944, the Germans occupied Hungary.

BREAK

58:40

Their neighbors were taken to Poland. They came back, but Alex didn't see them. A son told them how he found them and what was going on, that some people were rounded up, told to dig their own graves and then shot. Told about the more fortunate who tried to settle in town and the hostility of the Polish people. The mass graves he heard about were 4-5 people, not the Babi Yar proportions. They believed it as they had read of earlier programs. But they didn't want to believe it about the Germans and the Hungarians. The neighbor's son found his parents and sister, and a second sister. He brought them back, hid them in the mountains, acquired papers for his family. This man made it through the Holocaust, came home as a very disturbed man. Died in 1947 died of heart failure. Couldn't readjust.

1:5:24

They were deported in 1944. It was on the last day of Passover word was leaked out that the Jews were to be rounded up and sent to the ghetto. At first disbelief. Elders met, and the word came that it was true, and they were asked to bury valuables. That night they worked in the dark, went to the basement and buried their valuable in the dirt under the wooden floor and in the flower garden. They sewed paper money into their clothes. 5 o'clock in the morning saw the gendarmes march families past their windows, they were next. They were given a short time to pack up and go. Were taken to the synagogue and the rabbi's house where the Jewish families were kept for two days--about 350 families. Then they were marched to the railroad station where a cattle train waited. Taken to neighboring city, told to find their own quarters and that they couldn't leave town.

1:12:50

From that ghetto they were deported to Auschwitz. They were in the third transport. First there was voluntary transcription to go. Gendarmes told the Judenrat that they needed so and so many Jews on the train. Some volunteered others chosen by lottery, some got out of it.

1:14:21

Alex's older brother came home for Passover from Budapest, came to the ghetto with them. He left for the labor force three weeks before they were deported. His father had be enforced to shave his beard, it was an order for all male Jews. Alex didn't know how to cope with it. Had never seen his father shaved. he didn't look pleasant without a beard.

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1:17:10

There were in the synagogue 24 hours before going to Auschwitz. Were beaten and mistreated. Marched to station, loaded on cattle cars. Before boarded train the gendarmes brought them postcards from previous transports saying that they were together, doing farmwork, and they were told they were going there too. When the train took off in the opposite direction, they tried to explain it. When they came to the next city, they came going north. When they reached the polish border they still hoped to be taken to Hungary. The knew about Auschwitz and couldn't believe that such things existed.

1:20:03

They arrived at Auschwitz at night after a journey of 3 days. The train was crowded, family tried to keep together. No sanitary facilities, used cooking pots and designated a corner of the train as a john. Emptied the pots through the little windows. got no food, but had brought some. No water. Little talking. Alex chatted up some girl, trying to ignore reality. Train stopped in grandparents' town, recognized some young men on a platform, she yelled to them to tell the grandparents. Don't know if they heard. Saw the flames on arrival in Auschwitz, smell of burning flesh. The knew already it was flames of human fat. Alex's reaction, it wasn't true. Doors opened, saw people in striped uniforms. Were told they were going to wear the same uniforms. German sentry with dogs yelling at them to get into formation. The family started walking, including sister with a 2 and half year old son. Lined up. Mother asked sister to carry the little boy. sister answered: No mother, he is my son, he is my responsibility. The sister held on to him. Mengele motioned people left and right. Father to the left, mother to the right, sister with baby to right. Just before Alex was told which way to go, Mengele asked father for his profession. Father said farmer, was asked to show his hand. "You're a damned liar, go to the other side." They hoped he would go to a camp for older people.

1:29:15

They were marched down an alley between barbed wire fences. Saw big piles of suit cases burning, and they heard babies being burned alive crying. Shaved, deloused. Given prisoner clothes. It was a production line set-up.

1:31:44

The kommandos told them pointing to the chimneys, that they were going there and that's were their relatives had gone. They were not allowed to talk to the arrivals. later they were beaten by kapos and SS men. Were herded into an area where they were registered. Their names and addresses were noted down and they were given a number, Alex 90052. Were told to remember the number, then brought into the barracks.

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1:35:02

They were in Auschwitz for just a few days in C-Lager. Saw his sisters across a ditch. Saw some girls from his hometown, but he didn't recognize them shaved. They called his sisters. Alex had a loaf of bread, climbed into the ditch and gave it to his sisters. Saw an SS-man with a dog and he jumped back. Both sisters survived.

1:37:20

They were given a dish and a spoon and a fork. They were given a very thick soup made of dried beets, cracked barley etc. Rumor had it that they were eating human meat, and the soap they used was made of human fat, which was true. The camp was huge surrounded by watchtowers.

1:39:17

Alex was very afraid. Had to learn to speak German or he would be lost. Was unable to eat the food during his stay in Auschwitz. Had been hungry before.

1:41:51

On the 3rd or 4th day they were lined up again and told they were going on a transport. Walked out of camp, loaded on cattlecars again. First city they passed was Krakow. Hoped they were going back to Hungary. Were taken to Warsaw. Let into the Warsaw ghetto surrounded by walls and barbed wire. Knew about the rebellion in Auschwitz?. Were told that somebody made it out alive, and that there were partisan activities in the city. Gestapo headquarters located in the ghetto.

1:45:46

They were sent there to clear the rubble and salvage building materials. Were told the last survivor of rebellion was a 17 year old girl who was shot on sight. She was incoherent and had gray hair. Phosphorous bombs were thrown at the rebels. Escapees had joined the partisans, they were told. They had no formal contact with the outside.

1:48:10

They had a rabbi with them, held services every morning and evening in the barracks in Warsaw. Alex never went to services. Doesn't really know why. Some prisoners were cynical, other kept a distance, other took part in services. Alex often said part of the prayers. Once they went through the gates, they had no guards except in the towers. They were guarded by prisoner kapos. Top kapo, a German prisoner, gave rabbi extra rations and exempted him from work. Alex was questioning his religious faith, but didn't lose it. Asked why, but didn't have any answers. That's where he stopped.

Not until he came home, did he remove himself from religious practices. But came back to religion in 1957. Started practic-

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ing again, praying every day, eating kosher.

NEW TAPE

00:00:00

(Something missing)

On the train they got no water, some canned meat. by the time they arrived in Dachau, they were at the end of their physical strength. At Dachau they were told to stay at the big Appellplatz. They put out big metal drums for their personal needs. They got coffee, bread, and soup. They got to Dachau early in the morning, got into the barracks in the evening. They even got some fruit. Were fairly well fed at Dachau.

0:03:57

Something about prisoners covered in feces from the train ride is missing.

Alex had to dig out his bowels with his fingers. Some people never made it out of Dachau. They were taken from Dachau to Muldorf. Was in Dachau less than a week. When they arrived in Muldorf, they were marched to a forest with tents in a barbed wire area. They got some food. Alex and his brother were removed from camp to barracks. There were military camps in the camp as well as a woman's camp. Had kitchen facilities. They were marched out to construction area. They were making an artificial mountain to serve as a hangar. Also there was to be an underground aircraft factory. Their work was to drag 100 pound cement bags on their backs up wooden ramps. That cement kommando was an effective killer, people didn't survive for more than a few weeks. Dust got into their lungs, their faces became birdlike, developed open wounds etc. he saw people keel over as they walked with the bag. There was a Kommando to take away the dead people.

0:11:12

He had developed an attitude of saving himself in any given situation. He helped his brother as much as he could, but himself first. Muldorf was a death factory. Transports supplied fresh labor. Mengele came into camp, selected people out and took to them Dachau.

Everybody had lice, and they carried typhus, Alex got it in April 1945. His brother saved him. Brother worked in the kitchen. Kept Alex in the kitchen for a few days, then removed to the hospital. Brother brought him coffee and aspirin until one night they decided to evacuate that part of the camp. Brother heard and begged an SS officer to save Alex. SS officer called Alex's name, and they got out of there. The SS marched them out of the camp into the hospital. One boy hid in the latrine. Alex recovered. The boy in the latrine survived too. Camp evacuated. Ultimately they were liberated by the American

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forces.

0;20:03

They had Yom kippur services Kol Nidr. In their barrack there was a man who was there with his son. He wrote down the text of the services on a cement bag. They convinced the Eltester to let them scrub the barracks and light candles. It was jammed packed. Next day they marched out to work. When they came in after work they were denied food. It was Yom Kippur, fasting.

In Muldorf, he got out of the cement Kommando. Was picked to work on bomb damage. On the second or third day of Passover, he couldn't eat food, came down with typhoid. He never gave up religion.

0:24:03

He knew his parents were dead. Thought his sister was too. His older brother made it out of Budapest somehow. Got gentile papers, got into the Free Hungarian Troops, wore the uniform of a master sergeant. People saved by him. Budapest fell to the Russians in February, he signed with the Russian army??. Some kind of shooting accident with bullet in movie theater. On operating table his circumcision was discovered. Rumor had it that he was taken to the Danube and shot. He never came home. Brother had worked with Wallenberg, getting people into safe houses. Sisters who stayed together throughout, and they came home.

0;29:23

His blind faith helped him survive. Hope of reuniting with family also sustained him. Alex believed that his older brother was all right.

0:30:58

Alex always considered himself younger than he was, closed out the 5 years in his life that were bad. That gap is even wider now, considered himself 40 mentally. Got over the actual Holocaust period by putting up a protective shield. When he came home, he was faced with responsibilities without a trade, and education. He was frightened about the thought of establishing a family. Started to learn a trade and got an education. But kept floating over difficulties he didn't want to face. That has stayed with him to some extent.

He has talked to his wife about his experiences to some extent. He tries to talk with his children, but doesn't get far. he wants to do it. He can talk most easily to fellow survivors. For many years he couldn't cry, he had no sympathetic emotions. If he went to a funeral he didn't get involved.

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0:37:03

He cried once in Warsaw, Sat down behind a wall and started crying. Cried in Muldorf right after allied planes shot at the camp and hit one of his friend in the stomach. he died. Once in Montreal when he was in a difficult period business wise, he pulled over an cried. He didn't know what was going to happen to his business.

When he had damaged his leg, he taught he was going to be paralyzed and cried then. Broke down and cried several times a day. But he was never able to concentrate on the kaddish services until a communal kaddish in Washington with Reagan, when finally he connected with the loss of his parents.

0:41:58

At Kol Nidr services he thinks of his childhood. Kol Nidr in Muldorf was on of the few emotional experiences in the camps. At Muldorf Alex met a rabbi who had known his grandfather. That was another emotional experience.

0:44:55

On a daily basis he goes back to the holocaust. He still has nightmares. He is now on a more even psychological keel than before. Had some difficult years. he is now finding himself. Had a reunion with his fellow inmates and he observed their inhuman behavior. Alex felt that he had recovered. That was the first time he felt out of the concentration camp.

0:46:29

Often he asks himself why he was picked to survive. When his kids came, he wouldn't allow himself to be glad. Not until now has he allowed himself to be grateful. He is also grateful to the US and to Canada for giving him a home. he has a desire to teach to avoid a repetition. He wants to give of himself, and be involved in the holocaust movement, Hopes through that to connect with his wife and children.