

HOLOCAUST INTERVIEW WITH ABE PASTERNAK

Sid Bolkosky interviewing ABRAHAM PASTERNAK

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1984 interview with ABRAHAM PASTERNAK

00:25 Born in Transylvania, Romania. Family consisted of father, mother and 6 brothers. Two brothers died in Auschwitz. One in New York, one in Israel. Parents died in Auschwitz. Of all the family of about 40-50 people, 12 to 14 survived. Lovely community of 5000 people. 250 Jewish families. Romanians, Germans, Gypsies and Jews living there. Lots of preparations for the shabath, scrubbing the floors, cleaning windows, cooking and baking. They shined their shoes, pressed their shirts, went to the bath house. As children they were forced to sleep in the afternoon to be fresh for the afternoon meal and the synagogue. In the summer the shabath didn't start until 8 or 9 o'clock. It was happiness, except when the gentiles would scream from across the street: You dirty Jew.

04:54

There was always anti-Semitism. Always told to go back to Palestine. Has four years of secular education. Father had a yarn goods store. Father had to make money to put 6 brothers through Jewish schools. Mother was the businesswoman in the family. Mother, father and brother used to work in store. Wednesday was the busy day. Family was quite well off.

07:00

Went to Yeshiva in western Transylvania for a year and a half. His religious life would not have changed whether he was in business or some place else. Dependent on whom he married. Very religious household. Hasidic house, father wore beard, and all wore dark clothes. On Saturdays wore special clothes.

09:13

Things started to change in 1938-39, but before then Jewish kids were exposed to anti-Semitism, beaten up. Were not taught how to fight back. In 1938 when Hitler became popular, there were new nuisance laws for Jews. In 1939 the Rumanians wanted to show Germans that they were trying to punish the Jews, so they passed a law that every Jewish store had to be open on Saturdays. Jews heard about it, they were stunned. To a religious Jew it was like cutting off an arm. Rabbi advised that since it involved life, they should open the stores. Jews began to liken it to the destruction of the temple. When there was a black-out they would not open the display windows, but they paid a fine for not doing it. When mother asked if she did business on a Saturday, she broke down and cried, and father was angry. Those were very unhappy days, people were torn. If package from post office was torn or ripped open, they couldn't complain. Laws forbade it. Man

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complained, was fined. Jews had to clean toilets and clean streets of officials. Jews were blamed for the war.

Jews thought that when Hungarians came in to Transylvania, they would be treated better. No better. Quickly learned what they could expect the Hungarians. They started new laws--all able-bodied Jewish people could not be part of the army, were conscripted into the labor force. 2 brothers drafted. Old gypsy assigned to oversee Jewish people. Didn't have any rank. When brother didn't salute him, he started screaming: I'll teach you a lesson. People started to become big shots.

Abe encountered soldier with his girl friend. Soldier shouted at Abe: "Dirty Jew, don't you know you aren't supposed to walk on the same sidewalk as I."

Priest accused them of being responsible for the war.

22:25

In 1942-43 things were rationed. Jews were not allowed to slaughter cattle. Only allowed to eat chicken. Germans started to ration a lot of things. They started to get used to restrictions, always hoping they wouldn't last very long. In late 1943, all Jews had to register. One Friday afternoon, a soldier wanted to show off to his girlfriend, the daughter of somebody who used to buy on credit from their store. Abe came to the Kommandantura to pick up father's picture I.D. German cut it up. A gentile former friend cut Abe's side curls, but only one. Abe kept the other one in order not to give former friend the satisfaction. A month or so later, they were picked up by the Hungarians.

27:25

There was no specific ghetto. Jews lived all over town. Jewish community not that large. They tried to stay home most of the time, or go to the synagogue to study. May 3rd, 1944, father got up to go to synagogue. In the meantime, two gendarmes knocked on the door and told the family to get their things together in 15 minutes and go to the school. When father came home he said that a customer told him: You dirty Jew this is the last time you go to the synagogue.

They went to the school, had a bit of money. Mother spoke 4 languages fluently. She went to her friend, a German. Here is some money, keep it for my kids, or if they don't come, keep it for yourself. Friend turned mother in. Mother came back pale, but didn't say anything. Everybody was at school. Luggage examined by gendarmes. Kept at school all day long. The only Jew who was smart got drunk. Had a feeling that something was going to happen. In the evening, they were marched 30 kilometers into an open forest, no tents, but they constructed some kind of shelter. Lived like animals. Germans decided that youngster had to do work. They dug foxholes and ditches. The Hungarians also

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put out order that everybody has to shave. Mother saw father without a beard for the first time, broke down and cried, She could believe it, she couldn't take it any longer. Was kept in forest for 3 weeks in rain and muck, unlivable. Gendarmes punished people for kicks.

37:30

They were not prepared for that. They had heard that Germans were persecuting Jews. Thought they were put in jail and then let go. Newspapers were censored. Were not allowed to listen to American radio. Gypsies tried to make themselves nice to the gendarmes. A gang of boys that Abe went to school with, beat him and his brother up, they could fight back. Father depressed he could even help his own sons. Hungarians were just as nasty as the Germans.

40:40

In the field for 3 weeks. One Saturday, a loudspeaker told them to go to the train. They were thrown into a boxcar, 80 to the car. It was hot, crammed, no room to sit, couldn't see out. Even a little window was wired up with barbed wire. Everybody scared, little kids crying. It was chaos and pandemonium. Parents prayed. Felt like little sheep going to an unknown place. Abe hadn't heard about Auschwitz, until he got there. During the journey, doors were opened, two German guards watching them while they emptied the buckets. Reflections on having to go to the bathroom in front of people on train. People collapsed. Organized a sitting schedule. On the train for three days. Some people died the minute they got to Auschwitz.

47.00

Train came to screeching halt. Dogs barked. Heraus, heraus! One guy who walked into train asked in Yiddish if they had gold and diamonds. Train higher than platform, people beating, trying to get out. Stench hit them. Didn't know what that was, where they were. Saw prisoners in striped clothes, and sniffing dogs, people being beating up, a band playing in the distance. confusion. Abe was with 5 family members. SS-man put the three older brothers and the kid brother with them Abe told little brother: Go to father and mother. Like a little kid he did. Little did Abe know he sent him to the crematorium. Abe feels like he killed him. Abe and other brother talk about it. Wonders what parents thought about, especially when they went to the crematorium. Abe doesn't know what to do about it. has to live with it.

51:57

After selection, they were turned over to the gypsies. Were marched to the camp, taken to shower, shaven, smeared with some kind of disinfectant. Were told to sit down, stand up, sit down stand up. Gypsies were the kapos of the camps. Beat people up. Stood at the door hitting people. So many things happened that

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day that Abe can't figure it out. The Jews were civilized people and suddenly they were treated like animals, worse than animals. Finally they got to the barracks, but had to stand and wait. Guards were looking for good shoes. Exchanged shoes to make uneven pairs. Were handed postcards to write to their parents, but didn't get pencil and no address. Abe wanted to write, somebody told him he was crazy, that his parents were killed already.

56:37

Abe's brother was able to find a place to lie down. Older man gave brother ration of cheese to be allowed to sleep in their bunk. Cheese was inedible. Before going to sleep, Appel because somebody was missing. Were beaten on their way out of the barrack.

BREAK

58:53

Abe was in a daze when told that his parents had been killed. didn't tell his brother. He was sure they were not dead. Remembers a angry kapo. For ten days they did not do anything. When SS came everybody had to stand up and take cap up. They were counted five times a day, given a little bit of food, back to the barracks. Abe not tattooed, didn't know what that meant. Got accustomed to the stench, saw fires, saw carts, two-wheelers, saw people carrying corpses. it became natural, didn't see it anymore. Wonders how one could adapt to a situation like that. They were concerned about off, important part of their daily existence. Heard that people threw themselves on the wires. Abe was not ready to die.

After ten days they were awakened one morning and told to get ready in ten minutes. Went out to Appel and then marched to railroad station. Herded in like cattle. Abe gets mad when he hears the word "Heraus". Thrown into boxcars. Stopped in Dredsen, opened the door. Abe sitting next to door, guard opposite saw a soldier reading a newspaper: the Allies had landed. Abe thought he would be out of there soon, but it was to be almost another year.

Taken to Buchenwald, still with his brothers. Kept there for about a week.

1:07:14

Shipped to Schlieben?? Abe put dust in his eyes. Tells story of running in to fellow inmate after war. Confirmed his strange eye story. Survivors will not believe the story.

When Abe came to Schlieben, there was an old man who told Abe to knock down a wall. Abe started, and red dust came out. Put dust in eyes, put in infirmary. Hungarian doctor sent him back to Buchenwald, which was reputed to be better than other camps. Abe told brother he wasn't blind. Bother wished him good luck. At

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Buchenwald a Jewish doctor told him to open his eyes. "You're lucky. Was in Buchenwald for two months. Brothers stayed in Schlieben.

1:11:44

Both brothers survived. Worked in Buchenwald, menial jobs. One day they were standing in line in front of garbage can for peels and bits of cabbage to be thrown in, which they would eat. German with dog said his dog wouldn't eat that. Abe wished German would treat them as well as he treated dog. They had lice, unsanitary conditions. All kinds of diseases. Somebody discovered that if you took your clothes and twist them around the steam pipes, the lice would get killed.

1:14:55

Remembers going to the latrine at Buchenwald, looked up and saw big circle in sky--a plane. Then heard tremendous explosion. They bombed the factory part of Buchenwald. Whole barracks of SS were killed. Taken to Schlieben--hell. Was in the steel factory. had quota to fulfill. Kapo at lunchtime used to eat fat sandwich in front of inmates. Was once beaten by a blond SS woman with a whip because he step out of the line marching home a little bit. Remembers being transferred from steel factory to packing shed. Young man working next Abe was not fast enough, was beaten all night long, and then had to work to make up for the time. There was nothing that could be done. Great frustrations. Germans gave them unsliced bread; it took them 10 minutes to slice it, had to be accurate, or there would be fights. Tried to eat the bread slowly--paid attention to every bite. didn't want to be disturbed when he ate his bread.

1:21:24

Abe was at Schlieben until the end. Was in Oslo after the war, visited the resistance museum. Saw the Panzer exhibit. Froze. Abe had made it.

Were taken to Flossenburg to teach people metal casting. There they got a large slice of sausage, made it all worth it. They were afraid of being kept at Flossenburg. Nobody made it out of Flossenburg.

1:23:35

Every day there was something different. There were fights among the campmates. Over food. One Jewish Kapo who was the nicest of Kapos. Deserves to be mentioned. Used to alert inmates to shipments of potatoes so the inmates could steal some. Other two Kapos terrible.

1:25:49

Never received any help. The only thing was an old guard who got a postcard from his son in Florida who was black like an African and fat as a pig.

Suspicion if somebody had more bread than somebody else. Must

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have turned in somebody. Worked in Schleben from July to April. Then put in boxcars to 10 days with hardly any food. Once they were raided by American. guard ran away, prisoners left in the open. Abe found 8 plum pits next to manure, wiped them up and ate them.

1:29:29

Arrived in Theresienstadt. Rumor that Germans would machine gun them. Theresienstadt better than anywhere else. SS were all over. The Russians came in. Chaos. People got sick. Abe had typhus. Abe weighed 80 pounds, couldn't walk, couldn't sit down. Was treated in hospital. Remembers being very sick, getting better food, lying on the floor.

1:32:24

Thought about returning to Romania. Reunited with brothers in Theresienstadt. Were stunned, cried, and then didn't have anything to say to each other. In separate barracks.

1:33:50

Group of Jewish people coming from the east. By the way, Russian asked for a piece of bread, Russian asked why he didn't become a partisan. Came back to Rumania, asked a man where he was going. man wanted to find Jewish place. He wanted to eat and knew Jews helped each other. Told Abe to leave immediately. The Russians as bad as Germans. Went to Hungary and then to US with intermediate stop in a German Displaced Persons Camp. When he came to the US he saw lights flashing--it was cars, couldn't believe all the cars.

Stayed in hotel in New York. Went for walk in New York, saw lots of food in shop windows. Saw tall policeman, was ready to take out identification card. Abe was in daze going from hell to paradise.

1:38:32

Abe had uncle in Detroit who paid for his ticket. Relative in Los Angeles didn't want to talk about concentrations camps. Abe's first sentence in English was "If you laugh everybody laughs with you.." Went to LA for 4 weeks. Didn't know what he wanted other than going into a corner and cry. Arrived in 1947, was drafted in 1948. Basic training in Kentucky. Turned over to psychologist. Abe didn't speak English well, and psych, didn't speak Yiddish. Abe made Jewish acting chaplain.

1:42:00

Never Lost faith. In Buchenwald had access to pencil and paper, Wrote down prayers. Started to question why they were in camps.

1:44:46

Still affected by experiences during war--flashes come through.

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Still dreams, Always end up talking about concentration camps with friends. Dreams about little brother, feels in dream he is alive, so why doesn't he come home? Fights with himself over his brother. Didn't know that 30 years later Abe would be telling about concentration camps in schools. Abe feels that future generations are kinder people. Don't let any bigot do what the Nazis did in Germany.