

Interview with Joseph Wind 5/23/89

JW: I'm almost 77 years old. I had four brothers. My father didn't come back from WWI. One brother I had in Israel. One of those brothers I brought here from Israel about 20 years ago. He lives here in Atlanta. I never knew my parents. They were somewhat religious. We're both from Lemberg (Lvov). I met my wife after the war. She'd worked <sup>(as a maid)</sup> for the Gestapo passing as a non-Jew. But why did you come to see me? Who sent you? Don't you know I'm an outcast in this community?

WH: Why are you an outcast?

JW: Because of what I did. That I burned the bodies. They call me a murderer.

WH: And what do you say?

JW: I say the people was dead already. I just burned them.

WH: What year are you born?

JW: 1924. All my brothers were killed. My family was religious.

WH: What camp were you in, Joseph?

JW: I was in the Lvov ghetto. Then they put us in the Janowska Road Camp.

WH: Were you strong physically?

JW: I'm strong even now. I was strong, yeh. We carried railroad tracks. I was in Janowska Camp about four or five weeks. One day they took us to the cemetery by truck to execute us, but I jumped from the truck. Then I worked digging out mass graves, burying the people from the ghetto by the road, together with Leon Wells. First I made a stack of bodies twice as big as this room (a standard size living room), 25 or 30 feet. Then we put on some gasoline, put branches around and then it would burn for two or three days. Then we would pour the body fat on the bodies with a ladle. I don't have any eyebrows left, as you can see, because they were burned off from the fire. We opened up mass graves and we

2.

9  
JW: took out the bodies. They was like you open a can of sardines and we put them on the fire. I knocked out some of the teeth from the skeletons and put them over there on the side. After two or three months, I don't know what give me the idea, let me hide some of them. We had no latrine and we slept on straw . We went in the bushes to the bathroom. I put a big bunch of gold teeth in a handkerchief. Do I have something here ?

JW: No. We gave away the last couple of teeth to the museum, the Jewish community center.

WH: Did you read the book by Wells (He was showing me a copy sent to him by Wells, of his book, Janowska Road.) ?

JW: No. I didn't have to read it. I call him from time to time because he tells me who is alive. (When he talks about those who survived it sounds like someone talking about a big battle he went into and fought his way thru and emerged as one of the few survivors.) We were called "The Death Brigade" There were about a hundred of us. Today, including me, three are alive. Altogether I worked there six months. After the war , I found the teeth I hid, and sold them.

WH: When you were doing this work, were the people who died from Lvov ?

JW: People from all over, from Holland, Belgium, people I never saw before.

WH: Since it was indescribably horrible work, how did you do it ? How did you get through the day ?

JW: I'll tell you from the beginning. (He brings in a cocker spaniel dog, of whom he and his wife are very fond. They dote on it.) I washed my hands with my own urine.

WH: Why ?

JW: Because, I didn't want to wash with the water others put their hands in after they were working with the remains of the bodies. I was in concentration camp a few weeks. Then I fall in, in the sondercommandos. I believe it was in 1942.

3.

WH: Did you think, when you were there, that you were going to get out ?

JW: I didn't think at all. Nobody been thinking. We saw that people were only kept alive eight to twelve days; just to break in new people, they kept us alive. We had to make dust out of the bodies. What you think is left over from a leg ? No more than this pencil. In the second camp, I worked in a secret place as an electrician. But with the bodies I worked more than six months. I can't say exactly how long. When they opened the mass graves they used to put in clorox powder. Lice we had, you cannot imagine; like roaches in Atlanta. (He gives a short, mirthless laugh. Then laughing more heartily, he continues:) I had to change my shirt every day.

WH: Did it get harder as you were doing it ?

JW: No. First thing, you got used to it. Then, my name is Wind. They had a song: "Wind hat mir ein lieder ertzeht..." (Wind sang me a song). All of them knew me. And I had all kinds of ideas. I took a piece of wood and built something that you could open up the boot, but so small you could put in your pocket. That's why they liked me. (He made himself useful. He ingratiated himself.)

WH: How did these particular officers treat you ?

JW: In the beginning, just like everybody else. They treated us pretty good. We had an orchestra of five Hungarian musicians who got caught.

WH: How did you escape ?

JW: We escaped November 11, 1943. (At this point I'm offered some tea and cake and the conversation is interrupted as I'm shown some family photos:)

WH: What does your son do ?

JW: He's married, 42, and has an electronics business. The other one is an architect. That's my son-in-law. My daughter, his wife, is in real estate. They just bought

4.

JW: a \$400,000 house.

WH: Did you decide you had to escape because if not, they would kill you ?

JW: I didn't decide. I was just looking for any occasion. Just two or three people knew about it. I took two pieces of lumber, attached by one nail.

I kept them near my work-bench and, when the time came, I pushed them thru the barbed wire . These ideas saved my life.

WH: Did you ever feel, if my time is going to come anyway, I might as well kill myself already?

JW: No. I would have just given up the first time then. This happened to many people. One Yom Kippur, I remember, came a guy who said kaddish.

WH: I see. What happened after you escaped ?

JW: I went into town and hid. But then I got caught and was put in jail and I hanged myself because I was afraid of what they would do if they found out who I was. Since I was an instigator. They would torture me. But the other prisoners didn't let me do it. Then my life was saved because they needed an electrician to fix a siren that they couldn't turn off. Otherwise, they would have executed me. Then they put us in a camp. But the Gestapo who worked with me before were there and I was afraid they would recognize me. So I cut my hair, took off my glasses and worked in the dark. Then the Russians came and we were liberated. This was a deal with Wiesenthal and Bernadotte.

WH: What happened to you, Bronya ?

BW: I passed as a Gentile, working for the Germans, because I didn't look Jewish. We met after the war. I was fourteen then.

WH: What happened after the war?

JW: I was Director of the ORT School in Salzburg because I knew photography, carpentry, electrical.

5.

WH: What kind of a kid were you ?

JW: I was good. I was the only one sent to technical school. I did always something at home. I made sculptures, went to heder.

WH: Do you think other survivors could have ~~endured~~ endured what you went through ?

JW: I don't know. I have here a tape, where my brother is speaking about what I did. I don't know if I should show you that. He says I been murdering people and things like that. I should be person they shoot by the sand ?

WH: By the sand ?

JW: How you think the blood got disposed of? They poured gasoline over the lake and the blood burned up. You see the people in the graves were like a can of broken sardines. And the people buried in the sand between two hills, we dig them out too. Each body was like a dried out mouse. There was no meat in it because this body has more water than meat in it.

WH: Well, they say you can't judge people until you're in their situation.

JW: Yes, this I haven't seen. These were not fresh bodies. And another thing. You know, when a human being goes to death, they know it. You can see differences between a woman and a man. <sup>The man</sup> goes in straight. The woman goes in aheh, aheh, aheh. A woman maybe is not as strong. When we picked up the bodies after they died, very seldom a man discharged (fluids), the women 90%.

WH: I see your wife is loyal to you, she's your helpmate ?

JW: Yes, I have with whom to argue (They laugh). We're together 45 years.

WH: How did you come here ?

JW: We came to New Orleans by boat, the General Taylor. From there they brought us to Atlanta. Everyone wanted to go to New York and New York was overfilled. I didn't have nobody. The Jewish community was very good to us. In two weeks I had a job to print envelopes. They gave us a one room apartment with a kitchen.

6.

JW: After a while I went into grocery business and then I bought some land. (He followed the traditional Atlanta pattern of the newcomers.)

WH: What happened with you and the other survivors that they don't get together with you so much anymore ?

JW: We had a card game, and they took a quarter out of each pot for the Forwards. I speak Yiddish but I don't read Yiddish at all. No matter. I said if it is 2½ million Jews in New York can't keep a paper, then we don't supposed to give a penny. Cause I don't read no Yiddish and I don't have to support because he wants to read Yiddish. So 5 years no card games.

WH: Do you miss the card game?

JW: No. You know, I thought women are gossips. The men are gossiping more than the women. And another thing. Maybe I'm too sensitive. But they sit here and one whispers in the other's ear. You got a secret, okay, but not in company.

WH: Did you discuss the war with the children when they were growing up ?

JW: Not necessarily. Bad memories. They know I was in camps and death brigade.

WH: Why don't you close up your business? You don't need the money?

JW: I can't give it away. But you know what it is ? I'm lonely. I just sit here day after day after day....I go to work, I forget about it. At least before, I used to play.....I have one friend, Mr. Bass, he comes to see me. And this is the only person what I see.

WH: Do you ever go to the movies ?

JW: I got television. I like news, politics. I read the Atlanta Journal. No books, but Newsweek.

WH: Who did you vote for ?

JW: This time, nobody. I was afraid, Dukakis, with, eh, Jackson and I didn't like Bush. Reagan was all right but usually I vote Democratic.

7.

WH: Do you find Blacks (Who you have contact with) more anti-Semitic than whites ?

JW: Almost alike.

WH: Do you think what happened in Europe could happen here ?

JW: No. In Europe, anti-Semitism came from the head, the gov't; here comes from the bottom. They're not in control. I believe in freedom. I'm against abortion. The whites demonstrate against it, not the blacks because they get free welfare money. And in 100 years they'll be the majority and they'll take over the country. So if there's no abortion there'll also be more whites. Right now, only the whites are having abortions.

8 WH: What do you think about homosexuals?

JW: I don't think nothing. I don't think about it.

WH: What interests you in politics ?

JW: Well, they're all crooked, regardless. They spit on each other.

WH: Do you sleep at night ?

JW: Yeh. But before I go to sleep, I take a valium. because I'm very nervous.

WH: Do you dream about what happened ?

9 JW: No. I even don't think about it. Life got to go on. Only one time I watched something about the Holocaust because they were showing something else too, War and Remembrance.

WH: Did you ever see a social worker or psychologist ?

JW: No.

WH: Do you ever dream about the war ?

0 BW: No.

WH: You sent your children to Hebrew school, they were bar-mitzvahed. But tell me, when you think about everything that happened, is it possible to believe in God ?

8.

JW: I'm a member of the shul, \$700.00. I give donations to the Jewish community. I can't question. Whatever happened, this is the way it is. I seen people pray, it didn't help them.

WH: Do you believe in God ?

JW: No. (but admits this only reluctantly) I can't believe now in nothing.

WH: Are you close with your children ?

JW: Oh yes, I talk to them all the time.

WH: Do you get together with any friends now ?

JW: No. I don't have any. I told you, they threw me out from the game.

WH: Is any Jewish holiday important to you ?

JW: Maybe Pesach; I like it for the kneidel (matzoh balls.) (He laughs.)  
the

WH: Do you think religious acted differently during the war ?

JW: I don't know. I went to Israel to the Wailing Wall and I saw the Jews with the payes and it looked foolish to me. It didn't make an impression on me. Not the Wall, but the hasidim. Praying and ~~knock~~ knocking on the Wall with the head. I been in Israel two or three times. I like to see the historical places, the archeology.

WH: What should they do with the Palestinian problem ?

JW: It's a problem. I believe they don't need the territory at all. But they can't let in the PLO. They wouldn't have peace even if they give it back, regardless.

WH: What do you think makes the survivors different from American Jews.

JW: I'm gonna tell you something. Money talks. The survivors made a little money, they became snobs. At home everybody was somebody even if they poor, couldn't write.

WH: Did the survivors ever say that what you did was worse ?

JW: I never talked to anyone about it.



9.

WH: I'm very happy you decided to talk to me about it. Why ?

JW: Because you want to know for the book. This a little different.

9 You see some people might think something different. They might think I was the murderer.

WH: How do you know others would think you're a murderer ?

JW: I don't know. The behavior of some people. I've lived with them.

Who knows what they think? I just don't wanna talk about it, period.

WH: Did your children ever ask you how you managed to live thru it ?

JW: Nobody asked me. Why I have to tell if nobody asked me ? But the State Department came to take depositions from me. They came in with names. How could I remember with names?

WH: Are you sorry about anything you did since you came here ?

9 JW: Just that I didn't enjoy myself more. And now my wife goes shopping and I have to sit here alone. I'm very lonely.

WH: Do you ever take a drink to relax ( I had heard he drank)?

JW: Oh yeah. You want some? No wine, but I enjoy a drink once or twice a day, and sometimes not at all.

WH: No thanks, but tell me, would you say you're a happy person now ?

JW: I'm not happy, I'm not unhappy. Just natural.

WH: Did you learn anything from this war experience ?

JW: I don't think so. War is rotten all over.

WH: Do you think Jewish people could do what Hitler did ?

JW: I don't think so. We are a different kind of race.

8 BW: Jewish got a soft heart. They not like blacks, that they kill.

JW: I know I couldn't kill a person with a gun. I couldn't do no harm to nobody. I had a dog before and they had to take him to where they put him to sleep. I couldn't go. I couldn't kill a fly.

10.

WH: How were you able to pick up human bones from the mass graves and  
yet now the sight of human blood bothers you ?

JW: I don't know how. Maybe I was drunk. This I did not to get hit. The  
desire to survive is strong, probably. And this is past. I cannot bring back  
the people.