

RG-50.2266 #08  
BENJAMIN LAVI

My name is Benjamin Lavi [Bornstein]. Born April 1930 in Lodz. Parents Moshe and mother Bronya. Father owned a candle making factory, mother was a registered nurse [didn't like housework]. Had a maid. Life as middle class family. Large family - many uncles, cousins. Only two cousins survived. Unfortunately one of them lives now in Germany.

Describes German occupation and gradual persecution and restrictions [no radio, telephone, etc.] Father had to hide at home. As a child of 9, Benjamin was free to move around.

Sealing of the ghetto - families rush to bring as much as possible with them into the ghetto boundaries. Benjamin, again, as a child, could accomplish that better than his parents [with the help of the maid Marisha] - camping bags and packages. Moved in with father's friends. Marisha wanted to take the boy with her but he became sick with measles and stayed with parents in ghetto. Hospitals were totally destroyed and were turned into factories.

End of 1941 - Germans ordered all the children and elderly to report. A few of his cousins didn't want to leave the grandparents and joined them in the transport. None of them survived. Benjamin and his parents, on the other hand, were hidden with his uncle who was a fireman in the ghetto. As such, he was not touched by the Gestapo, as was the case with many doctors, nurses and other professionals. They were the lucky ones. The Germans needed them for daily functioning of life in the ghetto. His mother had an important job in a big hospital and even got his father a job as a bread distributor. It went like this until the German's decision to destroy the entire ghetto.

They were taken to a prison camp, next were loaded on trains to Auschwitz. The wagon trains were loaded like cattle. Written in blood on the walls of the cars: 'we are on the way to Auschwitz - this is the end'. When they arrived in Auschwitz, hell confronted them - beatings, yelling and horror everywhere. The Jewish 'policemen' screamed at them in Yiddish to tell that the younger kids were older, so as to try to save them from extermination. The first selection he witnessed, children, elderly and women to the left, men and youth to the right. Benjamin passed as an 18 year old and survived the second selection. On the third one he was sent to the left, but crawled back to the right to be with his father. Only then did they understand what was happening. They were taken to work in Germany in a tire factory [most buses in Israel today use tires manufactured in this same factory...]. Father and Benjamin were with approximately 1000 Jews from Lodz. Were moved to Hanover to work in a tank production plant. Many perished in this labor camp. Describes slave labor and the horrible conditions. This went on until April 1945. On April 4 Germans started to load up and prepare to retreat from the area. Ordered the Jews to march on foot. Father was in no condition to march - Benjamin and other youngsters escaped and by nightfall returned to the camp which was deserted by the retreating Germans. They stayed in the abandoned camp. First visitors were the German Red Cross promising their deliverance, hospital care, etc. Instead, the following day the Germans returned with troops and ordered to execute all the survivors in order

to eliminate all the witnesses to their crimes. They were loaded on trucks [believing they were on way to hospital]. For lack of fuel the trucks were abandoned and the Jews found themselves in the heart of Hanover in front of a French prisoners camp. The French took them in and helped them. On April 10 [his 15th birthday] the US army entered Hanover. American soldiers stopped and showered them with food, candies and drinks. Americans kept coming everyday with food. Father was hospitalized and died on May 6 [3 weeks after liberation]. Mother was in Bergen-Belsen where she worked in a hospital. She reached Benjamin in Hanover. They both returned to Belsen where mother resumed work at hospital. She met a man and planned to move with him and take the boy. Benjamin overheard this plan and refused to move with his mother and her fiance. He joined the 'kinderheim', an orphanage. Members of the Jewish Brigade, the American Joint, kept visiting and moved the home from Belsen to the Barburg family palace in Hamburg. The children were then moved to France and in the spring of 1946 boarded the Champolion, a French boat built during the First War. Then, via Biserta, in French Africa, via Alexandria and on to Haifa in Palestine - April 26, 1946. Were taken to Atlit for 4 days. Kids were put on buses to different kibbutzim. Benjamin went to Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim, his first experience with socialism - May Day - in the kibbutz - red flags mixed with blue and white....

Interviewer remembers their first Sabbath in the kibbutz. She came to see 'her children'.

Describes first months in kibbutz. 1948 joined the Palmach and other units in the Israeli army.

Benjamin is now a grandfather and lives in Haifa. Keeps in touch with the group. They have a reunion every 5 years.