

RG-50.407.0074

Interview: Yaakov [Jacob] b. Gershon Rosenberg, June 1996

Summary

Part 1.

Yaakov Rosenberg, born in 1922 in Lodz, Poland, the youngest of three children, describes: his family's working class status and employment in the textile industry; living in a one-room apartment; a hard life but happy family; his parents' Bundist political activism, opposing both Jewish assimilation and extreme orthodoxy; the importance of education and idealism in his upbringing; observing Jewish holidays amid a mostly secular life; speaking mostly Yiddish in the home; his sister, Paula, 30, surviving the selection at Auschwitz but committing suicide when her baby was gassed; rarely attending synagogue; living in a Yiddish, orthodox area; having Polish friends and his family being patriotic Poles despite pervasive Polish anti-Semitism, particularly after Hitler's rise; excelling in school but being barred from state schools; publishing six books of poetry and short stories; the closeness of his Lodz community; the community's inability to conceive of the Nazis' gross inhumanity and persistent belief that God would save it, which was its undoing; Lodz as "a ghetto without walls"; the lightning takeover and occupation by the Germans in 1939; immediate Polish complicity in persecuting Jews; creation of the formal ghetto in 1940; life in the ghetto; having no work, food, or fuel; anger at the deception and secrecy perpetrated against the Jews, which caused them to hope rather than resist even if suicidal; removal of 17,000 children and the elderly from the ghetto for extermination and his lifelong anguish; complicity within the ghetto of some Jews, particularly the Jewish leader of the ghetto; his arrest and subsequent release for inciting workers; the "orderly and systematic" liquidation of the ghetto; maintaining cultural activities with his friends; the work assignments of his family members in the ghetto; his mother's stalwart determination in the face of events and his father's disillusionment and depression; his membership in the ghetto underground; wanting to take a stand while other members refused; the impossibility of escape from the ghetto because of both German and Polish enmity; instances of moral courage, suffering, starvation, brutality, and death in the ghetto; roundups and deportations with the assistance of Jewish police; knowledge that exterminations were occurring but also disbelief;

Part 2 [at 1:33]

Rosenberg continues: attributing his survival to "pure luck" and "perhaps a little bit of instinct"; as a poet, the paucity of language to describe the Holocaust and the importance of metaphor; the importance of bearing witness to his experiences; dismissing present-day Holocaust deniers as people who deny it because they "are happy it took place"; the ways in which the past has shaped him as a person; replacement of hope for the future with ambivalence; the difficulty of conveying his experiences to a young generation (including his daughter) without depriving it of hope, and his conclusion that it is necessary to remember the past without dwelling on it [reads a poem on the Holocaust and the loss of his family, "Elegy on the Ghetto"].

Note: At several points, Rosenberg mentions the death of his parents and two sisters in Auschwitz (his sister Paula by suicide). However, most discussion is focused on the horrors of life in the ghetto and the ghetto's destruction, and relatively little on his experiences in Auschwitz.

Shows photos of some family members including: his father; sister Paula (who committed suicide in Auschwitz); wife Esther, who survived eight concentration camps, including Majdanek; himself and his wife in their early twenties, prior to settlement in Australia; daughter, two granddaughters (his “greatest triumph” over Nazism), and son-in-law.