

DONOR: WALTER SALTSBERG  
INTERVIEWER: LES MARKS  
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approx. running time: one hour, 30 mins.

Tape Footage: Background

1-639 Walter came to Canada in December 1947. He turned 17 in January, 1948.

Walter was born in Warsaw, Poland. After the war he spent a couple years in Sweden and a short time in England.

Life in Warsaw before the war was good. Walter's family lived comfortably. They had an apartment, a car, summer camp and all the amenities of life. His father was a good provider and they lived well.

Walter and his brother and parents lived with his mother's sister and her husband and daughter. Walter's father had six siblings. His mother had a brother living in Israel.

Walter finished grade two before the war. He and his brother attended French immersion school. Because of anti-semitism in Poland Jews could not attend Polish universities. Those who could afford to sent their children outside Poland to study. Walter's parents planned to send their sons to French university.

In 1939 Walter was eight years old.

His family was modern, not orthodox. They lived in the area that became the outer extremes of the ghetto. Walter does not recall his family being associated with any Jewish institutions. His brother had a Bar Mitzvah during the war.

640-1674 Most of Walter's friends were Jewish. At school there was a mixture of children.

Anti-semitism in Poland was obvious.

Walter's brother was six years older than him.

Their school was close to the University of Warsaw. Occasionally the brothers were afraid to exit the streetcar at their stop because of student demonstrations against Jews.

Before the war Walter didn't suffer anti-semitism personally. His family felt the impact after the German occupation, when the realization of being different manifested itself.

Walter's family had a St. Bernard dog before the war.

## WWII

After the war began in September many people, including Walter's family, left the city for a period of three weeks or so. This was the only time Walter was out of Warsaw during the war. His parents and brother were taken away near the last days of the ghetto.

These families, including Walter's, returned to Warsaw after the defeat of the Polish forces. Walter's family returned to their apartment where they stayed until the liquidation of the ghetto.

Walter does not know how his father made a living once the war started, but they continued to live reasonably well. They were not hungry.

After the start of the Lodz ghetto liquidation, Walter's family took in four refugees into their apartment. Another man from Warsaw lived with them as well. It was a large apartment. Personally Walter did not suffer greatly.

### The Warsaw Ghetto

Their telephone was removed. Walter still remembers the phone number and the car license plate number. The Germans also removed books and furniture to furnish their own quarters.

There was much hardship around them. The carts used in the Kenora Safeway are like the carts used in the ghetto to cart away the bodies.

A neighbor was shot right in front of the building. There was continued harassment.

There were frightful moments. If you heard footsteps during the night you did not go back to sleep, because you did not know if it was your door they were coming to.

There were many instances of emotional suffering and fear.

1675-2089

Walter's family was all together during this time. Once the Jewish police came to their door and demanded money from Walter's aunt. When she refused they threatened to send her to a camp. Once they were robbed by Gentiles.

Walter was saved by a Gentile doctor and a Jewish man.

Walter's worse experience was when his mother went out one day and did not return. Someone reported seeing her loaded on to a truck. Hours later she reappeared. German soldiers had got the Jewish police to round up women for sex, and she was one of them. Then the policeman got to choose one woman, and he chose Walter's mother.

There were dead bodies everywhere. People were hungry, there was always shooting and soldiers around.

Walter's basic hardship began with the liquidation.

Walter's parents did not give him a Jewish education. They spoke Polish and French at home. He thinks his parents knew Yiddish. Walter did not know what kosher meant until he came to Canada.

2090-2829

During the war schools were closed. Walter's parents tried to send him to a public school under the German reorganization. He was the only Jew. He attended for three weeks and was beat black and blue everyday. On his last day he was beat so badly he could not walk home. His brother had to come and find him.

There were sporadic attempts at underground schools, and Walter attended these off and on.

Walter's main activity during this time was reading. There were private libraries all over the place. Walter even read a book about Winnipeg. He read a book a day.

When Walter arrived in Winnipeg he had a grade two education. He studied a bit at the orphanage and later in Sweden, but had a language problem there.

#### The Liquidation

Ghetto life was not pleasant but it was not uncomfortable. When the liquidation began, the rickshaws, which were a mode of transportation in the ghetto, were commandeered by the SS.

Walter lived near Warsaw's main post office which was half in and half out of the ghetto, with an entrance on both sides. He faced the main gate into the ghetto, and when the liquidation began saw the Jewish police and German soldiers corralling people on the streets and leading them out of the ghetto.

The story going round was that if you were worked there would be no problem, but if you didn't work you would be relocated.

Walter's parents were concerned for him. They contacted Dr. Wizkowski, a Polish family friend. He was a member of the Polish underground and had great contempt for the Nazis. It was amazing he was never arrested. He often came into the ghetto through the post office, where he would put on an arm band. He tried to convince Walter's parents that they wouldn't survive if they stayed where they were. But they felt that since they and Walter's brother were working they were not in imminent danger. They all worked in a ghetto factory that produced typewriters.

When the relocation began for non-workers the German civilians who ran the factory permitted the workers to bring non-working relatives to the factory, so Walter went with his parents. When the soldiers came to collect these people the factory people prevented them from entering on a few occasions. That was not safe enough, so Walter and a few others hid in an enclosed area around the factory during the day. But this too wasn't good enough.

### In Hiding

Walter's parents contacted Dr. Wizkowski and arranged for Walter to leave the ghetto. At the time Jews were still allowed to leave the ghetto to go to work, so Walter joined them on a horse-drawn cart. It was amazing that the soldiers didn't react to seeing a boy among all these men.

Today Walter can't understand why a number of situations worked out as they did, enabling him to survive.

Dr. Wizkowski took Walter to his apartment. This was the last time he saw his father and brother. He remembers them standing on the corner. He saw his mother once more after that.

2830-3408

Walter stayed with the doctor and his elderly sister for about five months.

Walter's father was from Russia and his mother was born in Poland. Her parents owned a drugstore. His father was a soap salesman. Walter's mother even visited Israel before the war. She used to go skiing.

In total Walter hid with Dr. Wizkowski's for two years. The doctor had been a radiologist before the war. He survived the war and moved to England where Walter visited him once after the war.

After staying in the doctor's apartment for a while, Walter hid on the Prague side of Warsaw (across the river) for a couple months. This arrangement didn't work out. He moved to another place for a couple months where his mother managed to visit him one day. At this point Walter's parents were ready to leave the ghetto but the arrangements couldn't be made. Walter moved again, and then returned to the doctor's home where he stayed until the Polish uprising in Warsaw in 1944.

Walter's parents and brother had been taken away before the uprising began. He thinks he heard from his mother once after they were deported.

Walter stayed in the doctor's apartment all the time. He read medical books for recreation. There was no radio and nothing else to do. The doctor's sister was not so happy that Walter was there. They lived on the top floor of a six floor building, and the plan was that if someone came Walter was to hide in the central bathroom opposite the entrance to the apartment.

One day the SS came to the door. Walter squeezed between the bathtub and the wall and draped a towel over the tub. The SS came into the bathroom, knocked on the walls and shined their flashlight, but never lifted the towel. It is incredible to believe.

Life continued. The doctor came and went, often not returning at night.

3409-4298

The Russian Army arrived in occupied Prague. In September 1944 the British approached Warsaw and stopped. The Polish underground started an uprising in Warsaw. The doctor was not home. During the shelling the

apartment residents went down to the basement, but Walter would not go because he was afraid of the reaction of the residents'. Whether they were anti-semitic or not, they could all be killed if he was discovered.

The doctor's apartment was shelled. Every apartment was equipped with barrels of water in case of an explosion. A fire started in the apartment. Walter put it out, and it became obvious he could not stay there any longer. When the doctor's sister came up from the basement she prepared a food hamper for Walter and he left.

### A New Hiding Place

When Walter talks about it now it seems like a dream. He manages to live a normal life but there are days when he just wants to scream. His experiences are difficult to deal with.

Walter walked through the building back door and down the road. German planes flew overhead shooting machine guns. People on the street went running but Walter couldn't run because of months of inactivity. Members of the underground noticed this and questioned him at length, then took him to their headquarters.

A Jewish man named Jablonski who lives in Toronto saved Walter's life. Walter visited him there recently. He met him hiding in a building. He was 10 years older than Walter and befriended him. Walter made trades with his food. The underground was losing the battle and it was obvious the Germans would reoccupy this part of the city.

There were German bombs and machine gun fire. Walter and some others hid in the building basement. They all had assigned places, but this day Walter sat in someone else's spot and refused to move. A bomb fell on the building, and everyone to Walter's left was killed. Walter was completely buried in rubble up to his head. His friend Jabonski and some others dug him out. His right leg was broken. They carried him to the caretaker's building and lay him on a bed there.

Unknown to Walter, Jablonski and three other Jewish men had dug out a hiding place under a bathroom in the building. Everyone said the Germans were coming. Walter begged them not to leave him, and Jabonski agreed to hide him. He opened the trap door and carried Walter over to it. He had to get down the ladder himself.

Walter crawled down and through the opening in the wall and into the hiding place. Jablonski followed him and guided him and helped him lie down. It was a very small area with room for three people to lie down and one to sit. When the other three men came down they were upset to see Walter. He was a liability. They put the bricks in place to hide the entrance. They had food and water for four people for three weeks. They ended up being there for five months, until February 17, 1945.

Walter went into a coma. There was not enough water. The others discussed how to kill him and how to dispose of his body. They were afraid he would

make noise while he was in the coma. Then they thought if they killed him and put his body outside it would be discovered and lead to them.

Walter came out of his coma. The food was only divided four ways, with Jablonski sharing his portion with Walter.

It was obvious the food would not last. They slept by day and were up at night. Near the end Jablonski went out at night to search the ruins for food and water. He found water and a sack of onions which was all they had to eat. They made a big production out of cutting up the onions. The caretaker knew they were there. The area was evacuated but he managed to get in. He would go into the washroom and describe aloud where food was. Those hiding could hear him and would know where to find the food.

One day a German patrol came down to the basement and knocked on the walls. Another time a dog sniffed at the manhole. Jablonski managed to kill the dog.

Walter's leg grew together at an angle. Over time the pain dissipated. He slept with Jablonski on a sliver of a bed full of lice.

It was not a friendly environment. Walter was not wanted by the other three.

### Liberation

4300-4756

On February 15 they heard a commotion. Jablonski told them not to move. Many of those in hiding came out too early and were shot. They stayed hiding until the caretaker called to them that the Russians were there. Walter stayed put until they carried him out the next day. Jablonski continued to look after him.

He found an apartment in a half destroyed building. During the day he scrounged for food. They stayed there a couple months until the agencies showed up, and he got some Russian soldiers to take Walter to an agency which then took him to an orphanage.

The likelihood of someone who was crippled surviving was great, because survival meant being able to run and hide. Walter's survival was against all odds. He was the only one in the orphanage with a handicap.

Walter was sent to a Russian military hospital for leg surgery, but it was unsuccessful. He returned to the orphanage. A reporter wrote a story about the orphanage for a New York Jewish newspaper and mentioned Walter by name. A friend of Walter's father read the story. He knew someone going to Poland and arranged for him to bring \$100.00 to Walter. Walter was carefully questioned about his identity before he was given the money.

### Sweden

Then Walter was selected by the Swedish Red Cross Mission to go to Sweden for treatment. The operation in Sweden was successful. Walter lived there for a while. He had friends from Poland there.

He lived just outside Stockholm where there were many Jewish Polish refugees. He walked with two canes, By the summer of 1947 he was riding a bicycle and the strength returned to his leg.

Walter is a construction engineer and doesn't think about his leg anymore.

His friend from New York tried to get him there, but the Polish quota was full. This man arranged for Walter's distant cousin in Winnipeg to bring him here. Once Walter knew he was coming to Canada he took English lessons.

### Winnipeg

4756-5264 Walter arrived at the Winnipeg CN station on December 10, 1947. Many relatives greeted him. Walter was nervous. They spoke to him in Yiddish and he asked them to speak English. He did not know Yiddish.

He stayed at a relative's home for a while and then found a board and room arrangement. His family supported him while he resumed his education. In 1948 he took grades 10 and 11 at St. John's High School and did reasonably well.

Walter worked evenings at various jobs. His family was very good to him. They wanted him to study pharmacy. Walter had always wanted to be an engineer, but he listened to his family. He apprenticed at a drugstore for a couple months and did not like it.

He applied for a job at the CNR station working on constructing the rail line out at Lynn Lake. He started off at the lowest possible position and worked his way up to bridge inspector. He experienced some anti-semitism.

Today Walter is acting director of Bridges and Structures for the Province, responsible for all bridges and structures in Manitoba. It is a responsible job.

He is in this line of work because of anti-semitism. The engineer at the resident camp in Lynn Lake was anti-semitic and did not like Walter. He sent him away. When Walter complained to the man in charge of the whole project, he was assigned to be the assistant of the engineer who looked after the construction of bridges.

Walter went back to school and graduated from engineering. It was a struggle, but he managed.

Walter was married before his graduation. He has three children. His daughter is chronically ill and suffers from schizophrenia. It is a very painful situation. One son is artistic, and one has done very well. Walter is divorced and remarried. He is very involved in his professional life. He has served as president of the Association of Professional Engineers in Manitoba and is involved with other organizations like Canadian Friends of Schizophrenics.

In some aspects of his life he has done well, in others not so well.