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Henny Gurko 2/8 Interview

[CR#1]

SWB: Okay, Henny, I want you to tell me about when you left one work camp and ended up in Dachau. Start with what time of year it was and how old you were. And then just start telling me what your life was like. What work you did, where you lived.

HENNY GURKO: I start at the ghetto, Vilna ghetto, was liquidated, they brought us to Kaiserwald. To Latvia. And it was a terrible camp. And we were there two days, and then they brought us to, uh, one of the camps, now I don't remember.

SWB: Okay. That's all right. Let's stop for a minute.

HENNY GURKO: That's what happens to me, I can't, I just....

[CUT]

[TAKE #2]

HENNY GURKO: And then they brought us to Denerwerke, Denerwerke or verke, whichever way you pronounce, and we

were there close to a year. The work was very hard, unbelievably hard work, there were, people outside, were w-, there were all nationalities, there were even Russians there, that worked, in all parts of Denerwerke. Um. They didn't give us food, enough of food, we were always hungry, always cold, and always overworked.

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SWB: How, so tell me when you ended up in Dachau. Was it in the fall of 1944.

HENNY GURKO: Yes, it was 1944. They brought us to, um, Destutoff, and then another selection was done to all the inmates, where everybody else was going, and where everybody else was sent to different camps. We were brought to Ponjeviersk, and we were there two months, [breathes], and then they brought us to Landsberg Lagaeinz, which was one of the complexes of Dachau. It was an unbelievably terrible terrible camp. The time of the year was the end of, um, fall, it, the camp was in the woods, it was freezing. I didn't even have a jacket, I was trembling with a cold, and

I ran into the barracks, and they started to call me and I was just trembling. I couldn't, uh, they asked me to sing, and I heard sounds of music. So, somebody handed me a jacket, and um, ordered me to sing. I went over, I was told to go over to the orchestra where about six musicians sitting in the middle of the camp. Nazis were sitting around on benches. The inmates were sitting behind the barbed wires, and waiting for the concert. They played William's Tell overture, and um, they asked me what I'll be able to sing, I saw the Germans so I didn't want to sing Yiddish songs, so I sang, I told them I'll sing Schubert's serenade in German. And, from then on, we were like a unit. We were singing and entertaining, going from one camp to the other, and Sunday when everybody rested, was resting, we had to walk miles and miles from one camp, to the other, to perform.

SWB: And, um, it was you and these same musicians who did this.

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HENNY GURKO: After the liberation, yes.

SWB: So tell me a little bit about what you did during the week when you weren't singing with them at this particular camp. Put your book down, and...

HENNY GURKO: [sounds of shuffling] We worked in moll. M-O-L-L. It was a terrible, terrible place. We called it Egypt, like we were the slaves in Egypt, the work was [sound of shuffling] very very physically hard, and the whole surroundings, I can't even describe it, it was so unbelievable, they, the, there was a gigantic manmade mountain, so high, and some people had to climb this mountain. We didn't know what it was, after the war we found out that it was some kind of a atomic research center that they tried to camouflage. And we did all the work, the ravven[?] had to walk up and down the highest mountain, carry stones and rocks and cement, very hard work for young girls. For everybody.

SWB: How long did you, what were your days like. And did you have friends there?

HENNY GURKO: My sister was with me. And of course, we all became friends because people were brought from all parts of the country. There were people from my, exactly from my hometown, because we were always, you know, sent to different places. But, um, we lived in those unbelievable bungalows, which were more, deeper in the ground than on the

top. It was damp, cold, we never had enough food, and no matter how little I had, I always shared, and the girls used to tell me you'll kill yourself. Because we used to get such a tiny, piece of bread for the day, and when somebody

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walked by and looked at me I gave a bite. I just couldn't take it, I had to give it away [cries]. Sorry.

SWB: That's all right. So, was it from that camp that you left to go on the trip...

HENNY GURKO: Yes, one night I came late at night from work, that day we came late I don't know what happened that they brought us late, [sniff] and we saw the whole camp was in an uproar, the whole Landsberg camp was on, like nobody was sleeping, usually they sleep at night. And we were told that the camp is being liquidated, and [cries] Sorry. Please cut it out.

SWB: Do you want to stop? Do you want to stop for a minute?

HENNY GURKO: I don't know why I'm crying over... So we had to take whatever belongings we had, and start walking on the highway. We walked endlessly. The whole night. And then we saw, when, it was when the sun started to come out, we saw a German pass us by. And he said, /kopf froch die frien kompt/, do you know what that means? [cries] Hold your head up high, freedom is coming. [cries] This is a civilian German. And then we walked, we kept on walking, and a German was standing behind the fence, and he screamed at the Nazis, /iff off luchten lastie kindagin/, we were so, we looked like little children, we were so starved and hungry, and you know, underfed, and were so skinny that we looked like children, and he said, you disgusting, let them go, what do you want, you animals, let these children go. And then they brought us. Do you want details about this march? We were walking endlessly and we heard shots. And

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uh, we understood we were on a death march, whoever couldn't go on, who ever couldn't was being shot, and while I was walking it was still night time, I fell asleep while walking

I was exhausted, and I was very tired and I walked over the road and somebody grabbed me fast, one of my people, you know we were walking in fives. And, um, she dragged me in, or they would have, they would have thought that I'm trying to run away, because I went over the road. And um, I walk up, and then they told us to lay down, to rest. The minute they told us to rest, right away I had to get up. It was so cruel. Like they didn't give us a chance at all for the body to rest. Then all of a sudden we saw from far away, barbed wires again. A camp. It was already, the sun came out already, and we could see clearly that it was a camp and we walked in there, it was a Ukrainian camp. And we the girls were very scared of them, because they were a very rough people. And we were trying to keep away from them as much as we could.

SWB: Okay Henny, now we just ran out and we're gonna stop.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Okay Henny, now we're gonna go back to when the girl pulled you back into the line, and tell me what happened from there.

HENNY GURKO: So we went into this Ukrainian camp. And um, th-. we heard the next morning, that the Americans are coming. And then all of a sudden we start hearing shots.

We never knew whether the shots is killing inmates or the

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American army, but we heard shots, and uh, the leaders of the camp, um, started to run because they knew if the Americans are coming, they'll be, uh, get punished, but they were busy with [??????] because the next morning we saw that the leader of the camp was hanging on a high pole, his body swaying in the wind. They hung him, because he was pro Nazi. He was very cruel to the people in the camp. And, from all this walking I was so weak, that I was laying on this kind of a cot, and all of a sudden I heard, and a lot, I was like passed out from being very tired. And then I heard unbelievable screams, and somebody said, American is coming, an American tank came into the camp. He walked in to our bungalow and he came over to me while I was laying on this cot, and he said, I said to him, why did you let us wait so long, and I passed out. And of course they left, and, then we took off from there. We started, we wanted to start a life after that. If possible. If it was possible at all to live after that. But, life is stronger than everything. We had to go on. And little by little, we got

on our feet. I was called by the orchestra of the six, of the few musicians, that they found more musicians that survived, they formed an orchestra, and we were appearing before the audience, before the, in front of the survivors for years.

SWB: Let's go back a little bit to when you were in the camp and the Americans came. Do you not remember much of that because you were in such bad shape.

HENNY GURKO: Completely weak. That's what I just said, that the American came, he gave everybody a piece of chocolate, and he left. And the whole tank left, because they were needed somewhere, but that meant that this area

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was taken over by the Americans.

SWB: Can you put your purse just down, because... Okay, so the tank came and left and nobody came in to help all of you get organized. So all of you were left there with no help, is that right.

HENNY GURKO: We tried to organize as much as we could, but we were so wiped out, we were so ti-, exhausted physically. And mentally, you know, from everything that we went through, that it took a while till we got on our feet.

SWB: Did you get taken to a hospital or anything?

HENNY GURKO: We were brought to St. Tatillion. This was a church that, where a lot of people were brought to be restored to health. They brought us there, the orchestra came there, the few people. And when we came in that day, the last Germans were leaving the camp. They um, to this hospital. After that, they brought us to Furstenfelbruk, which is about twenty miles from St. Tatillion. And after that, all the DP camp, camps, started to form in a Bavaria, in Germany.

SWB: So how long were you in St. Tatillion, and do you know what months you were there?

HENNY GURKO: I don't remember the months but we must have been there about two years. And uh, we were going from camp to camp, from one DP camp to another. Every function that the first uh, Zionist congress, everything, Ben Gurion came to Germany, we appeared on every every major, uh, political, not political, happening, as a matter of fact in 1948,

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Leonard Bernstein came to Germany and heard about the orchestra. By then we were already a bigger orchestra, cause they found more musicians. More of them survived than uh, it wasn't a big one, it was only eighteen people, and Leonard Bernstein conducted the orchestra, accompanied me on the piano. This was something to remember.

SWB: When you were back at St. Tatillion, was that sort of like a home base where you came, and you and the orchestra went out to the DP camps?

HENNY GURKO: Yes.

SWB: And did you know Rabbi Klausner, did you run across him when he was there?

HENNY GURKO: He was in St. Tatillion.

SWB: Yes.

HENNY GURKO: He must have been the Rabbi there then, I think so.

SWB: Tell me about the sort of day-to-day life you had with the orchestra work. Were you happy or was it just a way to pass the time while you waited to get out.

HENNY GURKO: After everything that we went through, it couldn't have been happy, but we did the best of it. We cannot change things. Things that happen, happen. We had to go on with life, and we made the best of it.

SWB: Did you live in any of the DP camps, even just for a

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short time. Can you tell me what the conditions were like?

HENNY GURKO: Um, it was not a comfortable life in the DP camps. But at least they were free and they could do what they want to do. Of course they had their rules and regulations but they are allowed to leave cause it's a camp. Um, but they had enough food and they did some work, everybody was assigned to a different kind of work, and everybody was waiting to get papers to emigrate.

SWB: What about looking for your family, other than your sister.

HENNY GURKO: My brother was killed in Kloga, which is Estonia, the most horrible camp ever. My brother, whose name, whose Hebrew name was /Shimshonzaev/ and was Vladimir known to the world. Vladimir Drimashkin was a great conductor, he was a conductor of the Philharmonic Orchestra in Vilna. At twenty-five years of age, he was a child prodigy, he was on stage since he was six years old. And he was brilliant. He finished at conservatory of music in Vilna, then he went to the Warsaw conservatory and he started to conduct, at first he was a fantastic pianist, but he turned to conducting because some of his fingers became like a little numb, so he turned to conducting. And uh, he was right away assigned to be the conductor of the Philharmonic, uh, was in a very very high level to Vilna, oh, Philharmonic, and um, when they brought, when the ghetto was liquidated, they were brought, the men were brought to Kloga, K-L-O-G-A, and it was a terrible camp. Some people survived. It just so happened that before the Russians were coming from the east and the Americans were pushing from the west, an hour before liberation, they burned them to death.

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They burned them.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: What was it, did you experience a feeling related to being free, finally, after all that time of being prisoner? Or could you not sort that out from your losses?

HENNY GURKO: I feel that um, with everything we went through, and uh, it was very hard to be happy, because we didn't have our families. And um, we went through so much that we couldn't even feel it, 100 percent, me especially. I don't know about the others. There was no outrageous happiness, but of course when we saw the first American, we were, we knew that we are free and uh, the feeling, it, it takes a while to appreciate. It, it, the shock in itself, of being fr-, from, from this camp on to freedom, it takes, it takes a while to realize that you are free. That we had to wake up in the morning e- e- every day and think, are we free, or are we still in camp, you know. Takes a while to adjust.

SWB: What about in those months after liberation, did you

witness people finding their families, did you witness any things that stand out in your mind of people finding parents or children or brothers or sisters who they hadn't expected to find and they'd looked and looked?

HENNY GURKO: Everybody was trying to find out whether somebody survived because we were so um, you know we were like away from our hometown, and people were from all over

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the country. There were very few, hardly any, from the same part, from the same country or city, so, uh, it took an awful long time to find out whether somebody survived or not.

SWB: How did people do it?

HENNY GURKO: We didn't have, you know, uh, there were, they tried there was like a DP camp newspaper that came out like once a month and um, they couldn't advertise it, you know. But some did, but it didn't go all over, it was just a local paper. It wasn't a huge paper, it was a little tiny paper.

But little by little, we used to hear, that guess what, this and that happened. Somebody came from the same hometown and they, tr-, tried to inquire whether somebody survived, most of the time they didn't. But, I think once or twice I did hear that they met somebody from the family. Members of the family.

SWB: Ben Gurion's visit, you remember that.

HENNY GURKO: Yes.

SWB: Where were you when you, were you at the same place where he was and which camp was it?

HENNY GURKO: It was not a camp, um they had it somewhere outside of a camp, and um, we had to travel by bus, naturally we were constantly traveling by bus, to get there. Um. Ben Gurion was a very powerful speaker. And uh after his speech, we performed. I sang Hebrew songs. The orchestra played a medley of Hebrew songs beside all the classical pieces that they usually played. And uh, I

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remember once um, please, cut it out, I remember from my childhood something I wanted to add in..... I am nervous.

SWB: Can you tell me about playing at the Nuremburg trials, or singing there?

HENNY GURKO: While the Nazis were on trial, we were asked to come and perform in Nuremburg. As a matter of fact, I have the program here if you're interested to see. Um, there was the media from all over the world, which sang in striped, appeared in striped jackets, like the ones we wore in the camps. And um, after they were trying the Nazis, the concert took place.

[CUT as plane passes]

SWB: Okay. Tell me again how you sang and played at the Nuremburg trials.

HENNY GURKO: When um, when they were tr-, of course they were trying the Nazis, and after this trial was o- over, they asked, asked us to perform in a big hall. There was the media from all over the world, the orchestra played, we all appeared in striped jackets with our numbers on the left side of the chest, and um, I sang ghetto songs. I was very fortunate that I remembered all these words from the ghetto where in my ghetto, these songs were written and they became popular throughout the camps. And this is when I started to

sing the songs in Yiddish. I don't know how many people understood in this huge hall in the opera house in Nuremburg, and uh, the concert was a great success.

SWB: What was the reaction of the people on trial, or could

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you see any reaction. Do you remember anything in particular?

HENNY GURKO: Just that uh, he tried to, you know, to, like, I don't remember exactly who was tried at the time that we were there. One of the ex-Nazis, and um, the trial was going on, like in any other court, but in a huge, huge way, because it was such a tremendous place. And he tried to defend himself, he couldn't.

SWB: Tell me again about the Germans who spoke to you on the death march and told you that liberation was near.

HENNY GURKO: These were people from the villages that we were passing. And I'm sure that they were anti-Nazi,

otherwise they wouldn't have told us, and by saying what they did, give us a lot of courage. Because we were like, in the unknown, we didn't know what was going on, and that gave us, you know, hope that maybe we will survive. We were ver-, we appreciated it very much.

SWB: Okay, we're just about to run out, I think we only have one minute left. I want you to sing one of your songs.

HENNY GURKO: In one minute?

SWB: No, not in one minute. Why don't we all be very quiet and record room tone of the jet.

HENNY GURKO: Which song?

SWB: Okay, we must be almost out now.

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[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#4]

[HENNY GURKO SINGS]

SWB: Tell me how you came to be called...

HENNY GURKO: Raisal. [plane noise in BG] Because they loved this song so much, and when I'm on the stage, I act like a little kid, and, they loved it, because there were no children left. We didn't have any children, they were all killed. And this brought them back [voice cracks up] the memories of childhood. [cries] Please I'm terrible I can't handle this.

[CUT]

[HENNY GURKO blows pitch pipe, sings]

SWB: Now talk to me for a minute. You talked to Diana about a little skit that you did in the DP camps that made fun of Hitler. Is that right? Did you do a satire?

HENNY GURKO: I don't think it was me.

DF: You may have forgotten, but you told me about how you made fun of Hitler, on the stage.

HENNY GURKO: I don't recall.

SWB: Okay, let's sing another song.

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HENNY GURKO: Ghetto, ein, svei, drei [blows pitch pipe,
sings]

[HENNY GURKO stops, starts over from beginning]

[HENNY GURKO stops again]

HENNY GURKO: I don't know what it is, you have to cut it.

SWB: Okay, let's cut for a minute.

[CUT]

[HENNY GURKO sings again]

SWB: Tell me about that song. What does that song say?

HENNY GURKO: The Ghetto song. We're standing near the
walls, and our hearts are like clammed up with he- head

bowed down, like a, by, like a weeping willow, like the branches of a weeping willow. And, e- eyes that stare afar, look in the, look all the way outside of the ghetto. With so much pain, it's like foreverness. Ghetto, I'll never forget you. /acho/ is lamentations, is the only song that we can sing in the ghetto. /acho/ is lamentations. I see your little streets in pain, and in, and in hunger. And I hear your cries. What will be, what the end, what will the end be? I have no room in this narrow little streets. Ghetto, I will never forget you. It's like a vow, I'll never forget you.

SWB: Tell me about the other songs.

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HENNY GURKO: /Esrolich/? This little kid was left alone, his parents were killed, his sisters and brothers, and he has to make a living, so he's selling saccharin and cigarettes in the street. He has nothing to wear, a mantle and a, everything that he wears is like, you know, whatever the jacket he's, is- is- torn up. The pants are made out of

rough material. He has no shoes but only galoshes. And whoever is trying to laugh, I'll show it to them, you know, don't you, in other words, don't you dare laugh at me.

SWB: Tell me again about Rosaline, little Rosie.

HENNY GURKO: Little Rosie. It's a little kiddie song that was sang in my ghetto and I brought it to the world. And I'm so glad that I did because it's such a cute song, it sings about little Rosie. She's a little girl, um, lit- she got a little, how do you say, an, uh, oh God, a little lamb with long ears, like a toy, a little- with long ears and short legs. And she is trying to imitate this little lamb and together they make like a whole play of it.

SWB: Why was that an especially important song?

HENNY GURKO: Because there were no little kids. And it brought to us, back, childhood. All the kids, all the little ones were killed, you know it, and this is why it was so important, this kiddie song. To memorize the little girls.

SWB: Tell me about the other song.

HENNY GURKO: Um, one two three. I have to look. ... One two three, where is this, I can't see without my glasses.

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Life called us a life of sunny days, and yet, everybody in the land was walking with a lot of courage, one two three, one two three, we were walking with happiness and courage to work. Um, every step had a sound and every sound, and every sound, and ever- and also a, a song wherever you went. And you knew where you're walking and why. And now, all of a sudden, they forbade us to walk in the sidew- on the sidewalk. We have to walk in the middle of the street. Ummm. Only everybody else is allow- allowed to walk but us. We walk on the stones were not, were paved in the rocks and it was very hard to walk, ah, in the streets, in the European streets and not like here, the cement, uh, over the street. Umm, and we were hit while we were going, one two three, one two three, uh, they only left us the street, the road. Every step has his sound, every, and, and different kind of sound, different sou- kind of song, when you go and you're forced, why, where and why. Four hundred generations, we leaved with hope, till a storm[?], with this kind of people came and, and, washed everything down off the earth. And, and led us like the sheep, like sheep, one two three, one two three, they led us like sheep. Where's your wife? Where's your child? Where's your whole family? They

were leading us where, why.

SWB: Can you tell me that one now without looking at the words, just summarize it in your own words without translating it.

HENNY GURKO: Life called us, and we were all walking happy and sure. Uh, to work, with a good, with a sure step, with a lot of rhythm and sound, because we knew where we're going. But now, they forbade us to walk in, on the sidewalk, we have to walk in the street, um, and the sound,

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every sound is completely different now, because you're forced and you're beat while you're walking. Four hundred generations, we built our lives, till a storm[?] of this kind came, and washed everything away. Where's your wife? Where's your child? Where is your family? They led us where? Why?

SWB: Okay. We're almost out of film.

END

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