

-TITLE-MICHAEL THALER  
-I DATE-SEPTEMBER 14, 1989  
-SOURCE-SAN FRANCISCO ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
-RESTRICTIONS-  
-SOUND\_QUALITY-  
-IMAGE\_QUALITY-  
-DURATION-1 HOUR 51 MINUTES  
-LANGUAGES-  
-KEY\_SEGMENT-  
-GEOGRAPHIC\_NAME-  
-PERSONAL\_NAME-  
-CORPORATE\_NAME-  
-KEY\_WORDS-  
-NOTES-  
-CONTENTS

1:56 Michael Thaler was born in 1934 in a little town in Eastern Poland, which is now part of Russia. In 1939, at the age of five, Michael experienced the first part of World War II. At that time, Poland was divided into two parts; a Russian part and a German part. Michael feels that they are very lucky that they ended up with the Russians rather than the Germans between the years 1939 and 1941. In Michael's town, there was a total population of about 15,000 in his town, of whom about ten or eleven thousand were Jews.

3:23 Michael's mother came from a smaller town nearby. She was one of three daughters of a very poor family. She spoke Polish and German. His mother was a product of the first World War, where she was a refugee in Vienna. Like his mother, Michael's father was also a refugee in Vienna as a child, where he learned to speak and read German. Michael's parents were the first generation in his family to be secularized. Michael's grandfather did not even speak Polish, which demonstrates how isolated the Jews of that Eastern part of Poland were. Due to this secularization, his parents learned another language besides Yiddish or Hebrew. Michael's parents spoke Polish with him.

5:02 When the Russians came Michael was only five years old, so he was still too young to go to school (In Russia they would begin school at seven years old). Michael learned Russian from the soldiers. Michael's Father was a "buchhalter" (PH), sort of an accountant. He worked in the only movie theater in town. Michael spent two years of that time going to see the same showing of the same movies everyday. Michael remembers that Hitler's first attack was in the summer of 1941. One day, Michael recalls, that he decided that he did not want to sit through anymore free movies. He also did not want his father to play chess with his boss, who was a communist party member. So, Michael pulled his father away from the chess game and dragged him home. They had only walked about two hundred yards out of the building when the first German bomb was dropped on the movie house, and subsequently killed two hundred school children. That was the beginning of World War II for Michael.

8:04 Michael Thaler's father came from a relatively well-to-do family. Michael's paternal grandfather owned a tannery. When Michael's father grew up he became a very strong Zionist activist. His secularization expressed itself in this nationalism.

10:37 Although Michael was not brought up in an orthodox way, they still observed all the holidays, and remained Kosher. Michael says that the thing about this part of Europe that is not clearly understood, is that the Jews were the majority. It was the only place in Europe, where they were the majority. Furthermore, that fact that the Jews were so self-contained and isolated, plus the fact that they were surrounded by overtly anti-semitic people, were two forces which tended to separate the two groups. This meant that in a town where sixty-five to eighty percent of the population was Jewish, you could be born, raised, work, marry, and die without speaking anything but Yiddish. It was from this kind of environment that the strong, national spirit of the Jews of Europe developed. During the same time, the Western Jews were developing in the opposite direction; they were assimilating very rapidly. When the war came, one group was exposed to the other and they did not mix well, because they were so different.

10:37 Michael grew up in a Polish home, however, they were not that assimilated because they were strongly nationalistic and proud Jews. During that period, they did have problems with the Poles because Michael's parents generation tried to get into colleges and move into businesses that were competing with the Polish population. Between 1935 and 1939 there was a tremendous growth in anti-Semitism. The Poles would beat up Jewish students in the universities. In addition, the Polish government passed laws forbidding Jews to have stores or to own businesses of a certain kind. Michael recalls having anti-Semitic experiences as a child. There were occasions when he met non-Jews and they would always tell that he was not Polish. To the Poles unless one had blond hair, blue eyes, and high cheekbones, you were a stranger. A stranger by definition, had to be a Jew, because at that time, Jews made up ten percent of the Polish population. There were three and a half million Jews in Poland. Even if you spoke Polish better than the Poles, and you behaved, dressed, and looked like them, they still knew that they you were Jewish. Occasionally, Michael would get into fights with other non-Jewish kids. They would beat him up and tell him to go to Palestine, which was the usual taunt of the Poles.

14:23 When the Germans came it was the beginning of a unique and traumatic period in everybody's life around Michael. Michael credits his father as being largely responsible for their survival. Michael believes that no survivor can say that anything he/she did or the people around them did, was directly responsible for their survival. According to Michael, the greatest part of survival was luck. Of the 11,000 Jews that lived in Michael's town in 1939, fewer than four hundred survived. Both Michael's mother and father survived with him, albeit separately. Michael estimates that no more than three or four core family groups had survived that entire community. Michael had a rather large extended family of about fifty people. His uncle was one of the richest Jews in town. He was also one of the few Jewish people in the area to own land, since the Jews were not allowed to own land. Of his whole family, only Michael, his mother, father, and one niece (the daughter of his mother's sister) survived the Holocaust.

16:50 Michael says his father was indirectly responsible for much of their survival. His father's premise was that they did not know what was in store for them, what was the truth or what was a lie, thus he went on the assumption that whatever the Nazis wanted, could not be ... for the Jews. Therefore, if he could resist it, he would. After the war, Michael found out that everything that was happening in his town was part of a systematic process, very carefully laid out ahead of time, that the Germans were using in the process of the Final Solution of the Jewish people. Furthermore, everything that happened in Michael's town, also happened in hundreds of other towns at almost the same time. This also included Western Europe.

18:38 Any town with more than ten thousand Jews had a ghetto. Each ghetto had a history of its own and was destroyed. The people were killed in different ways; some were sent to camps, but many were taken out and ordered to dig ditches, and then machine gunned to death, as was done in the Kiev ghetto. This, Michael adds, was the usual way for the Jews of Eastern Europe to die. The Germans did not bother putting them on trains and sending them to Auschwitz, because it was easier having a population friendly to the Germans, like the Poles, which didn't object, but welcomed the destruction of the Jews. All the towns had mass graves outside of them, of which the most famous is Babi Yar, outside of Kiev. Michael points out that this was not unique, but that there were hundreds of mass graves like this outside that region.

19:47 Michael talks about the "Shtetl". The "shtetl" that Michael was born into was quite different from the Shtetl that Michael's father was born into, which was very Yiddish in those days.

21:10 Michael says that when you talk about ghettos in the context of the Holocaust, you are really talking about something very different. The ghetto, as established by the Nazis, was basically a "penal colony" like a prison surrounded by walls and in every sense comparable to a concentration camp. Michael says that perhaps in some ways, the ghettos were worse than the concentration camps, because in the camps you were subject to the same shootings, diseases, and killings, but if you managed to survive by luck, then you knew that there was a roof over your head, and that you had a little bit of food, whereas the ghettos had the same problems, except that nobody was supplying you even with that little bit of food. In the Warsaw ghetto, the population was dying from typhus and starvation at a rate of fifteen Percent per year. By 1941, more than thirty percent of the population had already died of starvation and disease.

22:45 Michael's father decided not to comply with the German orders if possible. The Germans were pursuing a policy about which the Jews did not know. After a month of occupation, people were starting to panic because they did not have food and the older people were dying off. The Germans said to the Jews that since neither the Poles nor the Ukrainians would help them, they (the Germans) would help them. The Germans said that they needed the Jews and their skills for the war effort. The Germans said they were going to register all males between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five, and that they would provide them useful work, in addition to being paid. Instead of registering himself, Michael's father admitted himself to the local hospital because he felt that the Germans were not telling the truth. On the day of registration, the Germans made two groups. The group to the left was made up of white-collar workers. All the white-collar workers were taken away in trucks and killed. The women were not asked to register. The reason for this was to decapitate the community's leadership. It also demoralized the whole community. They left an excess of women over men. Also left, were laborers and craftsmen people who were taken to labor camps. Had Michael's father not admitted himself to the hospital, he would not have survived.

25:37 Eventually, they set up a ghetto which said that every Jew over the age of eight had to wear a white armband with the blue star of David. In Michael's region, nobody wore the yellow star of David, but a white armband.

26:50 The Jews in Michael's town had to live in the oldest part of the city. These towns had been bombed by the "Luftwaffe" in 1941. If one knew about what happened in these towns, Michael says they would swear that the German pilots had maps in which the Jewish districts were drawn. The Germans were not dropping their bombs for any military purposes, but dropping bombs on the Jews because they knew that the majority of the population in those towns was Jewish. Later on, Michael found out that this was, in fact, the case. Thus, when the Germans came, they declared those bombed out areas, the ghettos. The Jews could live in those areas and nowhere else. Michael's father decided to keep Michael out of the ghetto.

28:32 Michael was left with a childless, old, Polish couple, whom they had befriended during the period of 1941, when many people moved out of town during the war with the Russians. Michael's family had moved to the periphery of town, during this time. Michael stayed with the extremely pious couple. So, Michael became a "good" Catholic. Since Michael could not leave the house, he taught himself how to read and write with the books that the old Polish couple had. Michael would read the catechism, and the lives of the saints and all the prayers. The walls of the house were covered with pictures of the saints. The Catholic church in Poland is very ritualistic. Michael could not understand why the paintings of the saints showed so much torture, killing, and martyrdom. He thought that that only happened to Jews. In Michael's mind, he felt that by becoming a Catholic, perhaps he would be spared. He had not figured it all out, but he knew that bad things were happening to Jews and nothing bad was happening to the Catholics, so he was safer and more comfortable becoming a catholic. He still could not understand why Catholics could be tortured and killed, until one day he found a footnote in a Polish book on the lives of the apostles which said that they were all Jews. Michael then spent most of his time praying for his parents, since Michael knew that they would die. He wanted his parents to go to heaven and not to hell, so that Michael, and a Catholic, would meet them there.

33:06 Michael recalls that when the Wehrmacht, the German soldiers moved in after fighting with the red army, Michael's father went ahead to see what had happened. The next morning, Michael's mother took him into town. Michael remembers seeing dead soldiers and horses on the road. There was a German soldier at every intersection. Michael and his mother could not find his father. The Ukrainian peasantry had been led into town to open up the prisons. They released everyone and then went into town and rounded up as many Jews as they could and incarcerated them for no reason. They killed about two hundred, the first day. They caught other Jews to bury the two hundred. The Ukrainians would make the Jews dig the graves with their bare hands, then they forced them to knock in the nails with their bare hands. The remainder of the people were buried alive. Michael thought that his father was caught in that group of people.

32:42      Upon returning to their house, Michael and his mother saw that it had been broken into and was surrounded by Ukrainians. His mother started screaming when she saw them doing this. A German officer showed up, and Michael's mother started asking him what was happening in German. The officer blew his whistle, then took out his gun and told all the peasants to leave. To thank the officer, Michael's mother gave him some leather from the grandfather's tannery. One of the Ukrainian peasants had taken a suit of Michael's father, where he found his work permit and his picture. He showed it to another German officer, who asked, "Where is this Communist?" Had Michael's father shown up at that moment, they all would have been caught.

37:29      Eventually things settled, and the ghetto was established. Michael's outside the ghetto. The Germans were aware that many Jews were hiding outside the ghetto. They made systematic searches and put a price on the head of every Jew who was outside the ghetto. They also made a spectacle of those who were caught. Both the non-Jewish and the Jewish family were hanged in the town square to make the example. Michael's father decided that it was getting dangerous to leave Michael in the ghetto. In the winter of 1942, he took Michael and brought him back to the ghetto. Michael was reunited with his parents and his grandfather. This was also known as the Stalingrad Winter.. It was the winter in which the Germans suffered their first defeat, and Michael and his family thought that there was a possibility that perhaps the Germans could be stopped. Michael talks about all the news they would receive over the radio and read in the news papers.

39:48      Michael stops the interview for a moment to make a phone call.

40:09      In the ghetto, people were starting to panic. The only contact with the outside Polish population was through the sewers. The stories about the kids running through the sewers and exchanging diamonds for bread were true. Michael, got very involved in that type of activity. He learned all the ways in and out of the ghetto. At this time, the Germans started doing an "aktion", which was basically like a round-up. The German Gestapo from the larger towns of Lemberg or Zborow which were about twenty klm. from Michael's, town, would come and surround the ghetto. They searched from house to house, until they caught about a thousand or two thousand people. In the early days, they would put them on trains to Belzéc and Sobibor and other extermination camps. Michael recalls that the kids were told to learn how to jump out of second story windows, so they would practice jumping out of balconies. Michael also remembers carrying a blade in his socks, so that he could cut the wire mesh of the windows in the cattle wagons carrying people to the camps. Some had escaped through the wire mesh in the windows. They survived the machine gunning and made it back to the ghetto to tell the others what was actually happening.

The Germans were saying that they were going to work camps. Michael says the Eastern European Jews knew what was happening, whereas the Western European Jews did not. Since the Polish Jews knew, the Germans had a lot of trouble with them.

42:53        Everyone in the ghettos was trying to build bunkers, which were secret hiding places. Each apartment complex had a bunker. This was the most closely guarded secret.

43:26        STOPS TO ANSWER A PHONE CALL

43:55        Michael recalls that some bunkers had false walls and moving chimneys. This was during the winter of 1942-43. Michael remembers people trying to smoke and not being able to because it was so crowded. According to Michael, it was not uncommon to see mothers suffocating their crying babies. They could stay in the bunkers for many hours.

45:28        Michael says that nothing was really safe because of the Judenrat and the Jewish police. In exchange for food and water, many young Jewish men were encouraged to put on a uniform. They formed the police, through which the Judenrat worked. These men were forced to help the Germans round up the Jews. Michael knows of some men who put their own parents on the trains, because they thought that they would ultimately be better off.

46:32        The food situation in the ghetto was terrible. The only source of food was what they could smuggle into the ghetto. The German and Ukrainian police would shoot any Jews they saw outside the ghetto. They would either shoot them on the spot, or take them to jail. The jail had a capacity of two hundred people. When it would fill up, the prisoners were taken to the Old Jewish cemetery, where they would be shot. This occurred almost weekly and was the gradual retrusion of the ghetto.

48:20        About three months after Michael came back to the ghetto, the German police knocked on their door in the middle of the night and told them to get dressed. They were taken to the German headquarters of the Jewish police. The Judenrat had been unable to comply with a Gestapo order, so all the families of the Judenrat were held as hostages in the police station. Michael's rich uncle was in the Judenrat.

49:31        Once again, Michael's father tried to get him out. A close friend of Michael's father had one of the rare work passes which allowed him to leave the ghetto, because he worked for the Wehrmacht. This man took Michael out of the ghetto and put him in the basement of the old courthouse, where he worked. Michael lost track of time and became frantic in the dark basement. He saw some light coming from a small window. He crawled to the top of the window and looked out. The jail was directly across the street.

Women and men were being led out of the jail, because it was filled to capacity with people from the police station. The men were sent to labor camps while the elderly and the women were being sent somewhere else. Michael thought his parents were in that group. He kept looking for his mother, who was wearing a red handkerchief, but he did not see her. After work, the man finally came to get Michael. When they reached the border of the ghetto, he told Michael to go. Michael ran to his house and found his mother upstairs.

54:50 Michael's father had been sent to Kamionka, a forced labor camp about 50 klm. east, on the old Polish-Russian border. His mother and grandfather were released from the police station and stayed in the ghetto.

56:29 Michael's father made contact with an Ukrainian truck driver, who would haul rocks from the quarry in which Michael's father was working. Michael's father paid the man to bring a note to Michael's town, BJane (PH). The truck driver delivered this note to Michael's mother. The note said, "This will be my last winter because I do not have shoes." Shoes were the difference between life and death. Michael's father asked them to send him shoes, so that he could escape. In the forced labor camps, there was a lot of killing, but it was not as bad as the concentration camps.

58:08 Michael's mother sent him out of the ghetto at night, to the old Polish couple with whom Michael had stayed. Michael's father had given them all his possessions. The same truck driver took the shoes and delivered them to Michael's father. This was the summer of 1943.

59:00 News started to filter into Michael's town that all the Jewish communities were being terminated. This was the tail-end of the Final Solution. Michael's mother heard that the nearby town of Zborow had been terminated. This was the town in which her family lived. She heard they had been killed. Michael's mother decided to escape and go back to the old Polish couple.

1:00:29 Michael and his mother tried to escape three times. The first time, there was a group of Polish or Ukrainian teenagers who saw Michael, as he was coming out of the vent. They jumped him and tried to steal his stamp collection. It was dangerous because Michael was out of the ghetto and exposed. All of a sudden, Michael's mother appeared and chase the boys away. The second night they tried, it was still not safe. Finally, the third night, they made it out of the ghetto to the house of the old Polish couple.

1:02:08 The woman was afraid to take them in. Finally, she told them to go to the hayloft in the barn and stay there. They wanted to keep Michael but they did not want to abandon his mother. Every morning the woman would leave a pale with some milk and some bread.



This is how they survived for four days. On the fifth day, they heard screams and shots coming from the cemetery. All the remaining Jews of Bjane (PH) were shot to death within 500 yards of Michael and his mother.

1:03:55 Michael recalls looking through the cracks of the barn. he tried to count the shots. On the other side of the barn, he saw the Polish and Ukrainian families watching from their rooftops. The hill leading up to the cemetery was getting covered with bodies. Some of the younger people would jump over the wall and try to run down the hill, but they were all shot down, because the Germans had mounted machine guns on the top of the hill. Michael was praying that none of the Jews would make it down the hill because if they did, they might escape. Michael was worried that he Germans would come look for them and would find Michael and his family. He said that if the Jews going to be shot, they might as well be killed up on the hill rather than near him. Everyone on that hill was killed except for one sixteen year-old boy, who escaped with shots in both legs.

1:06:10 Michael and his mother witnessed the destruction of the community. Within twenty four hours, Michael's father knew about what had happened through some of the younger men form the town who had been sent to the labor camps. Michael's father escaped from the labor camp. He went somewhere where he could watch for the truck driver, when he was on his way back to Bjane (PH). Michael's father got on the back of his truck and back to Bjane (PH) with the truck driver. The truck driver told Michael's father to stay under the bed because something was going on in town. The truck driver stayed out for twelve hours and got drunk. He forgot about Michael's father under the bed. Finally, he told Michael's father that he had to leave. Michael's father asked if he saw anyone in town, but the truck driver said that he heard that they had killed everybody.

1:09:29 Michael's father walked through the town asking about his family. People told him they had seen Michael's older sister and father walking to the cemetery to be shot. No one had seen Michael or his mother. Michael's father had the idea that they were with the Polish couple. During the night, he went to their house and into the barn, where he fell asleep. Michael and his mother heard someone below and thought that it was either another Jew hiding or a suspicious neighbor trying to catch them. The next morning they saw it was his father and they were reunited.

1:11:24 About three weeks later, they heard shouts and shots. The Germans were looking for Jews from house to house. the Polish woman told Michael and his family, that they had to leave. They his in a garden at the foot of the hill below the cemetery. They went up the hill and into the cemetery. At the cemetery, Michael fell into the mass grave because the grave was so big. His parents pulled him out. They walked through the cemetery and into the fields and then through the fields to the forest, where they stayed. It was the end of July 1943.

1:13:05 They found babies crying in the forest because the surrounding area was beginning to accumulate the few Jews that had survived. The shepherd boys would look for the Jews and then tell the Germans in exchange for money. Michael and his family knew where the farmers were located around the edge of the forest because of their grandfather's tannery. At night they would knock on their doors and buy food. The farmers knew that there were Jews hiding in the forest. This is how they survived for some time. As it got colder and rained, it was more difficult to stay in the forest.

1:14:55 Michael recalls his father going to one of the farmers whom he knew better and trusted a little more and asked him to take them in. The farmer agreed and put them in another barn. Some weeks later, the Germans came to this farmhouse and asked if there were any Jews hiding there. Michael could see through the cracks. An officer in a green uniform was pacing back and forth in the barn. They searched the house systematically. Michael said he and his family really thought that they were going to be caught. Michael says it is the closest they came to death. Suddenly, there was a lot of shouting and laughter, and then they were gone. The Germans had taken a newborn calf. They decided to take the calf and forget about the Jews for that day.

1:17:20 Michael's family left in the middle of the night and returned to the old barn. The next day they went to the old Polish woman. When she saw them she started to cry and pray. Michael and his family thought that she was going to send them away again. They were totally prepared to die because they had no other alternative and no money. Instead, she was thanking God for saving Michael and his family. From the time that the woman told them to go, she had not slept at all. She had nightmares that she was going to Hell for allowing their bodies to be destroyed. She figured they were dead. She told them not to leave again because it was the will of God and she would take care of them. For the next twelve months, Michael and his parents remained in the hayloft.

1:19:24 Around July 1944, they started to hear canons and then the planes started coming. The only time that Michael and his parents felt the safest and the freest, was when the planes were bombing the town, because everyone else was hiding. According to Michael, the chances that he and his family could get killed by a bomb were small.

1:20:11 The Germans were pushed back and the Russians came. Michael says his father was wise because he did not allow them to go and see what had happened, so he made them wait. They waited for two weeks. It was not until the front was 50 klm. west of them, that they went out into the town.

1:21:23 Michael finally got to go to school. He was much more advanced than the other kids.

1:22:23 Michael's rich uncle had a mansion, which the Gestapo had been using as its headquarters. After the war, the remaining Jews of Michael's town asked the Russian command to allow them to take over the building and let the surviving Jews live there. At one time, about half the surviving Jews were living there. Michael talks about his father's involvement with the communist party and his family's experience with them before the war.

1:26:37 While the war was still going on, something happened which Churchill called the "iron curtain". The Russians closed the borders.

1:27:38 Michael and his family took a train to Silesia, a part of East Germany that was annexed. They went to a town called Bytom. Once again, Michael started school. He was one of two kids who could speak Polish. Eight million Germans were moved to East Germany. They left the Germans with Slavic last names, because they had once been Poles. The other kids had to learn Polish.

1:29:37 At that time, Michael would not tell anyone that he was Jewish. One day, the teacher pulled him aside, and asked him his faith, to which Michael replied Catholic. Then the teacher asked if he was not "Mosaic", which was another way of saying the religion of Moses. Michael assured him that he was not Jewish. Michael told his parents about what the teacher did.

1:30:49 Michael's father contracted the Bricha, a secret organization set up to salvage the remaining Jews and move them out of the Russian zone and into the British or American zones, from where they would eventually be taken to Palestine. Michael and his family were smuggled out of the town in which they were staying. They were told to behave as if they were Greeks coming from labor camps, since they did not look like the surrounding population. They were also told to only speak Hebrew, because that would sound like Greek to anyone else. The trains were never stopped at the borders. Entire border crossings had been bribed to allow the trains to go through. Russian soldiers were also bribed to put people into boats and take them across the Danube, from Hungary into Austria. In the fall of 1945, Michael and his family ended up in a DP camp in Linz. Linz was the city in which Hitler had gone to school.

1:32:45 There were about six thousand Holocaust survivors in Linz. They were housed in the nice apartments of the engineers and workers of the Hamming-Goering (PH) tank factories. Once again, the Jews were totally self-governing, in a little ghetto surrounded by the Austrians.

1:34:21 They set up a school which Michael attended. They taught in Yiddish because it was the common language of Eastern European. Michael says at one point, he tried to run away.

1:36:30 On the first anniversary of liberation Michael and his family went to the nearest concentration camp, Mauthausen.

They commemorated the anniversary with a stone over the last mass grave. Michael was chosen to say the Hebrew prayer and cut the ribbon. The Austrian Jews asked the Eastern European Jews to help them set up a Jewish cultural center in Linz, so that their children and grandchildren had the opportunity to learn about Judaism.

1:38:58 When Michael graduated from his school, his parents decided that he should get a tutor during the summer so that he would learn some subjects that would allow Michael to enter a regular high school. Michael's tutor was a man who was not a regular teacher. Michael went to a chemistry lab during the summer. The man taught Michael geometry, French, and German. Michael would always get report cards saying UNSATISFACTORY, because he was failing German composition. One day, the man handed him a composition and it said SATISFACTORY. The tutor took Michael into a basement and showed him some old student records. One record was from the early 1900's. It was the record of Adolf Hitler, who had gotten an unsatisfactory grade in German literature. The tutor had been a member of the Nazi party, so he could not be on the regular teaching staff. Michael's father asked why they did not simply get rid of him. The man said that if they tried to get rid of everybody connected to the Nazis in Austria, they would empty the entire country.

1:43:35 The interviewer asks Michael if the Polish woman with whom Michael hid during the war, was anti-Semitic. He responds that you cannot divorce the religion of those with anti-Semitism. They saw the Jews as Christ-killers and therefore according to the Polish people, they lost their right to salvation. Michael says the woman felt that she would be saving Michael's soul, as well as his life by converting him to Catholicism, at the risk of her own life. Even though she had the anti-Semitic teachings in her, she had enough humanity in her to see Michael and his family as human beings. Michael believes that she was a true altruistic gentile in that context and was different from her other Polish neighbors.

1:46:55 The woman and her husband moved west. Michael corresponded with them for a while and then lost touch.

1:48:43 One of the children of Michael's mother's sister survived the ghetto in Sobibor. She was twelve years old and had wandered into the field. She lived with peasants who did not know who she was. She was found by a Jewish man who brought her back to Bjané (PH) to live with his family.

1:49:37 Michael's family went to Toronto, Canada to join his mother's sister who had emigrated to Canada in 1929.  
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