

San Francisco

Review of USHMM Tape: Julius Drabkin

March 17, 1992

IITI~: Julius ~rsbkin

TE: January 27, 1990

30URCE: SFHOHP

RE~aNS:

9CUND QUALITY: Excellent

IMAGE QUALITY: Excellent

DURATI(~: 1 hour 30 minutes

LANGU~GES: English (some German, he translates)

KEY SEQ~:

~C ~:

P~ NME:

CoRPoR~TE NAME:

KEY W~6:

NOTES:

CONTENqS: Describes life in Riga, Latvia during war. Drabkin skips around

in his stories and can be confusing, but is clear on certain fascinating stories. The most captivating passages occur when Julius discusses the crackdown of the Soviets (0:20:40), the ilr~nolation of 400-500 people by the

Germans (0 : 27 : 55), the murder of the Jewish ghetto police (0 : 52 : 55), and

the liberation of Riga by the Russians (1:00:00).

1 91 8-1 945

0:00:00 Born in "(ph) Mellitopol" in 1918, Julius' first memories are of 1921. In that year, he, his parents and two older sisters returned to their home in Riga. He has an especial memory, probably enhanced by his parents, of "(ph) Drzinski", the

Italian

kommisar (1918-1927). It was Drzinski who granted the family the necessary permits to re-enter Latvia. Drabkin re!members Drzinski as rude and as having "eyes with the power to kill." The family went first to (ph) Tbkhomsh, where his grandparents lived.

0:05:00 He liked sports very much, table tennis and football]. especially.

One of the best table tennis players in the country, he was able to travel to neighboring countries.

0:07:00 Both his parents were dentists. The family lived fairly well.

0:07:15 Julius discusses the Numerus Clausus policy as it denied him the opportunity to study to be a dentist.

0:09:30 Julius describes the seizure of power by Karlis Ull~nis.

0:13:30 Julius believed that Jews in Germany were relating l~ell with the

government until refugees started to pour in from A~stria and Germany in the late 1930s. Latvian Jews started to flee to

Sweden

and the USA but the process was extremely difficult. One needed many permits and guarantees. Both his sisters went to Belgium to study. Gne married a Russian and returned to Latvia in 1939 when her husband deserted her and her son. Her son was involved in zn anti-Nazi group end wae denounced. ~nth were erreected:

she was caught tyoing sniti-Nazi oocuments for her SO~ hey were shot in Latvia. The other sister escaped to Uruguay with her Polish husband.

0:15:00 Julius marriecl at 21 years of age. He joined the Latvian army, a life he describes as "not easy".

0:16:00 Julius shows a picture of himself in uniform.

0:18:00 He was drafted on May 10, 1939. The Soviets occupield the Baltics

in 1940 and Latvia became a Soviet republic. Juliu~l describes haw the Soviets held an election, the results of which shc)wed the overwhelming enthusiasm of the Latvian populaticm for Soviet rule. This enthusiasm was a result of the way the cluestion was

framed on the ballot. He also describes papers that: he had to sign. If he did not sign, he knew something bad would happen to him.

0:20:40 oIn June 13-14, 1941, the Soviet NKVD arrested Latvians with
big businesses or large tracts of land, as well as rich Jews. These people were sent to Siberia. Julius states that this action by the NKVD made the rest of the Latvian population angry, so that the people were overjoyed when the Germans invaded. Julius

relates the hardships associated with that time in his life.

0:22:15 Tuesday, July 1, 1941. Julius clearly describes the invasion of the Germans. Latvians believed they had received liberty.

0:23:10 Latvian nationalists turned against the Jews. Jews were blamed for food shortages and other problems. Jews were denounced as the Germans promised Latvians the return of their houses, flag, anthem, etc. Nationalists were determined to rid their country of Jewish "inferior elements".

0:25:00 July 2, 1941. 10,000 Jews, including friends of Julius' who were doctors, were seized by the Germans. Some were killed in their backyards, while others were jailed.

0:25:45 July 4, 1941. Julius found work as a janitor, cleaning up old Latvian army barracks. He describes himself as lucky; had he been seized before July 4, he believes he would have been killed.

0:27:55 Julius describes the two routes home from work. Those who took the route through the town were herded into the town's synagogue.

He estimates that 400-500 people were immolated by fire that day.

The murder was committed by German SS and Latvian nationalists. He walked home on the route outside the town.

0:29:50 Julius relates a story about Latvian police officers who were summoned to a meeting with the Germans on the 13-14 of July. They were told to come unarmed. These officers, numbering a

couple of hundred, were killed. Two survived; one of these survivors

relates this story to Julius.

0:32:05 Julius describes life in Riga in 1941. Jews could not go to the

store or walk on sidewalks. He obtained a permit to remain in Riga with his family.

0:33:00 Finding a job as a dentist's assistant, Julius was able to perform
"small sabotage": he slowed down treatment of German soldiers to delay their return to the front. It was dangerous, he admits.

0:33:55 On September 25, 1941, all Jews were forced to live in a ghetto.
His wife, who worked in a BMW auto shop, was still with him, but his grandfather had been killed.

0:35:00 Pictures of his grandfather and also of his parents and sister.

0:35:55 Julius describes living conditions in the ghetto.

0:38:00 The ghetto commandant "(ph) Klauser" is described as a small man
with eyes like glass.

0:38:25 One day the men were returning from a day of work, marching in
columns and singing. A comrade, Piganis, was 5-10 yards away from Julius. Klauser killed him simply because he did not like the Jew.

0:39:30 Julius recalls a selection which occurred on November 30, 1941.
Everyone was nervous as men who were able to work were allowed to stay and took whatever apartment they could find. The rest, the old, the very young and the women, were relocated to another
ghetto. Barbed wire was put up to separate the two ghettos.

0:41:40 At 4 AM, the commandant woke the ghetto that Julius was not in
and forced the inhabitants into the street. 40 or 50 were shot immediately, while 400-500 others were killed later. The workers
were not disturbed. It was very cold.

0:44:00 The arbitrariness of who lived or died is described here by Julius.
He relates the story of two drunk, young German soldiers who would
kill a man if they did not like the way he looked.

0:44:40 On the 7th of December, 1941, 32,000 people were forced to undress
and were shot into open graves near "(ph) Rumbula", a town which
is located 10 miles from Riga.

0:45:40 The story of Ella Goodman, a survivor of this massacre, is related.

0:46:50 On the 8th of December, the first transports from Germany arrived in Latvia.

0:48:15 The selection of the German Jews is described. Those who were sent to the left were herded into the woods and shot. Julius estimates that more than 100,000 were killed. Those sent to the right were herded into the ghetto and forced to occupy the same dirty, cold apartments that the Latvian Jews lived in. The Latvian Jews tried to help by stealing extra food for the newcomers.

0:50:20 Julius' wife was killed on December 8, 1941. The Germans often planted false letters to quiet the men, but they knew the truth.

0:51:20 The Jewish police inside the ghetto were "good boys". They warned the Jews when the Germans were planning inspections or other things. Meanwhile, outside the ghetto, a resistance movement was being formed. Members were stealing weapons from the Germans.

0:52:55 All the Latvian Jewish police were executed at 12 noon on Saturday, the 31st of October 1942 because they helped smuggle weapons into the camp, helped Jews escape into the woods and helped Jews join the "partisans". They were forced to march from the four corners of the ghetto and were shot with machine guns. Only two escaped. Many of the police were Julius' age.

0:54:25 If one weapon were found in an apartment, all inhabitants of the place were killed.

0:56:20 The ghetto was soon liquidated. The inhabitants were sent to a concentration camp called "(ph) Kaiserwald". They lived in blocs, men and women separated. The food was awful. His job consisted of loading ships with food for the German troops. Julius was proud of his ability to steal such prizes as chocolate and marmalade.

0:57:35 He remembers the arrival of a transport in 1944 from Hungary. It was full of 1,500 women with shaved heads. He describes the selection in a camp called "(ph) Staufenberg".

1:00:00 On the 13th of October, 1944, Riga was liberated by the Russians.
Julius recalls hearing Goebbels speech and relates the speech in German. He translates into English: "Today our Jews are laughing. Tomorrow no one will be laughing." Within three days,
the German flag came down.

1:00:50 Julius was sent to "(ph) Studthoff" n~r Danzig. He still remembers the numbers which denoted his existence in the camps.
He describes the life at this camp.

1:02:00 The Kapos at this camp were "criminals". He was sent to cut trees.
He continues his description of living conditions at this camp.

1:04:30 Julius assesses the reasons for his survival. He attributes his
life to optimism and sports.

1:05:10 Julius briefly describes some of what he saw at the camp: gas ovens, 300-400 people at a time entering the gas cha~bers,
women

who oid not resist because they knew they were oeing to oie.

1:06:40 Julius relates his bout with typhus.

1:08:00 On the 10th of March 1945, the prisoners were presentled with a
feast upon their liberation. Julius warned his ccm~ades not to eat much because he knew the effects on such emac~iated people.
Sure enough, those who gorged themselves died of dysentery. Optimism, intelligence and luck helped him survive.

After liberation

1:08:55 Everyone close to him was dead. He spent two month~ mourning and survived by eating food out of empty houses. He knew German
but had no documents.

1:10:00 He was brought to Brest-Litovsk by the Russians on June 5-6, 1945.
The Russians did not trust the survivors: if these people had survived, they must be "provocateurs".

00 Julius was lucky again. He obtained a bottle of wine with which he was able to bribe the Russian commander. He exchanged the bottle for a permit to return to Latvia, where he found work as a technician.

1:12:00 Friends took him in. Life was not easy, but compared to a concentration camp, it was just fine. Life gradually got better.

1:12:50 Julius shows a picture of his second wife, also a Latvian Jew, and his present family. He says he is happy.

1:16:40 In 1977, Julius suffered a heart attack. In 1978, he made the decision to emigrate to the US.

1:17:00 It was difficult to be Jewish in Soviet society. He felt like a second-class citizen. Thanks to his involvement in sports, he had plenty of friends, but his sons could not find jobs. Religious services had to be held in private homes.

1:18:35 Julius describes his impressions of Soviet leaders.

1:19:40 He has great respect for Mikhail Gorbachev. He approves of the changes occurring in Eastern Europe.

1:20:50 Julius expresses his fear of bloodshed in Russia due to anti-semitism. Before, anti-semitism was imposed from the top. Now, it is swelling up from the bottom.

1:23:30 His family life is successful and happy. He is a member of a group called "Survivors From Riga" and hopes God will Bless America.