

INTERVIEW WITH: NATHAN ANGER

INTERVIEWER: SHELLY GORDON

Hello, my name is Shelly Gordon.

If you don't mind I would like to ask you a few general and a few very specific questions about your experiences during the holocaust.

Q. What is your name?

A. Nathan Ancer.

Q. And, where were you born?

A. Poland.

Q. What city?

A. (Con-yen).

Q. Okay, what could you tell me generally, trace your experiences during the war. When you felt, for example, the laws beginning to change, where were you located, and what took place in your life?

A. Living in Poland, since my birth, I felt an Anti-Semitism all my life. We were a second grade citizens. We couldn't attend government schools, and in the universities we were setting in a special designed places and harrassed by the faculty as well as by the students.

Q. These were in the "public schools"? Or were they separate schools?

A. I never went to any Polish public or private school. We in our community we had to build our own schools, the Jewish er community financed that. We had public school, grade school and a what you call gimmasjum which is a high school. After that whoever could afford, left the country to study in France, Italy, or...

Q. About how old were you and what year are you talking about?

A. That was before the war. I was in the Polish army and I was treated as a Jew is also second grade and I could not advance and was treated horribly. I went into the reserves and before the war started I was called in for service. On Friday, first of September. I was in a city called Poznan, and the German aircraft came and bombed all the military er, places. We start, our army start moving Eastward until a few kilometers from Warsaw. We got surrounded by the German Army and taken prisoners of war. After a few weeks we were sent to camps, prison of war camps. I was there til about April, 1940. Then they, selected, Germans selected all the Jewish prisoners and send them back to Poland, and a little after the passover, our train stopped at Warsaw, and they let us go. I didn't want to stay in Warsaw, I went further east where my family was. And there I worked in the huge steel mills. We were slave laborers. It was arranged by the Germans with the help of the Judenrat, it was a Jewish, like a community center. In the meantime, they closed up a Ghetto in Ostrowiec where all the Jews had to live there conditions there were horrible. But the workers were treated better. In 1942, they start sending the Jews out of the Ghetto to Treblinka. It was terrible experience.

They were killing, shooting, wherever we gathered. They took the workers, send them to the factory, where they brought the barracks for them. And the rest send to Treblinka to er, gas them. Some people escaped, came back and told us the story, because they told, the Germans told the Jews, they are sending them Eastward to different places to work, which was not true. I personally have a very bad experience with Polish people, one of my brothers was killed by them, another was killed in Treblinka, my parents, cousins, uncles, and so forth....

Q. You lost your entire family?

A. Not, no. One brother and one sister got so called Arien papers, and they survived working of Pollacks in some labor camps in Germany.

Q. They survived the war?

A. Right. Er, the sister moved to France, my brother is now in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Er, I don't know of any other survivors, in my immediate or further family. At at the Oswiecim works I met my wife, who was sent from Majdanek Lublin to work in that camp. The camp in Majdanek was liquidated at that time. I don't know where the rest of the people went. And so happened, I was selected a foreman of a working group and she belonged to the group which I was supervising, er the German who was the leader of the hall group, got very friendly with me and I could do some favors to the workers, and I took advantage of it. We were fed a little bit better, er it was no beating or things like that, but the conditions in the camp were awful. The barricks infested by rats,

lice and er, whatever. We had guards, Ukrainians, which were not too good a friend of Jewish people, and they were coming and beating and killing people in the barracks. Er, in 1944 about summertime, July or August, they liquidated the camp and send the people to Auschwitz. Er, when we came by the trains there was a selection, one group right, one group left. There were a lot of the SS officers who made the selection. All the people, children went to the right to the gas chambers, we went to the left, we didn't know where we were going really, but we, er, were sent to the er, bath to clean, they gave us no er, clothes, and send us to the barracks in Birkenau. From there, I landed in a factory, a cannon factory, close to Auschwitz, er, where we were working, er, twelve hour shifts, conditions were a little better, I mean a little better means, it was cleaner, it was a small camp, and there were a very few Jews working there, mostly Russian prisoners of war or Polish people. When the Russian front was coming closer to Auschwitz, they packed us and sent us to Mathausen, which is in Austria.

Q. I visited Mathausen.

A. Yeah?

Q. Um, hum, in 1976.

A. Beautiful area there, and mountains. It was not so beautiful when we came there. And they send, I was with they group was they send to Gusen, which is about six kilometers from Mathausen, that's like a branch. There we were working in a ammunition factory, also twelve hour shifts, changing every week, this means working four

hours every weekend. Conditions were awful, so we were always sending, there was a small camp about six thousand people, they were sending every week couple thousand, but there was never more than six thousand, which means around two thousand was dying there a week. I got very sick, lots of people died there of malnutrition, sicknesses and so forth. Er, and I was just unlucky to have a block, a block commander who was a Ukrainian. He was killing lots of people there, too, on his own. He was a prisoner also, but er, it didn't matter. I was very sick, I hardly could move, malnutrition. I weighed at maybe sixty pounds at that time, when the American army came in - remember exactly, it was on a Friday, May first about five o'clock in the evening, we were standing ready to go to work, and the Germans disappeared, and we started looking what happened. They were gone, and the jeeps were coming in - Americans. Er, I, one jeep with some reporters came to ask me questions, they gave me a cigarette, and I passed out.

Q. From the cigarette, I'm sure.

A. From the cigarette, probably.

Q. Or from surprise?

A. It was a Camel cigarette. I never smoked Camel after that. Too bad for the (sic) for me. Er, and I woke up and a hospital like. And I was there, I don't remember about four or five weeks, and I want to go back to Poland to look after my relatives.

Q. Your wife?

A. Yeah, everybody.

Q. And you did not find very many, maybe your brothers?

A. No. Condition in Poland right after the war were awful. Er, the anti-Semitism was there, there was lots of Polish partisan from the right wing, which were killing up the few Jews who were coming back to Poland, I know in my area, every little town was cleaned up of Jews, by the Polish partisan. I went to different cities to Ostrowiec, same thing happened there.

Q. The Jews were still being killed after the war by those citizens.

A. By the Polish, er, they called it AK, Armia Krajowa. They were the partisans from the right wing. I went to Radom to look, I found a friend there and the other Jews got the warning from that partisan group to move out or they get killed, and I remember while I was there, they went to the city hall and asked them what to do, they advised them to leave town rather, because they could do nothing.

Q. Did you leave for the United States, did you stay in Europe?

A. Well, eh, I went back to my town, and in the meantime, my wife find me on the list of survivors and send me telegram she was in Sweden, and I told her to er, come to Poland, which er, she didn't listen, really, and I'm glad she didn't. She was in Sweden, and they put me on the list of the Swedish Red Cross. I had to smuggle out of Poland er, I was very depressed. I became an alcoholic. And while drunk I was talking against the Communist government, which was

then in Poland already. I had a friend in the police who let me know to leave the town because otherwise I would get arrested. I just did that and I smuggled to Germany and then to Sweden. There we spend about five years almost. This was a good therapy there, quiet country, plenty of people, honest people. And I think I recovered mentally, and some physically, too. Then when we got the visa to America, we just took the eh, boat and went...

Q. When did you leave for the United States?

A. Eh, the Sweden, you mean?

Q. Yeah, for the United States, what time? What year did you come?

A. 50. about er, in November, 1950.

Q. That was a very interesting story, I'd like to ask you some specific questions. First, I'd like to know how and what was a typical day like in the camps to you?

A. You mean the concentration camp?

Q. Yes.

A. Mostly, work, in the factory. We couldn't go into the barracks in the daytime, just standing outside, summer, winter, the snow, rain (sic) it was dark, we were standing outside in big groups huddling together to keep warm. At night, they put us into the bedrooms, they call it, where four people had to sleep on a bed about three feet wide and about six feet long, with very few planks on the bottom. So if you found some

good people we slept in shifts. Otherwise we were just fighting for room.

Q. Can you tell me, um, I asked your wife the same questions. Er, were you ever medically experimented on?

A. Beg pardon? Experimented on?

Q. Yeah, there are stories such in Auschwitz there were medical experiments.

A. No.

Q. Okay, do you recall er, or did you ever while you were in the camps see anyone tortured or murdered?

A. Murdered, yes. Torture, what do you mean, beating. Beatings, that was every day, every minute, it was normal. It was normal, either by the Germans, or by so called (Capos) which were the, in charge of the barrack group, they were responsible to the Germans.

Q. Did you ever see anyone you know murdered?

A. Yeah. This was in Ostrowiec in the labor camp. They caught two brothers who escaped, they caught them outside, they brought them to the er, camp, we had to stay outside and witness the killing of them. It was one of the instances where they were tied down, kneel down and they Ukranian officer came and shot them in the back of the head. On another occasion, we were gathered in the field, there came the SS officers and told us to put the big box in the center, to put all our other valuables

in that box. Who would not, would get shot. The people who were whatever got some jewelry, some er, money, or anything, would (sic) after the deadline came, they were looking all over, they found one man who had some dollars, they put them in the center, they told him because he didn't obey the order, they killed him. They shot him right there.

Q. Right there?

A. Right. After that, they gave them five more minutes if somebody had something to put it back, there were quite a few who took advantage of (sic)

Q. Can you tell me what the selection was like? When there was a selection either at the train when you arrived at the camp or selection for the gas chambers or to do certain kinds of work.

A. Well, er, I went through a few selections. Closing the Ghetto in Ostrowiec. Women, children, elderly people, whoever didn't walk straight, whoever was cripple, was put on one side to go to Treblinka. The healthy looking people, younger people went, were sent to the Factory to work. In Auschwitz, well, when the train arrived, they parked with the people, elderly, women, children, sick, went one way, and the younger people, who were able to work went the other way. In Gusen Mathausen Camp, everytime before going to work, the Germans was looking us over, if somebody had a sore, a bandage, couldn't stand, couldn't walk, they would take them away. So sometimes when we marched to work, we were holding the weak ones.

Q. To keep them alive?

A. Yeah. So er, those were the selections. If somebody had a sore, even, he was afraid to put something over it, because they looked for those things too.

Q. Can you tell me were you a part of any group while you were in the camps, were there any support given to one another to keep each other going such as helping someone who was the weaker one to keep marching?

A. Well, there was nothing organized. But, if you see somebody needed help you just helped, if you can. We all needed help.

Q. You tried to protect each other and stick together?

A. Naturally. Naturally. Only the er, couples who were of different nationalities, they were the meanies. They were killing just to look good.

Q. Did you have a feeling that you would survive what, if any motivation did you have to keep going on a day to day basis?

A. Naturally, everybody wants to survive. That is the basic. People trying to survive at the cost of others. There are people who want to go clean, to heaven or to hell, wherever they go. There are different kinds of people, Jews or not Jews. I know, we had about, er, one slice of bread a day which you didn't want to eat at one time, you just separate two pieces and keep it while you sleep, under the pillow, somebody would steal it. I don't know who. Maybe the guy who slept next to me, who knows. Others wouldn't touch it. So er, there you are.

Q. Another question, I have. Have you since your liberation had er,

nightmares, have you had increasing reducing...

A. Even living in Sweden, in that quiet safe country, nightmares, everynight.

Q. Any that you would want to recall, either recently or right after you were released, that you can remember?

A. The, er, nightmares? Oh, always about killing. Always about dying somewhere. Er, way, not natural way. Either eaten up by dogs, or shot by a German Ukranian. So, er, there you are.

Q. Have you had any medical effects from your experiences in the camps?

A. Yes, I had some, er, I was under observation in Sweden, for my lungs. They suspected TB. I was in the sanitarium for a time. I don't know, six months, or so. And I was released, I still have some scar there, because I go for regular check-up, they take X-ray - scars there. But er, it didn't affect me too bad.

Q. What is your reaction to the comment you hear quite often, that the Jews went like sheep to the slaughter?

A. I didn't get it.

Q. There is a common reference that when the Jews may have had some idea what was going on either back in Europe before they were deported that they maybe could have done something about their circumstance. What is your feeling about er, either having that information, whether or not it existed or whether or not there were any options as to what

you could do escape, defend yourself, er...

A. When the Ghetto in Ostrowiec was closed and we were sent to the barracks to work in the steel mills, we organized groups which suppose to escape into the forrest to some Polish partisan, to join Polish partisans in the forrest. Suppose to be divided in groups of ten, we suppose to bring our weapons with us. I got the weapons by er, from a German policeman. The first group went, one of them came back wounded and told us the story where they met the Polish partisans and they were celebrating, Pollacks made them drunk and at that night, they killed them, that one escaped because that bullet went, instead of the head sideways behind his ears (sic). So where do you go after that? There was no place to go.

Q. Is Israel important to you today? Do you follow...

A. All the time. All the time.

Q. Why is that?

A. I was a Zionist before that, I was a kid, I was er, a active Zionist. Er, why? You know how many Jews will be saved if there will be a country where we could go?

Q. Before the war.

A. Before the war, or during the war, there was no place to go. Every country was turning people away- children, (sic)

Q. Does this make you bitter, that there were ...

A. What do you think it is?

Q. Immigration Quotas?

A. It's not only America, every country. So, Jews were running to Belgium, Holland, France, they got caught. They came to America, they didn't come to America, to the shores, only. They went to Great Britain. They tried to go to Palestine, they were turned away by the British. There was no country who accepted Jews in those days. So, in fact, you couldn't find - Germans were smart putting the concentration camps in Poland for the Jews, cause they have allies, there are - oh, did they love it.

Q. I guess to summerize here, how er, how would you chacterize how your experiences during the war and in the camps affected you and how you feel today?

A. I think it cleaned me up like going through fire.

Q. What do you mean?

A. Clean me up, I think differently now about people, how good or bad they are. How forget now, cause they don't know what they were doing. I wouldn't love em too much for that, but I wouldn't hate em. Especially Germans who were like any other nation. Er, they had a leader, and his problem was to wipe out the Jews. And the leader promised them a lot. And he kept his word. They believed in him. While who put Hitler into the power, Hoodlums. Hoodlums, terror put him

in power. And the rest followed. They had no alternative. And I am afraid the same thing might happen in any country in the whole world.

Q. Today you're talking about?

A. Today, or tomorrow or some years from now.

Q. That's why we are here today.

A. That's why we are here to show what can happen, if you keep quiet, if you forget. You have to remember and tell people what happened and why and this can happen to any nationality to any people in any country in the world.

Q. To any minority, anywhere in the world, anytime...

A. The minority can become majority, very easy. If you have the guns, you have the power. Hitler was minority, he didn't win elections. If you have the police and the army, you got it.

Q. How do you feel about the gathering here in Washington?

A. I think it is a wonderful thing. I wouldn't give it away for anything in this world. I am just sorry my kids didn't come. They should be here too, and I hope the next time they will be.

Q. I'm sure you'll share your experiences with them when you get back to Chicago.

A. Ah, you bet. We even had some conversation on this matter before we

came here. They were very interested to know more and more and more.

Q. You've been able in the more recent years to share your experiences with them from during the war.

A. Yeah, yeah.

Q. And they've been accepting and understanding and...

A. They want to know, they want to know. Cause I think the kids are waking up now.

Q. Do you see any effect on your children of being er, first generation of children of survivors?

A. Rather, I would say, they feel more Jewish now than they did before.

Q. Are they also married with children?

A. Er, the son had a child, the, my daughter, not yet, hoping for.

Q. Well, I want to thank you very much for spending your time, you and your wife with me here today.

A. My pleasure.

Q. I've enjoyed talking with you.

A. Thank you very much.

Q. Thanks again.