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ABRAHAM PASTERNAK

INTERVIEW WITH: ABRAHAM PASTERNAK

INTERVIEWER:

DATE:

PLACE:

TRANSCRIBER: Katherine E. Lauster

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2 MR. PASTERNAK: I was born in DRES/LO, Germany,
3 but as a child I was -- my parents moved to
4 Hungary/Romania which is Transylvania. They settled
5 in a small community owned by BAT/LANDS so most of my
6 life I spent over there until I was taken into
7 concentration camp.

8 THE INTERVIEWER: And when was that?

9 MR. PASTERNAK: That was in 19 -- May 4th, 1944.

10 THE INTERVIEWER: And how old were you at that
11 time?

12 MR. PASTERNAK: I was 18 at the time.

13 THE INTERVIEWER: And what did they do? I mean
14 how did they --

15 MR. PASTERNAK: Well, at first they came into our
16 house. They knocked -- they broke down the doors.
17 Well -- and -- around 6:30 in the morning, and they
18 said, "Every single one of you get ready and be ready
19 within 15 minutes and be packed," and you're only
20 allowed to take so much with you, which amounted to a
21 loaf of bread for each one of us and a couple of
22 shirts. And we couldn't take any other valuable
23 things with us.

24 And then they told us to wait. And we waited, of
25 course, about a couple of hours. And then they picked
26 us up. And then they took us into the schoolhouse,

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2 and they kept us there all day long. And at night
3 they marched us to another community which was called
4 DAIJ which was -- must have been the central of all of
5 the people who were picked up that particular day.
6 And they kept us in the forest for three weeks.

7 THE INTERVIEWER: In the forest what did you --
8 how did -- how did -- how did you survive there?

9 MR. PASTERNAK: Well, this is a difficult thing
10 to do. Well, this is -- they told us -- they gave us
11 a -- some tools, and my dad, may he rest in peace, was
12 very good with tools. And he told us, "Go fend for
13 yourself." And we picked up some branches, and this
14 is where we lived. We lived in a tent. We lived like
15 animals.

16 And every day the youngsters who were from the
17 age of 12 to the age of 18 were forced to go and work,
18 dig ditches for the Germans. And that's what we did
19 for three weeks.

20 And then hell broke loose in 19 -- that was the
21 -- on June -- that was May -- I believe exactly the --
22 about the 23rd or the 24th, they hauled us into the
23 railroad station and they hurtled us into the box
24 cars. And we didn't know where we were going to go.
25 In fact, we didn't know anything. The only thing that
26 we knew, that there is something that's going to

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2 happen to us, but what will happen to us we just
3 didn't know.

4 And we got to Auschwitz. And the arrival was the
5 most unpleasant -- unpleasant, that's a very easy term
6 to say. The most horrible thing anybody can
7 experience. The wild -- first of all, the rain -- the
8 cars, you would hear some screeching and then the
9 train came to a stop. And incidentally, we were three
10 days in these box cars.

11 We were hauled in, about 70 to 80 people --
12 women, children, sick, young, old. Really, it didn't
13 matter. But we still had a certain amount of dignity,
14 of respect for the elders. Naturally, you could not
15 stretch or sleep, and you had to relieve yourself, and
16 so forth. But the youngsters, we youngsters made it a
17 point that we will allow the older ones, people, to
18 stretch themselves out while we were standing. And we
19 did our best, I mean, to try to make it as -- as -- as
20 comfortable for them as possible.

21 And people did not talk to each other. It was
22 something -- everybody was busy with his own
23 thoughts. And it was really very, very -- how shall I
24 say it? Cruel? That too is easy to say. It was
25 simply horrible, hell -- excuse me -- if you can use
26 the word on the radio, whatever it's going to be.

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2 And when we arrived in Auschwitz, then all of a
3 sudden dogs were barking, and they started to knock
4 with the doors and open -- now they opened up the
5 doors and dogs jumped into it with the SS. And
6 usually you hold back a dog. But they -- this time
7 they didn't hold back the dogs at all. And they
8 screamed and yelled, "HER/OS/DUMP/KI/YOO!" And the
9 translation is, "Get out you cursed Jew!"

10 And then the other prisoners who were there
11 already a long time ago, who were also in charge, the
12 first thing that they were interested in, if you have
13 gold or do you have diamonds, or do you have any
14 money, or do you have any food? I mean, it was like
15 animals were trying to eat up each other. That's
16 exactly what it was.

17 And then finally, you know, the platform was low,
18 and the people in the box cars were several feet high
19 up. And they threw us out from there, and many of the
20 kids mothers, young mothers with their young children,
21 the children were taken away immediately. And they
22 were torn to pieces right there in front of us. And
23 one guy stood and said -- I'll never forget his name
24 is Mengele -- he pointed his finger right, left,
25 right, left, and all --

26 We arrived -- excuse me. We arrived in Auschwitz

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2 about -- I think it was about 10:00 o'clock in the
3 morning. I don't know for sure. And they kept us
4 there until 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon. And then
5 they turned us over to the gypsies. And the most
6 ironic of ironic things that I have ever seen is they
7 made you march with a band. And you didn't know where
8 the hell you were going. They marched you around in a
9 circle.

10 And then all of a sudden that stench. And then
11 you see those carts, those people being hauled away,
12 skeletons. That was the most horrible day in
13 anybody's life, and I don't even wish it to my
14 enemies. My God! How a civilized nation like Germany
15 can concoct such inhumane treatment to -- to do to a
16 people. And I -- I mean to any people. How could
17 they do that? It's -- it was -- what was --

18 And then the gypsies too were not very merciful
19 with us either. And they marched you around and they
20 took you over to shave you. You didn't know who was
21 going where. All of a sudden you discovered yourself,
22 you have no brother, you have no parents, you have no
23 mother, you have no father. The most --

24 And here is something else. What they did was
25 this: After you -- you have been there for a couple
26 of three days, so they hand you a postcard and they

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2 says, "Write to your parents." They give you a letter
3 to write. The parents is going to get that postcard.
4 And eventually we found out that our parents were not
5 alive.

6 But we couldn't believe it. And I really -- I
7 was there in Auschwitz for about ten days, and then I
8 was -- we were shipped to Buchenwald. That too was
9 almost a similar story that I just -- unless you want
10 to ask me some questions, I thought I --

11 THE INTERVIEWER: Well, what about liberation?
12 How did that happen to you? Maybe, first of all, how
13 did you survive? Were there any things that happened,
14 anything that would cheer you?

15 MR. PASTERNAK: Well, let me say this: I'll
16 never forget it. While we were on our way from
17 Auschwitz to Buchenwald we made a stop in Dresden,
18 Germany. We stopped there. I don't know -- the train
19 may have stopped because of some reason or another. I
20 don't know. When I heard -- they opened up those box
21 cars and I heard one guard asking the other guard, who
22 was having a -- who was reading a newspaper, he says
23 to him "VAS/KEEPS/NOIS," "What's going on?" So he
24 said -- and happened to turn out it was June the 6th.
25 He said, "The AL/YI/TA/HABEN/LANDED." And I kicked
26 one of my -- "Oh, God! This is not going to last for

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2 very long." But then he says, "Oh, but the -- we just
3 threw them back. They lost a lot of people and we
4 threw them back." Well, that I didn't -- I didn't
5 believe that because maybe I didn't want to believe
6 it, but the truth of the matter is that they did not
7 kick them back, because they did land.

8 And I kicked one of my friends and says, "Oh,
9 God!" And we started to pray and -- you know, by
10 ourselves, quietly in our mind, because prayer was not
11 permitted. And we asked him, Please help the Allies
12 to come and liberate us. That was just -- it was
13 rather very difficult to take.

14 You know, but I must say, you ask me how -- how
15 did I survive? I suppose there is a certain will of
16 survival in everybody. Number one, I must say, in all
17 honesty, we were lucky. Simply lucky. I was not any
18 -- maybe my time hasn't come. Maybe my time was just
19 that I have to suffer and be liberated and go and
20 spread the word around, which I am doing.

21 I was willing -- you asked me over there, do I
22 want to be interviewed. Yes, I was willing, even if
23 it pains me to talk about the past and it's part of
24 the past, but I have to promote holocaust because we
25 do not want this to ever happen again. If a payment
26 was made, all right. We made the payment. But that

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2 shouldn't happen any more.

3 THE INTERVIEWER: It should never have happened.

4 MR. PASTERNAK: And it shouldn't happen. I lost
5 a kid brother. I -- I was holding back. I didn't
6 want to tell you, but I -- you see, we didn't know
7 exactly where we are going to go in Auschwitz. I had
8 a kid brother with me. He was a little kid. He was
9 about 12-13. And he was sent into our side. This
10 side. And I said to him in Yiddish, which I'm not
11 going to say it here, I said to him, "You go -- let
12 somebody be with my -- with the parents, with the
13 mother and father." Would you believe it? I must
14 have sent that brother of mine to death. That's
15 exactly what I did. I have yet to forgive myself for
16 that. People tell me he probably wouldn't have
17 survived, he probably wouldn't have been alive, but I
18 feel that I should not have been the one -- but being
19 that I was the oldest, there was no choice in the
20 matter, so I had to make some sort of a decision, and
21 had I known, I probably would not have brought him --
22 I would have had him come with us. Whatever happens,
23 I mean, I have no control, but he could have managed
24 somehow. But even that wouldn't have -- would not
25 have been -- because I was separated from my other two
26 brothers.

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2 By the way, we were six brothers. And four of us
3 went to a concentration camp, and two of my older
4 brothers were taken into the labor force by the
5 Hungarians. And one of them did not -- another one
6 did not survive. And my older brother did survive,
7 and I was in the armed forces.

8 Incidentally, when I came over to this country in
9 1947, I was drafted in 1948. I was discharged in
10 1950, and I was recalled to active duty. And I am
11 very, very proud and I feel privileged that I've
12 served in the armed forces. I've learned a great
13 deal. I've learned the American people. That sense
14 of justice, honesty and decency that these people have
15 for that -- all of us over here, I'm sure, are very,
16 very grateful.

17 That's why you can only have it in America.
18 Right now in the nation's capital, can you imagine
19 that? Why, to me that is absolutely unbelievable,
20 although I have been here 30 some odd years. But yet
21 it's America. It's -- one can express his opinion,
22 criticize, do anything. It's a privilege. Really it
23 is. It's a pleasure. Even sometimes you have
24 questions, so you ask the questions. But over there
25 you were afraid to ask what time it is, because maybe
26 you asked it in the wrong tone and he probably would

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2 have kicked you ten times over because -- simply
3 because I was a Jew.

4 Well, I went into a tangent. I'm sorry. I
5 didn't mean to do that.

6 THE INTERVIEWER: No, actually that's not a real
7 tangent because next -- another question is: Since
8 you have come to America how have your experiences
9 molded your thinking, or have you been working -- do
10 you see signs of antisemitism here? Are you working
11 against it? I mean, some --

12 MR. PASTERNAK: Let me qualify that in two ways.
13 Yes, when I see antisemitism, you know, something was
14 erected within ourselves, within me, having lived my
15 youth under dictatorial dictatorships under
16 antisemitic countries such as Hungary and Romania,
17 which -- and then Germany, which was the hell. Yes, I
18 am concerned about it. But on the other hand, there I
19 couldn't say anything. I had to keep quiet. My voice
20 was not heard. But here I can.

21 I trust the American because the American was not
22 raised with antisemitism, whereas the old guy was
23 raised with antisemitism. Look at Poland. Even today
24 there are hardly any Jews. So they blame it --
25 everything on the Jew. So I can't see it here. It's
26 antisemitism. Yes, there is antisemitism, but I can

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2 fight it.

3 So I -- I am trying my -- we are going to try our
4 best, I mean, to fight it. If there is a court, we'll
5 use the courts. We're not going to use violence
6 because violence only generates violence. It's
7 nonsense to do that. But in some cases when you have
8 to use violence, so you use violence. And I can use
9 it. And I know if I were to be taken to court, I know
10 in a sense they have a fair sense of justice to take
11 care of it. So I am not -- I am concerned, but on the
12 other hand, I kind of console myself that it could be
13 taken care of.

14 THE INTERVIEWER: Now, just to backtrack a little
15 bit, when you were liberated, the adjustments that you
16 had to make, the feelings that you had then, and then
17 the adjustments that you had to make back to a normal
18 kind of life.

19 MR. PASTERNAK: Well, it was rather very
20 difficult. Number one, it was very, very difficult to
21 -- after the liberation, because you still had a
22 glimmer of hope that -- that -- you will find
23 somebody. For instance, let me give you an example.
24 When I -- after the war was over, I -- you know, we
25 went around like we are going around right over here
26 to search, seek somebody who is going -- had -- maybe

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2 you have been with my brother or maybe you have gone
3 away or can you see him.

4 So I remember I ran into somebody who has been
5 with my older brother in the labor force. And he said
6 to me, "I know that your brother Isaac is dead. I've
7 seen him." Well, what do you do in that situation? I
8 performed the so-called mourning ritual, and that took
9 care of that. I was -- I didn't expect, really, to
10 find somebody. But the happy part of it was this.
11 When, as I told before, I was drafted into the armed
12 forces, I was walking guard duty. And then after the
13 Corporal of the Guard says, "Hey, Pasternak, after
14 you're done with your walking," marching, or whatever
15 it was, "report to the orderly room." And I report to
16 the Sergeant of the Guard, and I says, "Sergeant, I'm
17 reporting." He says, "Here." He hands me a piece of
18 paper. Now, that was 1949. I want you to know that.
19 It was 1949. Hands me a paper: "I am alive.
20 Isaac." And I see, "Tel Aviv, Israel." I couldn't
21 believe it.

22 So, you see, you know, people are questioning:
23 Why are you going to -- excuse me -- why are you going
24 to -- you -- you're searching. What are go you going
25 to find? You can find. I ran into -- here -- to
26 somebody. I ran in from my hometown I haven't seen.

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2 And I'm -- let's see. I ran into him in Israel in
3 1953 for two minutes because he had to catch a bus.
4 And I took a cab -- had to take a cab. We went in
5 different directions. And I ran into him again over
6 here. And it's since 1963. So we were able to catch
7 up and find out about certain things.

8 And the poor guy -- there were 13 brothers and
9 sisters. He lost 10 sisters and brothers. I lost two
10 brothers. Like I told you about my little kid
11 brother, and another, the older brother, who was in
12 the labor force.

13 Now, how did I adjust myself to this life? It
14 was very empty in the beginning. Very, very empty.
15 We've come to a new land. The customs are different.
16 The language was strange, and the people here, as you
17 probably may want to hear some criticism, I'm
18 criticizing. The people -- I don't know. The Jewish
19 people in America at the time, they just really didn't
20 want to listen too much to our experiences. Maybe
21 they had a guilt that they too have survived and they
22 -- and then -- and they may not have done what they
23 were supposed to do, and if they didn't do it, then
24 they felt guilty about it, yes.

25 I was fortunate, that's why I told you -- I was
26 fortunate I was drafted into the armed forces. I was

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2 busy there, and the Army was very nice to me. They
3 taught me English. I started to see the American way
4 of life. I'll never forget it. I was -- I spoke --
5 at the time I spoke several languages, and when I was
6 in the Army I was -- first I was placed in G-2, but
7 somebody asks you about your experiences, "Where were
8 you?" "I was in a concentration camp." And so they
9 immediately turned me over to a psychologist because
10 they wanted to see the reaction. I was a novelty for
11 them. Well, here comes another. And --

12 But the trouble is this: I couldn't communicate
13 with them. My English was very, very poor. So they
14 put me into school. So they taught me. They picked
15 me up -- would you believe it? They picked me up
16 after marching and after the exercise. They picked me
17 up with a jeep and they took me. So you see. I had
18 some sort -- my care, my loneliness was filled in with
19 something else. So I was more fortunate than the
20 others, whereas other people, I understand, had
21 problems.

22 THE INTERVIEWER: And what about the memories,
23 the haunting --

24 MR. PASTERNAK: The memories are still haunting
25 me today. There are -- let me -- I'll tell you
26 something. I -- there are many a times when I do

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2 something good I have a feeling that it's not going to
3 last for very long. I'm afraid. I don't know. I
4 went to a doctor. I went to a psychiatrist and I
5 asked him, "Why is it?"

6 He says, "It's your concentration camp -- your
7 guilt." I have a guilty feeling of some sort of
8 surviving and the others didn't. And I would say that
9 we live with part of it. Yes, we do. We'll always
10 live with it. You didn't need postcards to send these
11 guys to come around over here. Didn't need that. We
12 came because we -- we -- there is -- we want to
13 promote something over here to the world, that it
14 existed. We were part of history and we are calling
15 the world -- calling this to the world's attention.
16 And so, you see, it's a serious thing.

17 THE INTERVIEWER: Oh, I know.

18 MR. PASTERNAK: It's a very serious thing. We
19 are concerned here. Antisemitism -- you've asked me
20 once. I talked to you about it here in the United
21 States. Let me give you another example of this
22 antisemitism that it's -- right now going on in the
23 Soviet Union. These people have liberated
24 concentration camps, real concentration -- Majdanek,
25 Treblinka, Auschwitz. I was in Auschwitz. That's a
26 hell. If anybody has ever been to hell, that is

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2 hell. Yet today inflammatory books are being written
3 about the Jews. They are blaming the Jews, the
4 scientists. That's a civilized people. They are
5 kicking rockets up in the outer space. It's a
6 civilized people. They have an iron curtain. We're
7 afraid that the iron curtain usually follow their
8 leaders.

9 Romania has placed a special tax on the Jews only
10 who were to leave the country. Their educational
11 tax. I mean, I'm sure -- so it's behind the iron
12 curtain. Fortunately, what happened to the Poles
13 doesn't happen to the Jews. Who knows what's going to
14 happen in Hungary? The Hungarians are not known for
15 very nice guys either. They have antisemitic
16 tendencies. Right now they're enjoying a little bit
17 of a good -- they are enjoying a little bit of a
18 prosperity, but that prosperity cannot endure very
19 long, you know, when it's artificially created. They
20 might start again.

21 So we're worried. Hope for this -- the great
22 France, we had antisemitic -- what is it? Not
23 expressions. The people were -- I can't find the word
24 for it -- they -- people were shooting up people in
25 the synagogue. Austria, Italy. We're worried about
26 it.

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2 THE INTERVIEWER: Is there anything that you
3 think can be done about these --

4 MR. PASTERNAK: Well, this is part of what we are
5 doing right now. I'm sure that you have your people
6 from other countries too, and they -- like I told you
7 before, we can do it by promoting and teaching the
8 world what holocaust is. And if your -- if they know
9 what holocaust is, and we who have experienced
10 holocaust, maybe that will unite us, and we'll come to
11 find -- to some sort of a solution.

12 You know, I must say, I am from Detroit,
13 Michigan, Southfield, more or less. The teachers
14 there deserve a great deal of credit. They invite
15 many of us survivors to talk to the children. We
16 teach them and they -- they know. They ask some very,
17 very pertinent and intelligent questions. And I think
18 that that is our consolation definitely. I think that
19 as long as America stays democratic, I'm not going to
20 worry as much. But I worry.

21 THE INTERVIEWER: Well, I just want to thank you
22 for this interview it's -- it was my privilege.

23 MR. PASTERNAK: Thank you.

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