

Oral history interview with Philip Maisel

Interviewer: Diana Mara Henry

Location: Jewish Holocaust Centre, Melbourne Australia

RG-50.810.0005

Transcript

1/00:00

Phillip Maisel "My real name is Falk [Majzel]" born [August 15] 1922 in Vilna.

1/00:51

Today I am collecting testimonies. I am a Holocaust survivor. In 1939 Poland was divided in two parts, one occupied by Germany and one occupied by the Soviet Union. I found myself in the part that was occupied by the Soviet Union. [Vilnius given to Lithuania on 10 Oct. 1939] In June 1941 Germany attacked the Soviet Union On the 23rd we had Russians in Vilna and it became again the capital of Lithuania for 10 months. After 10 months [3 Aug.1940] the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania and for the first time I was a first-class citizen.

1/02:55

The SU occupied Vilna for two years.

1/03:28

When the Germans attacked, the majority of the Jewish population -which was very friendly with the Soviets because the Soviets gave them some kind of freedom - were accused of collaborating with the Soviet Union.

1/03:54

The Lithuanians on their own persecuted the Jews, under German direction. Lithuanian volunteers were arresting Jews in the streets.

1/04:25

About 5,000 Jews were killed. On September 7, 1941 they established the ghetto. There were about 60,000 Jews in two ghettos (because Jews had escaped from surrounding countryside to Vilna.) In one ghetto were Jews with their families who could work and in the other were the elderly and intellectuals which the Germans wouldn't need.

1/5:00

They gradually killed the entire population. They eliminated the Jews of the ghetto who were unable to work and in the other the Jews who they felt were not useful for the German war effort

1/05:28

My father felt that I could only be secure by having a trade useful to the Germans, and he told his friends that I was an automotive electrician. I knew very little about electricity. I had learned

about it in school in physics. There were few cars in Vilna but I learned on the job and become in six months an accomplished automotive electrician.

1/6:00

Why was it important? Because when the ghetto was liquidated in September 1943. I was sent to Estonia. I survived the war being an automotive electrician.

1/06:20

I was not always working as an automotive electrician and actually there were times when I was not sure I would live another 12 hours.

1/06:35

One Sunday we were sitting on a bench and with my friend we promised each other that if one of us survived the Holocaust even for 5 minutes we would tell the world what happened to Jews during the Holocaust.

1/07:00

And when I retired in Australia I was 68. I came to the Holocaust Centre to fulfill my promise to tell the stories of Holocaust survivors. The testimonies project already existed.

1/08:10

I worked for 2 years at the Centre before I realized that for three months no one had been interviewed and I began to interview six days a week, with volunteers including Vicki Gordon.

1/09:15

In 1943, when the ghetto was liquidated, Germans wanted Jews to dig for shale to produce oil (they were mining and powderizing it - a very elaborate and unsuccessful project for them, not like fracking technology today.[Lias-Olschiefer-Forschungsgesellschaft G.m.b.H. was the industry they slaved for.]

1/10:00

They deported I don't know the number 6,000 Jews to Estonia. Very primitive conditions. I had to build barracks. I was always hoping one of the cars would break down and they would need an auto mechanic.

1/10:25

One day it happened. A few SS men came. They were working for NSKK- National Socialist Kraft Kollone /Korps and they needed mechanics because they wanted to establish a workshop that would repair cars for the Germans.

1/10:50

In Estonia there were about 7 different camps for shale. They also had a camp for wood for the supports in the shafts. The garage was traveling all over Estonia and stopping at the camps to repair the cars for those camps.

1/11:40

In one of those camps I met my old friend Hirsch Glick who wrote the Partisan song. By working here I found out exactly what happened to Hirsch.

1/12:10

When the Russians came very close to the camps in Estonia, the Germans evacuated most to the camps to Stutthof near Danzig 23/08/1944. They sent us as experts in extracting the shale to Germany close to the French border. They kept us and after a month they sent us to Southern Germany. I was in two camps; the first was Dautmergen. The conditions were very very bad. It was very swampy, we had to work hard. Initially I was building [something for the railroad.]

1/13:36

Then one of my friends got a job as an automechanic for the Germans and he recommended me and I got a job as an auto mechanic. Conditions were better. It was winter and I had overalls. They treated me not like a complete sub human: I was like not completely human and not a sub human but somewhere in between. Conditions were comparatively good. But the conditions at the camp were very bad.

1/14:18

One of the worst things was in the morning was an Appel and you had to stand for an hours in the cold in the swamp while they were counting us. One day we had to stand like that for four hours.

1/14:37

The German foreman of the camp who needed us to work in the garage came to check why we didn't come to work. When he saw the conditions he asked that, because we were working for the German war effort, we be transferred to another camp, to Frommern. Sixteen people were transferred from Dautmergen to Frommern. [see post-war group photo.]

2/00:00

At Frommern I was with people who had been in the resistance or who otherwise the Germans thought should be locked up. The camp was run by a Frenchman who had a clandestine radio and every Sunday night he told us about developments in the war that he had heard on the BBC, we had proper rations, and we even had a shoemaker to repair boots.

2/00:48

My father bought a pair of WWI French boots in the ghetto and I still had then in the camp. In Stutthof near Danzig they took away my boots and I found a fellow who was wearing my boots and I asked him to give them to me and he said "Look, they are not yours any more. The Germans gave them to me." And I said to him, "Look, if you found someone else who was wearing your boots, would you ask him to give them to you?" He said yes. And if he was a decent fellow, would he give them to you?" And he said yes. So he had an opportunity to be a decent fellow. [Happy gesture 1:45] I kept those boots til the end of the war. They were resolved in Frommern and after the war I found a better pair of boots and gave those boots to another Holocaust survivor.

2/02:12

Compared to Dautmergen, Frommern was happy. At work, the work was run by NSKK. The soldiers didn't want to go to the front. So they had to be useful, by working in the workshop. They got an idea of finding a way to convert diesel oil to fuel that could be used in a car. It couldn't be done, but oil was in very short supply in Germany and we were conducting experiments. The work was completely useless in the garage....The Germans knew they had lost the war. During the day the British flew over the camp, at night the Americans were flying over with radar and dropping silverfoil on the ground.

2/04:45

They sent us on a death march. We were supposed to go West. We were just wandering The whole thing was rather absurd. During the day they sent people to the German villages around us to get food for us. Food was comparatively adequate. What was important was that we lost touch with the German authorities. They were wandering around without guidance.

2/05:55

One day two men came along on a motorbike and arranged the inmates into rows and asked the Jews to step forward. [The non-Jews] were the first to step forward in solidarity.

2/07:35

We continued walking at night. One day we were walking during the day, and we came to a place called Ostrach in Southern Germany. There was some artillery shooting. They brought us to the marketplace in the middle of town and suddenly we saw the French in front of us . The French arrived in American tanks wearing British uniforms. It was hard to communicate but somehow managed. We stayed in the square. We were free but somehow we didn't trust our fate. Who knows? The front can move forward and backward.

2/09:01

There were 16 of us. We went to a farmer and asked if we could sleep in the shed overnight. The next day was Sunday and on his way back from church he brought us a big basket of apples. Then I knew I was free.

2/10:10

Because we were with French political prisoners there was no revenge. The French soldiers asked us to join them to fight the Germans, because the German snipers were in the forest shooting people on the road. Naturally we didn't [join them to fight] because we had enough war and to be honest we weren't in condition.

2/11:10

The death march was a ridiculous march. There were not enough guards to look after us. Their bags were very heavy so they forced us to carry hand grenades. There was no use to throw a grenade because they would shoot us all.

2/12:15

So, we were free, we were near Sigmaringen. We didn't know what happened to our family We didn't know what happened to the rest of the world. We were under the impression that we were the only ones to survive. So we decided to go back to Balingen near Frommern and work for the

French army, and went to work for them in the same garage with the equipment and the same tools.

2/13:25

I have a certificate dated the 5th of May 1945. I was employed by the French Army geographic department. I worked for them for quite a while until UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency] was created and I became a second class officer in the French army with UNRRA. UNRRA was later changed to IRO [International Refugee Organization.] I had a brother in France who was studying to be an electrical engineer and joined the French army. I was living in Balingen very close to the concentration camp where I was before. My friends became guards over the people who were in charge of Dautmergen. There was a trial of the guards in Ratlingen [P.M. corrected to Rastatt] and I was a witness. The only person missing from the trial was the Kommandant of the camp. There were a lot of Polish workers working on the German farms. That is where they found the Kommandant DOLD and he was brought to the French authorities. The Frenchmen told us we could have a talk with them. I didn't know what it means. My friend beat him up properly. At the trial, He said he had wanted to help the prisoners and he became a hero, he was the only Kommandant to be honored by the German nation. I don't think he deserved it. The Kapos were called kamaradepolizei. "Your friend will be supervising you." They intentionally created the clique of very prominent kapos who were living much better than the rest so they could be cruel to the others because they were not equal. I wouldn't say all of them but that was the intention of the Germans.

3/01:20

There was an underground in practically every camp. Not in Dautmergen because conditions were very bad. The Communists in Auschwitz would find better jobs for the Communists. There were decent people who became Kapos to help other people to survive.

3/3:30

I knew people who were policemen who would never admit it. I knew kapos who escaped to Australia because they were recognized in Israel. They wrote books about how they helped other people to survive. The concept of decency is very individual. Some people think it's indecent to steal a piece of bread or to hit somebody and some feel that to survive that to survive you can commit the biggest crime but you will get off. And after the war some used the same tricks to pretend that they were good people.

3/05:55

I am under the impression there was a very big probability of Third war, between the Soviet Union and the Allies, would start and that both the Soviet Union and the Allies would try to get Germany. Germany claimed there were Nazis who persecuted Jews and other minorities, and there were decent Germans. They made a differentiation between the Nazis and the Germans. Actually, the whole nation supported Hitler. Without any doubt, for many reasons. The worst part about Germany was that there were so many bystanders, people who had objections but who did nothing. The denazification process wasn't properly conducted because they really felt that the Nazis would support them in the fight against the Soviet Union. I lived in Germany for three and a half years [after the war ended] and would you believe that I didn't find one supporter of Nazis.

3/08:22

Germans were so cruel that they expected the Allies to be cruel to them. The only ones who were cruel to them were the Russians, and the Frenchmen. The Frenchmen were really cruel. You see, there are different degrees of civilization. The Russians were comparatively primitive. Stalin had a son and he was caught and put in a concentration camp. And the Germans wanted to exchange him. Stalin said: "If he surrendered, he's not my son."

3/10:40

We get German and Austrian volunteers here. I got a letter from a German woman whose father was a prominent Nazi and her mother as well. He was in charge of the Group Operation Wüste. She asked me for forgiveness. What would you do? I gave it to her. The fact that she asked for forgiveness was already an indication. We had a volunteer here from near Tübingen in Southern Germany, a strong Catholic, went to Israel to work on a kibbutz, then she lived with Arabs on the West Bank, then came back to Israel. She became an ambassador for Israel and travels all over the world saying how cruel were the Germans and to justify Jews' treatment of Arabs. She uses a religious reason, saying that God gave Israel to the Jews. When religious Christians come here I tell them you should be glad Jews gave you the Christ.

3/14:15

What I am experiencing now is that the Catholic church admits its faults, regularly commemorates the Holocaust and invites speakers from the Holocaust Centre. I participated last year in a church. There was a Polish Jesuit. His name was Obierek came to Australia to apologize to the Jews. There were a lot of Poles in the audience. When Pastor Obierek said Christ was a Jew, a woman called out "Maybe Christ but not the holy mother!" I have it on tape. I was recording it.

3/15:49

There is no logic, there is so much preconceived bias. What I learned from interviewing here is that we are all biased. There is no objectivity, there is no objective reality.

3/16:05

Dr. Wajnryb was a prisoner [in another camp of the KLNa] Schomberg. [Author of *They marched us three nights.*] Very few survived. If I hadn't been an automotive electrician, I wouldn't be here.

4/01:25

The Kapos were very cruel. Some of the Jews cooperated with the Germans. They cooperated not to save their lives but because they believed that by doing the work for the Germans they would alleviate the plight of the Jews.

In Vilna, the fellow that was in charge of the ghetto was called [Jacob] Gens. He married a Lithuanian woman who could have easily survived hiding in the local population. He became the leader of the Jewish ghetto. He assumed that when the Nazis asked for 5,000 Jews or 3,000 Jews to be killed, that he could bargain with them and get them down to half and save 2,500 Jews. The truth was that the Germans wanted 2,500 Jews but they asked for 5,000 so they could

bargain. Anyway, the fact is that he was killed by the Germans because he was not required any more. In Polish they say "A man shoots but G-d directs the bullet."

<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn526314>There