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Summary by Eva Kleederman

Abstract

Willy Manela, born June 10, 1925, in Kielce, Poland of Joseph Manela and Miriam Strauch, remembers his three siblings, Chaya, Marcel (Marc) and Motek, his twelve aunts and uncles on each side; the Germans coming to Kielce, co-opting homes and neighborhoods, instituting prohibitions on Jewish activities, catching residents for labor and eventually establishing a fenced ghetto; tasked to unload bags of cement at a building supply warehouse; sharing responsibility for family with brothers Marc and Motek, also laborers; being rounded up with ghetto residents at the town railroad, there being separated from Motek, mother and sister, who were sent to Treblinka; being sent to Schvarzburg ghetto, bunking with Kielce friend Barnard Shulman and working in lumberyard while brother Marc worked in munitions factory in Pionki; being transported to Auschwitz Birkenau in late 1944, tattooed, assigned to Block 23, taken within the week to Pszczyna, English POW camp 30 km from Auschwitz to perform munitions-related work; on night of January 17, 1945, being marched in group on foot back to encampment at Auschwitz outskirts, from which several prisoners escaped, most sent to Dachau, and fifteen, including Willy, made to walk (for three months) to Flossenburg camp in Bavaria, housed in Barrack 37 with Kielce friends Warshovsky. Bernigola and (Sevig) Rubin; being transported on April 18 with Sevig Rubin to Klausing [?], a Russian POW camp, assigned to the "disinfectzia" to steam lice from clothing; evacuating the surrendering POW camp on foot and, on April 23 (the third night of forced march) breaking with several others for a close-by highway and there encountering US liberators; upon liberation, walking 17 miles to Friedenschoff, meeting other liberated Kielce friends, walking and hitching to Passau, Germany and then to Bergen Belsen, where he and Rubin found their respective brothers, also liberated from internment in Poland; the group traveling without papers on foot from Poland back to Germany via Czechoslovakia, where they were caught, arrested, jailed and ultimately released through intervention by the Czech Jewish Committee, which also secured their train travel back to Passau; without trade or other employment, subsisting in Passau on municipal food coupons; receiving word from Kielce friend Lederman in DP camp that brother Marc was headed to Liege, Belgium, to locate uncle Kalman Strauch; being smuggled over Maginot Line to reunite with brother and uncle in Liege; working with brother Marc in handbag factory; joining Zionist movement; in 1948, traveling by boat (the Atsmaut) from Toulouse, France, to Bahad 8 army training base for volunteers in Netanya, Israel; living in Tel Aviv until 1952, when he joined brother Marc in Patterson, N.J., learned electrician's trade and became business partners in an electric supply company with Ralph Weiss and Abe Diamond, both from Lodz; marrying Cecile Klajman, born in Brussels, raised in San Paolo, Brazil; living initially in Patterson, NJ, moving to Fairlawn NJ, and raising two daughters (Miriam Manela Fried, Eileen Manela) and a son (Joseph Manela); returning to Poland in 2012 with the March of the Living, participating in the Kielce Society, the Landsmannschaft and the East Side Social Center survivors groups; volunteering with the Jewish Federation, advocating for Russian Jewry, and delivering Meals on Wheels to the housebound in his community.

Full Summary

Willy Manela, born June 10, 1925, in Kielce, Poland of Joseph Manela and Miriam Strauch, third of four children, Chaya (four years older) Marc (originally "Marcel", two years older) and Motek (four years younger), lived near railroad in 3 ½ room rented apartment in building that housed four families (each with its own outhouse); in 1934 moved to bigger house elsewhere in Kielce; father in export lumber business and mother homemaker; of the immediate family, only Willy and Marc survived the war; describes life of modest means in a traditional but not pious home, speaking mostly Polish, but also Yiddish, attending Jewish gymnasium where brother Marc excelled academically and Willie at sports, participating in the boys-only Beit Har Zionist group, being visited when sick by a beloved Dr. Yankovsky.

Willy's large extended family included maternal grandparents from Belk, who ran a flour mill, and twelve aunts and uncles on that side, only one of which survived the war (Kalmen, very orthodox, prisoner of Tsar and then in Polish army); cousins from that line, surnamed Lentchner and Kleiger, from Lodz, did survive and moved to Israel; cousin **Misha** (Strauch) survived Gross-Rosen, where he and Willy's brother Marc played violin in camp orchestra, not then knowing of family relationship.

Paternal grandparents from [Sopot? Schoppe? Szopa? Czlopa?] named Moshe and Chaya had thirteen children, including Willy's father Joseph; aunts and uncles on father's side included **Bernard** (lived in Breslau, Germany, married Manya, owned shoe store, moved to Palestine in 1937); **Bluma** (married Kalmen, grocer in Kielce, had three children, Moshe, Rivka and Pincus (the youngest, and Willy's schoolmate); none of that family survived; **Esther** (lived in Skawina, where husband employed in refinery, two children, Adolf Manela and Skuli Rochlin, whose different last names reflect Jewish versus civil marriage authorities; cousin Adolf Manela lived in Russian-occupied Poland, branded bourgeois and sent to Siberia, became officer in Polish army, returned to increasingly anti-semitic Poland and left for Israel, married and had a child; **David and Israel** (partners in scrivener and rent collection business in Lodz); **David** perished in the camps, but son Pincus survived, moved to U.S., had sons Stuart Manela and Todd Manela, both dentists in south Jersey; **Israel** died before the war, daughter Tamara survived as a gentile, married owner of a Lodz textile factory, couple relocated to England, then to U.S.; **Manya** (lived in Kielce, moved with husband Joseph Rubinovitz to Uruguay, had children Nadia, Zosha (married name Cohen), Monyek and Dubeck, all with whom Willy had lost touch; **Sarah** (husband surname Singer had taxi business, couple left Poland for Russia where divorced, Sarah never heard from, Singer returned to Poland with name "Perzutsky" to conceal Jewish identity.

Willy remembers start of war in Poland when the Germans came to Kielce, co-opting houses and entire neighborhoods, catching residents to work as laborers, prohibiting assembly for minion, and so on, finally establishing a crowded, fenced-in ghetto populated by Jews from Kielce and surrounding areas; he remembers life in the ghetto, scrapping for food, exchanging valuables for rations, sneaking out to Goldstein's delicatessen (his uncle by marriage) and

bringing food back to the ghetto; unloading 50 kilo cement bags at building supply warehouse where he worked, coughing blood from lungs irritated by cement dust; being saved from punishment (possibly death) by Valkovsky, a Polish warehouse chief who lied to cover Willy's theft of a bit of plaster of paris for the ghetto dentist; witnessing daily collection of the dead; sharing responsibility with Marc (also a laborer) and Motek (sewed uniforms) to sustain the family; burning furniture for warmth; passing as non-Jew by his curly blond hair, knowing nothing of the existence of camps.

Willie remembers 4 a.m. sounding of Nazi bullhorns ordering ghetto residents to the railroad, where he and Marc were separated from Motek, and from where his mother, Motek and a sister were transported to Treblinka; Nazis sent Marc to munitions factory in Pionki, Willy to small ghetto of 300 residents in Schvarzburg to work in lumberyard building carriage wagons; Willy describes sharing barrack bunk with Kielce friend Barnard Shulman, having no possessions beside blankets/pillows brought from home, eating reasonably well (lentils, cabbage, horsemeat, bread), and even bathing with the steaming water used in processing wagon wood.

In late 1944, small ghetto liquidated, residents transported by cattle car to Auschwitz Birkenau. Willy describes a six/seven hour ride, arriving Auschwitz 9 a.m., to a sea of people in striped pajamas (recognized family friends from Lodz), the separation of men, women and children, the head shaving, delousing, distribution of ill-fitting uniforms and shoes, the tattooing (B3241), the threats of death for attempted escape. Willy and other Kielce folk were assigned to Block 23, the prior (gypsy) occupants having been exterminated; were driven five days later to Pscyna, English POW camp 30 km from Auschwitz where Willy performed dangerous work involving munitions. Willy describes decent camp conditions (heat, shower, bathroom, Red Cross packages), and a Viennese/Jewish CAPO he characterizes as "nice." Willie marvels that he managed every month to survive the "selection."

On night of January 17th 1945, Willy and others interned at POW camp were marched on foot back to Auschwitz, the sick separated out, the able-bodied (Willy) taken to a barn in town outskirts; Willy and mates Lipkind, Piacetski and Blumenfeld planned escape; Willy wanted cousin along but others feared detection with too many, leaving Willy behind. Of barn group, most sent to Dachau. Guarded by 25 SS, Willy and 14 others walked, cold, wet and hungry, every day for three months through German Silesia to Czechoslovakia, arriving half dead on April 1 at Flossenburg camp in Bavaria where Willy recognized Kielce friends Warshovsky, Bernigola and Sevig Rubin. The Kielce-men occupied Barrack #7. Around 18 April, Willy and Sevig Rubin were transported to Klausung, a Russian POW camp, and assigned to the "disinfectzia" to steam lice from clothing. Willy remembers eating horse food (rough corn meal), and the rare disinfectzia-steamed potato given by Russians mistaking the Jewish pair for Poles.

On April 23, third night of forced march away from surrendering POW camp, Willy and seven/eight friends broke for highway rumored to be close, encountering US tanks motioning them away from potential battle fire; Willy, confused, ran 1 km then backtracked to the tanks,

where, at 11 a.m., he found liberated survivors eating American rations. On liberation, Willie separated from Rubin, Glatchstein et. al., walked 17 miles to Friedenschoff (small town) to which he'd heard other Jews from Flossenbergl had been marched, there encountering Kielce friend Morris Warsofsky. Rubin and Glatchstein followed to Friedenschoff, and, with Willy, walked and hitched rides to Passau, Germany, then to Bergen Belsen to seek family. At Bergen Belsen, found Rubin's brother, previously interned in Poland with Willy's brother Marc; without papers, they all traveled through forests, borders, towns, staying at Red Cross houses, passing as non-Jews, finding folk from Kielce, including Willy's cousin Peter Manela who warned of dangerous Polish anti-semitism and urged them to go back. Returning to Germany via Czechoslovakia, the four undocumented men crossed borders at night; were caught, arrested, jailed; released with intervention of Czech Jewish Committee, which also secured them train tickets to Passau. In Passau, without trade or employment, Willy lived in apartment with Rubin's uncle and others, subsisting on food procured with coupons provided by municipality. In Passau, Willy received letter from Kielce friend Lederman in DP camp, reporting that Marc had written from Holland about going to Liege, Belgium to find uncle Kalmen Strauch, purportedly living there. Lederman letter to Willy also relayed information from Jewish Brigade that Marc had been interned in Poland.

Once in communication with brother, Willy found smuggler to facilitate nighttime passage through forest to Maginot Line, where Marc had arranged for guide on other side to bring Willy by train to Marc and uncle (Kalmen Strauch) in Liege. In Liege, Willy met uncle for first time, Kalmen having served years in Tsar's army, in Japan (1905) and later Europe, where he was imprisoned in Belgium during WWI, remaining there after truce. Willy lived with Marc and Kalmen, joined Zionist movement, worked with Marc in ladies handbag factory; having settled in Liege, he declined to join brother Marc in St. Louis, where Marc and new wife Harriet Fremder (daughter of factory boss) would immigrate.

In 1948, Willy, Zionist, speaking little Hebrew, left for Israel, travelling illegally by boat (the *Atsmaut*) from Toulouse, sleeping in crowded, unsanitary hold for days, delays occasioned by English blockade. On arrival, he was transported to Bahad 8 army training base for volunteers, and subsequently to Netanya for physical exam where doctor, recognizing Manela name, connected Willy with uncle Bernard Manela (wife Many), formerly of Breslau. Living happily in Tel Aviv, Willy worked in building supply establishment, continued as army volunteer until army-draftee cousin (Bernard's son) was killed in conflict; in 1952, urged by aunt and uncle to leave army for safety, Willy joined Marc (sponsor) in America; he travelled two weeks by boat, via Italy, arriving daytime to vision of GW bridge; lived with Marc, Harriet and two nieces in Patterson, NJ, apartment, attended night school to speak/read/write English, worked 70-hr/wk (for \$70) making ship mortars for Korean War effort; attended night vocational classes to learn electricians' trade, secured job at Pope Electric where met Ralph Weiss (from Lodz); became partner in electric supply store (Weiss Electric) on 10th Avenue in Patterson, NJ, joined later by third partner, Abe Diamond, also from Lodz.

In 1958, Willy married Cecile Klajman, Portuguese and English-speaking stenographer, only-child, born in Brussels, raised in San Paolo, Brazil, to whom he'd been introduced while she was visiting extended family in U.S. Terms of visa dictated she return to Brazil, but six months later joined Willy in New Jersey. They married at Polack's, a Lower East Side restaurant, Willy's small family and Cecile's mother attending; had two daughters and a son; lived at 10th Avenue and 26th Street (apartment) in Patterson, NJ, moved to three-bedroom home in Fairlawn NJ in 1961/62.

Willie silent about wartime experience until children attended Hebrew school. In 1984, he spoke to a Rutgers University class, where his college student son heard much of Willy's story for the first time. In 1996, fifty years after the Kielce pogrom, Willy and family, and members of the Kielce Society (Willy remembers Vladek Mandel) returned to Kielce, finding their former homes rundown and the town residents unfriendly. In 2012, Willy and family returned to Poland with the International March of the Living, again visiting Kielce to find no Jews, no working synagogue, and a decimated cemetery, the gravestones having been repurposed for street pavings. The group also visited Auschwitz, Birkenau, Maidenek and Flossenbourg camps. Until his death in November 2019, Willy participated in the Landsmanschaft and East Side Social Center survivors groups, both in N.Y., to talk about shared shtetl and war experiences. He volunteered with the Jewish Federation, supported Russian Jewry, and, for 24 years, delivered Meals on Wheels to the ill and elderly. He is survived by three children and their families: Miriam Manela Fried (husband David, son Benjamin, daughter Simona); Eileen Manela (sons Alexander and Caleb); and Joseph Manela (daughters Carley and Isabel).