

Oral History Interview with Mel Wolf 7-28-91

Interviewer: Ester Bailey; Survivor: Menasche Wolf

1:24 Into

1:40 name, birth name

1:49 born in Jedlicze, Poland, 7-3-1924

2:00 lived with mother, sister, aunt uncle

2:15 Mother- Hinda, Hannah

2:26 near Krosno

2:31 means of support- had land; income from the land, mined for oil-international oil companies; wife had some income from sister's shop

3:00 city- 80 Jewish families; about 2,000 poles; small village, not a city really

3:29 attended regular school in Poland from 6yrs old 8am-2pm; after that, Jewish school, Hebrew school 2pm-6 or 7pm; finished mandatory 7th grade, about 13yrs old; then went to technical

4:17 photo children from Hebrew school

4:55 family active in Jewish life; Uncle leader from Jewish community in town

5:23 observed Jewish holidays, every day life, kosher, traditional

5: 50 parochial schools- involved in sports with non-Jews, soccer, baseball, basketball; out of school- no sport activities

6:36 relations before the war between Jews and gentiles- lots of antisemitism; last 2 yrs before the war antisemitism became harsher

7:20 right before the war, kid would threaten that Hitler would come and get you, call you "Jew" instead of by name; dangerous to walk around on the street before Christian holidays, esp. Easter; not as much before Christmas

8:15 people saying don't buy from the Jews, etc.

8:43 first heard of Hitler in 1930s, esp. 1938 when Hitler marched to Austria; worried that something bad would happen, didn't believe that something as bad as what did happen would happen

9:43 didn't have radio in little town; heard from Jewish newspapers

10:26 not traditional for kids to read newspapers

11:14 changes from after Hitler occupied Austria; didn't have anywhere to go; still had two grandfathers, two grandmothers; not real changes, but aware something was bound to happen, didn't know when etc.

12:05 question about Jews from outside towns to be brought in, didn't happen until Hitler came into Poland

12:35 what happened to father? Father died when Mel was 6 months old; father died in 1930?

13:10 passage of Nuremberg laws; at the time, Mel didn't know about these laws

13:38 no discussions about leaving the countries, at least from a child's perspective; kids not involved

14:10 day that Germany occupied community; September 1st, 1939- war broke out; following Saturday, Germans occupied town

14: 40 Sept 1st, 1939 early in the morning, mother woke him up and asked him to go to the shelter, basement; thought was a false alarm possibly

15:18 mother saw that refinery in town was on fire

15:34 who bombed refinery- Germans; strategic, economic places bombed

16:15 mother sister, uncle, aunt in basement shelter with him

16:30 when Nazis occupied- drastic changes; within 24 hours no Jew could go out on the street; also, but not sure about Poles, extremely dangerous

16:50 day or so later, kids went out on the street and saw the Germans on trucks, etc.

17:13 next few days- called on Jews, esp. kids to come work for them, clean horses, etc. some worked in kitchen, work in stables, cut straw, change straw, etc. labor for occupation armies; clean cars, etc.

18:25 Mel worked cleaning horses, cleaning stables, etc. afraid of the horses; first week; 10,12,15th September

19:05 changes for Jewish community; announcement that no more school for Jewish children, no more going to synagogue; no communication with any organization, no social gathering, Jewish people should stay in own houses; still in 1939 armbands, star of David 8cm wide

20:00 armband white, blue star of David; in his town there was only one synagogue; Germans occupied and used for their purposes, warehouse; couldn't go Friday to the synagogue, Jewish bakeries closed est.

21:10 food situation in 1939 not bad;

21:45 Occupation army didn't treat Jewish families nicely

22: 09 1939- October already snowing, forced to go shovel snow to clear small highways for German machinery

22:56 photograph of men shoveling snow; much of Mel's family and friends; Mel identifies people in the photo

23:50 daily to Spring, forced to shovel snow

24:00 did all kinds of labor- young people; got some rations for work

24:50 1941- went to Krosno; they were building an airport, doing manual work- digging ditches; forced labor

25:30 selected to go to Krosno- Germans called all Jewish people to come to center of town and selected you from the lines; had records, were established; transported by train; family not part of the transport, Mel by himself; 7km from town; traveled daily in the beginning

27:11 1941 was in Krosno- it became a forced labor camp

27:38 couldn't go back to see family; weren't treated extremely harshly, except that you had to work very hard; not as harsh as later years

28:25 description of daily life in Krosno; got up in morning, groups, had foreman, had to dig ditches straight down, demanded speed, using antisemitic language- example "you lazy Jew"; needed landing strip, now at war with Russia

30:28 food- soup, slice of bread; not enough to starve, enough to survive;

31:00 no one stood out for cruelty or kindness

31:51 16 or 17 at this time

32:00 just men in the camp; no women; never saw a women until Mel was liberated May 3 1945

32:25 brigade- 200 men; other brigades also

32:50 family- was still in Jedicze, when the Germans tried to evacuate all the Jews from this town; family ran away into the farmlands to hide; aunt had a baby also

33: 40 photo of aunt Sarah, and baby

34:00 Mel says shouldn't have shown picture, doesn't do him good

34:40 after Krosno- sent to Szebnie harsh camp sent to in September 1943; very harsh, shooting people on a daily basis; extremely cruel, unbearable

35:30 example; every day in the morning went to work, called camp together, selected people for no apparent reason, told to come in the middle, shot in the back of the head; no explanations etc. told to do job right etc. tactic to scare; job he was doing was not supervised

36:42 food once every 24 hours, were women but didn't see them; selected to go to Szebnie- Germans were liquidated small forced labor camps; needed to build larger airstrips

37:50 what happened to family after they ran to the forest? Was told by friends after the war that Mel's sister was caught and shot; mother and aunt and uncle and baby went to Polish people to hide them- had money to use to trade for hiding; did hide them; until July 1943; Polish people tried to get rid of them because they wanted to keep the baby- 2yrs, or his family ran out of money; stayed in attic hidden, captured by Germans in 1943 and shot in the woods; day when Italy capitulated; never went back; none of extended family; mother was a child of 10, father's brothers and sisters, grandparents- no one survived; except a cousin- ran to Russian occupation army- sent to Siberia and survived

40:45 sister- Germans shot her, Poles wouldn't have shot her; couldn't run away too far, would be recognized as a Jew; Poles would receive something; common to sell a Jew for a pound of salt;

42:13 heard about what happened to sister after the war; some friends had ran away and survived

42:53 has a letter so he knows who hid his mother and where; read the letter once, but not since 1945

43:33 Szebnie; transported there by train; all transports in closed cattle wagons; short distance- 3 hours about; about 500 people in transport; there was sufficient room in this particular transport;

44:47 when first arrived in Szebnie- told them where to go; which building etc.; twice daily roll call; also shooting some; no selection when he first arrived; first impressions- very scary, unknown, very different experience; get used to daily routine- pray to God you will do job okay, not get sick, not get beaten up

46:39 all barracks- old buildings; lots of people together on bunk beds; and a roll call area; got not go from one barrack to another; the kapo; could not leave;

48:00 work- easy but unpleasant; in a big building; bringing clothes from people and they were sorting out the clothes; by gender and children or adult; sorted them;

49:00 the clothes were sent to Germany; the people were being liquidated from ghettos, taken to forest around camp and shot them there; did not see any bloody clothes, presume the people were undressed before they were shot

50:13 meaning of liquidation; sent to camps or shot in forest; huge amounts of people; lots of Jewish people in Poland;

51:13 don't remember any names; 80% from the soldiers which surrounded the camp were Ukrainian, no better than German soldiers; Ukrainian soldiers responsible for running and supervising the camp; didn't see people being shot

52:35 did see a lot of punishment, mostly beating; normal procedure

53:30 people hanged by their hands tied behind their back. Not as often as people taken from the line to be shot

54:00 did see this happen to some people from his little town

54:25 was beaten but did not experience the other punishments; God was watching out for him;

54:33 no reason for being beaten;

55:00 One time he was beaten because his bed wasn't made properly; no one didn't get beaten

55:50 Where he slept; bunkers beds nailed together; two bunks; 20 feet walking space between bunks

56:45 No sanitation;

57:20 beat people with hoses; Also sprayed running water on them very roughly

58:04 No one stood out for their cruelty or kindness; was 17, this idea never crossed his mind

Disc Two

01:11 When he hears the name Szebnie- horrible things, clothing from people who were shot; dogs barking all of the time; panic-stricken people getting up in the morning; extremely scary- amazing that they even survived; People hanging from their arms; Very difficult life, glad to be shipped out

02:44 Shipped out in October, one evening took them out on tracks and brought them to rail station in Szebnie and took off all their clothes except underwear and shoes and put them in cattle wagons; there were already people in the wagons too; maybe about 100 people; two days to Auschwitz no food.

04:00 Each wagon had a soldier; To his knowledge, everyone was shipped from Szebnie to Auschwitz

4:50 most people were his age or a little older;

05:20 no sanitation in the trains

05:45 how many survived? Arrived in evening in Auschwitz; crawled over people who were laying on the ground; Maybe committed suicide

06:35 Had heard that there were places that they just killed people there.

07:18 He believed he could survive; Prayed to God, to mother and grandfather

07:41 When first arrived in Auschwitz- at night lots of lamps; Told to jump from the train; ran 30 feet and told you to go here or there. German and Ukrainian soldiers

09:05 First impression- sacred; Could smell something that now smell every minute of his life-like burned meat; did not know what the smell was

10:00 smell the was from crematoria; factory of killing people; impossible smell

10:42 After selected, stayed for quite a while; other side loaded on tracks and taken away; uncertain what would happen

11:15 then took them on tracks; outside for several hours; cold winter snow; told that they would be given clothes; told that they would go to shower rooms and put them to work; explanation given to everyone;

12:37 no food or drink, told people to undress; stayed in long line; Tattooed on arm 161768; then got a shower and drank water from the shower; hot shower- first how show since left Krosno

14:14 assembled after shower and gave them clothes-wooden shoes no socks, pants, jacket, hat.

14:49 Lager #10 in Birkenau and first meal; Told procedures etc

15:28 meal was a slice of bread and soup; pushed around quite a bit; Block held thousands

16:11 Mel's description of the layout of camp; 50 buildings next to each other extremely long buildings; etc. Many people committed suicide on the electric fences

17:18 Description of where he slept; Three bunks high; If someone did not eat his bread, it would get stolen; But Mel did not do this-did not take chances, was very much subdued;

18:20 Sanitation- for that particular building, there were toilets; Open toilets and washroom house separate; no running water; were expected to keep clean though. If you were not clean, were given beating; In the middle of the building- looks a fireplace, that's where the beatings were given on prisoners' back or backside; Mel was given 10 one time

20:30 cleanliness inspections; check uniform; punished if kapos didn't like what they saw

21:11 description of a typical day; given coffee, no food; then role call-lines to no end; If you didn't respond to your number- gravely punished

22:38 after role call, went to work; Mel's work was nothing of importance-killing stones from one place; wooden shoes in snow; Mel did not have any specific job to amount to; cleaning facilities and streets; not building or work of any importance

23:50 in the evening-back to the block daily meal-slice of bread and some soup; had to be orderly in lines; after that bunks and sleep; lights were always on

24:40 every once in a while (maybe every three weeks) marched to show room and de lousing room and then given new clothes

25:00 What soup was made of; potatoes mostly or potato peeling; probably potatoes went all to the kapos or German or Ukrainian soldiers; Mel does not remember anything else in the soup- no meat or rice etc. Eat right by your bed

26:30 Selections all the time; Mainly selecting people to send to different concentration camps; Went to many selections; Selections in the blocks- looked at your face and health, etc. If people were selected out, they never came back

27:57 Crematorium was only a few blocks away; piles of dead bodies- they saw them when they went to the showers

28:40 Mel saw dead bodies in the thousands; bodies of men, women, and children; they did not hide this at all;

30:20 not aware of any medical facilities-doubt this very much- not in Birkenau;

31:00 medical experiments- know now about them, but not at the time

31:24 in Auschwitz until December 1944; then they were looking for people to work and Mel volunteered because he wanted to get out of there.

31:55 sent to coal mine in Poland- Furstenfeldgrube; transferred there by train- wasn't very far from Auschwitz- maybe two hours; several hundred about 400 or 500; Were constantly bringing people to this coal mine; lots of available slave labor;

33:45 when first arrived- assigned to a building; smaller bunk; everyone slept separately; no mattresses;

34:40 constant selections; worked on night shift the whole year; normal procedure- counting and look if the prisoners look healthy; if selected out-probably sent back to Auschwitz

36:05 Mel's description of the layout of the camp; small houses, built in the late forties; in circle configuration; in center- conducted counting and hanging; not shooting, hanging was standard; as much as 12 people at one time; prisoners had to watch the hangings; methods to scare people to work harder

38:00 scare tactics- had to fill 28 wagons in the mines; no apparent reason for hangings.

38:39 punished in the line; very hungry; given food once every 24 hrs;

39:22 when stayed in line for food- when not precisely in line you would get kicked. One time he fell asleep; hit on face still have scar on face; also have scars on behind; shows scare on face;

41:15 the German supervisors in the coal mine were old- the young were at the front;

41:50 work was 10 hours; however, there was a long march to each work site; Very dangerous mines; description of work

43:00 more interested in drilling machinery than the people;

43:40 were told to go in immediately after dynamite; air was extremely thick. Shovel- could not even see it; no protection for the face; had a carbine light; didn't even have a hard hat

45:00 the Germans were making margarine and grease for tracks; coal was oily; more description of work; no kneecaps

45:50 would tear through clothes; had to get clothing replaced often; same type of clothes as in Auschwitz- same numbers as well

46:15 left this camp January 18 1945; went on death marches; marched for quite a while and went to other concentration camps- there were dozens of little coal mines;

47:30 Gleivitz- was a very heavy winter- very harsh; lots of snow- very bad situation on the march; people were dying; people in the thousands on the march; people shipped in all directions from Gleivitz; distance to Gleivitz two days or three days walk; no food or water provided but there was food

49:50 back to Aushwitz- in the fall there were leaves falling from the trees and they eat the leaves; later on- ate any type of leaves, or grass;

50:50 on the death march to Gleivitz- people who fell behind were shot; probably 80 percent survived;

51:47 once Mel arrived in Glievitz stayed for a couple days- put in open trains; still had a blanket; shoved into the corner in the cattle wagon; covered self with blanket and didn't move from them; So many people in the wagon- 100 to 120; many people died; weaker people died and stronger people through them overboard; don't remember stopping until Prague; heard that Czech people through food into the trains- did not experience this personally

54:30 did not see food; Mel lived off of snow- was constantly snowing; just men on this transport; did not see any women for years; couldn't become friends with people but didn't know people by name; friends from working and marching together, but couldn't become close;

56:50 transport lasted a couple weeks; no interaction with anyone on the train; each person tried to survive on their own.

58:42 about 25 people were left in wagon when they arrived in Dora Mittelbau;

59:08 arrived in Dora in February; Dora was an arms factory of V1 and V2; Von Braun was the man in charge of that place- later built for the U.S.

1:00:21 wasn't there for very long; Dora was in the mountains in Germany, cities of huge factories; 60,000 slave labors plus Germans; but Mel only saw his own group; mining streets; sent from Dora to another concentration camp Termalin; Dora close to Nordhausen; camp in Termalin and worked in mountains; specific job was mining streets; in Dora worked in stone mine; had street cares, volunteered to do this work; in Dora through April.

1:03:06 why selected to go to Termalin?

Disc 3

00:00 recap of Dora (last disc at 1:00:21)

03:10 why selected to go to Termalin? Division of Dora; people housed in Termalin; working on tunnels in the mountains to build in the mountains;

04:22 when did you leave Termalin? April 1945; English and American army- Nordhausen liberated by American army and then later given to Russian army; Mel sent on another march; Thought they could still use them for labor or destroy them, not going to allow them to get liberated

05:50 death march- thousands of people, columns with no end; probably weighed around 90 kilo at that time;

06:40 walked a couple weeks; the walk- walked about eight or ten abreast; if you stepped back one, they shot you, didn't wait until you fell behind; never knew what was going on during the war; I saw during the march, thousands of airplanes overhead; the sky was black with airplanes; didn't think they were German airplanes because he knew what those looked like; didn't know that America was in the war, but did know that the airplanes would help them

08:55 marched until May 3rd, 1945 arrived to Neustadt-Holstein; put them on tug boats; 100-200 people per boat and then took them on a ship- anchored 5 kilo from city of Nuestadt Holstein (fishing village); about a thousand on the ship

10:58 purpose of putting Jews on the ship was to destroy it;

11:51 eight or ten hours to liberation; no food;

12:20 Germans were on the ship; put had different uniform than the ones who marched with them; German uniform was dark gray with helmet; uniform of the people on the ship was like marine uniforms;

13:34 tremendous amount of commotion; could hear English airplanes; frequent firing from the ship to the airplanes;

14:49 there were also a lot of other ships; he saw women on another ship

15:16 English airplanes came and bombed the ship; enough to create fire and panic and make the ship tilt; he jumped from the ship before it sunk

16:00 bombed the ship because it wouldn't surrender; the city was already liberated; they had orders to blow the ship up; 90% of the people from the ship died; or 99%; they left the city only 7hours before they could have been liberated;

17:34 the English then rescued as many as they could- 350 people officially; Mel hopes they rescued more;

18:11 rescued on May 3rd 1945 between noon and three; rescued by British army or navy by a boat and took him out of the water and brought him to a beach;

19:15 took them on military tracks; "God bless the English army; God Bless the American army," they made a huge mistake; they gave them all kinds of goodies and food; and we so starved to death and systems deteriorating; everyone got sick and lots of people died; best intention, but ; they were good human beings but lots of people ate and suffered

21:00 only have five minutes left; ask if he can come back or complete now;

Disc 4

01:09 August 1st 1991; continuing the interview

01:26 beginning with questions about his family; parent's names, etc. cousin, etc.

02:16 sister two years younger, Hanna

02:30 when ordered to wear Jewish star armband, thoughts? Thought it was scary, thought something worse would then happen, but was also proud to see the star

03:20 in Krosno, a cousin was with him Simon Fries; talked about family and worried about family; didn't have contact with family

04:21 did see Simon Fries again

05:00 in Krosno; guards wore yellow- type uniforms; working division;

06:08 Szebnie was a concentration camp for murderers or people who committed crimes; sorted clothes; ethnic mix- just Jews; some women but did not see them

07:20 camp supervised by Ukraine police, main were German Gestapo or SS; could see insignia

08:33 tattoo; description of being tattooed; was painful; but went through worse things

09:31 Mel shows the number

10:02 who were the kapos? Jews, fellow inmates; also lots of Germans, gay people; political Polish people;

10:46 how did he know they were gay? Had a V upside-down sown on their jacket.

11:30 some of the gay men were kapos as well, but doesn't how they were selected; thinks maybe they came earlier on; never saw these selections;

12:22 at that time they were half vegetable, half human; not to Mel's knowledge were the gay men treated differently; not aware of any homosexual relationships

13:27 Kapo's living quarters- separate rooms in the barracks;

14:00 Polish prisoner's uniforms? Maybe had a red mark as political prisoners; heard later on that there were also Russian soldiers captured- POWs; mixed in with other prisoners; told later about it;

15:00 did not venture from his barrack; if you did it would be dangerous from other inmates; just tried to survive and did what he was told; didn't take chances; wasn't brave at all, just tried to survive;

16:10 in Furstenfeldgrupe –Germans ran the camp, also had some Ukrainians; when they marched to coal mine-Ukrainians were their guards;

17:11 hangings in Furstenfeldgrupe- often, think of this often; 6 at a time or more; scaffold was never removed from roll call place; saw this many, many times.

18:05 Germans finalized hangings and red out why they were being hung; kapos put rope around their neck and then told to kick away the table; people were yelling in Polish- tell wife, etc.

19:15 prisoners didn't talk very much to each other; cannot possibly forget it; can see it like Mel sees the interviewer now

20:15 Dora- chaos, hard work, underground tunnels; there was not severe punishment like others; the people running the camp knew that the enemy armies were close by;

21:37 didn't know that liberation was coming- maybe "slave mentality"; didn't have any inkling that the war was going to end;

22:30 Germans didn't behave much differently as liberation was coming, maybe more aggressive; maybe they were tired too or hungry but doubt it because they had some rations and the prisoners didn't; shot anyone who fell out of line

23:30 any friendly or helpful German soldier? Mel says no; German or Ukrainians soldiers did not come into contact with individuals

24:27 some compassion during mining operations-left a cigarette or a bite of bread; Polish? In charge for drilling

25:15 Mel did not approach soldiers; did not want to take the chance of them thinking he was trying to hurt him; maybe this is why he survived, with the help of God; lots of brave men are not here now; Mel did not take chances, was not brave;

25:40 Termalin- about 5,000 people; same mountains; where V1 and V2 built, all underground;

26:44 just daily work, not one single thing was memorable; was slavery;

27:44 passed through Lubeck during march; big city-passed right through it; saw something more than normal when they went through side roads;

28:48 other towns passed through; doesn't remember names;

29:23 what happen in Neustadt-Holstein;

30:29 what Mel was seeing, thinking? Amazed, shocked, etc.; lots of little ships

31:40 did not see very many Germans, maybe one or two dozen; white uniforms;

32:00 Mel could see airplanes flying over the ship; more came later on; ship that Mel was on fired at the planes; 65 months from on camp to anther;

33:30 were the people from the death march? Mel believes so; ship was overloaded with people- about 8,000 people;

34:50 the British bombed the ship; everyone panicked; fire on one side of the ship was severe; people started jumping in the water; Mel jumped in the water to survive; When he jumped, there were hundreds of people in the water, people were drowning, nothing to hang on to; didn't have debris to hang onto; the British sailors came after about 20 minutes; small boats were also bombed; women from a concentration camp drowned; no children were there;

37:15 after the rescue; given sweets and taken to hospital; 305 people were brought to that hospital;

37:55 photo; marched to lay wreaths for people who had drowned;

39:20 what happened next? Mel says he doesn't like to talk about it; was very sick- had Typhus, lice, other things; Stayed in hospital, did not have civilian clothes;

40:12 by June of 1946 left Neustadt- Holstein; in a displaced person camp for a short while there;

40:46 people told him to go to American zone, more Jews there maybe could find relatives or go to Israel or America;

41:00 description of displaced person camp- not as bad as a concentration camp but still was no picnic; had to live on handouts;

41:30 photo of a letter; from cousin; mother's cousin; letter says she's alive and she's happy he is alive; says uncle died in a ghetto; knew also that Mel's family was caught and shot- told him later;

43:31 any survivors in family? Not from immediate family at all; did have a cousin who is now in Israel; ran away to Russian occupied side of Poland and sent to Siberia;

44:14 what happened to Aunt's baby? Baby survived; mother and aunt and uncle did not survive-shot in 1943; was in contact with Jewish organization after the war and told him that they took the baby from the Polish family; but never able to find the baby or verify;

45:45 Polish people did hide people but kicked them out if they got sick of it and then the Gestapo would kill them

46:16 where next? Went to Munich, and then somewhere else; ?, went to Jewish organization school; told that if he got a profession, he would have better chances to immigrate to America; stayed there and went to school; met wife there-she was at the same school; was a form of DP camp; technical training;

47:40 met wife in 1948; came to America in April, 1951;

48:05 what documents was Mel able to take? Had eyewitness documents that verified people were with him in concentration camps

49:15 photos of documents

49:33 pamphlet that Mel got in Germany; factual pictures taken from American army;

50:34 photo of mass grave, although photos; etc.

Message for future generations- should see to it that this doesn't happen again; should not happen to any nation or any other religion; was reluctant to tell story;

From age 15 to close to 21 in different concentration camps;

See now antisemitism in the U.S. and Holocaust deniers; Hitler did not kill all the Jews, satisfaction that Mel survived; built a family; have a wife, three children, two grandchildren;

53:11 age 67 now, still work; maybe still have "slave mentality," with God's help, hope you can do something; people should not permit this to happen to anyone; but have to be educated and told what happened;

54:27 even in this description, did not describe one thousandth of a percent of what it was like in a concentration camp.