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Jack Werber - Holocaust Rescuers Interviews

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TELEPHONE INTERVIEW OF JACK WERBER by SAM OLINER

O: What I want to do, Mr. Werber, is to ask you some specific questions. You were born in...?

W: Radom.

O: I know Radom. And, most of your family perished, right?

W: Yes

O: Where did they perish?

W: Treblinka.

O: Most of them perished in Treblinka. O.K. Could you tell me...you got into Buchenwald when?

W: In 1929.

O: Why so early?

W: I'll tell you why. See, they arrested Polish gentiles. The Germans, they came into Radom and they arrested the leaders. The leaders consisted of the editors of newspapers, who were the residents of the town just like me, then they arrested another 3,000 Polish gentiles and about 100 Jews and I was one of them. I was a leader of Shamer Hatzair. These arrested people were taken right away to Buchenwald. We were the first Polish Jews and Poles. There were also political prisoners who came to Buchenwald from around various countries. Buchenwald was for political prisoners', not only for German Jews but also for German political prisoners such as Communists, Jehovah's Witnesses. Buchenwald was built approximately between 1926-27. I was among the few Jews who first were sent to Buchenwald. I arrived there in December in Buchenwald in December of 1939 and was there about 5-1/2 years until liberation, April 11, 1945.

O: Yes. And, then from that met your wonderful wife, Millie, afterwards.

W: Yes.

O: And got married. But, tell me.... Let me return back to Buchenwald. You said.... Well let me ask you first, why (I am sure you have been asked this question many, many times; I have been asked similar questions) why did you get involved in saving these 700 children when it was less risky to save yourself and your friends.

W: I will explain to you further. First of all, when we came in we had very rough times. The We were sent to quarries not so much to work hard but to be killed. This was a method of killing people. [In other words, they worked them to death or brutalized them to death occasionally.] They came out with four or five hundred people, in a specific work unit called a commando. If three quarters came back to the camp at the end of that particular work day it was a miracle.

O: Where was the quarry?

W: Outside Buchenwald.

O: O.K.

W: Outside Buchenwald about a mile or so was a quarry. There we broke stones, smashed stones, with some fixing of roads. They don't need it, the stones. But, there is a method of killing people.

O: Mostly men.

W: There was only men there. Buchenwald was a camp for men only.

O: So...

W: Then, I tell you, in the lowest category in Buchenwald were Jews. We were put in a barrack, they called it barrack, a Jewish barrack. Most of them were German Jews at that time. The German Jews, for no reason at all, hated the Eastern European Jews such as Polish Jews. They were regarded as the lowest category of prisoners by everybody. And, then they began to organize an underground, a resistance movement, and at the beginning they didn't take in any foreigners, just German political prisoners including German Jews. But, approximately a year and a half later they approached us Eastern European Jews who suffered the most to join them and they joined the underground. The leader was Carl Bach, who is still alive in Germany.

O: What's his name?

W: Carl Bach.

O: Yes, he's in your book

W: Yes, he was one of the underground leaders and they asked me if I wanted to join them. I said, "Yes, I'd love to." We wanted to have better conditions. Because at that point, they were stealing from us food. Most of the underground leaders initially were professional criminals.

O: Uh huh. Professional criminals.

W: Yes, professional criminals.

O: Yes

W: They hated us and they were stealing from us. The Germans authorities put those criminal types in charge of us in Buchenwald.

O: These were obviously not Jewish.

W: Not Jewish.

O: Of course, of course. Go ahead.

W: Little by little, the political underground took over the power. Little by little, these underground groups got the power. They also started to organize not only the Germans political prisoners but other political prisoners including Poles and Jews, but they considered us Jews as Poles because we were from Poland. For them there are no Jewish group, we were just Poles. This is the way it was initially

O: They regarded you as Poles

W: Yes. As Poles. But, we had our own group. I organized a Jewish group of about 12 – 15 people who joined me, and this was our group. And, this group was trying to help Jewish prisoners who were in the camp or were newly arrived.

O: They were mostly Jewish, that group.

W: Yes, they were Jews.

O: O.K.

W: And then, during a specific time there arrived a group of Gypsies. Among them were some children. They took all the children, about 200 of them, and they took them to a forest and they killed them all. All right. Little by little, our group got a little more power. Day by day we have more power. And, they have a way to organize this way.... When a new transport came in, let's say they were Czech, then the Czech group took over the power and try to help their countrymen, the Czechs.

O: Yes.

W: You have to take care of the good ones and the bad ones.

O: Yes

W: The same thing, when a Jewish transport came in, we had to take care of them. As a matter of fact, they came in with certain fears and experiences and were afraid of the showers. We didn't know at that time that there existed showers, which were really gas chambers. But, they came into Buchenwald, the Jews, they were afraid when we told them to go to the showers that it was a gas chamber. We had to change this fear that they brought with them. We took a

shower with them to show that there is no danger in it. We undressed ourselves and went into the showers.

O: I see.

W: We assured them they should not worry about it. We took over the power of the Jews. We had to take care of the Jewish people who came. The first transports came in from a place called Skarzysko.

O: Skarzysko Kaniniene? Yes, I know it.

W: Yes. Previously they liquidated Skarzysko. As the Russians were approaching the camp, they were liquidated and the population remaining was sent to Buchenwald. There came with them a few Jewish children from 5 years to 16. At the same time... Oh, I have to tell you something that is important. Prior to those children arriving, the Ukrainian neighbor and friend came with another transport from Radom. He was our good friend and was on one of those transports to Buchenwald. He told me that my family was taken to Treblinka and was murdered. He came over and he told me the whole story. At that time I had a little girl who was three years old when that happened. But when I left she was one year old. They liquidated in Treblinka my wife, my brothers and sisters and other members of my family. Jewish children came in. I had an urge that they had to be rescued. Because I remembered what happened to my child. And, I saw what happened to the Gypsy children. And, I knew what was going to happen to them. And, I knew that something must be done because I suspected that they were going to do something similar to those Jewish children. I approached Carl Bach, our leader, and other members of the underground, mostly German Jews, and I said they have to help, they must help me to save the children. See, we registered these children as being older children, found them jobs in the various work groups and show the authorities that they were working in various places including the hospital. I tried to show in the records that I have jobs for them all to work in. And, then most of the children were placed in the small camp which was a satellite camp next to the main large camp. This was like an annex.

O: An annex, a small one.

W: It was like a warehouse because when prisoners arrived there they stayed temporarily and then they were needed for other camps or for extermination. They didn't take them from the main camp.

O: I see.

W: When they were taking roll call in this small camp, this so called warehouse of people many would hide and many of the small kids were not included among the roll calls. Because the Germans used prisoners to help to administer the camp, it was easy to cover up the numbers of people in the camp.

O: Sure

W: And because there was typhus the Germans were deadly afraid to go into the small camp, because they were afraid of getting sick. Generally, Germans were afraid of sickness and contagion. That's why they were afraid to go in and count.

O: They are afraid to go in to count?

W: They are afraid to go inside to count because of contagions. The small children were very smart and bright, they got the wisdom of the ages because they knew the consequences of not paying attention so they helped in their own survival. Even though they had the mind of a six year old, they know everything because they knew the danger and tried to help.

O: Yes

W: Because of this kind of concealment, we were able to establish schools, which we organized in certain barracks in the small camp, in which we taught various lessons. We even had singing lessons, violin lessons. And when a guard might be approaching, or someone that might betray them, there was a warning system and the signal was Strigler.

O: Strigler. O.K.

W: What we were teaching them was singing, teaching them about hope, about the future, about Zionism and about that they might be able to go to Palestine after the war. The children did not believe much of this because they also are realists and not sure they are going to survive.

Among them was a well known person whose name was Strigler, who later came to this country after the war and became the editor of a Yiddish newspaper called "Forward."

O: So how did you keep singing and playing the violin in secret?

W: Well, we had a warning system and our signal was #18, so if danger was approaching somebody would say 18 and the rest of the message was passed on to the barracks in which the classes were held in which the singing was done.

O: Now, you also said in your book, Mr. Werber, that Buchenwald was not very well guarded and there wasn't too many S.S. people, it was mostly by the prisoners.

W: This was already 1944.

O: What about prior to that date?

W: Before that it was a problem because we were brutalized, and at the same time there were also people who hated Hitler, people such as socialists and communists who were in that camp. Yet, the German guards treated them better than the Jews.

O: I see.

W: Because there was a munitions factory outside of Buchenwald, many of the members of the underground were stealing weapons from the factory, especially towards the end of the war, and they were also buy them from the S.S. people near the end of the war. The commandant had a good idea that something was going on.

O: He knew?

W: Oh, yes. The first time in the history of Buchenwald, he held a meeting which is called reveille, actually in German it is called “apel”, and he told us that he suspected something but as long as we don’t bother him, he won’t bother us. From time to time, they showed us newsreels, especially when the Red Cross came to inspect and the newsreels showed how the Germans were winning the war, etc. Because the Germans were afraid of illness and diseases, they would not come to inspect the hospital either that existed in Buchenwald. On the occasion of alarm, when the S.S. guards were walking to the camp, the signal of #18 was given and various people who needed to hide, especially the kids, they went into the hospital, and because the hospital staff consisted of some Jewish doctors, nurses, etc. they would hide them in the basement of the building until the guards passed. As I have said before, towards the end of the war the Germans were more cautious and would not venture out into the camps. They were relatively cautious.

The Germans regarded Jews as the bottom of the barrel, the least desirable people on earth, and the Jews knew about that and they also knew if liquidation time came that the Jews would be the first to go. So, at one point, there was a reveille, or apel, that is all people have to line up in front of their barracks and the commandant gave an order that everybody should go back to the barracks except the Jews. Well, all the people went back to the barracks, so this was a kind of disobedience of 40,000 people. There was not much that the commandant could do, and it is also known in history books that Buchenwald was one of the few camps that liberated itself; not by the allies, but they themselves liberated—they took over the camp at the very, very end.

Among the prison leaders there was an elder in each barrack called Lager Eltste.

O: Were those Lager Eltste, were they Jews?

W: No.

O: They were Germans? Or Poles? Or....

W: No, no. Just Germans.

O: Just Germans, German prisoners.

W: German political prisoners. They too cooperated because they also saw the handwriting on the wall—that liberation was coming and there is no way, besides German propaganda, the newsreels in the local movie house, that the Germans are really winning. Everybody knew that they are really losing.

O: Let me ask you this—I noticed in your book that you were hanging on a tree, there is a photograph, you were just punished and were just cut down. What happened? Why?

W: The prisoners were carrying boxes, and the load was very heavy. They had handles on the boxes, so in order to help themselves out, they tied a rope around their shoulders to help their shoulders carry those boxes. Well, this was a mistake, and the Germans disapproved of it. At one point a box was dropped, then those people who carried those boxes tied to ropes around their shoulders were hung on trees.

(In the book there are pictures of people hanging by their arms tied to trees and Werber was one of those people hung there for a long time before they cut him down. Another person who was hanging there was a man by the name of Otto Feuer who was a Jewish political person from Austria. He survived the war and still is in touch with Werber. Afterward, the papers praised him as a great poet and author.

W: Karl Bach, he lives in Germany, in Frankfurt.

O: I see. Now, are you still in touch with Karl Bach?

W: Yes. From time to time he comes to my house. And sometimes he stays for three weeks. He still believes in communism and still believes that that form of society is less oppressive. He has to believe in the communist socialist ideology.

O: Well, listen, he believes in something strongly. Let me ask you another question. Any of these kids, you say “I believe that one of those kids is a friend of mine”. I was born in 1930, so when the war was ended, I was 15. One of those kids, I know is a very good friend of mine, lives in Chicago, his name is Sidney Finkelstein.

W: I don't remember, but there were some kids who are now adults and grandfathers who are in touch, and one of those is a famous man who is a chief rabbi of Israel, called Rabbi Lau. Others are in touch with him and there was a conference held in Toronto where they took pictures together of this gathering of those “kids” who were prisoners in Buchenwald and who [Werber had a substantial hand in saving their lives]. I visited some of the “kids” in Toronto and took pictures with them. Some of them also live in Brazil and other places. So, they are in touch with each other, those who are still alive and around.

O: Let me ask you one other question. And that is, How are you feeling now. Do you feel O.K? Are you in good health?

W: I'm like an old Chevy, you know.

O: Like an old what?

W: Like an old Chevy. I feel O.K., don't break down.

O: Again, why do you think you got involved with this helping of these kids? Was it much....

W: I don't know. When I received the news that my family perished in Treblinka, as well as my beautiful young child, and when he saw the Gypsy children who came and were exterminated in the forest, I decided then I had to help. I didn't care about danger. Along with others, we knew we had to help. And that's the major motivation why I got involved.

O: You said that the Germans left, and the Ukrainians took over the towers.

W: And then, of course, as the end [of the war] was coming, we were angry at the Ukrainians who were in the service of the Nazis, and who beat them up and maybe even killed some of us, for brutalizing us, and the Ukrainian guards tried to hide but were unsuccessful because the prisoners recognized them.

O: I see. Listen, I am very grateful for you talking to me.

W: I don't care. I could stay a whole night of talking.

O: And, you are extremely, extremely informative. Can I call you back again, when I have some additional questions? And I hope to have some of your permission to use some of your things in an article, in a piece, that I am writing?

W: Just when you write it, send me a copy.

O: I will. It will take some time, because I am writing actually a book of Jewish heroes. Are you familiar with a book, Mehama Tec's book (T-e-c), she has written a book about the Bielsky brothers.

W: No.

O: O.K., my friend. Let me get your address first. I'll send you a book and when I think of some additional questions, I will call you.

W: Any time.

O: What's your address?

W: 84-22 Midland Parkway. Jamaica Estates, NY 11432

O: So, I want to say thank you

W: It's a pleasure... I survived to tell the story.

O: Yes. I'll send you actually two books. I'll send you my book, which is the story of my.... I called it "Restless Memories", my own story. And then I'll send you a book about this Jewish...this Wilhelm Bachner, Jewish rescuer like yourself.

W: Thank you.

O: I will do that and I'll talk to you soon again.

W: O.K. Thank you very much. And, you can call me any time.

O: Thank you. And, when I am in New York, I have a brother-in-law living in Manhattan, so when I come to New York next time, I will give you a call.

W: Oh. Thank you.

O: Thank you so much.

W: Your welcome. Bye bye.