

Transliteration of Cassette

Holocaust Survivor: **Naftali Sieff**

Interviewer: Libby Reichman

The interviewer Libby

Place: Sydney, Australia

Language: English

Date: 11.7.1995

\*^\*

I was born in the small town of Sveksna, Lithuania. This was a quiet place. The total population was about 1000. This number included about 50-60 Jewish families. Life centered around the main street. The Synagogue was located at the end of this street, near the market place. The Jews lived in the town's center, mostly on streets that led to the Synagogue. Sveksna differed from other small places for a high school was located there. It was run by the Catholic Church. There were not many Anti-Semitic laws, for the government was democratic. There was a strong Anti-Semitic sector in the local population; it had been this way for many years and never changed. Our family did not feel it too much; for we were quiet; but we did feel that there was Anti-Semitism. This was before the Germans captured the area.

A few restrictions were placed on the Jews:

1. Jews were forbidden to buy land.
2. Only a small percentage of Jews were allowed to study in the University.

Most of the Jews owned small stores, had small businesses or were traders (shoes, building supplies, etc.).

Sveksna was situated near the German border; and Anti-Semitism also came from there. The large city in the area was Memel (Klaipeda). This city was 40 kilometer from Sveksna.

The largest town in the area was Taurage, and the 2 small neighboring towns were Vevirzani (Vazan in Yiddish) and Naumestis (Naistot in Yiddish). Lithuania is a small country, so Sveksna was not too far from Kovno, the capital. My father would buy supplies for the store there and would take me with him. The city was nice.

The local population was made up of 90% Lithuanians, 7% Jews, and the remainder was German and a few Gypsies. The local language was Lithuanian (from the Lithuanian-Latvian language group. There is no other language which is similar to these languages). The Jews spoke Yiddish. They were able to speak Lithuanian; but not too well; but spoke if need be. All the Lithuanians in Sveksna were Catholic.

There were 5 children in our family, and I was the youngest. My oldest brother Max went to South Africa in 1928. I had 3 sisters. My oldest sister fled to Russia, at the time of the WAR. My second

sister went to Ghetto Vilna and was killed there. My third sister was shot together with our mother near Sveksna.

When I was about 9 months old, the entire town was burnt. In those days there was no insurance. My father had to start from scratch. It was difficult to earn enough to support the family. He bought a small house and a shop, with the financial help of his 2 brothers in the USA. His business was not as good as it had been before the fire. The house was barely large enough for the family. We had an aunt, my father's sister, who lived in Sveksna. She died about 4 years before the WAR. My mother had a few relatives in the area, and a sister and other relatives in South Africa. They immigrated there for economic reasons and for wanting a higher level of living.

Children began the Jewish school at the age of 6. The learning in the Cheder was in the afternoon. Jewish children studied this way until the age of 14. After my Bar Mitzvah, my father wanted me to receive a general education. The Rav and the Rebbe wanted me to continue in the Yeshiva. I applied and received a scholarship for the Catholic high school. My 3 older sisters also received such an education and also received scholarships, for our father could not afford to pay the tuition. Only a few Jewish children studied there. The ratio was 4:100. The relationship between the Jews and the Church were satisfactory. It was compulsory for us to attend school on Shabbat; but we did not have to do anything there, not even to answer questions. The Rebbe taught there, as a religion instructor.

The Catholic students showed Anti-Semitism; mostly in their speech. I did not suffer, for I was among the best in sports; but others in the class did suffer, mostly from distress and anguish.

There was Anti-Semitism outside of the high school. I myself did not feel this; but we worried when we closed the store for Shabbat/Jewish Holidays or on their Holidays (Christmas, Easter). They always loved to do some damage, when they left the Church. I remember that they once painted the sign on our store with black paint.

There weren't any changes when Hitler came into power in 1933. We were aware of the fact that Hitler entered Poland in 1939 and what was happening; for a number of Jewish refugees arrived in Lithuania. We helped them as much as we could. Some stayed in our house. They told what was happening. I was then a boy; so I do not remember much. Our parents spoke between themselves, and worried about the future. They didn't try to influence us to leave; and did not consider this an option for themselves. Due to the fact that we were geographically situated close to the German border, people heard things, such as that Jews were being persecuted and were being attacked. Remarks like "we will take care of you" were made, when someone got angry at a Jew; but nothing was actually done.

Hitler reached Memel in February, 1939. My youngest sister was then studying there; and she was forced to escape. She returned home. She told us that she was forced to escape; but did not tell why. She knew. However this did not cause much reaction from our family. As for myself, I only felt the entrance of the Germans after the War with Russia began. We listened to Hitler's speeches on the radio and of course understood that the situation was not good. Something else caught our attention; for we saw that the Russian army had begun to build bunkers and organize other methods for defense. The latter contributed to the feeling that a war was approaching. The Russians didn't have the opportunity to complete these goals. Even so, up to the last day we did

not know for sure, for we did not notice anything particular signifying that a war was coming. It seems that the local people were aware of this fact. On that particular Sunday, we were scheduled to have a football tournament, and the teacher said not to worry, for who knows what may happen by then. They seemed to have a spy ring operating by way of Germany; for they were against the Russian infiltration in the area.

We weren't well-to-do. We were a family of 5, and 4 after my brother had left. My mother had to do everything, and this was more than enough for her. Her housework was very very hard. We did not have running water or electricity in our house until I was about 12. Our father worked in the store and a bit in the garden. He tried to grow vegetables in order to help. I spent my time either in school or at sports. I was a sportsman.

The family attended the Synagogue. We went every Friday night and on Shabbat in the morning. Our father also went to pray every day, and if he did not manage to do so; he prayed at home. We were not extremely religious; but according to Australian Jewry today, we would have been considered Orthodox Jews. I remember going to the Synagogue; but not liking it that much. The Synagogue was built of stone, and was pretty new; for the old one had burnt down. I have a photograph. The women's section was upstairs. There was a small stibel next to the Synagogue. A different type of Jews prayed there. The Synagogue had a very nice Bima (platform) and Holy Ark. The synagogue was up kept very well. All the Jews prayed, were traditional and celebrated the Holidays.

The Beginning of the WAR.

Things changed for me. The WAR in Sveksna began on 22.6.1941. We all stayed at home. We did not know what to expect. My father didn't open the store. We did not stay at home for long. The store was finished (When the Russians entered Lithuania in 1940, they shut down all private businesses. Therefore it was very hard to make a living. We lived from what my brother sent from South Africa that was about 20 pounds a month, and from what we received from my father's brothers in the USA. On Shabbat, the 28.6.1941, we were arrested and taken to a camp. This happened on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the WAR in Lithuania. This occurred on Shabbat; for the local people always tried to annoy Jews on Shabbat. Then a group of SS soldiers reached Heydekrug. They were, under the leadership of Dr. Shau, who lived in Heydekrug, which was the central city that was closest to eastern Prussia. They split up into small groups of 2 SS and 1 Lithuanian volunteer. The Lithuanians knew exactly how many men were in each house. They went from house to house and arrested all the physically fit men. They took everyone who had then been arrested to the Synagogue. I was then 18 years old. They took my father and myself to the Synagogue and then the process began. This was made up of taking our personal belongings, shaving our heads, searching our bodies; and all of this included some slaps here and there. They assembled us in the woman's section of the Synagogue (upstairs). We were still wearing our own clothing. At the same time they made a camp fire of all of the prayer books, holy books and Torah scrolls. They tortured the Rabbi and afterwards shot him. They shot him while he was in the yard and we upstairs. We heard what was happening to the Rabbi. I am referring to the Rav, and not the Rabbi who was the teacher of religious subjects. They forced him to dance around. They tortured him before they shot him.

We were about 60-80 Jewish men upstairs, and about 20 Lithuanians watched over us. Everyone knew that there were about 50-60 Jewish families in Sveksna. They held us there all day and all night. In order to entertain themselves, they had us stand in lines. The woman's section had a high ceiling. They forced everyone to do exercise. This was hard for a few people; so they were pushed. This was not hard for me. They noticed this and made me and another young man stand in front of the lines; so that everyone would be able to copy what we were doing. We slept on the floor there. Trucks began to arrive in the morning, to take people a way. They did not have a problem of gasoline, etc. then. I went in the second truck.

They took us to Labor Camps in East Prussia, just on the other side of the border. This was all organized by Dr. Shau, the local SS commander, who was then in Heidelkrug, East Prussia. He owned much land and needed workers. It seems that he had gotten permission from Berlin, to do so. He organized these camps to aid the local villagers and gave them the requested labor. The 3 camps were his own camp and 2 larger ones. I was in Misloken. People worked as local laborers, mostly on the road. We built a road that led to the village Shlaven. Afterwards it became known that a road was also built, which led to the second camp, Katukin (Katkitz in German); and that these 2 roads met to form one new road. We finished this job, and we had done good work. We were in Shlavin about 2 months. The life there was similar to life in a Concentration Camp, in the way that the SS watched over us. The commander of the camp and 2 younger SS took care of beating us and torturing us. They shot a person, because he tried to escape. A few died because of the torture.

When we left the Synagogue, we were divided in to camps and trade was done with us, Then every truck went to a different place. My father was in the second truck after me, and got to the place where I was. He was only able to keep up for 3 weeks. He was 59 years old and not all that healthy; and the work building the road was very difficult. After 3 weeks, on Shabbat in the morning, a truck arrived. The SS announced that anyone who thought the work was too hard for him should get on the truck and would be taken home. So, as understood, my father went. They took him to just across the border and shot him. When we returned to the camp in the evening, we found a pile of clothes; and then we knew what had happened. We knew that the situation was not good. Afterwards someone told us exactly what had happened. The cloths on the pile belonged to those who had gotten on that truck.

After a few months, we were moved again. We received another type of guards. SR soldiers replaced the SS. One of them recognized us for he was previously with us, when we were taken from the Synagogue. Now it was a bit easier; but this was still a Labor camp.

We lived in an old farmhouse. French prisoners had lived there before us. We knew this from what was written on the beds. There were 2 big rooms on each side. We lived on the right side and we had bunk-beds. The guards lived on the left side. The washrooms were outside. We washed in cold water. There was a well outside. This was in the summer. The guards had a way of heating up water for washing themselves. We stayed in these camps for almost 2 years. One year we stayed in the exact same place. According to rumor, orders had arrived from Berlin, stating that Dr. Shau and others used the Jews for their private business, and that a change must be made.

We were gathered and then were divided out to various municipalities in the area. We lived in 1 building, without guards and walked to work. We usually had work helping the local farmers. This

way, the second year was much better than the first year, After about a half a year, I was transferred to what was called "WATERBOARD". This belonged to the Water Authority. Our job was to save the banks of the river. The melted snow and ice, after melting in the spring, reached the banks of the river. Most of the people here were from Sveksna, or from the other 5 villages near the border. I also had a school friend with me. He survived until Birkinau. We were in a place that was near the sea. We lived in 2 houses on the water. We numbered about 30. Our job was connected to saving salt from the delta that of the river; in order to save the river bank from decomposing. We had to watch the river bank. The work was interesting.

Our boss was in charge of this project and was a water engineer. He was an expert in this field. He was a member of the SS and wore an SS uniform; but that was just about all of his connection to the Nazi regime. He did not want to be taken to the Russian front. I personally had good experiences with him. His name was Jurgutis. One day I had a terrible tooth-ache and was not able to go to work and he knew of this. He came to me in the middle of the night and took me to a local dentist who pulled out the bad tooth .I thought this was very nice of him. I didn't suspect him of being a Nazi. I trusted him. He proved himself to me.

He knew that sometimes in the evenings we escaped to the farmers who lived in this area and received a bit of food. They were good people to us, despite the fact that they didn't have too much for themselves. We were able to escape for there weren't any guards. Sometimes I went to a woman, who was all by herself. Her 2 sons were on the Russian front. She worried about them very much. She would cook 6 potatoes in their peels for me and peel them when I arrived. She would sit and cry while I ate. The boss knew of this. He understood that we also helped him. He would take a few of us home with him and be nice to us. He also made sure that we would get as much food as possible, for our rations were very little. Our daily ration was no better than it had been in the previous Work-Camp. This meant that in the first year, we received about 100 grams of bread and soup in the mornings and evenings. The soup was watery with a potato or a beet or something else floating in it. The food was a bit better in the second Work-Camp; for we were closer to people and they tried to help. The boss also tried to increase the ration that came from a central place. We wore our own cloths- with the yellow star. We didn't wear uniforms until we reached Birkinau.

We were only about 15-20 kilometer from our homes, which were on the other side of the border. Before the War, these people worked in trade with the Jews and knew them. We were almost at home. There were many that helped us. During the first year, there was an old couple that went to all of their friends in the area that they trusted, in order to collect food and clothing for us. After the night roll-call, one prisoner would escape and go to them, and bring back what they had collected. This was how we had a change of clothes.

When we worked on the road, I met a young man who had studied in high school with me. We had then been good friends. He had then sometimes spent time with us. He was a member of the Communist Youth Organization. He volunteered to go to work in Germany, in order not to get caught during one of the round-ups. When I would return to the Work –Camp after a day's work, he would be working in the fields. He told me what had happened to the Jews who had remained in Sveksna. This was about a half a year after we had been taken. He told that about 3 months after we had been taken the SA that went from village to village arrived in Sveksna. They told all the Jews to dress in their best clothing for they would be taken to visit the men. They were taken

to a place about 3 kilometers from Sveksna. A pit had been previously prepared there. And they were all shot. They took all the Jews that were then in Sveksna. Whoever wasn't there then, returned after the WAR. This was the first time that I heard what had happened to my Mother and my sister. My sister, who was teaching in Vilna, was killed in the Vilna Ghetto. I knew then that everything was lost; but I succeeded in airing myself from this feeling and continuing. Then, I did not know for sure, what had happened to my father. His young man did not know anything about my father.

When we went to work in the "Waterboard"; we had good conditions, then someone complained that the Jews there had too much freedom. They decided that that place should be freed of Jews. One day we weren't taken to work and our boss knew we would be returned to Heydelkrug, to where Dr. Shau was. All this area was very close to the Lithuanian border; approximately -20 kilometers away. Then told us that he had connections with the higher-ups in the area; and he therefore knew where we would be taken. ; and that he would come to visit us. He said that when he would come in, we would know that everything was Ok if he would touch the SS pin on his collar, with a certain hand movement.

Everyone from the 3 previous camps was gathered there. We numbered no more than about 80-100. SD guarded us. These were soldiers who were in the security police. This was the first time that I had seen such guards. They had uniforms. I do not remember if they had dogs. Our previous boss came and touched his collar.

We slept at night on the floor of a school. The next morning, we were arranged in a row and Dr. Shau, who was the area commander, gave short speech and stated "Jews, you are going to another camp to work; if you work well there like you worked here, everything will be OK". We, of course, did not believe him. Perhaps he himself did not know anything more? I think that he did know more, as to what was going on. In the morning, we were put into 2 cattle-cars of a train. Thus the trip to Aushwitz-Birkenau began. More cattle-cars were added to the train, along the way. We did not know where we were going. We reached Birkenau. The conditions on the train were not as bad as in other transports. We were able to move. We were not packed in like sardines in a can. I don't remember if we received any food. There were no washrooms on the train. We still wore our own clothes. This trip took about 2 days and 1 night; for we had to travel from Eastern Prussia to Southern Poland, to Aushwitz-Birkenau. We reached a side railway platform in Birkenau.

We still did not know what this place was. We saw a big camp, with people walking around. We thought that that was all. We entered the camp through the usual way of the "selections" and going either to the right or to the left. The fact that we were good workers, and that we were not too thin helped us. The food that we had gotten as beggars, had kept us in good condition. Therefore only a few of us were sent to the left side. There were a few older people and youngsters who were told to go to the left side and get on the truck.

We went into barracks, and until we entered them, we still did not understand what was going on. The person responsible for our barrack was a French Jew of Polish origin. The Women were in a different camp. The head of our barracks arranged us in a line and gave us a short lecture. He said that if we will behave and do what we are told to do it will be alright; and if not our end will be like those who were burnt in the crematorium, like those who after the "selection" got on the truck. Then there was smoke coming from the chimneys. He said things; but did not explain anything. We

had not heard previously about such actions; so even though he said this, we did not actually understand. There had not been a radio in our previous camp. The local German population in Eastern Prussia also did not know what was happening. After we spoke with other prisoners who had been there a while we began to understand; after all the meaning was clear. We arrived in Aushwitz-Birkenau in September 1943, just about 2 years after we had first been taken. We went through the preliminary procedures: we took off our civilian clothing and they were taken away; we were de-loused, which was not very pleasant, our bodies were washed with carbolic acid, all of our hair was shaven, we went through showers and then received our uniforms. Our numbers were tattooed on us. The latter was done by hand, by prisoners. My number was: 132852.

Then we entered our barracks. We were not too many. The internal conditions were very bad. We had never seen such a sight. There were bunk –beds, 3 to each bed in 4 rows. There was a metal oven at one end, with outlet pipes running along the walls. That was all that there was there. We were like sardines. Then everything began. There was roll-call the next morning. Whoever did not move fast enough was pushed and beaten; then we went to work. The work was simple; only the torture was hard. We got the job of taking water from the river. I believe it was the Bug River. We took out our mess-tins, which were made of tin and were attached to us with a string. There were 4 guards sitting on the river bank. They called people to them and told them that they had tried to escape. The people went to them, for they did not understand. Afterwards they understood.

I managed to get out of this work; but I do not recall how I did this. I started to work on the extension of the railway to the crematoriums. Previously the station had been outside of the wire fence. People were brought to the crematorium by truck. That was why we marched into the camp, upon our arrival. They decided to change to location of the platform. Every time a new transport arrived, we had to lay down with our faces facing the ground; for they did not want us to see what was happening, even though we could not do anything. There is one scene that remained clearly in my memory. One day a train arrived with that was full with dead people. On top of the pile there was a lady with long blond hair that was still alive. All were sent to the crematorium. We were lucky that we had arrived after we had been in a work-camp and were therefore strong and were therefore sent to the left. People who arrived from their home or from Ghettos weren't so lucky. We spoke to other prisoners and learned much about what was happening in this camp. We learned that every week or few days there was a "selection", so that people could be sent to the gas –chambers. We learned from what to try to stay away from. During the 3 months that I was there, there were many "selections". They would write down the number of the person, and after the roll-call, took him and moved him to a different barrack. In the evening, all of the people, that had been placed there, were marched to the crematorium. At roll-call everyone stood naked and a doctor and an SS went by and looked at everyone. Then they decided that a man who had too many sores, or that was too thin, or that was not able to work longer would be taken. This would have also happened to me, if I had been there longer than 3 months.

The bathrooms were pits with a pipe for a chair. Every barrack had one. There were many people in every barrack. I don't know exactly how many. People had to go outside to use the bathroom. At night there was a big bucket inside. The barracks were closed at a certain time. Then, whoever went outside was shot by the guards. There were searchlights outside. It was also scary to go outside during the day.

We worked 6 days a week. On Sundays, they took pleasure in torturing us. What they liked best was to send us to get dirt from a big pile, in order to fill up a hole, and then to dig a hole and to do everything over again. We saw people who got slapped and other physical punishments; but there was nothing worse. I remember a young man from a place near Sveksna who did something that the guards didn't like; so they put him into a pit. He was alone and without food. I don't remember how long he was in there, and if he came out alive. A person that was taken away never returned. There wasn't a possibility to survive what they did. We heard screams ,for the barracks where people were tortures were not far away .We knew that prisoners tried to escape; for then there were sirens and everyone was forced to remain in his barracks' during the time of the search. Most of the time, they were caught and hung. All the guards had dogs. The fence was electrified; and therefore bodies stuck to it. People tried to commit suicide and did so. There was no way to escape from the camp; only from the place of work. Most worked outside of the camp; only those who worked in the shops or kitchen worked inside the camp. We never heard that someone who worked inside the camp tried to escape. I have no idea how many escaped. I had luck; without luck there was no way to remain alive. The Warsaw Ghetto uprising took place after I was in this camp for 3 months.

The Nazi plan was to destroy the Ghetto and build "Hitler Plaza" there. They therefore needed workers. They decided to take prisoner; but prisoners who were not originally from Poland. Afterwards we found out that this was because of the Nazis not wanting a connection with the Polish in Warsaw. Therefore I left the camp where I then was. Then I was almost 19. We traveled in a special train that was usually used as a cattle-car. Many people from the Work-Camp were together with me. This included everyone that wasn't sick, that didn't have sores, and that had not been chosen for the "selection"; and that had survived these 3 months. I did not have a very close friend. Most of the people were introverts. We arrived in Warsaw; but we did not know what was going on there. There were still fires in the Ghetto area. We did not even know that this place had been the Ghetto. We did know what a Ghetto was. We were taken to the Concentration Camp in the Ghetto. This camp had been in existence before we arrived. They took us to the new part of the camp that was not finished. There were barracks with rooves and walls; but without floors and without windows, though there were narrow openings up on top. We heard that this was Warsaw and what had happened to the Ghetto. Our work was to clean the bricks that remained in the Ghetto. When we went to work we had contact with the Poles that were there. They brought and took these bricks with a horse and cart. We also saw a few Ghetto survivors that were dragged out of their hiding places. I do not know if these were Jews who had hid or Jews who had fought. We worked there; but not like we had worked in Birkenau. They wanted to benefit from our work. The food was a bit better than it had been in Birkenau. The Nazis wanted to sell the bricks to local citizens. They also took all the pieces of iron; for there were many big buildings there. The conditions were bad; for the camp was not organized. After a short while, we were all covered with lice. There was a typhus epidemic.

I did not get sick. I did have swollen feet. It was hard for me to walk. I had luck again. There was a German overseer that sort of took me under his wing and watched over me a bit. The first time was when I fell from a wall; because I tried to take out 3 bricks with a pick. I fell back and hurt myself. Then this man told me not to tell anyone and not to stay sick in the camp; but to go to work. He took me out of work and put me in a hut where there was a fire; for it was winter. He watched over me this way for a bit over a week and gave me a bit of his own food. The only

reminder I have of this incident is a split on my nose. This was a good man. We destroyed buildings and large, nice marble tomb stones from the local Jewish cemetery. There were a few "selections" there.

There was what was called, a hospital in the back of this camp. People only lay there. It was emptied every once in a while and the people were sent back to Birkenau to the crematorium. I have no idea how I succeeded to not be chosen for a "selection"; for I was no longer strong .I must have been stronger than those that were taken.

We remained in Warsaw until the Russians were about 10 km from there. They reached Parga, which was possibly a suburb of Warsaw. As is known the Russians did not enter Warsaw. The Russians stopped there, for political reasons. The German camp commander could not decide what to do. He awaited instructions from Berlin. We did not go to work; for the Russians were so close by. It seems they thought that the Russians would enter Warsaw; and were also afraid that we would try to escape. On the first morning that we were told not to go to work, we saw a huge pit that had been dug in the camp. We knew what this was; but we could not do anything about it. We were kept this way for 2 days and 2 nights and they awaited the instructions that did not arrive. On the third morning the German camp commander decided himself to empty out the camp. They took us for a march. This was one of the worst things that happened during my years in these camps.

The plan to build "Hitler Plaza" was to level out the Ghetto and to build the Plaza, in its' place. Ghetto Warsaw was an extremely large area. A brick wall was built around it. The plan was to destroy everything that was left of the Ghetto inside of this wall. We left this area in a mess, for we did not finish. They did not leave any work force to finish; for everyone wanted out- to flee from the Russians. We were able to see the light from their camp. They could have come into Warsaw. The Germans wanted to flee and not have to take us out of this work place. The guards became very cruel and were without pity. Maybe they had always been this way; but this march was very hard for us for we were together with them all day and all night. When we had been in the camp they only watched over us while we worked, and only watched us once in a while when we were in the camp. The guards inside the camp were from our people. The SS barely came into the camp.

The Kapo and others were responsible for us, and there were good ones and bad ones. After all, this is natural. Their work was to be bad, to push, to punish, to torture, and to be cruel to the prisoners. I believe that most of them wanted to be liked by the Nazis. Some of them were a bit more thoughtful and good. There were prisoners who tried to get on the good side of the kapos; but I didn't know any such people. I myself couldn't be like that. I only know that in Warsaw there was much trading going on. People found gold. etc., and traded with the kapos etc., for bread and better conditions. I did not do so; perhaps since I did not have the luck of finding expensive possessions. There were beautiful mansions and plantations. We destroyed them and cleaned the bricks. I don't know for sure; but it seems to me that everything went to the black market. There were prisoners that had much more than what I had.

I remember that in Warsaw I had a friend from my town. He was a bit younger than me. I don't know how he managed; but he always managed to get receive living conditions that were a bit better than what I had. He worked in the kitchen, and this in itself was something. He had enough food and he also managed to bring some food to his father. His father was still surviving. In my

opinion, his father lived through the Holocaust because of his son. He said he would help me. He lived in the old part of the camp. One evening he came and took me to his barrack. There was a room there with a ping-pong table. In the past I had been school champion in this game. He thought that if I would show there how I play, he would be able to obtain permission for me to move there. This didn't work out, for I was not worth anything. I could not move my legs. He had tried to help me.

In the period before we left Warsaw many people were beaten. The hospital was also emptied a few times and the sick were sent back to Birkenau. We did not see them or hear about them; so I can imagine what happened... Also, when we were in Warsaw, one day there was a "opposite - selection" of the people who were healthy and able to work. Most of the people who had come from Heydelkrug were chosen, for usually they were well fit. According to rumor, they were taken for experiments. I never met one of them afterwards. I understood that I was a lost case; since I had not been taken. Perhaps they didn't have the strength to keep going. They are not to be found anywhere in this world.

Now to return to tell about the march: We left Warsaw in 1944; and it must have been spring; for it was not cold. They had us march close to a full day and it was hot. In the middle of the day they brought us to a large river and arranged us in lines of 100. They announced that every 100, according to their turn, would be able to drink. We were so thirsty and people were not able to wait and rushed to the river. I did not do so. There were shots and dogs; and the river turned red. Everyone that had not done so, or had returned was again put in line and we continued to march. The dead floated on the water.

Towards evening, we were brought into a large field and told that we would spend the night there. We had not eaten or drank all day. We dug big holes and found water, dirty water. So we tore pieces of material from our clothes to make filters, and then drank the water. The SS guard paid attention to this. He called another SS guard, who was also responsible for us and this one looked at what we had done, and he remarked "only because you were so smart, I will allow you to drink this". There was no food. We slept on the grass.

The next morning we marched again. Then I did not know in what direction we were marching, and I still do not know. It began to rain and we got completely wet. We reached a railroad station, which I think was Kutno. We were packed, like sardines, into cattle cars. Before the train left the station, we were given coffee and a piece of bread. The train was on its way and we still did not know where we were going. I don't remember how long this trip took; but it was a long trip. It was something like a day, a night and a day. We sat in our wet clothing. There weren't any restrooms. This entire trip was very difficult and people were irritated. We arrived at the Dachau Concentration Camp. When we reached Dachau, we were not in very good shape. The commanding officer of the camp was promise a train full of workers; so he was irritated and angry. We entered Dachau, and it is hard to believe; but we were given food and to rest in bed for 3 days. We understood that this was because they wanted good work from us. Afterwards we were taken to Muehldorf, which was a large town and an important railway junction near Dachau. This was a Camp in a forest. We lived in underground wooden barracks. Only the rooves were above ground level. After a while these barracks were sold to pedestrians. We received uniforms again.

We were given work. We built underground airplane hangars for the air-force. These hangars were actually deep pits, with diagonal sides. The work included dragging sacks of cement to the cement-mixer on the hill. This was very hard work. Again I was lucky and I managed to get myself out of this work, and to transfer to the building the hangars. This new job was to insulate the hangars with 2 meters of cement. A cover was put on as a roof and this was the new hangar. I worked here for almost a year. There were about 12 men, with long sticks, who stood there, and checked the amount of cement that was being poured into the iron foundations. This work was much better than dragging the sacks of cement. The food rations here were a bit better for they wanted us to have strength to work. Luckily, this was not too late. There was a bit of torture.

In April 1945, it was decided to take us out of this place. We were put on a train that was going south, in the direction of the Western Alps. The rumor was that there was a plan to finish with us there. We traveled for a day, and reached a train bridge that had been blown up. The connection with Berlin was lost; so they did not know what to do with us. We traveled forwards and backwards until we reached a place called Feldafing, or some similar name. The platform manager said to the guards "You are crazy. The Americans are 1 kilometer from here." This worked like magic. All the guards fled, and disappeared. We knew we were free and for a second we did not know what to do. We went to the field. We did not know directions. We were about 1500 prisoners. Suddenly we were shot at from a plane above us. Anyone who did not know what to do, had a problem. I entered a ditch and then went back to the train. The SS returned and stood in 2 lines. They held their spears and forced everyone to run quickly to the train. There was a need to run on top of the men that were lying on the ground in order to save ourselves. We were locked again in the train for a full day, and the train traveled forward and backward; for they did not know what to do with us. American soldiers attacked the train. Since they had seen anti-aircraft missiles on the back of the train, they thought there were German soldiers inside. Many were killed. The SS fled. We fled to the forest. When this was over, we were returned to the train. We did not know what to do next. The train returned to the station and suddenly everything was very quiet. All the SS had fled. American tanks arrived. We were permitted to get out of the train. Not all were physically able to do so. I have no idea how many we were then. I had absolutely no more strength; and was barely able to walk.

The American soldiers gave us what they had in their pockets, which was mostly not very good chocolate. Then let us walk around, and they took those who could not walk off of the train. They rounded up the Germans who had fled. This happened near the town Po-ing and not far from SesHoft, which was not far from Feldafing. They forced the Germans to march to the train and see what they had done.

The local mayor was a smart person. Right away he organized a field kitchen. I could not walk, even if I wanted to; for I was too weak. In the end, I lay on the stage of the high school with another 7 men. He understood that if we were given food, it would be easier to continue. Some went out and looked for spoils. The Germans brought us food from the field kitchen. Then the Americans decided that it was not healthy for us to remain here, for men went to look for what they could take.

We gathered together and placed in Displaced Person's Camp in Flederbing. This camp had 2-3 barracks. Previously it had been a Hitler Youth Camp. There was not enough room for everyone

there; so we were also placed in private houses (villas), whose owners had fled. I was in a very nice villa. It was located in a forest, close to the camp, about 50 meters away. There were 7 of us in 2 rooms.

Life began again. It was hard to believe that the War was finished. For a while I did not fully understand this. We trusted the American; for they proved themselves with their attitude to the Germans. Their behavior was completely different from that of the Nazis. Afterwards the Allies arrived and organized a military government with a first aid station and a connection with the nearby hospital, that had previously been under the auspicious of the Germans. The military government officials helped us as much as they could.

I never believed that I would survive and that I would be alive after the War. At this time I realized that everything was lost. The young man from Sveksna, whose father was with him, who was with me in all the camps was also here; but for a short period. He was not able to stay in this camp. He was an organized type. He found his way to Munich, which was the large city in this area. He found himself a job with the American army. After a while, I also worked for them in the army kitchen. He did not finish the War as I did, as a physically weak man. He always had enough food and was also able to help his father. He also sometimes helped me. His name was Samuel Sharon. His father died, when he was about 90, in the USA. He only survived because of his son. He would not have even been able to pass the "selection".

In this new period we began to trust fellow Jews; for the first time in 4 years. We were able to speak among ourselves. We were not able to trust anyone in the Camps. I understand that when one is very hungry, and almost dead, and there is a possibility to steal a bit of bread from someone; then this is what one does. I did not make any close friends in the Displaced Person's Camp. We played cards. During the first months, we did not have much to do there. A few people from the towns near Sveksna were there; but there was no one else from Sveksna there. The Jews there were from many places in Europe: Holland, France, the Baltic countries, and Greece I remember that when I was in Warsaw, many Greeks arrived in a big transport from Salonika. They were able to work. The people who wanted to live a Jewish religious life could do so. I had no inclination to do so. Many wanted to return to religion. We celebrated the Holidays and kept Shabbat. Even when still at home, I didn't have a desire to be religious. I was not in the Displaced Person's Camp for too long. I was there for less than 6 months. I found a camp nearby where there where the conditions were even better. This was not exactly a camp; but we lived in private homes. The office building had been an old brewery, which had also been a hotel. In Germany both of these things always go together. This building included an office, a storage room and about 6-8 rooms. We used about one half of the hotel and the other rooms were for the Germans. We were free to leave the first DP Camp. We were allowed to ride on the train without paying, and go to Munich. We received food every day and medical care. The United Nations (afterwards called UNRA) was responsible for us. We received a budget from the Red Cross. Everything was from the USA: cigarettes, soap, canned goods, etc.. We did not actually receive money until a while later. We did not actually have a need for money, if we did not want something that was extra-ordinary. We were listed in the office. There was a file there that listed everything about us and what we received. Afterwards we and the Germans received spending money. In addition to all of this, we received "CARE" packages from the USA or from the "JOINT", which was a Jewish organization.

Here is what I knew about my family. When we were in the first DP Camp, I already knew about my family. A friend of mine was sick with an appendix, and was in the hospital. I went to visit him. He had read a Jewish newspaper from America, where there was an article that my cousin in America had written. It told that my sister, who had escaped to Russia, had returned to Sveksna after the War, and had found out what happened to our family and to all the Sveksna Jews. I wrote to my cousin and through her renewed the connection with my sister. Afterwards my sister came on Aliyah to Israel. I know that I had remained alive; but I didn't know that I still had a sister. As is known my brother was in South Africa.

^^^

The cassette of Naftali Sieff was translated into Hebrew and then transliterated in to English by Esther Rechtschafner.

I am interested in Sveksna for my grandfather Zacharia Marcus was born there.

Please see my website on Sveksna: <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/sveksna/>

Esther Rechtschafner

Kibbutz Ein-Zurim

Israel

Note: This translation only deals with the period of WWII. Naftali told a bit more about his life after the War; but it was impossible to understand it, because of problems with the cassette. ER

The interviewer Mrs. Libby Reichman

Mrs. Libby Reichman volunteers as a guide in the Jewish Museum in Sydney, Australia. Twelve years ago, she began to interview Holocaust survivors. She works with the Shoah Foundation that is under the auspicious of Steven Spielberg. She has interviewed 12 survivors. Since her family emigrated from Lithuania, she feels closeness to survivors from there.