

## **Jacob (Yanek) Friedman**

*Rishon LeZion, nursing home "Till 120".*

*Recorded on 2.14.1996, Ramat Ha Sharon, Israel.*

I was born in L'viv in January 1926.

L'viv was the "capital of Western Galicia" then. The city before WWI belonged to Austro-Hungarian Empire.

By 1926 L'viv became Polish territory.

My father owned a tobacco shop on Krashitsky street. Our family lived in the same building, in the Polish quarter of the city. Back then, Jews lived all over the city, not only in the Jewish quarter. Next to our house stood a district court. A local ministry of internal affairs was across the street from us.

Our house was located in the city's business section, which was a significant advantage to my father's business: businessmen were his clients.

You can say I have a very happy childhood. I was the youngest of the family.



*1933. Seven-year-old Jacob with his mother.*

Our family could be described as (laughing) "my children, your children, and our children".

My father was a widower with two sons. Mama was also a widow with a daughter. And together, they had another four kids, all boys. So our family was a big one,

I was never bored at home. My father was a Hasid. Every Saturday, the family gathered at the table. The Shabbat night was always a celebration, happening week after week. Dressed in our best, we walked to the synagogue with our father.

The neighbors, Poles, once told my mother that Friedman, walking to the synagogue with his small sons, looked like God with two angels.

After the prayers, everyone gathered around the table. Polished silver candelabrum were shining, candles were lit, the snow-white tablecloth was sparkling.

In winter we stayed around the Shabbat table for especially long time. The oldest brother was reading stories by Sholom Aleichem to us. (Every week the newspaper published an excerpt from "Tevie the Milkman"). My brothers invited their friends, and they had sung together. Mama was cooking the Shabbat meal.

During the summer, my brothers were in a hurry to spend time with friends. On Saturday morning, I awoke to father's prayers.

Our house was a palace for me, an indestructible fortress, the way of life unchangeable. It seemed our life will last forever - my parents, my brothers, our house.

I attended the Cohen school. The classes were conducted in Polish, despite the school being Jewish. We also studied Jewish traditions and spent summers in summer camps. During that time L'viv Jewish population was 100.000. Jewish cultural life was vibrant: the city had a Jewish theater and Jewish newspapers.

Did I want to go to Palestine back then? I was too young to think about it.

I remember though how I used to get up early to take a peek at the Jewish newspaper "Khvila" to read the news from Eretz Israel. That was 1936 - 1938. My parents were not going to Palestine because of their religious views: my father was waiting for the Messiah.

In 1939 our life started to change.

After a short period of fighting, the Red Army entered L'viv. Russians came. We didn't know anything about Russians. We knew Germans were the enemy of Israel and all the Jews, and if they would invade our life would be extremely hard. So when the Red Army came, the city Jewry breathed the sigh of relief.

Even more so after first Soviet laws gave Jews equal rights with the rest of the population and abolished all oppression based on ethnicity and religious beliefs.

We, kids, liked everything and were very happy about the arrival of Russians. My father, though, did not always agree with us. Sometimes we argued. My older brothers were able to get an education. The fact was that studying used to be expensive under the Poles, and every year, the father's business was worse and worse.

Under the Soviets, students not only studied for free but even received a scholarship - a salary, like all working people!

Of course, other things were happening.

Poles and Jews were suffering from deportation to Siberia. Those few who managed to escape Nazis in Poland were also exiled to Siberia. In reality, the deportation saved their lives (later, under Nazis, they would've died for sure), but we didn't know that, and the deportation was viewed as a tragedy.

We, the kids, went to school, sung Soviet songs, and were happy.

My parents' family nest started to empty two of my brothers left for college, one went to Russia, another to Ukraine, to Kharkiv.

On June 22 the war between the Soviet Union and Germany began.

In one week, Germans entered the city, and our entire world turned upside down.

I remember that day.

Pogrom started in the Jewish quarter. Nazis gave the mob three days. The mob was mostly Ukrainian: Germans had promised "Free Ukraine."

Our street in the Polish quarter was quiet. We didn't know about the pogrom. The parents probably knew but hadn't told us, kids.

Germans hadn't done anything all at once. The changes were gradual:

- Jews were ordered to wear the white band on with Star of David on the right arm;
- Jews were banned from using the trams;
- Jews were forbidden to remain in Polish quarters, they had to move to the Jewish quarter;
- Jews had to surrender furniture, furs, and jewelry to authorities;
- Jews of L'viv had to pay "contribution" 20.000. 000 rubles. Those who didn't have the money could pay with their valuables instead;
- Jews started to be sent to labor camps.

Poles were told Jews were not human beings, but "subhuman," carriers of evil and disease. Poles were forbidden to conduct any business with Jews and interact with Jews in any other way.

In 1942 the first so-called "aktionen" started in L'viv.

First, they took the elderly.

Then they took those without "proper" documents - papers. They were taken from their homes and transported somewhere. Where - nobody knew. Through the Polish newspaper, Germans announced that Jews were sent to the farms in Ukraine. Little by little, the rumors about people being killed. Why? Of course, no accurate information was available, but the way Germans had been treating those arrested was telling enough. I saw them take my father on June 20, 1942, and understood what was happening. At that time, only the middle-aged were arrested. My father was the only one taken, despite my mother and myself being home. He was taken by force, he was trying to hide. My parents then were between 45 and 50 years old. The day my father was arrested, on that day, my mother turned entirely grey.

After a few months, another "aktion" happened. This time it lasted for two weeks. My mother woke me up at six in the morning and told me I should try to run away because the street is swarming with SS.

- I'll hide in the house, she said.

Surprisingly, I managed to escape. I didn't look like a Jew, and the house had another exit that led to the Polish quarter of the city. The back door was guarded by the SS soldier. I told him I was Ukrainian and lived nearby, and he let me go. I have not seen my mother again. The concierge gave her away. My mother was hiding in the basement, but the concierge betrayed her to Gestapo because she wanted our children's things. The concierge had a large family with many children our age.

I was alone.

I was 16 years old.

One of my brothers was hiding in L'viv under the name of Trzihovich. He had forged papers. My sister went to Warsaw under the Polish name Antonina Snit. Another brother was evacuated by Russians, and the oldest brother worked for the German army somewhere, and we didn't see him at all. I didn't know what to do. When I went to the apartment to pick up some things, the same concierge turned me over to the Gestapo. We lived on the second floor. She told her husband to let the Gestapo know she caught a Jew not wearing the white band, and then she ran after me to the second floor.

A Gestapo soldier brought me to a place where all the Jews detained in this "aktion" were gathered. The "aktion" was not over yet over. I just remember the shots and the screams: it felt like the end of the world. I went back to the Gestapo soldier who had arrested me and told him in German: "I'm very young, and I want to live". I was locked with everybody else, and during the night, the "selection" happened. Later in the night, we were lined up, and women and the weak were taken away.

After that, the commander questioned each of us about the age and occupation. I said I was 18 years old and was a "feinmechanik" (a skilled turner). I didn't know what it meant but had heard the Germans were looking for such workers.

So I landed in the camp Janowska. I want to talk about this camp in detail. It was located vicinity of L'viv and was known as a "Thug University".

Most of the Jews from our area found their death there. The working conditions in this camp were inhuman. The food was scarce, the labor grueling. It was impossible to last there for more than one or two months.

In the morning, they gave us a piece of bread and some water, sometimes with rotten potatoes floating in it. I don't remember for sure what we had in the evening, probably another piece of bread. In short, the hunger was constant. We were dressed in civilian clothes, but red stripes were painted on pants and jackets with oil paint. People were dying, like flies.

I did not understand why people worked there at all, they were doomed anyway.

I was too young then, but my common sense told me that I should look for any opportunity to escape. I began preparing to run away from my first day in this camp. Our squad worked as loaders at the railway station, the wardens were Poles, they battered prisoners for the slightest misstep: we were "subhuman."

In the evenings, they executed the misbehaving. Our lives were worth less than the life of a housefly.

We slept on crowded bare plank-beds, with not enough space for everyone. Once I quarreled with a group of young men for a place on the plank-bed. I said to them: "Gentlemen! You are out of your mind! You've lost all human likeness!" They replied that in the camp, a man was a wolf to a man, the fittest would survive and that there was no room for compassion and pity. "Run! Why do you work for the Germans?" — I said.

On that, I was told there was nowhere to run because the Poles would give everybody away.

As was said before, I had been preparing to escape from the first day in the camp.

Once a week, we were taken to a bathhouse in the city prison. There, in a pile of clothes, I found pants and a shirt with no red stripes. The shirt was linen, the kind peasants wore. I thought my shaved head would look just right, and I could pass a peasant who used to shave their heads to avoid lice.

I put on my striped coat over those clothes so the Germans wouldn't notice anything.

On the day of the escape, I didn't go to breakfast. Everybody was standing in line for rotten potatoes, breathing into each other's necks, waiting to fill to an empty can (the only bowls we had). Meanwhile, I walked along the railway, running under a concrete wall until I reached a gap. I slipped my head into the gap and realized I could get out. I crawled through and ran.

I think I broke all the world running records. I heard yelling, the guards were chasing after me, but I did not stop and was running, running, without looking back.

In the city, I first went to my grandmother's apartment in the Polish quarter.

Grandmother was no longer there, she was taken in the first "action." Yet in the apartment, I found my sister, who was hiding there.

I changed my clothes, ate, and went into town.

After what I saw in Janowski camp, I no longer had any illusions about my parents and grandmother's fate. It was hard to be alone in the city, with no family and home. To get food, I sold cigarettes at the tram stop. Pole by the name of Yuzek gave me packets of cigarettes, and I sold them in the city center. I slept in the Polish quarter, wherever I could find a place. Too many Poles knew my family and me and could give me up to the Gestapo. Once I was caught by a Pole who used to live on our street, he was about to surrender me to the Germans. I reminded him how my mother helped him during the hard times (he was penniless), and he let me go. After that, it was clear I had to leave town.

Once I visited Jews in the ghetto, while it was possible.

As I already said, the German didn't do anything at once, but gradually, step by step.

The Germans tried to convince the surviving Jews that with good behavior and "working for the society," they would remain alive.

In the ghetto, I met a young man. His parents were already gone, but apparently, they had managed to leave him a little money, so he made a life for himself in the ghetto.

The young man said that he was afraid to leave the ghetto and hoped for the best because his life was somehow stable there.

Among other documents, he had a Ukrainian birth certificate, in the name of Elias Shostak, 18, living in a village. He just gave this certificate to me.

With this birth certificate, I volunteered for work in Germany.

There was an organization in L'viv that sent volunteers to Germany. The Jews told me it was dangerous because, during the medical exam, the German doctors could see that I was a circumcised Jew.

But I had no other option. I got lucky. On the night when of the medical exam, the Germans brought about 2,000 peasants, Poles, and Ukrainians, from neighboring villages. They were forced to go to Germany as manual laborers. The exam was quick: the doctors had no time to deal with everyone. When they saw I was a volunteer, they didn't even look at me.

So I landed in Germany, in a town on the border with Holland.

10 more Ukrainians and I were selected for work at the railway station.

I was fluent in German because I had studied it in the gymnasium.

I learned Ukrainian in two years while I studied at a Soviet school from 1939 to 1941.

At first, I concealed being able to speak German. We worked as switchmen at the station, servicing 7 km of the railway track. I gradually got used to work. But I was young, and in winter, the work became hard. The Germans noticed this and transferred me to work as an assistant cook. I served 20 Polish workers and 10 Ukrainians; we had enough food and were treated normally.

We wore the clothes of the dead Jews.

One night I was told a man was waiting for me in the kitchen, a German. He asked me: "How are you, Jacob Friedman?"

"I'm not Friedman, it's a mistake," - I answered.

Anyway, he told me he works for the Gestapo, and they know that I - Jacob Friedman - is a Jew posing as a Ukrainian.

"Get dressed and come with me," - he said.

We had to take a tram to his office. On the way, he told me that the Gestapo had caught my brother, Samuel, who was also hiding with false documents in Dresden and knew everything about me. Right there, on the tram, I came up with a story about my former acquaintance, Jozef Romaisky, who, as apparently, wanted to make trouble for me saying I was Jewish.

"You know," said the German, "go home now, and tomorrow come to my office, to the Gestapo."

My documents were sent to Berlin, to Department IV.

The Department IV dealt with Jews.

While I was waiting for the court decision, I was working as an interpreter. Again, I got lucky: I spoke five languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Czech, Polish, and German). The conditions were good, the warden locked my solitary cell only for the night. All day long, I worked at various jobs, even caring for rabbits bred by the head of the prison.

But three months later, an order came from Berlin to send me to Majdanek.

In May 1943, I was brought to a prison in Lublin. Majdanek, a concentration camp, was located in Lublin suburbs.

In prison, I heard machine guns. Those were the last day of the SS suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

In Majdanek, I was sent to the fourth field. It was an extermination camp. In the morning, we went "to work." We took big stones and carried them to the camp. And then we brought them back. I saw murders and unimaginable cruelty.

One of the Germans, a prisoner, a thug, simply drowned Jews in a barrel of water. He stuck the head of the victim in the barrel and waited until the bubbles stopped coming out.

The camp was ruled by German prisoners. Each group wore different emblems. Green triangle - criminal; red - political prisoner; a red triangle with the letter "P" in the middle - Poles; Jews wore the star of David.

Unit wardens "capos" treated prisoners terribly. Mostly the capos were Jews from Slovakia (they were one of the first prisoners of Majdanek) or cab drivers from Warsaw. The units occupied disused stables. Some stalls even had plaques with the horses' names on them. Now people lived there on three-story plank-beds.

I was lucky to get to Majdanek after Stalingrad.

Another selection was carried out, and everyone who was still strong was dispatched to work in Auschwitz. It was June 1943. On the train, we realized that we were meant to work, not to be killed. Each prisoner was given some bread and sausage. The floor of the car was covered with straw, and there was a bucket for excrement.

For us, the people of Majdanek, Auschwitz, seemed a paradise. In the morning they gave us 400 gr of bread, soup, jam, and sausages. Numbers were tattooed on left forearms (mine - 128022). A couple of days after arrival, I was sent to Buna-Verke, to the plant producing liquid fuel from coal.

1,000 barracks, 12,000 prisoners.

Russian, English, and French prisoners of war, as well as Jews, Poles, and Germans. We worked until 4-5 p.m. Everyone had a bed, and we were fed 3 times a day. Life was possible.

I stayed in Boone camp until January 1945. I got scurvy, for a short time even worked in the infirmary. Right there, in the camp, by chance I met my brother Samuel, he was walking out from a barrack. I approached him from behind, covered his eyes, and said: "Who am I?"

After that incident with the Gestapo and his letters, Samuel had been sent from Dresden directly to Auschwitz.

Meanwhile, the Red Army was getting closer to Krakow, and the Germans realized they had to run.

On January 18, 45th, on foot, on the snow-covered road, we were herded to Gleivitz, about 50 kilometers from Boone. We walked all night. Guards shot those who fell down. In the morning, my brother and I ate 2 kilos of bread and a kilo of ham, which he got somewhere before the dispatch.

It probably saved us, because during the next two weeks we had nothing to eat.

In Gleivitz, we were stuffed into railway cars.

Without food and drink, they dragged across Germany. I remember, once, at some stop, several loaves of bread were hurled into the car. On every stop, we threw corpses out of the car.

How did I endure it? Was I distressed?

No. You could only think about surviving another hour, another day. It was impossible to think about the universe. My brother and I did not discuss anything, I learned the details of his life in Dresden only later, after the war.

We knew the war was coming to an end. Stalingrad broke the Nazis' spine. Whoever could withstand the transport would have survived.

We understood that.

The last time I sobbed in Majdanek when on my first day, the wardens had clubbed a young Jew to death because he had been hiding somewhere. Last time. No more.

During the two-week-long trip, we disembarked in many camps, but all of them were overcrowded. In the end, we landed in Sachsenhausen.

It was in Sachsenhausen, where my brother and I parted our ways. The prisoners were sent to different camps, and he said that we would be better off separately. Only after the war did he explain the reason for this decision. He thought we were dying, and it would've been easier to die separately.

That's what he thought.

I was sent to a camp where planes were serviced, the Henkel-Werke. There I was assigned to work in the kitchen. I worked in the kitchen until someone complained to the camp commander that a Jew was working in the kitchen, the job too easy for a Jew.

And I was transferred to unload railway coal cars.

It was April 1945.

A day or two later, our capo warned us not to dare to hide in the huge plant furnaces during the bombings. We could hide in the field only. In just 15 minutes, an air raid siren started.

About 500 American airplanes (I counted them) bombed the plants for close to an hour.

It was hell.

Of the 400 prisoners, 100 or 200 survived. The German wardens were all killed.

At first, I was hiding in a wooden bunker, then I ran into a gigantic funnel from an American bomb, the edges covered with pieces of human bodies.

In the end, I ran into a grove. I survived. Only my right-hand little finger was disfigured by a small piece of shrapnel. After the bombing, the planes scattered leaflets. The leaflets said that only 100 km remained between the American and Russian fronts.

Freedom was close.

The surviving prisoners ran. Everybody rushed in different directions. I joined a group of Poles. There were six of us - four Poles, one Volksdeutsche from Sweden, and me, a Jew. We ran to the forest and were getting ready to cross a highway when suddenly heard the noise of engines, whistles, and dogs barking. It were SS men looking for four escaped Russian prisoners. They grabbed us and took to the main camp - Sachsenhausen.

People looked at us as if we were back from the dead when they realized we had survived the bombing.

After 2-3 days, all the remaining prisoners were sent to clear the rubble and bury the corpses in the camp destroyed by the American bombing.



The camp was obliterated. Mountains, mountains of bodies. We piled the bodies in pyramids and burned them. Incidentally, the kitchen from where I was kicked out, was completely destroyed. A concrete wall fell on top of the kitchen and buried everybody without exception. Go figure. So we were still in the camp, there was no "German order" anymore, we did not go to work. It was clear that these were the last days.

On April 20, the Nazis cleared everybody out of the Sachsenhausen, Everyone got a loaf of bread. We tracked from Berlin towards the Baltic Sea along the corridor that was still in German hands.

On April 21, 1945, by the order, the march of death began. The plan was to transfer over 30 thousand prisoners in columns of 500 to the coast of the Baltic Sea, load them onto barges, take them to the open sea and drown them. Exhausted and lagging behind were shot. Thus, in the forest near Belov in Mecklenburg, several hundred prisoners were executed. However, the prisoners' planned mass extermination failed to be implemented - in early May 1945, Soviet troops liberated marching columns.

On April 30, Swedish Red Cross cars caught up with us. Food parcels were distributed, according to an agreement with Himmler.

Many died suddenly of overeating.

The young survived.

On May 2, during a rest stop somewhere in the woods, the Germans guards disappeared.

In 1948, even before the Declaration of Independence, I sailed to Palestine.

The British were not welcoming, and the DDT powder to treat lice didn't uplift the mood. We were covered with it from head to toe.

Soon I received a new oiled Czech rifle and found myself in the vanguard platoon "Palmach." Yes, I was in combat. To tell you the truth, I wasn't a weathered soldier. It always seemed to me I was taking part in a strange show, not clearly understanding my role. We never talked about our past in Europe. Though nobody asked.

The local "Sabras," born free in Palestine, treated us, Europeans, with fear and disdain.

Although, in many ways, regarding culture and education, I was stronger than them. I knew more.

After, I was sent to northern Tel Aviv to study accounting.

By nature, I am not a businessman at all. Philosophy, astronomy, and drawing are closer to my heart. So, when after graduation, my classmates were looking for positions, I set off to grow bananas on a plantation and had been doing it for 8 years.

Later I was a general manager of a medical insurance company warehouse for 30 years. That's all.

I guess my most important personality trait is that I always make my own decisions.

One always has a choice. At the age of 14-15 in the Janowski camp, I met people much smarter and more experienced than me, waiting for the mercy of the Nazis, I understood then the most important thing. Submission and apathy will not save you. You must take risks to survive. I think my escape from the camp in 1942 is the most important thing I've done in my entire life. I realized then I love freedom and would not allow anyone to make decisions for me. To escape, I "volunteered" to work in Germany using forged documents in the Ukrainian name, Elias Shostak. I was captured for the second time and sent back to camp.

I still read a lot, draw, and listen to music. Although I'm going deaf nowadays. My older daughter has a Ph.D. in biology, my son owns a hi-tech company. On Fridays, my son takes me to Tel Aviv. We have coffee in Dizengoff center, in a cafe next to a bookstore. We buy a couple of books after coffee.

Human life doesn't have a meaning: a person himself gives meaning to his life...