



Arek's Story, Chapter 2

And then 1939 came and eventually when I finished my school then the Germans attacked the 1st of September 1939. And with us being a garrison town all the civilian population had to leave the town and we had some family in Lodz. It was a big industrial city similar to Manchester, textile mills and so on, and we walked it was about 65 km, it took us about 3 days to walk and the whole town, civilian population had to leave because the Polish army made a stand on the River Warta. The River Warta came from Germany. We got eventually to Lodz and 18 hours later the Germans broke through and they arrived in Lodz. I was at the square and a place called Plac Wolnosci, Freedom Square, and for the first time I've noticed German soldiers and they came on motorbikes and then the next 2-3 days I was watching the tanks and the planes. Poland had nothing like it. That's why they've lost. The Polish army fought with ordinary guns against tanks and so on, they had nothing. No armoured vehicles, nothing. And then we were a few days in Lodz and I've noted German soldiers cutting some religious Jews' beards and they cut their beards off and so on, and I thought to myself 'That's not right', they were laughing and joking, and then eventually we went back to the same town where we lived and we hoped that life will go on but life didn't go on. First of all in 1940 we had to start wearing the star of David, one on the front and one on the back, then they formed a ghetto, and it wasn't enclosed, because the Polish people had to walk through there, but we weren't allowed to go out from the ghetto. Food was rationed, elderly people and children only got half the ration, what the ordinary people got, and you were starving, it was a very bad time. Toward 1941 one night they came for my father, the committee had a list and they took men for work in different camps. And they came and they asked him to come with and he did, and as they took him out he disappeared. He escaped. Then our door was kicked in and they looked at my brother who was four years older than me and they said 'Your father escaped, you've got to come'. So he went. And he escaped. And then our door was kicked in, the policeman shouted at my mother, she said 'Well you took them and I never seen them again'. He looked at me, 11 years old, I never thought me, they wouldn't take me, no. At that time they still took you to a doctor to see if you were fit to work. And the doctor sent me home. But somebody from the committee said "No, his father escaped, his brother escaped, somebody must go, and he must go". My fate was sealed and I went. I wanted to go. I saw them

going, I wanted to go. And we were taken to a police station, we stayed overnight in the police station and the following morning we were taken to the railway station. Outside the railway station my brother was beckoning me, he says "I want to speak to you", he had a suitcase, he said "I'll go", I said "No I will go", and so we had a situation but I won. And we were taken on a train to Otoschno, that's near Poznan and we started with 2 ½ thousand men and within 18 months there were only 11 of us left alive. The beating, the hanging, it was just terrible. The SS were there, they run the camp, the black uniforms and our part of the train, railway line was finished and it was all ready for the attack on Russia. I was lucky, I was cleaning the camp commander's office and his house, and I could pinch a bit of, a piece of bread and so on from him because I was cleaning his place. And that kept me going and when the camp was closing he said "I'm sending you home". I got warning when he send me home because a bit before that these people who volunteered to go back home, a van came, it had just a door to open and had a pipe from the engine in the back and that's the first gassing, they started gassing people. So he says "I'm sending you home", anyway he says "There's a man came from your town", I knew him, he was a painter, he was a ethnic German, and it was right, they did send me home. Me and another boy. And that was 1942.

There's one episode you recounted in the film which I found deeply affecting because I know that the instances of brutality in that camp had a great impact on you

Terrible

And there was a young boy wasn't there, in the laundry room

It was Shymek. Yes. He was about 21 years old and he went to beg for a potato in the village and there were Germans and the officers said "Oh you wanted to escape". He didn't say that he wanted the potato. He wanted to escape and so they hanged him for it. Three times it took them, twice the rope broke and the third time it happened. He was an intelligent boy, a very nice family he came from, there were four boys in the family. And then when I got home I thought my father would be at home and everybody but my father was taken to another camp and to this day I don't know where he was taken and I was at home for two weeks, mothers came and wives came to ask "How is my husband, how is my son", I said "Everybody is working", I never told them what actually happened to them because I felt it wasn't right.