

Maya Wald
9/15/13
Term Paper- Interview With a Survivor

Interview with Bob Geminder

Maya: So I wanted to ask you a little bit about music during the time of the holocaust.

Mr. Geminder: I don't know anything about music in the holocaust. Don't forget I was a little boy.

Maya: How old were you at this time?

Mr. Geminder: Well when it started I was four. When it ended I was ten. It was '39-'45.

Maya: Was your family actually in a concentration camp?

Mr. Geminder: No, I was in Poland. I was in the ghettos. And as you'll hear from my story, we ran away from a train, about a hundred yards from Auschwitz. The train just stopped, for no good reason. Luck, a lot of luck. Every survivor, you know, that survived, had to be very lucky. You had to be a little smart, a little brave, but mostly lucky.

Maya: Yeah, it was probably a lot about timing.

Mr. Geminder: Yes. So that was good timing for the train to stop.

Maya: So, did you know of any musical activities going on in concentration camps?

Mr. Geminder: Zero. First of all I was not in a concentration camp. I was in a ghetto.

Maya: So you had no idea of anything musical going on.

Mr. Geminder: No, I didn't. My biggest concern in the ghetto was my tummy. You know I was always hungry. So, um, I don't know. I mean, my mother, who I asked many questions to, kind of put a book together. In fact, it's on my website also. But in the book, she never mentions music. Because that was kind of the least thing we were worried about.

Maya: Right.

Mr. Geminder: And I don't remember ever hearing anything. You know, we went through, like, those six years, moving. There was really nothing, uh- I lost my train of thought. But, you know, her mode was survival. I started to say, we had no radio. You know, we never heard any news. In fact, the only news I remember reading about, was during the second world war, Roosevelt died. President Roosevelt. If you know a little bit about history. And the headline in the papers, this was when the Germans really had a lot of papers, Polish papers, German papers, Germany won the war, because the leader of the US is dead. (Laughs) So that's the only time I remember reading a newspaper. But music, I don't know. I can't help you with that I'm sorry.

Maya: No, that's completely fine.

Mr. Geminder: I don't know anything about music.

Maya: Did you know of any other types of creative activities that were going on in the ghetto?

Mr. Geminder: Well, there was a lot of art being done. Art, like some of these horrible pictures that you see. (Points at museum walls with drawings) I don't know when these were done, if they were done in the holocaust or afterward. But there was a lot of that stuff. And some of it was recovered after the war. Again, did I know about that going on when I was between four and ten? No.

Maya: So you didn't partake in any type of art or anything?

Mr. Geminder: No, to be honest. No. I mean I never did anything of that sort. It was survival, it was all about survival. Cause it was all about finding something to eat, and that was how the days went by. And we were in hiding many times. Um, as you will hear from the talk, so, artistically or anything like that, I have no idea. A guy from SC, I forget his name. He came to our synagogue, and he actually played this music from the holocaust. And he developed it and he plays it. So that's what he does.

Maya: And besides survival, and obviously like you said, finding something to eat, did you engage in any other types of activities in the ghetto? With other children?

Mr. Geminder: Well, we were only in the ghetto about six months. Then we escaped. But no, we never played with children. Because, we were always afraid they would know we were Jewish. Boys, it was very easy for boys to be recognized as Jewish. Because only Jews in Poland were circumcised, just as an example. So, many, many more women survived. Because there was no way to tell a woman who was Jewish. If she died her hair, if she wasn't dark-haired anymore, she'd look like a non-Jew. But for me, I also died my hair, but if a German really suspected something, or anyone, they would literally make sure I was not circumcised, which I was. So, after we escaped, you know, there was a four year period. So for that time, my mother would somehow go out and buy tobacco. This has nothing to do with art. And my brother and I would make cigarettes. Every day we'd sit and make cigarettes. Put tobacco into the plunger, put the plunger into the white paper, cut the ends. My mother then would sell the cigarettes, to make some money so we could buy some potatoes, some bread. But, so, what we did during the day was, many times, was stay quiet, and that's kind of about it.

Maya: Where were you in hiding?

Mr. Geminder: Mostly Poland. I mean, many places. We moved very often. Because we stayed in one place, but Polish people were always nervous with Jews being around. Because their families, if they helped a Jew their families would be, in jeopardy. But my brother and I, we looked very Jewish. Dark eyes, black hair. Cause I had black hair then too, before it got grey. But, so, they would immediately suspect that. If there was any inkling of suspicion we would move. So, I would keep moving, just constantly keep moving.

Maya: And as a child, were you aware of the reality of the situation and what was really going on?

Mr. Geminder: Well, you'll hear from my talk, I don't want to get into it now, I was scared all the time. And what kept me quiet, and my brother quiet, was the fear. That and we were hungry all the time. So we were constantly concentrating on, where can we steal the next potato. Where can we get the next this and that.

Maya: And then once the war was over, when you were no longer in hiding, was that a big shock for you?

Mr. Geminder: Well, it was nice, obviously. You know, the kind of movies you see here sometimes, with liberation, and people cheering. But anyway we were liberated by the Russians. So you know, we went back to where we were from. And, here's the art part. My brother and I decided to go to a movie. After the war our first movie. So we went to see a movie called 'Gunga Din'. A classic. You guys probably never heard of it. One of these days I should rent it, and see it again. But anyway, during this movie, this was our, like our first movie, my brother and I, and during this time some kids sitting around us were looking at George, looking at me, and you know, we were kind of new in this town, so immediately they started saying, "Jew, Jew." So we kind of left the theater and they went after us. Kind of threw stones at us, they missed, of course, fortunately. But then, we came home, from this 'artistic adventure' as I call it, and my mother said, "Ok we're getting the heck out of Poland." And then we left, and made our way to America. So there's an artistic thing for you, Gunga Din! I'm trying to think of some other thing. Oh, in the camp, we were in Germany, and we went to a good camp. One of those camps like I'll mention later. The United Nations set up these camps for displaced people. So, in that camp, while we were waiting to come to the states, you know there was music. In fact I played the

accordion. I was encouraged, or, all the kids were encouraged to play some little instrument. So I played the accordion. I forgot what my brother played.

Maya: And they gave you instruments in the camp?

Mr. Geminder: Yeah, yeah. You know, this was the good camp, they gave us everything. I ate bananas and oranges and stuff like that for the first time. And then in '47 when we came to the states, we again came with nothing. You know, no money, no nothing. So, my mother couldn't buy, accordion lessons. That wasn't, you know, in the cards. We didn't have the money to pay for any lessons.

Maya: But did you enjoy that? Did you enjoy the music and being able to play and do that?

Mr. Geminder: Of course, of course. I enjoyed everything I did in that camp. Cause you know, that was freedom, and they fed us very, very well. The soldiers were very, very nice. Because American soldiers, they always loved kids. And I was just ten, eleven years old, so, they were very nice to us. But I don't really remember, we probably saw some movies in that camp, because they had all kinds of activities. I went for the first time to school, I learned the alphabet, some math. Because I had never been to any school before.

Maya: Was it just the children in the camp?

Mr. Geminder: Mostly. My mother and step father were able to come in, because they were hired to help take care of the kids. But the camp was mostly for the kids. There were so many orphans at that time. Many, thousands. You know you can't let a kid be just on the street. So a family like us we were kind of lucky, to get into the camp. Again, luck.

Maya: Thank you very much. I look forward to hearing the rest of your experience.

Mr. Geminder: My pleasure.

Survivor Interview Response:

Talking to Mr. Geminder allowed me to understand how different the culture of Jewish children was during the wartime period. At the end of my interview with Mr. Geminder, he told me that his signature quote is, "You're never too old to have a happy childhood." This seems to be an incredibly optimistic outlook on life after the tragic events that Mr. Geminder went through as a child. It seems unbelievable to me that a child between the ages of four and ten can have the ability to be silent when needed, go months without sufficient food, and still be able to forgive and live life with a positive outlook. When I asked about music, Mr. Geminder did not seem to know about any musical activities in the ghetto. I wonder how his mother or older brother might have responded had I asked them the same question. Mr. Geminder explained that food was the main priority in the ghetto, and that he was always focused on his stomach. I could not imagine a childhood entirely revolving around the next source of food. Mr. Geminder revealed in his talk that he had very little interaction with any other children in the ghetto, besides his brother, though there were thousands of children in the ghetto who participated in art and other activities. I feel as if the culture of the life that Mr. Geminder was born into shaped him into a more solitary and introverted person. I can certainly understand how under the circumstances he would feel more inclined to focus on food and his immediate family rather than anything creative that was going on in the ghetto.

I was struck immediately by Mr. Geminder's sense of understanding. At the end of his talk a woman asked if he had ever gone back to Poland. She questioned how he could ever back, know of the monstrosities that occurred there. Mr. Geminder explained that one cannot harbor resentment and hatred for a place. He explained that all of the perpetrators

who participated in horrible activities in the concentration camps and ghettos are dead, and you cannot blame children for the faults of their parents. I think that this outlook is extremely interesting and is one to be respected. I have personally been to the ghettos in Poland and to a few of the concentration camps including Auschwitz. Though my only connection to the place is my Jewish heritage and the legacies of my family members who died in concentration camps, I was still struck by a sense of resentment towards the people of the country, though they were obviously not to blame. It seems incredible to me that Mr. Geminder is able to have gone through what he did, losing his extended family members in the liquidation of the ghetto, and still be able to return to his birthplace without resentment.