

Micha Tomkiewicz
Oral History Transcript

Historian: Did you know that you were liberated?

Micha Tomkiewicz: Good question. First, the term liberation was obviously meaningless, okay? Because frankly, from the day that I was born, there were changes and stuff like that, so liberation, we didn't know, but alright. The height of this liberation experience for me was not actually in the train, but from the train. And [US Army First Lieutenant] Frank Towers then started to take command, then get us to a DP [displaced persons] camp.

Historian: Right. Because they had no food. The Army had no food. They were not carrying food.

Micha Tomkiewicz: Yeah. And DP camp was in a place called Hillersleben, [Germany], and that was not far from Magdeburg. And we visited the place about two or three years ago. It served as barrack for the Russian army before that, and that was the DP camp basically. And it's a complete ruin right now. It's desolated.

But my memory, very strong memory, that the American soldiers basically treated me like a doll. I had blue eyes, I had blond hair, I was a fun kid. We had a really good time together. And they had plenty of stuff that my mother didn't have, none of the people that I was with didn't have that.

And still the memory is valid today that what happened was that you had the kitchen and dining hall on the first floor, and the American sort of places where they stayed was the second floor. So I was in the second floor with all the guys and the rest of the people were on the first floor getting their food. And for the fun of it, I decided to pee from the second floor into the first floor.

Historian: And that's your vivid memory?

Micha Tomkiewicz: That's my vivid memory. Absolutely.

Historian: I guess that was probably the first time in your life that you were free.

Micha Tomkiewicz: Okay, but the meaning of freedom basically was problematic because, frankly speaking, I didn't have bad time in the camp because I and the few other kids that were around were really sort of collective kids because most of the people there—children were lost, the kids were really the first sort of victims of the Nazis in the ghetto and the Nazis in Poland. It's said that these were the first guys that basically either from starvation or they were, basically they killed them.

So now a lot of people that lost their family, lost their kids, etc., and we were around. So people gave us whatever food that they have. We were the guys that got it. So I was for me, it was not a—

Historian: You were very resilient.

Micha Tomkiewicz: —not a bad time. Yeah.

Historian: Kids are resilient.

Micha Tomkiewicz: And the point is I didn't have any reference whatsoever.

Historian: So you didn't know if you were free or if you were not free.

Micha Tomkiewicz: No, no, no. I was not free because I couldn't, for example, cross that barbed wire and go to pick up flowers. And when I did, they caught me, and so I knew that I was not free in that sense. But if I go in the United States and I see some fence, probably I'm not allowed to go through the fence. Of course, I'll go if somebody will go. And then, yeah. So that the issue of freedom was sort of—

Historian: No reference.

Micha Tomkiewicz: Right? No reference whatsoever.

Historian: Do you recall when the train was there and the GIs came in and took you off of the train? There was a stream in the area.

Micha Tomkiewicz: There was what?

Historian: There was a stream in the area.

Micha Tomkiewicz: Okay. This is actually—my mother in this book, which is the book about the camp, described the last four pages actually, are dedicated, yes, the stream is mentioned there. And one of the things that was mentioned with great emphasis that the very precious Palestinian list—that was basically the reason that we were in the camp and at least in principle, and we didn't know otherwise, these were our passports to Palestine away from them—that ended up in the stream.

And how they got them out there, about that time, I don't know if you're familiar with the history of Israel etc., but there were organizations that tried actually to bring as many Jewish people to Palestine as possible. So about August '45, we got connected with the Jewish agencies and they put us on the ship and were able to get us in.

And the interesting part is that this was—again, this happens maybe a few months before the British started to put really very, very tight control over the people that that were allowed to go to get into Palestine. So even my wife, my wife is a good American right now, etc., and she is full of wonder how the timing of all of this was sort of not arranged, it was incidental, but that it was a lot of luck.

And since then, anytime that there is a lottery, I never play because I said I got all my luck for six years and that's—

Historian: You were fortunate.

Micha Tomkiewicz: Yeah.

Historian: Do you remember your impression of the GIs? Had you ever seen people like this? I mean, they had two large tanks that were there.

Micha Tomkiewicz: Okay. No, but you have to realize that at that time we saw a lot of different people, okay? We saw the Orthodox Jews in Poland that are similar to the Jews in Poland. So the Polish guys, we saw the Nazis of every shape and form that they showed up. So the GIs were not that outer planet guys.

But they were outer planet guys only in the sense that they were very friendly. They were happy to see us, and they had plenty of stuff that we didn't have, and we really liked it very much.

Historian: Everybody introduced themselves to the GIs?

Micha Tomkiewicz: Nobody introduced themselves. Okay.

Historian: That's what I heard.

Micha Tomkiewicz: That's at least from the kids perspective. Our sort of test was with the amount of stuff that we were able to extract from the GIs. And I was pretty good at this.

Historian: Do you remember, looking back, and do you remember fear?

Micha Tomkiewicz: No.

Historian: The whole time?

Micha Tomkiewicz: Okay, again, when I had the typhoid, when I had my nightmare, etc., I don't know if it is fear or not, but no. Because the situation that we were in, fear really came from understanding of the situation that we were in, okay? And we were not in a position to understand.

Historian: Do you think it was because you were with your mother, and you also had two, two friends there?

Micha Tomkiewicz: That is true. But at that time, the role of my mother was not really that unique, okay? I had that and I had the other kids. ... And even when I should have feared, when the Germans caught me going and going—it's like any kids that is doing what is not supposed to do and getting caught and...

Historian: So had you understood more, you would have been very afraid. And looking back, it must dawn on you that precarious position that you were in as a child.

Micha Tomkiewicz: Yeah, that is correct. Because looking back at this with my background, I knew exactly what was going on, I had the numbers and one of the presentations with the survivors, liberators, etc., I did statistics of survivors there. Okay. My own statistics and the fraction of a percent, okay? That's—so yes, when you see this kind of numbers, you are afraid. But not on the spot.

Historian: What did you do afterwards? After you were liberated, after the Americans came and took you to the aid area?

Micha Tomkiewicz: Okay. They took us to DP camp in Hillersleben, and we stayed there until August. So that measures about three months. And then the Jewish Agency came and picked us up and we went through Belgium, through France, from there to Palestine.