

Henry and Sally Wolkoff

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Interviewer: So tell me first a little bit about pre-war Poland. What it was like, where you lived, about your family.

Henry Wolkoff: Well, we were a family of four. I had a brother and then later on a little sister and we lived a nice quiet life, although the antisemitism was great, the Polish weren't that friendly to Jews, but we lived. And we made a living.

Interviewer: Where were you living in Poland? Where in Poland?

Henry Wolkoff: In Lodz, in the City of Lodz.

Interviewer: How old were you when the Nazis invaded Poland?

Sally Wolkoff: He was born, I think '14.

Henry Wolkoff: Yes, 1914.

Sally Wolkoff: And they invaded '39, so about 25 years old, right?

Henry Wolkoff: 1914, so how many years was it?

Interviewer: Tell me about that day.

Henry Wolkoff: About what?

Interviewer: Tell me about the day the Nazis invaded Poland.

Henry Wolkoff: At that time, it was, right away it started being difficult. We couldn't go, we couldn't drive a street car. We couldn't do anything that the Germans didn't permit. It was difficult. We started having difficulty getting food. I don't know what else you want to know.

Interviewer: Tell me about the invasion. What do you remember about that?

Henry Wolkoff: I don't remember...well...

Sally Wolkoff: Tell them that you went in the...

Henry Wolkoff: I was in the army, the Polish army.

Interviewer: You were in the Polish army?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes. But right after a few days, everything fall apart and we just...

Interviewer: How were you treated in the army as a Jewish soldier?

Henry Wolkoff: Where?

Interviewer: In Poland.

Sally Wolkoff: As a Jewish soldier.

Henry Wolkoff: Not good.

Interviewer: Even by the other Polish soldiers?

Henry Wolkoff: Well, it was... Yeah. Polish was so difficult, as you can see, they treated us different.

Interviewer: You lived in the ghetto, 1939, you were in the ghetto?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: Until about 1944?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes and I was in the--

Sally Wolkoff: No, no. First we were in Pabianice ghetto.

Henry Wolkoff: That's right.

Sally Wolkoff: And then they sent us to Lodz ghetto.

Henry Wolkoff: Pabianice.

Sally Wolkoff: Did I not write this down?

Interviewer: No, that's OK. I'm just lining up the dates in the camps. That's all you... You did fine.

Sally Wolkoff: We were in one ghetto until '42.

Interviewer: Where you together in the ghetto?

Sally Wolkoff: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: You were.

Sally Wolkoff: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Tell me about the ghetto, what do you remember most?

Henry Wolkoff: It was hell. It wasn't good. There was no food. It was very, very small rations that they supplied and we just had to go to get by with it.

Sally Wolkoff: And then they sent us to Lodz, '42.

Interviewer: How did you know Sally at that time?

Henry Wolkoff: How did I what?

Interviewer: How did you know Sally at that time?

Henry Wolkoff: We lived close by.

Interviewer: You were neighbors and you were friends?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: Not engaged yet to be married?

Henry Wolkoff: No.

Sally Wolkoff: No, we just met in the ghetto.

Interviewer: You met in the ghetto.

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Henry Wolkoff: Well, that's all that we could do is go for a walk and meet people this way. That's what we did and we met in Lodz and then in Pabianice.

Sally Wolkoff: First Pabianice and then they send...

Henry Wolkoff: Yes, and Lodz.

Interviewer: You said your strongest memories of the ghetto were the hunger and the fear. What were you most afraid of if you have think back?

Henry Wolkoff: They were catching people and send them away to work camps. We were always afraid for that. We were always hiding. But they had ways to find out where we are and they found us.

Interviewer: From the ghetto, how long were you there in Lodz?

Sally Wolkoff: Until '44.

Interviewer: Until 1944. You spend about five years in ghettos.

Sally Wolkoff: Then they sent us to...

Interviewer: Then you were sent to Auschwitz.

Henry Wolkoff: In both ghettos, in Lodz and in Pabianice.

Sally Wolkoff: Yes.

Henry Wolkoff: That two ghettos.

Interviewer: Then you were sent to...

Henry Wolkoff: Then later on were sent to Auschwitz and to Mauthausen and Ebensee. I was in three camps.

Interviewer: Tell me about, were you transported?

Henry Wolkoff: Did I what?

Interviewer: How are you transported to Auschwitz?

Sally Wolkoff: Cattle cars.

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Sally Wolkoff: From Lodz to Auschwitz, how did you get to Auschwitz?

Henry Wolkoff: On closed tin cars, cattle trains.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Henry Wolkoff: A lot of people had a hard time being closed up that long.

Interviewer: How long were you closed up for?

Henry Wolkoff: Two days.

Interviewer: Were you together at that time?

Henry Wolkoff: No, not on the...

Interviewer: You were separated by then. But both of you were in Auschwitz?

Sally Wolkoff: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: You were sent to Auschwitz first?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes. First to Auschwitz then from Auschwitz to Mauthausen. We were in Mauthausen quite a long time and then they send us from Mauthausen to Ebensee. That was already toward the end of the war.

Interviewer: What was your job in Auschwitz?



Sally Wolkoff: How long did you stay in Auschwitz, honey?

Henry Wolkoff: In Auschwitz, we didn't stay long. Just a few days, but then in Mauthausen, we were carrying big bricks, big, big rocks and it was a hard work.

Interviewer: What do you remember most about that experience in the camp?

Henry Wolkoff: I'm going up and down on those couple of hundred stairs and carrying these rocks. And then without any food and without any water.

Interviewer: What did you know was happening at that time?

Henry Wolkoff: Didn't know a thing.

Interviewer: You didn't know a thing.

Henry Wolkoff: Didn't know a thing.

Interviewer: Where were your parents?

Henry Wolkoff: I didn't know. They were separated much before we came into Lodz.

Interviewer: You were separated before the ghetto?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes. No, not before the ghetto.

Interviewer: Before the transport to Auschwitz?

Henry Wolkoff: After the ghetto.

Interviewer: After the ghetto, before Auschwitz?

Henry Wolkoff: Before Auschwitz. When I came to Auschwitz, they weren't there.

Sally Wolkoff: But they were sent out...

Henry Wolkoff: I could find them.

Sally Wolkoff: To Lochow then.

Henry Wolkoff: That's right.

Interviewer: You knew where they were sent to? Did you ever see them again?

Henry Wolkoff: No.

Interviewer: Do you have a sister?

Henry Wolkoff: I have at home, yes.

Interviewer: You have two sisters?

Sally Wolkoff: One sister and a brother.

Henry Wolkoff: Yes, that's right.

Interviewer: A sister and a brother. What's your brother's name?

Henry Wolkoff: [Salel (sp) 0:07:55.2].

Interviewer: Did they survive?

Henry Wolkoff: No.

Interviewer: Nobody survived.

Henry Wolkoff: Nobody survived.

Interviewer: You are the only survivor of your family?

Henry Wolkoff: I'm the only one.

Interviewer: When you remember Mauthausen, because that's where you spent the most time, correct?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you remember the most there?

Henry Wolkoff: I remember the day we came in, the guard who was standing on a tower opened fired and we had around six or eight dead bodies in front of us. That I remember. I knew that people that got killed. They lived in the ghetto with us.

Interviewer: What do you think kept you alive?

Sally Wolkoff: You did something for...

Henry Wolkoff: Yes. You know, by trade I'm a watchmaker and that fellow that [unintelligible 0:09:04.7], you know what know what [unintelligible 0:09:07.1] is?

Interviewer: Uh-uh.

Henry Wolkoff: The guy who was in-charge of all of us.

Sally Wolkoff: A German guy.

Henry Wolkoff: A German guy. And he gave me some work to do to fix a watch and that saved my life.

Interviewer: Your ability to fix a watch is what saved your life?

Sally Wolkoff: Not one work. He had quite a few.

Henry Wolkoff: More than one.

Interviewer: So, you repaired watches for the guards?

Sally Wolkoff: For him.

Interviewer: Do you think he kept you alive for that purpose?

Henry Wolkoff: He made profit on that. He didn't do it for free. He knew what he was doing.

Interviewer: So, he gave you broken watches to fix?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: Then he profited on them.

Henry Wolkoff: Right.

Interviewer: Did he treat you any differently?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes. He gave me an extra soup.

Interviewer: Extra soup.

Henry Wolkoff: It was a lot of millions, millions of dollars worth it.

Interviewer: How long were you in Mauthausen?

Henry Wolkoff: In Mauthausen I was...

Sally Wolkoff: We got there at the end of August, right?

Henry Wolkoff: Five, six months.

Sally Wolkoff: End of August '44. Then they sent him... From Mauthausen, how long have you been...?

Henry Wolkoff: In Mauthausen, it was a very, very short time. In Mauthausen I was, maybe six, eight months.

Interviewer: Then you were sent to Austria?

Henry Wolkoff: No.

Sally Wolkoff: That's Austria. Mauthausen was in Austria.

Interviewer: Not Austria.

Sally Wolkoff: To Ebensee.

Interviewer: Right, Ebensee.

Sally Wolkoff: It's Austria also. We were liberated by the American army, May 6th, right? '45.

Interviewer: Tell them about May sixth.

Henry Wolkoff: May 6th, a day before we found out that they want to take us into, you know, we were in the mountains and they had a plan to take us in into one of those. They were trying to get ready those mountains for...

Sally Wolkoff: It was explosives?

Henry Wolkoff: For victories. For military victories. For military stuff. They found that out and objected to go in one of those tunnels. They planned to dynamite the tunnels and kill everybody. At that time we didn't go in and everybody was on the street. The guys in charge of us, they're already worried themselves, so they ran away.

Sally Wolkoff: Because they knew the end is coming. That the Americans were close by.

Henry Wolkoff: They knew already that the guards left them and they don't have any protection.

Interviewer: What was one of the first things you remember on liberation? Did you see the soldiers?

Henry Wolkoff: I remembered about two or three tanks came in into camp and everybody was elated.

Interviewer: How soon were you able to eat?

Sally Wolkoff: Red Cross had the food prepared after that.

Henry Wolkoff: We got some food. I don't know how we got it. We got it.

Sally Wolkoff: And everybody got sick. Typhoid.

Interviewer: Typhoid. Did you have typhoid?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes, after the war I got really sick. I was in [unintelligible 0:13:04.1] in the hospital because I was sick.

Interviewer: Were you sent to a DP camp?

Henry Wolkoff: What is a DP camp?

Interviewer: Displaced person's camp. Or were you sent after liberation?



Henry Wolkoff: Concentration camp.

Interviewer: No, a displaced person's camp or is it...

Sally Wolkoff: No, we didn't. We went back.

Interviewer: You went straight to the hospital from...

Henry Wolkoff: From the camp.

Interviewer: From the camp, straight to the hospital.

Henry Wolkoff: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: How long was you in recovery?

Henry Wolkoff: Maybe three, four weeks.

Interviewer: Three or four weeks. What was going through your head during this time?

Henry Wolkoff: Nothing much. I'm just waiting for the soup. The soup was the God. Everybody was waiting for their food. That's all what we think. We couldn't do anything much. We couldn't talk, we couldn't speak, we couldn't have a newspaper, we couldn't have anything.

Interviewer: Do you think it was your ability to fix the watch is what kept you alive?

Henry Wolkoff: That saved my life.

Interviewer: What about faith, did that play a role in that at all for you?

Henry Wolkoff: The what?

Interviewer: Faith. Any of your religious upbringing, did that play a role for you?

Henry Wolkoff: I wasn't strictly religious but I believed that in it.

Sally Wolkoff: And hoped.

Interviewer: Anybody in the camp with you that you remember?

Henry Wolkoff: Not today. No, not today.

Sally Wolkoff: Love, you had a nephew with you.

Henry Wolkoff: Yes. He passed away.

Sally Wolkoff: He didn't make it.

Henry Wolkoff: He passed away.

Interviewer: How old was he?

Henry Wolkoff: He was maybe 13, 14 years old.

Interviewer: When he was murdered?

Henry Wolkoff: He was my nephew. I was taking care of him as long as I could but then after that he passed away. He's still in the grave there in Ebensee.

Interviewer: When you came out from the hospital, how soon before you saw Sally again?

Henry Wolkoff: That was quite some time. We had to come home to meet. We came home to Poland.

Interviewer: You returned to Poland after the hospital?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: How did you feel about Poland when you came back?

Henry Wolkoff: We felt so bad that we ran away to Germany pretty soon. We had a chance.

Sally Wolkoff: To be able to emigrate.

Henry Wolkoff: To emigrate.

Interviewer: You went to Germany. What made you pick Germany?

Henry Wolkoff: It was the only place that was a way to get to United States.

Interviewer: You weren't there to live.

Henry Wolkoff: No.

Sally Wolkoff: No.

Interviewer: You were just there to go through. OK. Then from there you went to the United States?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: Where is the first place you went?

Henry Wolkoff: New York.

Interviewer: New York, and then where?

Henry Wolkoff: To Chicago.

Interviewer: Did you stay in Chicago?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Interviewer: Is that for work?

Henry Wolkoff: I had an uncle in Chicago.

Interviewer: You stayed working in Chicago?

Henry Wolkoff: And I wrote a letter to them and I didn't know the address, so I wrote his name and it was delivered.

Interviewer: You just wrote his name and put Chicago?

Henry Wolkoff: I just wrote his name and just describe the situation.

Sally Wolkoff: His name.

Henry Wolkoff: And they delivered that.

Interviewer: Oh, it's extraordinary. Oh it never happened today, isn't that amazing? And so from there you came to Tennessee? What brought you to Tennessee? Sally.

Sally Wolkoff: Sally's sister.

Interviewer: Your sister is here.

Sally Wolkoff: My sister is here.

Interviewer: How long have you lived here?

Sally Wolkoff: Since 1954.

Interviewer: You've been here quite awhile. Almost 50 years.

Sally Wolkoff: That's right.

Interviewer: When people ask you about what happened, what do you say?

Henry Wolkoff: Nothing. We don't tell the story because it's so too painful to tell the story. We just keep it to ourselves. We didn't even tell the children.

Sally Wolkoff: We tried not to live with it all the time.

Henry Wolkoff: We didn't tell the children.

Sally Wolkoff: Put an end to it and we started a new life.

Interviewer: How did you keep the memories away?

Henry Wolkoff: We just didn't talk about it. We just didn't talk about it.

Interviewer: What's making you talk about it now?

Henry Wolkoff: You do.

Interviewer: Besides me grilling you. We invited you down here. We're honored that you chose to.

Henry Wolkoff: I'm not comfortable with all the stories. I'm not, I don't know why not but I am not. Some people like to tell the story.

Sally Wolkoff: They know how to tell the story.

Henry Wolkoff: They know how to talk.

Sally Wolkoff: But it's important to tell the story, we know that, for the future generation to know what happened.

Henry Wolkoff: Right now, I'm collecting books that described the situation, what it was. I have a book now that describe the situation in Lodz which was the city I was raised.

Interviewer: You feel like it was accurate?

Henry Wolkoff: So, I gave it to my daughter. Let her find out what I did at that time.

Interviewer: Is this the first time you're talking to your children about it?

Sally Wolkoff: The last few years.

Henry Wolkoff: Small talk but nothing serious.

Sally Wolkoff: Nothing in details.

Interviewer: Do you feel OK talking about it today?

Henry Wolkoff: I never like to talk about it. We talk about it sometimes between ourselves. We understand each other, what happened.

Interviewer: Do you think that there are certain things you might do differently now as a result of your time during the war and in camps?

Henry Wolkoff: In what way?

Interviewer: We have some survivors that keep extra food in garages, things like that. Extra bottles of water, extra blankets.

Sally Wolkoff: Where?



Interviewer: In their homes as a sense of feeling more at ease and comfortable.

Sally Wolkoff: You mean now or after...?

Interviewer: Now. Oh no, not during the time, now. Do you think that there are certain things that you do that help you feel safer and more comfortable now?

Sally Wolkoff: We feel very comfortable. As soon as we came to this...

Henry Wolkoff: You see, we understand each other. You don't have to...

Interviewer: Do you think part of your healing and ability to cope is that you have each other?

Henry Wolkoff: Yes.

Sally Wolkoff: Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: I think so too. It's nice to be with somebody that you really don't have to talk too much.

Henry Wolkoff: That's right, that's right.

Interviewer: They just know.

Henry Wolkoff: We understand each other. We know what's we're talking about and we don't have to lay it out too much on the table because we know what we're talking about.

Interviewer: Thank you very much. I know this was difficult and something you really didn't want to do.

Henry Wolkoff: You're welcome.

Interviewer: It's an honor to have shared this with you.