

**The Southern Institute
For Education and Research
at
Tulane University**

Presents

**Stories of
Holocaust Survivors
in New Orleans**

MARTIN WASSERMAN

MARTIN WASSERMAN WAS BORN IN WARSAW, POLAND. HE WAS 14 WHEN WORLD WAR II BEGAN IN 1939. AFTER THE GERMANS OCCUPIED WARSAW, MARTIN WAS GRABBED OFF THE STREET AND SENT AS A SLAVE LABORER TO A NAZI WEAPONS FACTORY IN RADOM, POLAND.

MARTIN WAS DESIGNATED A 'WAR ESSENTIAL' WORKER, AND SURVIVED MANY NAZI CAMPS. IN 1945, HE WAS LIBERATED BY AMERICAN TROOPS AT DACHAU CONCENTRATION CAMP NEAR MUNICH, GERMANY. HE CAME TO NEW ORLEANS IN 1950

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY THE SOUTHERN INSTITUTE'S PLATER ROBINSON.

MAP OF POLAND ZOOMING IN ON WARSAW 00:44

PR PLATER ROBINSON
MW MARTIN WASSERMAN

MW My name is Martin Wasserman. I was born in Warsaw, Poland, and born on June 12, 1925. And just four: I had three brothers and one sister. We all went to school and had just a regular school routine: going to school and coming home, and all that.

PR And that world ended in September of 1939. I wonder if you will describe for us that September in Warsaw.

MW Well, we didn't know that. We had seen that the Germans came in on motorcycles and bikes, and we seen soldiers and all that. We were surprised. We didn't know that the war had already begun.

PR Did the Jewish people in Warsaw know what to expect from the Nazis?

MW We didn't know at first, no. We thought that it was gonna be a regular...we'll go back to work and everything gonna be continued the same way. But they changed. They didn't let us work. They took away everything from us. They didn't give us nothing.

PR What were the first changes?

MW They change it when they started putting us in the ghettos and taking away everything, you know, the family.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MEN IN THE BACK OF A TRUCK, GUARDED BY SOLDIERS 2:16

One day I went walking around and listening to different things, you know, and the Germans picked up people, anybody, you know, they seen, and they picked me up, and they brought me to Radom. And when I came there, they already had a few, were trucks waiting, and they loaded us up, and brought us to Radom.

PR So you were picked up off the street...

MW Off the street, and I couldn't even go back to say, you know, goodbye to my family. I hadn't seen them 'til now.

PR And the Nazis took you to the city of Radom, and there you worked in an ammunition factory.

MW I worked there, right, in a carbine place. I used to make the sights of the carbines.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MEN WORKING IN A FACTORY 2:57

We had two machines. We used to cut them out, and, another thing, if you break a tool, they tell you, "Sabotage," and they take you away and they beat you up, because you can't break things. They said that you were doing it on purpose.

PR Was there enough food?

MW Food, they give us a piece of bread and some black water in the morning. And for lunch time they gave us some water and potato peelings. And, at night, they gave us another hot tea and a piece of

bread.

PR Was there any possibility of resistance?

MW No, because they came in at night checking on us all the time, and in the morning, unexpected.

PR And there was one occasion when you were in Radom, when a German guard, he confronted you, and he beat you.

MW Yeah, well, while walking, and he'd been beating some guys in the front, and I seen 'em all beaten, and I got kind of upset, and I just told him, 'Man, the war will not go on forever, and as soon as it's over, we will be looking for you.' So he took the carbine, because the carbine had the bayonets on, and they would try to get me, and I grabbed the bayonet, and he pushed me away and he hit me right here, and I still have the marks.

PR But it's extraordinary that you spoke back to him, and he didn't kill you.

MW No, I know that, and I've been wondering myself afterwards. You know, sometimes you lose your mind and you get aggravated and you do things you know you are not supposed to do.

PR So from Radom, you transferred to Auschwitz.

MW To Auschwitz.

PR But you don't stay there...

MW We didn't stay there.

PR So you went to a labor camp instead.

MW I went to the labor camp, yes.

PR What were you doing there?

MW Down there we did cleaning barracks, whatever they find to get us to work, and we used to do, crazy to think, we used to take telephone poles from one place, put them there, then they said that they didn't like them there, put them back there. So we moved them back there.

PR Just useless work?

MW Yeah, just useless, nothing.

PR And there was not enough to eat?

MW Nothing to eat.

PHOTOGRAPH OF PRISONERS WEARING STRIPED CLOTHING 5:25

Because you were so bitter and thinking what people doing to somebody who didn't do nothing, and fourteen. I didn't do nothing to nobody. Why should I suffer?

PR And once you snuck into the kitchen.

MW We organized a few guys who wanted to go, you know. So we went at night, and we went. We all go, you know, with the fence around, we went underneath the fence, and sneak in underneath the barrack. And when we went underneath the barrack, we pushed the board out, because there were barracks, you know, lifted up, and we

went inside. And we went in the kitchen and we took some bread and we tied it up on the bottom all around, and we used to put them in there and then come out, full of bread and butter. We used to bring it in.

PR The place was well lit?

MW Lit but the light used to go around. We wait until it passed, and we stick close. And then we went into our barracks and we used to give it to whoever been with us in our barrack, used to be. We divide it, and everybody got it. But one time it didn't work out too good. So we went with that food, we came back, and they were waiting for us, the SS, and we put back our head underneath, he came out and put the foot on my head.

PR The SS man?

MW Yeah. And he told me, "We caught you this time. We been waiting for you a long time, and we knew that you been getting in here. Now you gonna suffer." So put me on the side. "Drop everything. Stand up." They took me to a bench in the middle of the yard, and they took out all the barracks. Everybody was standing, watching. We had to stand all day like this, you know, with our hands up, and took it down, you know. They gave us another 25 lashes, and then they told us to go back in the barracks. And in the barracks, we couldn't even stand up.

PR And they gave you 25 lashes. Did you lose consciousness?

MW Well, I was strong, and I don't know how I didn't lose consciousness, but when they hit me in the head, I seen stars. This is when they really got me. But like this, I've been in one place, they gave me 25 lashes and I walked off like nothing happened. They

called me back and they told me that I didn't feel nothing, you know, that they gonna give me ten more, because I'd been standing in the line for a second time to eat, you know, lunch. And they took it away from me, and I didn't eat nothing all day. But I got it anyway, because my friends, everybody, gave me a little bit from theirs. They had little, and they gave me.

PR One reads that, in the camps, it was 'survival,' you know, 'of the fittest,' but you have told us many examples of people helping one another.

MW Yes, they did, not everywhere, but some places, they did.

PR What sort of person is it, you know, in a camp, a death camp, what sort of person is it who thinks about others as well as himself, but perhaps others before himself?

MW Well, I don't know what the reason it is, but I know when I asked somebody to help, they never refused me, and they always gave me something. I don't know what I had...if something...they felt sorry or...I don't know.

PR And then you were moved to a German labor camp near Stuttgart. And there, in the barracks, you were beaten by pipes.

MW Yes, this is because we didn't walk out fast enough. And when they called us reveille in the morning, you know, "Loos! Loos! Loos!" "Get out!" And we couldn't get out fast enough. When they be hitting, and everybody came out. And he hit me over the head, and I had a split right in here. This is when I seen the stars.

PR Did you think you were dead?

MW I thought that I'm falling down, but I put myself together like nothing happened. Just hold my head and I came into work and I just put a patch on it, and I never did go to a doctor. I don't understand why. Now when something happens to me, I went to the doctor. And before, I didn't worry about it and nothing happened. I never got sick one day.

PR At this same German labor camp, there was a 'good German' guard.

MW Right, one. I know one good one.

PR Tell us about him.

MW When we came to work, he used to take bread and he put it behind a post. He couldn't give it to me, so he told me, "Go down there. You gonna find something," you know, so I went there. I couldn't go right away. I had to wait. I went a little bit later. I went down there and there was bread, a half a loaf of bread. And I wrapped it and brought it in the barracks and used to spread it so everybody get some bread.

PR What explains him? On one hand you have brutal guards, on the other you have this one guard who...

MW I don't know why. He was nice to me. I don't know why. He always checked on me every morning.

PR Was he helping other Jewish slaves?

MW I don't know, because I couldn't see. The only thing, he helped me.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF A 'DEATH MARCH' IN THE WOODS 11:25

PR And then you were on a 'death march' to Dachau.

MW Yes, the 'death march' is anybody who couldn't walk, stayed back, they shot him. There's no question about it. You could hear. So two friend of mine's that been walking in the front, I seen 'em fall back, so I told them, "Don't go to the back. Stay in the front, and that's the best place, you know, so I been holding up and carrying them for a long time, and finally they told us to go in a field. We gonna stay overnight. And they opened up, and we stayed in there all night. They had machine guns all set around. And in the morning, we had to get up. No food, no nothing, just march again.

PR Also in Dachau, when they would take you out, you would go to German civilians and knock on their door.

MW Yeah, I used to volunteer for work, and I use to go everywhere and I don't know, they felt sorry for me, and they gave it to me, food.

PR And they knew you were a Jewish slave?

MW I used to [speak] good German. I used to [speak] good German

PR They knew you were Jewish?

MW They knew, yeah.

PR And the civilians near Dachau gave you bread?

MW Yeah, but they told me just to go, not to stay there, just to go.

PR Did they know what Dachau was?

MW Oh yeah, they told me.

PR What'd they say?

MW They feel bad about it, you know, that they hope that soon it will end, that it is bad, you know. They couldn't help me too much. They gave me a little courage, I know.

PR How did they give you courage?

MW Because, you know, when they gave you food, then it felt like somebody wants to help you. If they don't give you no food, I feel like nobody even worrying about you. But if they come out and give you something, I felt like they really worry about me.

PR So you were in Dachau when it was liberated by the Americans.

MW The last day, I remember that, I was standing on the side watching, because we knew something had happened, was changing, because we didn't see the guards. They must have been somewhere, you know, but we didn't know that they left, some of them left and then I seen a tank or something coming in. We hollered, "Tank's coming in!" When it came in, they said that "Everybody should be quiet, not to worry about it. We gonna help you all, whatever you need."

PHOTOGRAPH OF EMACIATED PRISONERS 13:59

And they did help. They used to bring us some food. The whole kitchen used to bring in. They opened up, they put it in, they said, "Everybody can eat now." But plenty people been eating too much. Everybody was pushing, and trying to get in, and they put their head

in it. You couldn't eat, we found out afterwards, you couldn't go and eat too much at first. But they been eating and plenty of people died.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MARTIN AFTER LIBERATION14:30

**MARTIN WASSERMAN IN 1945,
EIGHT MONTHS AFTER LIBERATION.**

MW Right afterwards we used to look for them, for anybody we can find, we used to look at them because the SS had marks underneath.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MARTIN IN THE SNOW14:52

PR The Jewish survivors went looking for the SS and the Gestapo?

MW Not only us, because we had from all different countries, the survivors. Anybody who can catch one, they used to beat them. Even on crutches, he said, "Let me hit him one time."

PR The inmates on crutches?

MW Yes.

PR And the Americans gave you three days.

MW Three days. We could do anything.

PR What did you do?

MW We did all kinds of things, trying to get revenge. For three days, anything we could do. And we felt better. Once we did what we could do. The Germans were scared, you know, when we had power. They were scared. When they were in power, we were scared. They were so scared, they even asked us, "Please, I have a mother and father and children." They didn't ask me that.

PR And you were with your cousin at this point?

MW Yeah, I had my cousin, and we were liberated in the same place.

PR So you went through the war together?

MW All through the 'death march,' everything, we were together.

PR Did he give you strength?

MW He gave me strength, I gave him strength. We both said, “We gonna go through. We gonna go back to the place, but we didn’t want to go back to the place.”

PR To the place?

MW To Poland, back to Poland. We didn’t want to go back. He went to Israel, and I haven’t seen him to about a few weeks [ago]. I had a call, and he called me up, said he’s in Canada. So we supposed to meet soon.

PR Did you ever hear what happened to your family?

MW Nobody. I had uncles, father, mother, from mother’s side, from father’s side. Nobody.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MARTIN AFTER THE WAR 16:55

PR So you arrived in New Orleans with ten dollars in your pocket.

MW Ten dollars. I paid seven dollars for my room. And three dollars left to have in the morning to go, when I go to work, I have the breakfast and lunch.

PR And then you joined the U. S. Army.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF MARTIN IN U.S. ARMY UNIFORMS 17:10

MW The U. S. Army. I made “Soldier of the Week.” And I stayed permanent party. And I really enjoyed it. I really appreciated what Americans did for me. I did everything what I could do. That’s the reason why I joined the service, to do my share. And I did train troops for a year and a half, and I did everything else

I could.

PR And you learned English.

MW I learned English.

PR And one of the first words you learned...

MW Hamburgers. Naturally. Yeah. And then when I went to order the hamburger, then he came and he told me, "Oh yeah! You want a hamburger." I said, "No, I don't want a hamburger. I want a hot dog."

PR And you had many struggles here in the United States.

MW Well, I had to struggle for a while. And I didn't want nobody to give me nothing. I did work. When I came back, I was working for a company and then I find out that I can do it for myself.

PR Carburetors.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MARTIN AND FELLOW WORKERS IN FRONT OF HIS SHOP **18:34**

MW Carburetors. I opened my own business, and I'm still have it, but I'm retiring, and I go every so often. I work maybe about a week. Then I stay off. I don't have to work now.

PR And you didn't tell your children about your experiences.

MW I didn't tell, no. I didn't want them to know how I suffered. Because they would feel sorry. I didn't want them to feel sorry for me.

PR And finally when you did tell them?

MW Well, I had a friend of mine, Zitler, and he told me, “Why don’t you tell your story to somebody because you went through too much, the people should know.” So this is when I started going to different schools

PHOTOGRAPHS OF MARTIN WASSERMAN SPEAKING TO STUDENTS**19:27**

**KAPLAN HIGH SCHOOL
KAPLAN, LOUISIANA**

And telling the people so they know what it means, and to be more, to think more about us. How we suffered and all that.

PR Is that what you want the young people to learn?

MW Yes, to learn about us. How we suffered and there should never be repeated.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MARTIN WASSERMAN IN NEW ORLEANS**20:02**

PR But you not only suffered, Martin, you survived and came here to a New World in which you didn’t speak the language and you’ve become an ‘American success story.’

MW Well, nothing comes easy. I had to work for everything that I have. And nobody helped me. I didn’t ask for nobody and I’m doing pretty good on my own.

PR And your faith in God, Martin?

MW I, at first, I didn't think that this God let this happen, let that my family lost and all that. I didn't think, you know, that. I didn't believe but I do believe now what, you know, you gotta think about yourself and everything for the future. And I think there is somebody over us

PR But where was this "somebody" during the war?

MW During the war? This was different during the war.

PR Do you ever want to go back to Poland and see your homeland?

MW I didn't want to hear nothing about Poland. And my wife says, "Why don't we go back and see the place?" And I say, "I don't want to go back because I don't want to see the place. To memorize what I lost, my family, and all that."

PR Have you gained happiness since the war?

MW Oh yeah. My children, we go out 'three-wheeling.' We do all kind of things together. Even the little ones, with their wives, we go to the spillway and spend plenty time and I even bring neighbor children and we take them, we teach them to ride.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND AUDIO OF DAVID DUKE'S LOUISIANA GOVERNOR'S CAMPAIGN IN 1992 WITH PHOTO OF BLACK PROTESTORS BETWEEN

DAVID DUKE, NEO-NAZI AND FORMER KKK LEADER, RAN FOR LOUISIANA GOVERNOR IN 1992.

HE WON 55% OF THE WHITE VOTE.

PR You left this world that was destroyed by racism, and you arrived here in the Deep South that has its own race questions and race problems and I wonder if you ever hear an echo from a world that was destroyed.

MW Sometimes I think I would like to speak to David Duke. I wish he would come and tell me why he hates. He's the one. He's a Ku Klux Klan, and he's a neo-Nazi.

PR And he says, "It didn't happen."

MW And he says, "It didn't happen."

PR Thank you Martin very much for speaking to us.

MW Thank you.

**MARTIN COMES FROM A FAMILY OF SEVEN.
HE IS THE ONLY SURVIVOR.**

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