

Interview with Michael Tag

The Struggle to Survive

Frequent contributor and Gesher Galicia member Nina Talbot shares with us another interview in this series. Her deep interest in the Jewish community of Dynów has already brought our readers an eyewitness account of life in this western Galician town during the inter-war period (see the June 2018 issue of the journal). This month, we are introduced to Michael (Mechel) Tag, who was also born in the same area in 1927. The conversation with the Tags, which was recorded by Nina and her husband Moish Rand, takes us through a teenager's ordeal during the Holocaust. The interview was conducted on February 26, 2017, in Boro Park, Brooklyn, New York. The edited excerpts from the transcript are presented below.

Nina Talbot (N): You are from Galicia?

Michael: Yes, from Hłudno [in the western part of Galicia, in present-day Poland]. There were four *minyanim* [ten Jewish men required for religious ceremonies] in Hłudno, with forty Jewish families in Hłudno and Wesola, another nearby shtetl, combined.

Moish Rand (Mo): Tell us a bit about your family.

Michael: My father, Yitzhak Tag, had a tobacco store and a grocery—you had to have a license to sell tobacco. He had served in the Polish Army after World War I. Before the next war, one of my uncles first went to Hungary and then came to the States about two years later; that's how he was saved.

When I was ten, *Zaide* [grandfather] also went to the United States. But ten weeks later he was home. My grandmother died about eight years before the war.

Mo: Why did your grandfather come back home?

Michael: He couldn't find work. They said that if he worked, he would have to work on Shabbos, and he didn't want to, so they came back. [*crying*]

N: Did you go into the town of Dynów much?

Michael: We used to go there very often.

N: Every day, once a week? To shop, *daven* [pray], to see the rebbe?

Michael: We went there to see other people and to shop at the market. We went by road with a horse and wagon, which took an hour to get there. There were big hills when you came to Dynów. I remember; I had a rebbe from Dynów who taught me for ten years.

Mo: Did you know my family—the Neger family?

Michael: Neger, yeah. They had a butcher shop right near the Grossman's bakery in the center of town. They were a very nice family. I remember the store.

World War II

N: Let's move on to your recollections of the war. Where were you when the Nazis invaded Dynów?

Michael: I was home. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah in 1939, the Nazis took out more than two hundred people from the *shul* [synagogue] in Dynów. A lot of strangers from Brzozów and other nearby places were forced to go down to the San River.

Mo: These people came from different towns and they stayed in the shul?

Michael: They were there for *yuntif* [holiday].

Mo: Did the people in the town know what the Germans did to them?

Michael: Yeah. The Nazis forced the Jews down to the river and then to go across. Many drowned — those who couldn't swim, children, and those carrying babies. [The San River became the boundary between the German and Russian occupied zones from 1939 to 1941.]

Mo: How did they know?

Michael: They knew it. The Germans also took a Jewish friend, Buchman. He was from Lemberg, one of six kids. His family had a big farm, cows, and horses.

Mrs. Tag (Michael's wife): Then, the Nazis came back and killed Michael's grandfather.

Michael: He was shot. A Nazi passed by his house when Zaide was outside, and he shot him in front of the house. [*crying*]

N: You were able to stay home in Hłodno until 1942. What happened then?

Michael: In February 1942, Jewish men between ages fifteen and thirty-five had to register. The SS took us to Płaszów (some 126 miles away), but our barrack wasn't ready. We slept on the floor for five weeks until the barracks were finished, and then were taken to Kraków-Płaszów concentration camp.

N: Were you a laborer there?

Michael: Yeah, I was carrying fifty kilos of cement twelve hours a day for about seven months. I was in Płaszów altogether for twenty months doing heavy labor. I was there with the rabbi who's in the picture. [*pointing to the wall*] He helped me because when I couldn't carry any more, he put me to work elsewhere. He knew the chief of the Jewish

police, whose son was a doctor. The doctor helped to change my job to working on grenades and explosives. It was better, but remember that the grenades are poison. After you worked ten, eleven weeks, your lungs got affected. People were dying from lung problems.

N: Where else were you during the war?

Michael: I was in Skarżysko-Kamienna, a town in Poland. You never heard of Skarżysko?

Have you seen this book? [*Death Comes in Yellow* by Felicja Kray] tells about the place where I was. That's how we looked after eleven weeks. [*pointing to the cover with the picture of emaciated faces*] The camp had three subdivisions: A, B, and C. The Skarżysko C section was the biggest and the hardest to survive. There was heavy labor.

We worked with grenades and explosives for nine weeks. If you got a lung problem, they put you in the woods and shot you. The Nazis ordered the other people to dig a grave and shot them too. Once, I saw a woman who fell into such a ditch filled with water. A man passing by heard her crying and took her out. That's how she survived.

N: What happened after you were in the Płaszów and Skarżysko camps?

Michael: They sent us to Częstochowa for eight months at the end of 1943. There were also three camps. It wasn't bad; I was working outside.

N: Were you liberated from that camp? Or was there something else?

Michael: No, we were sent to the concentration camp in Buchenwald, Germany, for another eight months. In 1944 I was sent to a camp in Strasbourg in occupied France. There were about seven hundred people, and I was working on machines that made airplane parts.

[When the Allies were approaching,] they sent us to march for four weeks to Annenberg on the German side of the French border. More than half of the people died.

Once a boy went under the wagon—they were used to bring food for the SS—and took a piece of bread. A German soldier shot him in the leg; the boy lost his leg but survived. The last day, I remember, we walked very slowly. They took us to the woods and we slept outside. Anybody that got up was going to be shot.

N: Did your father and mother survive the war?

Michael: No.

N: Where did you lose them? Were they taken before you?

Michael: No, after me. I was already in the ghetto in Jasienica [Yashnitsa in Yiddish], a small town near Hłodno. I had one brother, Tzvi Herschel Tag, who was with me. Before the war, he was going to school learning to become a mechanic in Przemyśl.

N: Did he survive the war also? What happened to him?

Mrs. T: No, he didn't survive. When Tzvi died, he was about twenty years old. Michael was not with him. His brother was in a hospital for something having to do with his leg. One night, they took him away and he was never heard from again. The Germans came in with dogs, and they took away everybody.

Michael: My mother was in the ghetto too; the whole family, my sister, two aunts, and an uncle.

N: After the war, did you come to the United States soon?

Michael: After liberation, I went back to Poland and spent some time in a hospital in Kraków.

Then, I went to Hłodno and gave our house to a family that had taken care of it during the war.

In 1947 I managed to get to Germany with some Greek refugees. They were Jewish but didn't speak Yiddish or Polish. We didn't know what they were saying.



Michael Tag at the age of twenty-one in a displaced persons camp in Landsberg, Germany, in 1948. The Landsberg camp was situated in the American-occupied zone and housed some five thousand Holocaust survivors.

N: And from there you came to New York?

Michael: I had two aunts in the States, and an uncle. After seven months in the displaced persons camp, I arrived in New York City on April 28, 1948. In the US, I lived for about three years with my aunt Lena Selig, who married a Tag.

Reflections

Mrs. T: We didn't talk about the war until we went back to Poland in 1990.

N: The two of you? Did you go to see where you came from?

Mrs. T: We wanted to go back; he always told me "we had a house," and I was dying to see that house. When we went there, we met the lady who lived in their former house; before the war she was a maid there.



Pesach Tag (1931–circa 1941) at the Jasienica Ghetto. The photograph of Michael's sister was saved by a caretaker of the family house and returned to the Tags in 1990.

She was eighty-three years old and was so happy to see Michael. She was very nice to the family during the war, bringing them food to the ghetto. If the Nazis caught her, she would have been a goner.

Her family told us that we could stay with them, but the problem was that we are kosher. So, they said they were going to take a chicken and kill it, buy new dishes and everything else for us. They took us to a place where Michael's mother, father, uncle, and sister [pictured on this page] were [buried].

N: Was it a Jewish cemetery?

Mrs. T: It's not a Jewish cemetery [but a mass grave]; the Germans killed everybody, and that's the place they took us to.

We went to all the camps and all the cemeteries, and the synagogues. He still wants to go back, but I won't let him. I feel the streets are covered with blood there; there is nothing to find.

Mrs. T: In Kraków, we went to the Remah Synagogue (named after R. Moses Isserles, ReMA), which is a beautiful shul. It's old—you feel the oldness of it. The synagogue was built in 1553. My son *layned* [prayed] there. Kraków is a nice city; we stayed there most of the time.

Michael [interjecting]: Years ago, I went from the Płaszów labor camp on Shabbos to the Kraków Ghetto.

N: Did they let you go on Shabbos to the ghetto?

Michael: Yeah, yeah. We had permission to go. Once, 120 boys were missing from the camp. They searched at night in the ghetto with dogs and caught them all. Polish Jews—not too many are left. That's the story, a long story. [crying]

N: Thank you. It's a miracle you survived.