

# MARTIN WASSERMAN: STUDY GUIDE

## BACKGROUND

Martin Wasserman was born in Warsaw, Poland, on June 12, 1925. He lived with his parents, three brothers, and sister in the Jewish district. For several generations his family owned a business selling horses to the Polish military. Martin experienced vicious anti-Semitism at the hands of Poles *before* the war – slurs, bullying, and fist-fights on the street and at school. He was small but strong and always fought back. In fact, he got into trouble at school because of his fierce, uncompromising attitude.

## WORLD WAR II

When the Germans invaded and occupied Poland in September 1939, Martin was fourteen years old. After ferocious aerial and artillery bombardments, Warsaw surrendered on September 27<sup>th</sup>.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** ‘Street round-ups’ were common acts of Nazi terror. The round-ups’ were random and final.

A few weeks after the Germans occupied Warsaw, Martin was caught in a 'street round-up.' He was grabbed off the street by the Nazis and carted off to 'work.' He never saw his family again.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** The Nazis built slave labor camps throughout occupied Poland – and throughout occupied Europe. They exploited Jewish labor and non-Jewish labor to produce goods for the German Army.

## LABOR CAMP in RADOM

Martin was sent to a slave labor camp at Radom, Poland, where he was forced to work in a factory manufacturing rifles. If a prisoner made a 'mistake' in his work, he was accused of sabotage and beaten – or simply disappeared.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Martin anticipated problems with the machinery and took chances by being 'assertive' with the Germans.

As Martin tells us in the documentary, he informed the German supervisor about the deteriorated condition of his machine and thus avoided being labeled a 'saboteur.' Martin describes another occasion when he threatened a guard, which was unheard of. "Man, the war will not go on forever, and as soon as it's over, we will be looking for you," Martin said. The guard used his bayonet against Martin, but Martin grabbed the bayonet "and he pushed me

away and he hit me right here [back of the head], and I still have the marks.” Martin was surprised that the guard didn’t shoot him, “and I’ve been wondering myself afterwards.” Martin was later caught trying to ‘organize’ (steal) food from the camp kitchen. He was whipped (twenty-five lashes) as punishment. He describes another time when he was whipped and refused to scream or reveal any pain. The Germans ordered him whipped again.

From Radom, Martin and other Jewish slaves were sent by train to the *Auschwitz-Birkenau* death camp but spent only a day there. The Nazis made a ‘selection’ and put the Jewish slaves capable of work, including Martin, on a train bound for a Nazi labor camp at Wihingen, near Stuttgart, Germany. The Jews were forced to do meaningless work. Martin says. “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.” This kind of work exhausted the prisoners and kept their minds off escape. It also gave the Nazi guards a less than dangerous ‘job.’ They were only too happy to be far from the front, where there was considerably less opportunity to survive the war. In the last months of war, the Jewish slaves received less food than ever. “Nothing to eat,” Martin says. From Wihingen he was sent to a labor camp at Hesential, Germany.

## ‘DEATH MARCH’

During the last month of the war, Martin was ordered on a “death march” from Hesential to the Dachau concentration camp near Munich, Germany. In the documentary, he describes helping his cousin Henry Wasserman and another man during the ‘march.’

On April 29, 1945, Martin was liberated by American troops at Dachau.

## JEWISH REVENGE

As Martin tells us in the documentary, he and other Jewish survivors tracked down SS men after the war for revenge.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Jewish acts of revenge against Nazi criminals occurred for several months after the war. This group of avengers was called the DIN, which means 'revenge' in Hebrew.

## POST-WAR

After the war, Martin worked for the U. S. Army in Germany. He immigrated to the United States in 1950. A few months later, he was drafted into the Army and served as an instructor at Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. He is proud of the fact that he earned the 'Soldier of the Week' award.

Martin married in 1954. He and his wife have two sons and a daughter. For many years, Martin owned and operated a carburetor repair business in New Orleans. He began speaking about his experiences during the war after a fellow survivor (Shep Zitler, whose own experiences are recounted in another documentary of this series) told him to speak out. Martin was further encouraged to talk when Holocaust-denier and former Klansman David Duke ran

for political office in Louisiana (and won 55% of the white vote).

# MARTIN WASSERMAN: GLOSSARY

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Define the following glossary terms and explain their relevance to Martin's story:

1. Warsaw, Poland –

2. 'Street round up' –

3. Labor camp –

4. 'Death march' –

5. Dachau –

6. DIN –

## MARTIN WASSERMAN: KEY QUESTIONS

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions using information and quotes taken from the documentary and study guide:

1. Describe Martin's family and his life before World War II.

2. How did Martin 'arrive' at the Nazi labor camp at Radom, Poland? What was his 'job' there? How did he avoid being accused of "sabotage" by the Nazis? What were he and other prisoners fed?

3. Describe the 'incident' when Martin threatened a guard at the Radom labor camp. How does Martin explain what he

did?

4. Describe how Martin and “a few guys” stole food from the German kitchen? What happened?

5. Describe what happened to Martin on the occasion when he was caught trying to get a second portion of food.

6. Describe “the good German guard” who helped Martin.

7. Describe Martin’s experience on the “death march” to Dachau.

8. Martin says that German civilians near Dachau gave him “a little courage.” Explain how.



9. Describe the liberation of Dachau and how prisoners died after they were freed.

10. Describe Martin's experience hunting down former SS men. How did the Jewish survivors determine who was an SS man?

11. Describe Martin's experience as a U. S. Army soldier.

12. Describe Martin's life in New Orleans. Did he have a family? What was his job? Why did he decide to tell his story?

13. What is Martin's message?

