

David Kohen In The Forced Labor Camp In Haskovo



This is a photo of a forced labor camp, taken in June 1943, Haskovo. I'm at the top with a towel on my head. My brother Aron Kohen is the third from the right sitting, below. We were digging then on the Haskovska River flow correction.

I have written an article on the Jewish forced labor groups. I explained there that the legal basis for the formation of such groups lied chiefly in the Law for the Protection of the Nation where there was a strict passage clarifying the status of the Jews as people who couldn't be summoned to service in the army, but had to serve their time as soldiers in the labor corps. They were set up in

January 1942.

These groups were given separate projects for fulfillment such as corrections of river flows and drying of swamps. The Jewish labor groups were formed only of Jews. Until 1941 Jews weren't separated in special labor units and took part in the construction corps with everybody else. After their separation in special labor corps they expended hard physical work without any payment in severe field conditions. The main difference between the Bulgarian labor troops and the Jewish ones was that we used to go there in our own clothes and shoes and our work wasn't considered a military service. These groups were operating throughout the country and each of them was between 200 and 400-men strong. I was first mobilized to make correction on the river flow of the Haskovska River, and after that to Svilengrad to carry out correction on the Kanaliyska River. I also worked for the factory of Georgi Chonev near Haskovo, we dug the bomb shelter under Yamasha and we worked there only in the evenings. In 1942 I was with my brothers after which I was sent to Smyadovo while they were in Haskovo.

The work was hard and most of the guys hadn't done hard manual labor before. We used picks, spades and wheelbarrows for our work. We had a target of four cubic meters of soil but it was hard to fulfill it every day. As a result of the hard work my hand got infected and I was likely to lose it. The infection was caused by the excessive exercising of pressure on my hand in the area of the wrist. In the evenings I had to visit a surgeon, but he didn't have the instruments to help me. He froze my hand and he made a section with ordinary scissors. After that I had to go to the hospital to disinfect it for two weeks. Haskovo's hospital was near the railway station and about one or two kilometers away from the city center. In order to go there I had to ask for permission from the police commander. My father also had to ask permission from this institution so that he could take me there. I was bandaged for a month, but when I got well I had to return to the digging again.