

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

Oral History Interviews of the
Kean College of New Jersey
Holocaust Resource Center

Interview with Mayer Lief
1983
RG-50.002*0016

PREFACE

In 1983, Mayer Lief was interviewed on videotape by Sidney Langer on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

Summary of the
Interview with Mayer Lief
1983

Mayer Lief was born in Lemberg, Poland, (Lviv, Ukraine), on August 18, 1908. He was the third of seven brothers. His father owned a dairy business. Mayer went to public school and attended cheder in the afternoon. He attended trade school at 13 and was drafted into the Polish Army at age 20. Although there were no religious difficulties in his unit, there was Antisemitism in Poland in the 1930's. The Lief family attempted to emigrate to the United States but their papers never came through. They did not attempt to leave after the Russians took over Lemberg in 1939 because they did not sense danger.

Mayer was captured by the Germans on the first day of war, June 22, 1941, and was forced to dig mass graves. The next day he disobeyed orders to return to dig more graves. The Germans issued armbands to the Jews and set up a ghetto in Lemberg in November 1941. Mayer was able to leave the ghetto for German Army quarters because of his job as locksmith and safecracker. When the Lemberg ghetto was liquidated, all Jews had to leave the base as well. Mayer was sent to Janowska Concentration camp in Poland. He escaped with the help of a Polish worker at the camp and got false papers. He remained in hiding until the Russians liberated the town in 1944.

Mayer stayed in Lemberg until 1946 and then moved to Poland. From there he reached a displaced persons camp in Germany. Mayer joined his mother in the United States on March 12, 1949. In 1954

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he was married. He worked in construction and then became a farmer. He is now retired.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Mayer Lief
1983**

01:00:00

Mayer Lief was born in Lemberg, Poland, (now Lviv, Ukraine), on August 18, 1908. The population of Lemberg was 250,000; about 30% of whom were Jewish. Mayer was the third of seven brothers. He had no sisters. His father had a dairy business and shipped produce out to a radius of about 50 miles. This background provided him with a pass to travel freely during the Nazi era.

01:05:00

Mayer went to public school and to a "cheder" after school. At 13, he began to learn a trade, which helped him to survive. He felt Antisemitism in Poland in the 1930's.

01:10:00

Mayer describes Lemberg's Jewish community and personalities, especially Rabbi Ziff. Mayer belonged to a Zionist organization, beginning at age 18. He worked during the day and attended the trade schools classes at night for four years. He was drafted into the Polish Army for a two year term at age 20.

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01:15:00

His army company of 150 had at least 12 Jews in it. There were no inter-religious problems in the Polish Army. Then he returned to the family business.

01:20:00

There was a greater level of Antisemitism in Poland after Hitler came to power in 1939. This did not lead to an exodus except for Chalutzim who went to Israel, e.g., his brother who went there in 1936. They could leave in 1939 for the New York World's Fair, e.g. the Fisch family. The Lief family also had papers to leave.

01:25:00

The American quota for Poles meant that permission to enter the country was slow to come. The Lief's had a number of family members in the United States, but their papers never cleared. In 1939, Lemberg came under Russian dominion.

01:30:00

The Russians needed Mayer for his trade knowledge just as the Germans would need him after 1941. His family did not consider leaving Poland at this time. They did not feel the danger during the Russian period.

01:35:00

When the Russians came, there was sufficient food (on the black market), but there were long lines immediately. On June 22, 1941 the Germans caught Mayer on the very first day of the invasion.

01:40:00

The Germans took Mayer to the location where they were killing. They were digging mass graves. This was Mayers's job.

01:45:00

Mayer was directed to return the second day to continue his job, but he did not return. Hundreds were killed that first day. They hid the second day in the cellar of their home. The Germans set up a ghetto in November. Everybody went into the ghetto, including Mayer. Between June and November, they distributed arm bands and gold stars to the Jews.

01:50:00

The ghetto was made smaller until it was liquidated. His mother was already in America. His father had passed away in his 60's. Mayer was with a brother, sister-in-law and family in one room in the ghetto. After a while, the German Army gave him a

special pass to go anywhere he wanted because he was a locksmith. He was given special quarters with about 35 others at the Army base.

01:55:00

He lived there until June 1943, about 18 months. The Army was then forbidden to have Jews living at the base. Mayer was taken along with the Jews from the ghetto to Janowska concentration camp, in Poland, outside Lemberg. There, people were shot and their bodies fell into pits or "valleys" where they were buried.

02:00:00

How did they decide whom to kill? They killed everybody. Blood was flowing like a river. The blood was streaming a mile away, where Mayer was taken. One of the prisoners told the supervising officer that he was an army captain in World War I. He said that as a German officer he deserved to die with honor. He asked to be shot on the spot instead of slaughtered. The issue was brought to another German officer who ruled: "Why not? Let him pick a grave and kill him." This was done.

02:05:00

Mayer and a close friend were on the maintenance staff at the camp. A worker (not a prisoner) who was in charge of taking prisoners to Lemberg to pick up materials for the camp agreed to

take them into the town and let them off at a predetermined location. If the two did not return, he knew that they had been able to escape successfully. Mayer and his friends bought false identification using money that his friend had taken from clothes in the camp laundry where he worked. Mayer's friend left for Warsaw and Mayer remained with the man who sold him the papers. Mayer posed as the man's brother.

02:10:00

These papers made him into a Pole with a Polish name. Mayer remained with this name almost until the end.

02:15:00

They built a bunker for Mayer in the house of the man who sold him the papers in case the Germans came. It never proved necessary. He had no contact with any family members during this period. The Russians were bombing Lemberg in April 1944.

02:20:00

In 1944, Lemberg was relieved by the Russians' arrival. Mayer remained in Lemberg until 1946.

02:25:00

Then they went to Poland, and on to Germany. Mayer stayed at a displaced persons camp in 1946. Many went to Palestine at this

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time. Mayer went to the United States in order to join his mother, arriving on March 12, 1949.

02:30:00

Mayer relates the story of his arrival in the United States. He arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, and traveled to New York. Finally he arrived in Elizabeth, New Jersey. When he arrived, his mother was at a Purim party in the Synagogue!

02:35:00

He was married in 1954. He was a construction worker. Then he had a farm. Now he is retired.