

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

**Interview with Isak Levenstein
1983
RG-50.002*0017**

PREFACE

In 1983, Isak Levenstein 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 Isak Levenstein
1983**

Isak Levenstein was born on February 11, 1906, near Lublin, Poland. Both his parents died by the time he was 11 years old. At the age of 12, he moved in with an uncle who lived in Kraków, Poland. Isak went to Cheder and then started work as a young man. He owned a factory which produced pots and pans. On December 29, 1931, he married his wife, Sally, and moved to Kazimierza Wielka, Poland. He belonged to two Zionist organizations, Mizrachi and Hechalutz. In March 1941, Isak and Sally were moved into the Kraków ghetto. During a comprehensive round-up of Jews in 1943, Isak was able to get Sally and some of his family to a bunker while he, himself, was forced into Plaszów concentration camp in Poland. He was able to hide his children in the camp by bribing a guard for 14 months, but was unable to save them. Isak qualified as a metal worker for Oskar Schindler and went with him and other Jews from Schindler's Gross-Rosen factory in Poland to his Brünnlitz factory in Czechoslovakia. Sally was imprisoned in Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland and Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany before she was liberated. They were separated from each other for ten months from October 1944 until August 1945. Isak and Sally emigrated to the United States to live with an uncle in Brooklyn, New York. They eventually moved to New Jersey where Isak started a construction company with two other survivors who had been saved by Schindler.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Isak Levenstein
1983**

01:01:00

Isak was born on February 11, 1906, near Lublin, Poland. He lost his parents at ages 4 and 11. He moved to Kraków, Poland at age 12 to live with an uncle. On December 29, 1931, he married and moved to Kazimierza Wielka, Poland. He was the youngest in his family.

01:06:00

His education between the ages of 11 and 17 was in a Cheder, a traditional, educational arrangement for Jewish boys. Then, he went to work. he married at age 25 and he and his wife have been married for 52 years. There was a population of 70,000 Jews in Kraków. Everyone made a living. He belonged to Zionist organizations, Mizrachi and Hechalutz.

01:11:00

He did not feel and Antisemitism in Kraków until the mid 1930's. A Polish Sejm (Senate) member wanted to ban ritual slaughter of

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animals. He talks about his family, his wife's family, his factory for dishes at the time of his marriage and his partner who now resided in Brooklyn, New York.

01:16:00

When ritual slaughter was banned, Isak ate chicken, but no other meat. Antisemitism by Poles was very widespread. Ninety-nine percent of them worked with the Nazis. In 1942, the Poles took in his wife's wealthy family and then turned them over to the Nazis. They were fooled by the Germans, whom they considered educated and civilized. The Nazis ended up murdering 1.2 million children.

01:21:00

The question about Kristallnacht reminds Isak of his experience in Jerusalem, Israel at a dedication concert for Shaare Zedek hospital in 1978.

01:26:00

Some Poles, very few, saved Jews. That is how Sam Halpern, Millie Zuckerman and Clara Kramer (other Holocaust survivors) were saved. When the Germans came, escape was impossible. "We were on foot,

they were on motorcycles." Where was there to escape? France and Spain would have been the best.

01:31:00

His wife's family was put with 30 other people in a bunker, near Kraków. They were all shot. He and his wife lived in Kraków until March 1941. Then they were forced to move into the Kraków ghetto, constructed by the Germans.

01:36:00

The Judenrat would be instructed to round up 3,000 Jews. The Jews were then shipped to Treblinka or Auschwitz concentration camps, both in Poland. He has no use for the role of the Judenrat. Was he paid for his work? "No, they didn't kill you and they didn't pay you." When asked what was the level of Jewish practice, (Prayer, Tfillin, etc.) Isak says, "Whoever wanted to, did it."

01:41:00

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At selection time, he hid himself and his family. When asked how did he know when the selections would take place, Isak says, "I was alert."

01:46:00

In 1943, there was a comprehensive round-up. He directed his wife and other family members to a bunker and he was sent to Plaszów concentration camp. This was Friday or Saturday. The slaughter occurred on Sunday.

01:51:00

He tells the story of his effort to save his family. He told the German commander that he had a factory of pots and pans. He bribed a guard with Vodka and 500 zloty.

01:56:00

He hid the children in the bunks in the camp for 14 months. There were 369 children in the camp.

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2:01:00

He talks of Oskar Schindler. Isak had an identification card that said that he was a metal worker. This saved his life. He went to Gross-Rosen for three days in Poland and then was sent to Schindler's Brännlitz factory in Czechoslovakia. He has an original copy of Schindler's list dated May 12, 1944. Through his alertness, he could save himself and his wife but not the children. On May, 1, 1944, 500 men were to be deported.

02:06:00

Schindler started the factory with Isaac Stern, a Jewish accountant. Schindler was a Nazi, but a human being, a "wheeler dealer." He was in Kraków for more than two years. His wish was to be buried in Jerusalem, Israel and he was buried there. Isak's wife was in Auschwitz and was liberated in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. She heard after the war that Isak was alive. Then they went to Brooklyn, New York where his uncle lived.

02:11:00

Isak and Sally looked for relatives in Germany and Austria in 1945, but not in Kraków. The difference between the Czechs and the Poles was that the Czechs stood up in the trains and made them sit down ("You were in a concentration camp," they said) and the Poles did not. He talks about their visit to Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. "That was a camp. With Schindler, we were in a convalescent home."

02:16:00

Isak was separated from his wife for ten months from October 1944 to August 1945. He wanted to come to the United States and not Israel because of his uncle in New York. An American GI helped by placing an announcement in the *Jewish Forward*. President Truman helped by allowing survivors to enter the United States without affidavits.

02:21:00

He has visited Israel 25 times. He talks about the role of American Jews and the United States government.

02:26:00

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When asked how he came to New Jersey, he says, "I went into construction with Murray Pantirer and Abraham Zuckerman."