

**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives**

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

**Interview with Charles Levine
February 14, 1989
RG-50.002*0037**

PREFACE

On February 14, 1989, Charles Levine was interviewed on videotape by Robert Nellworm and Bernard Weinstein 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 Charles Levine
February 14, 1989**

Charles Levine was born in Augustow, Poland on June 15, 1915. He was the youngest of seven siblings. His oldest brother emigrated to the United States in 1923. In 1939, Charles was drafted into the Polish army and taken to Baronowice, Poland and then to Russia in closed wagons. When he finished his military duty, he returned to Augustow, which by that time was occupied by the Russians. On June 22, 1941 the Germans invaded and a ghetto was established in Augustow. Charles remained in the ghetto from July 1941 to November 1942. He was then transported to Bogusze concentration camp in Poland where he describes the death of inmates from starvation, typhus and shootings. In January 1943, he was moved to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland where he was forced to participate in the building of the crematoria. Two years later, he was taken to on a death march to Gross-Rosen concentration camp in Germany where he stayed for one month before being sent to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. He was forced to work in a brick factory in Weimar, Germany until April 13, 1945, when he was liberated by American soldiers. After liberation, Charles travelled around Germany and Poland. When the war was over, he went to Czechoslovakia, then Hungary and finally to Italy where he stayed in a displaced persons camp. Charles married in 1947 and he and his wife emigrated to the United States in December 1949.

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They live in Woodbridge, New Jersey. They have two children and two grandchildren.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Charles Levine
February 14, 1989**

01:01:00

Charles Levine was born in Augustow, Poland, near Bialystok, on June 15, 1915. His father was a fisherman. There were six brothers and one sister in his family. He was the youngest. Education was impossible if one was poor. Sometimes, he had no books. His older brother came to the United States in 1923 and his family followed him in 1928. His brother's son recently retired as a teacher from Old Bridge, New Jersey.

01:04:00

Charles was drafted into the Polish army. He left the army in 1937. Two years later, the war broke out and he was drafted again. The Poles fought on horses. There was no military technology. He was in Baranowice, Poland. The war was over in four to five days. He was several hours away from his home. People escaped from Baranowice by wagons. Each wagon had about 100 people. The doors were locked so one could not see outside. They were taken to Russia. They traveled four days and four nights. No one knew what was going on.

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01:07:00

The doors finally opened. Everyone was given a fish, head and all, to eat. There was no water. Then they rode together for another four to five days. They finally arrived at a military barracks. There was no water or food. They thought that the war had ended. No one understood the situation. People developed typhus and other maladies.

01:10:00

People under the Russians had to go to their area. They were told that they could go home. Charles was told that his area was now under the Germans. He said that he was born in Vilnius, Lithuania. He had actually been there a few times. He knew how to lie credibly. After four days and four nights, Charles went back to Baranowice.

01:13:00

He was told that he could not get off. He jumped off and ran. A man took him and gave him some Polish money to go back to Augustow. The Russians had sent business people, Zionists, etc. away. Finally, he came home. He got a job in a restaurant. He

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had to go to meetings and parades. He had to work on time or be arrested.

01:16:00

The Russians were not particularly Antisemitic. There were many high ranking Jewish officers but religion was not tolerated. Secretly, he exchanged places with Gentiles on religious holidays. He talks about Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin's brutalities.

01:19:00

On June 22, 1941, the Germans invaded and things got progressively worse. Everyone had to register at city hall. People who did not register were shot. Augustow became a ghetto. Charles lived there from July 1941 to November 2, 1942. He was given some provisions.

01:22:00

People hoped that the war would end soon but on November 2, 1942, the were sent to Bogusze concentration camp, near Grajewo, (not

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verified) Poland. There was already a Judenrat. There was no food. Dead horses were used as meat.

01:25:00

Children who ran to get potatoes were shot. Food was so bad that they couldn't live long. Fifty people, on average, died each day from typhus, starvation, etc. About 6,000 people were rounded up for the first transport. The destination was Treblinka concentration camp in Poland. People were stripped of their possessions, killed and cremated.

01:28:00

On the second transport at the end of December one woman paid an SS man to shoot her father. Charles was on this transport. Its destination was Birkenau concentration camp in Poland. There was a selection. About 200 boys and 200 young women were taken.

01:31:00

All luggage was taken. They never saw it again. Crematoriums were active. Bricks came from Germany. Charles and three others were taken. They had to build the crematoria. The crematoria killed 24,000 people. It had no windows and no pipes. There were about four crematoriums.

01:34:00

His sister and parents were gassed. He was taken for forced labor with three brothers. Charles shows his tatoo, #85719. The crematoria had a big door. When 4,000 people went in, thinking that they were going to the showers, the gas was thrown in. After 15 minutes, in some cases, children were still alive. After everyone was dead, they took out their teeth to extract gold.

01:37:00

Professional Jewish goldsmiths were used to extract the gold. Charles slept on a plywood bed. There were five people on one side of the bed and five on the other. He got shoes from dead people. One was too big, another too small. The crematoria was not far away. People came from all over. Some rabbis from Greece came there. They were told to write letters to their congregations to tell people everything was "all right." The winter was six months long. The Poles were used to it but people from warmer climates were not.

01:40:00

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He talks about Mordechai Rumkowski, chairman of the Judenrat in Łódź, Poland. Upon arrival in the camp everything was taken away. You take a shower, your clothes are taken and you get a change every couple of weeks. A transport arrived from the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He was in Auschwitz until December 1944 or January 1945. He was taken ten miles away. There was no work to do while in the camps. Most were too weak or sick.

01:43:00

People were shot if they couldn't work during evacuation. Finally, they came to Gross-Rosen concentration camp in Germany. There were electric wires that were a couple of hundred feet deep. There was no place to run.

01:46:00

One escapee was hanged in front of thousands of people. In Gross-Rosen, there was also a camp for gypsies. Millions of others, besides Jews, were also killed. In February, from Gross-Rosen, he was taken to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. Many died from typhus. In Auschwitz, there were many Jewish doctors who taught German doctors. They were killed anyway.

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01:49:00

Gross-Rosen was a terrible camp. He was there for about a month. Buchenwald was isolated. They were taken by train to Weimar, Germany to work in a brick factory. The owner fed them. Once, they dug graves for German soldiers who were killed.

01:52:00

One day, work stopped. They did not know what was going on. There were no guards and no soldiers. It was Friday, April 13. Suddenly, big tanks started moving. He and some others went under a bridge.

01:55:00

He saw American soldiers. He is thankful to them for saving his life. He speaks of General Dwight Eisenhower's visit. Later, they went to Dresden, Germany, and saw bombed-out areas. They were told that the Russians were coming. They were given the choice of staying or not staying. He chose not to stay.

01:58:00

Some who chose to stay had to go into the Russian army. He went from house to house begging for bread. He went back to Poland by horse and wagon. He arrived in Kraków, Poland.

02:01:00

He got to the Jewish Refugees Committee. He saw the woman who was to become his wife. He returned to his town in order too see what happened there. One of his friends was shot by the Armia Krajowa, the Polish army of the underground.

02:04:00

He went to Bialystok. He was not sure whether the Russians would arrest him. He was told not to walk on the street in the dark. The Poles and Russians were fighting. He went to Warsaw, Poland and then back to Kraków.

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02:07:00

On May 8, the war was over. He had been liberated on April 13. A Jewish organization got him to Czechoslovakia and then to Budapest, Hungary. The people from Betar (Palestine?) put him in a displaced persons camp. The Russian occupation army was in place.

02:10:00

Russian soldiers took away his possessions. He went to Italy to another displaced persons camp. There was no work. The government did nothing for them. There were only very rich people or very poor people.

02:13:00

He was in Cremona, Italy. He ate at the army PX. After the war, there was no place to go {interviewee breaks down} . He married in 1947. He and his wife came to the United States in December 1949. He worked for his brother and earned 17 dollars per week. Somebody recommended he get a job in a handbag factory.

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02:16:00

German Jews owned the factory. He learned how to operate machinery and earned more money. His brother rented an apartment. The factory was in Old Bridge, New Jersey. He couldn't afford the rent. He worked 17 hours a day from seven in the morning to midnight. He worked this way for 15 years. He bought a house in Woodbridge, New Jersey seven years later. His boss gave him the mortgage.

02:19:00

His son and daughter got good educations. His daughter has two children. His children wanted to know what happened to him. He lamented on the fact that they lost everything, no one helped and that his life was forever changed by what happened to him.