

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **Archives**

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

**Interview with Lee Merel  
November 20, 1992  
RG-50.002\*0078**

## **PREFACE**

On November 20, 1992, Lee Merel was interviewed on videotape by Joseph J. Preil 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 Lee Merel  
November 20, 1992**

Lee Merel was born in Berlin, Germany on April 7, 1924. The Merel family was Orthodox and consisted of Lee, his parents and his sister. In 1935, Lee's father decided to leave Germany and take his family to Palestine via Switzerland. All of Lee's extended family that remained in Germany, perished in the Holocaust. With the exception of Lee's sister, the family moved to the United States in 1937 because of the Arab boycott. They settled in Washington Heights, New York before moving to New Brunswick, New Jersey to be near the father's furniture business. Lee left Rutgers University in New Brunswick in the fall of 1941 in order to volunteer for the United States Army. He began as a combat engineer. He then transferred to military intelligence. Lee experienced much Antisemitism while in the Army. He went to England a year prior to the invasion of Europe and changed his name from Merel to Brewster in case of German capture. He went to France directly after D-Day before serving as an interpreter at the investigation of the chief engineer of the Krupp Armaments in Germany. Lee says that he learned much about the Germans, who "had only one regret, that they lost the war." He was also put in charge of a company of 125 men whose mission was to clear out the Gardelegen concentration camp in Germany. He tells how he communicated with and discovered a deaf-mute cousin who was one of the inmates near death. Lee describes grappling with his religious beliefs and how best to transmit them to his three children and five grandchildren. He currently resides in Westfield, New Jersey.

**Time-coded notes of the  
Interview with Lee Merel  
November 20, 1992**

01:01:00

Lee Merel resides in Westfield, New Jersey. He was born in Berlin, Germany on April 7, 1924. He attended Orthodox Hebrew Day School in Berlin. At age ten or eleven in 1935, he left for Switzerland and then to Palestine. He arrived in the United States the day after his Bar Mitzvah, in 1937. Both of his parents were from Poland. His father had five brothers and his mother had four or five sisters, and he had numerous cousins. He attended Adat Israel Day School.

01:06:00

Lee had one more sister. She married in Palestine and remained there. The approximately twenty family members who remained in Germany, perished in the Holocaust. The twelve to fifteen who left Germany, survived the Holocaust. Lee's family of four left Germany suddenly one day when his father simply announced that they were leaving. His father was in the furniture business in Berlin and in Palestine. They came to the United States because of the Arab boycott. His customers had been wealthy Arabs.

01:11:00

He began his life in Washington Heights, New York. The family then moved to New Brunswick, New Jersey to be near his father's business. Lee graduated from New Brunswick High School. He

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enrolled at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, and soon thereafter, volunteered for the United States Army in September or October of 1941. He encountered much Antisemitism in the army. He had a difficult time.

01:16:00

Lee was an observant Jew. He did not join in the drinking bouts. He managed to transfer from combat engineers to military intelligence. He was in a camp in Ritchie, MD., for eight to 10 weeks. Then he went to the University of Illinois, to the University of Indiana, and then to England for about a year prior to the invasion of Europe. His name was changed from Merel to Brewster for protection in case of capture by the Germans.

01:21:00

He went to France in June of 1944, immediately after D-Day on June 6, 1944. He was in Paris, France before it fell. He blew the Shofar at Rosh Hashanah services in Aachen, Germany in 1944. This was probably in September. He was the interpreter at the investigation of chief engineer of the Krupp Armaments in Germany.

01:26:00

One man had lost two of his sons, his wife and he lost a leg in the bombing. Did he have any regrets? No, but they would not make the same mistakes again. Lee found this feeling widespread. He feels that the people of the Hitler era have only one regret, that they lost. The Germans always

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thought that they were superior from the time of Bismarck. Perhaps this does not apply to today's younger Germans.

01:31:00

He was in Gardelegen, Germany, in May of 1945, in a concentration camp. He was in charge of a company of soldiers and a medical unit. About 125 men were in the camp. Lee asked if the viewing of pictures showing camp inmates and ovens of the camp is possible on this tape?

01:36:00

He continued to show the pictures taken on his first day in the camp. The stench was felt miles away. A person that Lee thought was dead pulled on Lee's ankle to indicate that he was alive. Lee had him shipped to a nearby hospital and visited him there. The patient was deaf and mute. During their communications, Lee discovered that the patient was his cousin, Grunbaum, his mother's sister's son. Consequently, Lee had his cousin come to Washington Heights and Lee's father helped the cousin to find work and to settle down.

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There were 2000 inmates alive, 4000 dead. The live people were very ill when they were liberated. Lee's company of 125 were very kind and very caring. That experience at that time made Lee question God. That was, and is, Lee's greatest struggle.

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He finds it difficult to grapple with religion. He believes in Jewish heritage. He believes that the older generation is more receptive to discussing the Holocaust than the younger generation. He has three children and five grandchildren. He feel that the Holocaust must be taught.

01:51:00

He believes firmly that Jews must practice traditions and remain and survive as a people.