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Leon Kushinski was born in Poland and until he was 14 or 15 received a good education in public and private schools. At 14 or 15 he went to work in the leather business belonging to his uncle and continued going to schools. Life was very hard in Poland for the Jewish people - there was a lot of anti-semitism before the war. When the Germans came, he was about 19 years old. Conditions became intolerable. Young men were sent to labor camps. There were beatings, killings, not enough food and generally intolerable conditions. His home town was turned into a Ghetto. His family and friends and neighbors contended not only with the Germans, but with the Polish people as well, who were just as bad. The Germans also recruited "new Germans," Lithuanians, Latvians to help them, promising independence as a reward. Leon's life was one of a desperate attempt at survival, minute by minute, through unsuccessful attempts at uprising and cruel and inhuman work without pay and extreme hunger and fear. Because of his skill in leather working, he was able to escape harsher treatment and probably even death.

Leon Kushinski is an attractive man with a sweet personality. He is a man of some cleverness which stood him in good stead when he was able to bribe a German who eventually helped him. His business acumen provided him with a very successful career in the leather goods business when he finally arrived in the United States.

Leon Kushinski tells his story evenly, although from time to time, an interrupted sentence or digression interrupts the facts. At times, he is overcome with emotion as the memories come back to him.

15:01 Name is Leon Kushinski, called Label Kushinski.

15:02 Was born in a small town in Poland and went to very fine school and had fine teachers. He was also learning religious and Jewish education with public and private teachers hired by his parents.

At thirteen, he was sent to his uncle in Chanclerhoff (ph). His uncle had a leather business. A year later, his parents also moved to Chanclerhoff (ph). They believed children should get a better education.

15:03 In Chanclerhoff (ph), he didn't have any difficulties in school. He received many compliments on his language and math skills. He started to work at 14 or 15 years of age for his uncle. His father's business was the lumber business and he had to travel most of the time.

15:04 His father was in partnership with his grandfather and most of the work was done in the winter. It was very, very cold. Leon didn't like it. He preferred to learn the leather business from his uncle whose name was Moise Jakobovrich (ph). Moise Jakobovrich (ph) had a son named Israel, who lives in Israel. This son was very developed morally and helped Leon to learn the leather business.

15:05 Personally, Israel wanted to be a journalist, but he helped Leon learn as much as possible from his father and him before he left for Israel before the War. He survived there. He was in the English Brigade. Leon and Israel are in close contact now. In Chanclerhoff (ph), he learned the leather business from his uncle and continued to go to schools - Jewish and non-Jewish. He even learned English at school.

15:06 Life was very hard in Poland. He prayed for something to happen. Life for the Jewish people was almost unbearable. They weren't able to walk the streets. This was before the War. Pickets walked the streets telling people not to buy from Jews. Two of his cousins were stabbed.

15:07 One was Israel Ben Moishe and the other was stabbed the second day after his wedding - in the spine. This cousin managed to hide out and hardly survived. He now lives in Australia. His name is Henry Auerbach (ph). Three of them were working, Lieberman and Abraham Lenchner (ph) as well. Two were stabbed.

15:08 His cousin was stabbed 1/4 inch from his lung - and survived. Lieberman was stabbed in his heart or so, and died years later. This was before the War. He was 19 years old. A policeman came to get Leon into the service, but everything fell apart when the Germans came to Chanclerhoff (ph).

15:09 They came on horses. Leon's father, mother, and three sisters and neighbors lived in an apartment building. They didn't worry too much because the Germans were in Poland 20 years before and nothing happened to anyone. No one was killed or tortured. So, they didn't expect anything.

15:10 Leon's two brothers, three sisters and his parents and he lived in an apartment. The Germans came on a Friday. By Monday morning, all people were driven out to the Platza Novarinik (ph) and Stavarenik (ph). There was the New Market Place and the Old Market Place. He was taken to the New Market Place. There was a big church there.

15:11 There was a lot of shooting. Hundreds of people were shot for no reason with machine guns - for no reason. Somehow they were driven into the church. Whoever made it to the church survived. Whoever didn't, didn't. Hundreds of people died. Jewish people. It was called Bloody Monday. A struggle started. Everyday they took people to different places to work digging ditches, regulate rivers, cleaning houses. The Germans set up their camps.

15:12 The Jewish Community Center set up the Judenat (ph), they called it. Set up some groups - to work at the airport - to train pilots. Everyone tried to get out. It was hard work with no pay. They cleaned out the Jewish apartments and stores.

15:13 Many times, Leon was grabbed in the street to help transport soap which had been confiscated from Jewish stores where the storekeepers had hidden it. They would march through the streets. Once he ran away - with the soap and dumped it. This was the way it was - like this - hit and run - for a year or so.

15:14 They were trying to get food. They would trade clothing and leather with the Polish. The Jewish people lived in the area and traded with the Polish who brought potatoes, bread and butter. Everything was good.

15:15 Young people were taken to the labor camps. He was taken to Ukraine and worked on roads and ditches - against Russian tanks - because the Germans prepared to attack Russia. He felt like a trapped animal when picked for the labor camp. There was no way out. Conditions were bad.

16 The roads were like clay. They were beaten and there was not enough food. He tried to find a way to run. One day, he was sleeping in a barn with pigs. 120 people from Chanclerhoff (ph) decided to fight back. He was hit first.

17 And he hit back. Friends came to his rescue. Some were very badly beaten. Blood was running. Leon came out without a scratch [very emotional here]. They paid dearly for it. Somehow they survived. There was a man near where they worked. A Jewish man came to see .

18 Someone told him what had happened. He took these badly injured friends to, almost a complete Jewish village, before the SS came. The SS were stationed 10-15- km away in another village. One Myerdoff (ph) was a murderer. He had to shoot people just for breakfast, on a horse or with a dog.

19 By the time he came, the in_ilred young people were already on their way to by bus or train. Some survived. One, Victor Granik (ph) lives in Uruguay with his wife and children. A few years ago he and Leon had a beautiful reunion.

Leon decided to run away from this camp, five or six hours after his arrival. He organized a few guys. Had some clothing. Tipped off the Ukrainian guarding them.

20 He took them back to a Jewish baker in the village. The Jewish baker sent another Pollack to Chanclerhoff (ph). One of their parents came and for money purchased 10 tickets. They needed special permits to travel by train from the German Military Command. Trains were only meant for the German military. They must have obtained this - they were taken home to Chanclerhoff (ph). The day they arrived, the Jewish police were already formed. They were not armed. They were closing up the ghetto.

21 All the Jews who lived outside of this area were driven in. When Leon came, they wanted to stop him from entering, but he was fast. They were just pulling the last part of the barbed wire to close up the street where they came in from the station. He can't imagine how Weitzman (?), an elderly man, go through, because when Leon had seen (they travelled together) what was going on, he jumped. Leon didn't know what happened to Weitzman, but he knows that they were there later (Weitzman and others?), because he saw them and visited their homes. They were good friends. So, they got back to the Ghetto. Then, that was called the Big Ghetto. Then began another struggle - for survival. People hid whatever they could.

22 Little by little, they took these things which they had hidden out and traded them for bread. Mostly for food - none cared about anything else. There was still a way some Pollack could come to the Big Ghetto. They probably tipped off some Germans or Polish Police guarding the entrances. There was flour available to buy, potatoes and bread - if you had money or valuables to exchange. This is the way time passed by. One day, they talked about the expectation that the Germans would take people and send them to camps.

23 But not about burning people in ovens! Then, before Yum Kippur in '42, the whole area of the Big Ghetto was circled by the German military and Ukranians and the Black Uniforms and Lithuanians and Latvians. The Germans promised them independence if they would help them. They would also do it for a pound of sugar or a bottle of vodka - anything - or a piece of herring. There were thousands of them.

24 They started to drive out the people and took them to trains and Treblinka. There was a German Officer names and some others, SS, etc. They all took part. The military also took part.

25 There was a selection. From about 50,000, they selected 3-4,000 people to work. Young people. They took them to a furniture factory - him, his uncle, a cousin (girl) arrived at 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning.

26 His family was gone. His sisters: Miriam (oldest), Esther (younger), and brother Ruben (lives in Israel) and Masha (youngest). His youngest sister went with his grandmother [very emotional here].

27 His grandfather Kushinski, a very [crying] learned man, especially in Jewish education - well known - cried out "There is no God !"[crying] Leon doesn't know if he should mention it, because nobody would believe it. But he heard it. He said "There is no God!"

28 There were some people who felt what was going on, but very few understood. If they had known, they would have fought back. They didn't expect - they thought they were going to work or to a camp.

29 One man, Kleinman (ph), who had a leather business, put a fire to his building. Others could have done this, but most didn't expect - left everything for the Germans and the Pollack.

30 No young people were left to try to join the Partisans then. Later they did, but it was too late. They just tried to survive until after they took their parents and sisters and they took them to camps to work - or to the furniture factory and then to three or four different factories. One was in a foundry and he worked in a munitions factory. There were several munitions factories.

31 Until then, they did nothing to organize. No one expected it - when a few people came back from Treblinka and told them that people were being gassed and burned, they thought they were crazy. No one wanted to believe it.

32 No one believed the stories. It cannot happen. Took them to this Hassack (ph) and organized a small Ghetto for 4 1/2 thousand young people who survived.

33 They were sleeping and living - 5, 6, 10 - in one room with little to eat. They were at this Hassack (ph) for six weeks. Others came back a little earlier to the Ghetto - those who were in other factories. For a while Leon was going to work in Rakov (ph), 4 or 5 km from also a factory. On the way they heard insults from the Polish people. No one cried or said a good word to them.

34 Later on, he will mention one who tried to help him. While they marched in line, under guard, the people yelled "You will not eat any more our goose."
They said "till now the streets were ours and the buildings were Jewish - now everything will be ours."

35 One day, he was miserable. He met a Pollack named Henry Schglaske (ph). They were working in Rakov (ph) with Polish together. He let him know through a contact that he wanted to get away from the camp and he should wait for him. And the Pollack came.

36 And Leon was able to get out. Henry Schglaske (ph) took him to his house where he was received nicely. They slept together in the same bed. The next day, Schglaske's (ph) sister came back from work with a German-Polish newspaper, the Gazette

37 This newspaper existed before the war and was "like vampires against the Jewish people," telling the worst lies. Leon asked Henry why she had this newspaper and he told him that his sister works for the paper only because she needed a job. Leon was very afraid and only stayed two more nights.

38 There were no toilet facilities in the house - they were outside, across the back yard. People from other houses could see him when he went to the toilet. Leon was afraid and on the third day, while Henry was sleeping

39 He left and joined up with people marching to work. He went through a river and was all wet. He came too early and went into a bakery and sat down.

40 It was too dangerous to be on the street, so he went into the bakery and sat down at a table and ordered coffee and rolls. A lady came out and recognized him as Jewish and said for him to come into the back room and she would let him know when the group was approaching. So, when the group approached, Leon joined up with it and kept going to work at Rakov (ph).

41 After six weeks in - there was a doctor who was hungry all the time and whom his mother had fed in the camp. He came in from another town. He had some influence, and Leon said he was sick and the doctor got him out of working, so he didn't have to march to work.

42 The doctor had thus paid him back for what Leon's parents did for him. Leon started to work in the Peltzers (ph) - a factory where he carried steel beams on a construction site. They were very heavy and difficult to manage.

43 One day, he felt he couldn't do any more. He noticed they were bringing a lot of Jewish possessions and storage rooms. The factory was huge. He saw that they brought leather and machinery for leather work. And he thought he would go to ask if they needed help.

44 But no one was there. Leon fell asleep there - he couldn't go on. He was awakened by a German pulling his ear. Then he offered his services as a leather worker.

45 The German said that they would need him. Told him to come tomorrow. He was to tell the guard (Steiglitz [ph]) that the German had told him he should let him go to the storage room. But when Leon told the guard, he kicked him. So Leon ran away again and hid and watched for the German and when he saw him, at first the German didn't recognize him and took out his gun.

46 Then, after finally recognizing Leon, the German went and told the guard and Leon was able to work there for two weeks. There was more food there. One day, they took him back to the Little Ghetto and said they would stay there and go every day to the Peltzers (ph). Then they started to organize and to resist. They had means and ways to make grenades - metal, machines and experts.

47 There were young boys who had learned metal working in schools. They made halves of grenades and had enough powder. Leon's brother-in-law was with him and his brother. Then they really started to organize. But it was too late.

48 Because before the Germans let them back in the Small Ghetto, they cleaned out everything. They were hungry and weak and could only go to a little kitchen to get soup. He went every day to the Peltzers (ph). Others went to Rakov (ph) and there was a place where they were fixing the railroads and they were the most active group organized, because they were more free and had some contact with the Pollack. They were trying to buy guns. And, instead of fixing the railroad, they put dynamite in some places under the tracks. They paid with their lives. But it didn't matter because by then they had a clear picture that none of them would ever survive.

49 They would bring back whatever they could. Leon had a friend in a shower (?) and they were allowed to go there. Leon himself wore a little leather bag which the Germans inspected many times, but they got used to seeing it carrying harmless items, and later they didn't bother to inspect it.

50 So, he and hundreds were later bringing parts and powder to the Small Ghetto. But those who tried to fight back - all vanished - like his friend, whose brother is in Chicago, Yanik Kravis Krauser (ph) and Yitzok Schein (ph).

51 They tried to resist in the open in the Small Ghetto. One day, the Germans were beating and killing people - they were all killed and thrown in a grave. It was really a ditch for calcium which they used for building. After the war, Leon and others took these dead out and buried them in the Jewish Cemetery and put up some monuments.

52 Leon remembers these two well. They were his age and his friends. There were many others too. Then a friend Tannenbaum, asked him if he wanted to join a group in resisting. Naturally, he said yes. They started to dig a tunnel underground, so when the Germans wanted to liquidate them, they could get out through the tunnel.

54 And they would bring in, through contact with the Polish people guns and ammunition. They hoped that the Polish people would help, but they didn't. The Poles were the worst enemies - just like the Germans or even worse. They were able to dig to the outside to the Big Ghetto where it was unsettled - houses were vacant - to the River. And, they planned to bring in guns and ammunition. But there was no help on the outside. The Polish people were catching the Jewish people and bringing them to the Germans for a pound of sugar or were killing them themselves. They didn't even need the Germans.

55 Some of Leon's friends went out and on the second or third day were killed by the Pollack. Yitzok Schein survived. Saul Tannenbaum did not. The story of their killing was told by two girls.

56 These two girls came back. They told how they were cooking dinner away from the group so that they wouldn't be noticed. A group of Polish people came and said they wanted to join the group and help and when they got close, these Polish people took out their guns and killed them all. When the Germans saw there was some resistance, his brother-in-law was killed. He was beaten to death. Someone must have told about him

57 One day, they closed up the Ghetto and took everyone to camp. All freedom fighters were shot. This was the end of the Small Ghetto. Leon was then in the Hassack (ph).

02 They came to the Peltzer (ph) - the Hassak (ph), after the liquidation of the Big Ghetto. He noticed an ex-Polish policeman, Bonik (ph), whom he remembered from his boyhood. He used to chase him and Leon knew him well. This man was standing at the entrance in a black uniform as a guard. The Germans tried to mobilize people as "new Germans" for bread. And he was one.

03 Leon contacted him and dealt with him. He gave him money for bread. Leon had money which was hidden. This was not the first tragedy for Jews. They had learned. Leon even had some American money with him - a few dollars.

04 They were taking the money away from the Jews. When they told them to change their clothing, the Jewish people glued the money with tape to their bare feet. Leon had some American money stuffed into a bottle - no one noticed. They thought it was water.

05 Bodnik (ph) helped Leon a lot. He brought him food. The head man was a Pollack also - Perkush (ph). He was not too bad. He didn't help, but he also didn't harm. He did some good for Leon. Perkush (ph) was a strange man - in an emergency he showed he was also a good man. One time, when he got orders to fix leather belts for the machinery, little by little, he was able to hire people to help. One was Lieberman, who used to make seats for bicycles. [He was able to set up a little shop (Leon)].

07 Leon's sister had worked at the Lieberman factory in the office, and they were very nice to her. When Leon got the shop, Lieberman came over to him and said "Leon, I think you owe me something," and wanted to get into the shop. Leon said he would try.

08 Leon was able to arrange it, but Lieberman started to take big chunks of transmission belts, and one day he was caught. He said that Leon had given it to him. The Ukrainians came and took him.

09 He was taken to the guard room and Lieberman was bleeding from all sides. He said that Leon had given it to him. Lieberman was beaten to death right there. Leon didn't blame him for what he had said. Perkush (ph), the Pollack, came in and said that he guaranteed that Leon Kushinski is not a burglar, and doesn't need to steal, because he gave him (Perkush) money to hold for him. Having money was a crime, but you weren't shot for it.

10 Leon was let off. But Lieberman was killed right there. Perkush (ph) wasn't that bad - he saved Leon's life.

11 A few weeks later, a guy named Plaishol (ph) arrived from a camp which was liquidated. A lot of people as well as the SS came to Chanclerhoff (ph). A guy Muller, came in and hit his brother. They didn't know how much longer this would go on - - - it actually took maybe three more months until the Russians came.

12 They tried to survive from minute to minute. He went to Bodnik (ph) when his brother was beaten and got bread, vodka and salami from him and then went to Muller (ph) and offered these things as a bribe to him. Leon had made them up into a package and he put it down on the table and told Muller he ___ bought it.

13 Muller asked him his name and shook his hand, and said that from now on they would be friends. Muller kept his word, but the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th day, he wanted more. Leon told him he didn't have any more money.

14 Muller said to stretch it another day or so because he was getting another two carloads of the finest brushes from, near Krakov - which would be under his supervision. But Leon shouldn't take any to sell or he would shoot him. He said he would give him the keys. Everyday, Leon would take one or two brushes - gave to his uncle and his brother, enough to buy bread. This was the way they survived. The last day, before they took everyone out from the factory, the Russians - - - planes were flying overhead and they heard guns.

15 The last night, Leon went to Muller and asked if his girlfriend and his brother could sleep over in the barrack where they worked. Muller said that Leon and his brother would be ok, but not the girlfriend, because if the SS men saw this, they would shoot them all. Muller said he would sleep there also and would help them get back to camp in the morning. When they went to the camp, it was surrounded by guards and the SS. But, his brother's girlfriend was taken out to work in the factory.

16 But not Leon's wife, Hannah. She was left in the barracks and a train was standing in front to take them away. Leon wondered how he could get her out. He knew if he could get her out, they would go to this place where he worked and Muller would protect her, which he did later. Leon found out there were Jewish policemen, and he went to his friend who was a sign painter and asked him to make three armbands for Jewish policemen.

17 His friend did it and Leon went into the camp as a policeman. He was recognized by another - but he had enough friends, so he was, able to take out his wife. They went to the shop where he worked. Muller was there. His brother and his girlfriend were there.

They were ripping material for bandages. Muller told them to do this so when the SS men came, they would see that they were doing something.

18 But Leon saw it was coming to an end. He went to this same guy and asked for a big bottle of vodka and got it and the last day he gave it to the SS man. This was about 2:00. The SS man got so drunk, he didn't know what was going on. About 3:00, other SS men came and wanted to take them out in the wagons. The SS man said no, he would take them and he tried to get them into the street, but it was impossible because the SS were everywhere. So, the SS man said "do whatever you want - run" and he took his gun and put it on a nail and said that this would be for the Russians.

19 He had a pair of slippers also and put them on top of a dresser and said that this would be for the Russians and "I'm going." Everyone ran away. Leon hid in the back of a barn for five hours. Everyone who didn't hide was taken to Germany. His uncle - all, most of them killed - another uncle was killed. His wife's father was still surviving. Leon begged him to go with him. He said no. They were afraid because they were going to burn the whole camp so no one will survive.

20 At about 12:00, all was quiet. Leon went out to see what was going on. He saw other people. He met his friend Reuban. They went to the Command. No one was there. Just rifles. When he saw a bottle of ink, he threw it at a picture of Hitler on the wall. Now he wishes he had it for a souvenir. In the morning they went out and left the camp. There was still fighting in the street and this was the way they got liberated.

21 Leon was in Poland another year. He tried to survive. His plan was to immigrate. He got a room with other people. The Pollack started again to kill the Jewish people. There were pogroms. He was in Krakov. There was a pogrom. He survived and decided to run away.

22 Leon talked with his brother and they decided not to go together because it wasn't legal to leave Poland. His brother went to a different border and was caught and put in jail. Leon was still free.

23 He went and bribed the prosecutor and his brother was freed after six weeks in jail. He was in terrible condition. Leon couldn't intervene for his brother's friend Polinger. He could only help his brother. Before he left for the United States from Belgium, he went back to Poland and Polinger was just freed from jail. He was 40 years in jail!

How do you feel about telling this story?

24 Leon doesn't know. He has no feeling about telling his story because if he felt he couldn't tell it. It just comes out. Sometimes he can talk and others - - if he thinks about it, he can't talk. If is asked about feelings he can't. He went to Brussels and lived and worked there.

25 He, at first, applied right away to go to the United States. He didn't intend to stay in Europe. But he couldn't because the United States wouldn't let people in. But when the Korean war started, the U. S. wanted the young people in. Leon came to New York with his wife and daughter and they wanted to go to Florida. They ended up in Long beach, California. They had two more kids. Three children are Frieda, Miriam and Alan. He was quite successful in his business. His first job in the U. S. was in a leather factory. After ten or twelve months, he opened a handbag shop and was in this business until three years ago. He sold to the finest stores. Supplied handbags for the Rose parade for the queens and princesses for over 20 years. Has beautiful thank-you letters from Bullocks and Presidents. Then he developed some health problems. Since he had some finances, he gave up the business and is only still involved in a limited way.
.END.