

Lakner, Armand
RG-50.029*0022
One Videotape
In English

- Abstract: Dr. Armand Lakner was born in Cluj, Romania, on May 3, 1922. When he was six or seven years old, his family moved from Cluj to Bucharest. When war broke out, the family was living in Bucharest. In 1943, the Hungarian army recruited him to go into a forced labor camp. He was not part of the actual army. The camp was near Transylvania. He and the other laborers built a German airport. Then they were taken to Mauthausen. He was at Mauthausen for several months, and then just before the Americans liberated the camp, they were marched to another camp called Gelsenkirchen near Oberosterreich, a region in Austria. People were totally unaware of what was happening. On May 4th, the camp was liberated by the Americans. After the reunion with his family, they all went back to Bucharest where half of the family still lived. Armand went to the Polytechnic Institute in Bucharest and then got a PhD in physical sciences. In 1947 he met his wife.
- 00:00:58 Dr. Armand Lakner was born in Cluj, Romania, on May 3, 1922. When he was 6 or 7 years old, his family moved from Cluj to Bucharest.
- 00:01:44 Bucharest was a very large city with a Jewish population of 100,000. The city was vibrant and very modern. The Jewish community was well established. Everything revolved around the synagogues.
- 00:2:16 His father was born in Hungary and was a Huszár (cavalry) in the Austro-Hungarian army. Armand's mother was born in Cluj and was from an Orthodox family. His sister was four years older. He had no brothers.
- 00:02:58 He went to an elementary school in Cluj and moved to Bucharest where he finished elementary school and most of high school until 1940 when his education was interrupted.
- 00:03:34 Armand had two problems in Romania: he was Jewish and part Hungarian. He was verbally and sometimes physically abused.
- 00:05:06 He had a Bar Mitzvah in Bucharest in a small, conservative Hungarian synagogue that had 300-400 families. He went to cheder and wore tsitsis ["fringe" or tassel] until he was twelve years old. His Bar Mitzvah was not a big event. After services, the family went home and had a drink with a few friends.
- 00:06:37 When war broke out, the family was living in Bucharest. The Nazi Party came into power. Jews were restricted professionally. They could

not attend universities or schools, or participate in civic activities.
Armand's parents decided to move back to Hungary after 20 years.

In the summer of 1940, Armand went to Hungary so he could start his final school year. His parents were planning to come later. Borders were soon closed, and the family was separated for five years (1940-1945). Armand graduated from high school but could not go to college.

- 00:08:45 His grandmother and other relatives of his father lived in Budapest. Armand was accepted to a Zionist school to learn a skill, should he have to leave the country.
- 00:09:50 In 1943, the Hungarian army recruited him to go into a forced labor camp. He was not part of the actual army. Jewish inmates wore no uniforms but did wear a yellow armband rather than a yellow star. The camp was near Transylvania. Laborers built a German airport. "Life was not very sweet." Any infractions resulted in punishment. One form of punishment was called "hung out." Wrists were tied in the back and a person was hung by a pulley to a tree branch so that his feet did not touch the ground. If the person fainted, he was revived with a bucket of water and the punishment continued.
- 00:12:22 Armand volunteered to transfer near Budapest which was a relatively good move. He was closer to civilization. Food was minimal but enough to stay alive and to perform physical work. Most prisoners were 21 to 22 year old males. He saw his family once in awhile.
- 00:13:36 He describes labor camp in Transylvania. The routine was roll call in the morning, standing at attention outside for a long time. They lived in military-type barracks and were crowded on large bunk beds. The food was just enough to keep the prisoners alive. There were no sanitary facilities.
- 00:15:10 Laborers built a dirt tarmac for the airport. Some inmates loaded and carried wheelbarrows full of dirt; others hauled dirt away. They had no rest. The Hungarian guards were brutal—hitting, screaming, "faster, faster, don't loaf." In the evening they were forced to work in the kitchen. The next day started with the same routine.
- 00:16:40 They went to Budapest in the winter in boxcars. The facilities were very much like the ones they had left. By that time, the Russians were closing in, and American and British air forces were bombing. Again he worked at a military airport. His duty was to refuel Messerschmitt 109 fighters. He saw many American fighter pilots who had been shot down, burned and charred. The first American he "met" was dead.

- 00:18:54 Armand was not well clothed for work. He had civilian clothing but nothing warm. Also he had street shoes, but no winter boots.
- 00:19:39 Armand was allowed to leave camp once every month. He went to visit his family in Budapest.
- 00:20:42 Six months later they were taken in railroad cars to northern Hungary to clean up after bombings. It was chaotic. No specific tasks were given. Russians were coming but they were not sure about the allied forces. They lived in small villages and wandered from one place to another.
- 00:22:03 On October 15, 1944, Miklós Horthy ordered the Hungarian Army to turn against Germany but the Hungarian Nazis took over. It was an extreme right-wing Nazi political party. They established ghettos in Budapest. Jews were then deported to Auschwitz, including his father's family.
- 00:23:54 "After several months, starting in March, we were taken to Germany. First we were taken by train but then had to walk the rest of the way, including crossing the beautiful Alps." Armand had no shoes.
- 00:26:07 He remembered an SS officer just shooting randomly at prisoners as they were walking. "It was horrible. For the first time I realized how close to death I was."
- 00:28:03 He was taken to another camp where there was no work. "First time in months we had a bowl of soup with some potatoes." A gourmet meal. They arrived at night at Mauthausen, west of Vienna on the banks of the Innes River. They were frozen and ill fed. They were walking skeletons. It was then that Armand suspected that he might not survive.
- 00:30:20 "I was 23 years old and still somewhat immature for my age. But somehow I knew I would survive. My only desire was to get out of this situation and be reunited with my parents."
- 00:31:16 "In Mauthausen I saw everything from mounds of skeletons, living skeletons and cannibalism. People eating other people. One individual was still moving but was cut to pieces by other Jews. People were starving. What more can I tell you?"
- "After a rainy day, I ate live snails. It was not very pleasant to have moving and crunching snails in your mouth. We ate flowers, grass, anything that was chewable and digestible. When a horse died, it was cut to pieces in ten seconds."

- 00:33:08 At one point during the death march, people found a potato field and went to dig up potatoes. Within a few minutes, hundreds of people joined them. The Germans shot them when they saw what was happening. "A very dear friend of mine who couldn't march because he did not have the strength either psychologically or physically was shot on the spot. And I begged him to march because I knew what would happen to him."
- "I think I survived because of my youth and physical strength in addition to my desire to return home."
- 00:34:59 He was at Mauthausen for several months, and then just before the Americans liberated the camp, they were marched to another camp called Gelsenkirchen near Oberosterreich, a region in Austria. People were unaware of what was happening. On May 4th, the camp was liberated by the Americans.
- 00:38:18 As news spread that Americans were in the area, the German guards disappeared. One SS guard was caught and brutally killed by several prisoners. Some prisoners left, but Armand stayed until the next day.
- 00:38:36 There was destruction and death even after liberation. People died of malnutrition. He saw American soldiers in a jeep. They could not speak each other's language, but the GIs knew who they were. They gave them packets of raisins. Some of Armand's friends died from eating too much.
- 00:39:33 Armand was taken to a hospital. He weighed 105 lbs. He stayed a few months in the hospital to put weight on. He could not even sit up on a wooden bench. He volunteered to be a gravedigger so that he could be out of doors.
- 00:41:06 He went to another little town where he was placed with a German family for a few months. The father was a pharmacist and a Nazi leader. They were very nice to him.
- 00:41:56 Armand's parents came from Bucharest to Budapest to look for him. They accidentally bumped into each other. They had not seen each other for five years. In 1945, they had learned through the Jewish community that he had been in a camp and then in a hospital, so at least they knew he was alive.
- 00:43:52 After the reunion with his family, they all went back to Bucharest where half of the family still lived. Armand went to the Polytechnic Institute in Bucharest and then got a PhD in physical sciences. In 1947 he met his wife.

- 00:44:33 Armand talks about his impressions and perceptions when he was in Mauthausen. Mauthausen was the third camp of horror for him. It was a large camp built during the First World War. During the Second World War, it was designated a POW camp for Russians. Toward the end of the war, POWs came who were from France, Great Britain, USSR, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The camp had a conglomeration of nationalities. Not all of the prisoners were Jewish. The main purpose was extermination. As one commandant put it, "There is only one way to Mauthausen: "IN, never OUT." Individuals were reduced to nothing. They were completely demoralized. One Russian officer had to stand naked in the middle of winter and was sprayed with ice water.
- 00:48:24 Mauthausen was close to a granite quarry which was famous for its 120 death steps. Inmates had to go down and carry up huge boulders. They were killed if they couldn't carry a load.
- 00:48:34 Many inmates were intellectuals; lawyers, doctors, artists and politicians, including the former chancellor of Austria. The daily routine was chaotic because of the workload. The subdivisions were ammunition factories and other plants all around the camp for which the Germans were getting paid by the owners. Those who did not work were executed on the spot. The Kapos supervised beatings and torture, but then they were killed.
- 00:50:42 In the evenings, the prisoners saw flames coming out of chimneys and knew they were from the crematoria. Many prisoners were taken into a room and told they would have their picture taken, but they were shot.
- It was systematic extermination.
- 00:52:02 In April, Armand marched to Gelsenkirchen. Thousands of prisoners lived there in huge tents that were used as barracks. Food was given once a day. It was a bowl of black, semi-warm liquid with nothing solid. The last day before the march, the prisoners were given a piece of margarine. The Americans were close. It was raining and cold. Everyone was starving. Armand witnessed cannibalism. Armand discovered the storage for a German kitchen but could not get close. On April 4th, Americans liberated the camp and the barbed wire and the German guards disappeared. Armand went to the hospital and then home.
- 00:55:05 On July 27th, 1947 Armand met his wife, Simona Hoffman, in Bucharest. Later she left for the United States because her mother was an American citizen. In 1950 they were married and went to Israel for a year. Then he got a job teaching and studying at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He also worked at General Dynamics in Canada (Canada's premiere defense company). In 1954 they came to the United States. He became an expert in the aerospace industry, and in 1961 he joined the Space Agency.

- 00:56:40 Armand became a manager of service and command modules in the Apollo project designed to put a man on the moon. Now he is a senior partner in a nuclear safety firm.
- 00:57:42 The Lakners have two children and four grandchildren, all of whom live around the corner. Their son is a physician, and their daughter is a lawyer.
- 00:58:28 “This was the time in life to look back and see what our contributions have been. For my wife and me, our primary accomplishment is our children and grandchildren.”
- 00:59:00 “My wife was very much at home in the United States, and from the first day when I came here, I too felt very much at home.”
- 1:00:00 Shows pictures, including documents of place of birth, camps, and the day of liberation. Pictures of family in Israel who survived because they lived in Romania. Another picture is of a military monument in front of his grandmother’s house in Budapest. The inscription was written by a relative. The grave of one of his aunts in Hungary. A picture of his family. A picture of the lunar landing in July of 1969 dedicated to Armand by one of the Apollo managers. He wrote a book with the help of Ronald T. Anderson titled “Reliability Engineering for Nuclear and other High Technology systems – A Practical Guide.” The book was published in England in 1986 and is still in publication as of 1992.
- “I made my contribution to the United States by helping to put man on moon.”
- He also wrote guidelines for nuclear safety and advised the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on nuclear safety. He was given an Academy of Science award for advising the USSR on nuclear safety.
- 1:06:33 Even though he is not extremely Orthodox, he is concerned about anti-Semitism everywhere, including the United States. Talked about the need for people to be tolerant. He thinks the remedy is to cooperate with other countries and people. “When people and nations learn to coexist, we will have a better world.” (Einstein.) He felt a need to tell his story.