

GINSBURG, Leon
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Tappan Zee, New Jersey
Two tapes

Abstract

Leon Ginsburg was born on June 12, 1932 in Maciejów, Poland. His family owned a dry goods store and lived in a middle-class Jewish neighborhood. Leon's father died before the war. The Nazis killed his mother, by stabbing her with a bayonet in front of him, and also killed his sister, brother, and other relatives.

Maciejów was captured by the Russians in 1939, and by the Germans in 1941. Leon describes how he narrowly escaped the Ukrainians and Nazis on many occasions. He hid in attics, a cemetery, a drainage pipe, and a barn. For a while, he hid with a Polish family who gave him a Polish name.

He describes many atrocities, including Germans marching Jews to graves, forcing them to disrobe, shooting them while partially undressed, and filming it. Leon donated the film to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. He recalls watching Germans forcing Jews to throw holy books onto a fire outside a synagogue, and photographing it for propaganda.

In 1945, he returned to Lyuboml (Ukraine), then went to Berlin, and then to a DP camp.

He arrived in the United States in 1946 with a group of orphans, and lived in New York with his great-aunt. He earned an engineering degree. He married, had three children, and developed a successful business in the United States.

He returned to Maciejów to erect three monuments for the 4,500 people who were killed, including his mother, sister, brother, and other relatives. Only then did he cry.

"I'm proud of being Jewish, but my philosophy has changed from my Chasidic roots, which believed that the Messiah would come down and save you," Leon says.

Tape 1 of 2

- 00:00:31** Leon Ginsburg was born June 12, 1932 in Maciejów, Poland. Until 1939, the town was Polish, but then became part of the Ukraine (Maciejów is now in Poland). The town had 5,000 Jews (70 percent of the population). Ten percent of the population was Polish, and 20 percent was Ukrainian. Poles hated the Ukrainians and were very anti-Semitic. Jews were religious; most were Chasidic. Everyone went to synagogue on Saturdays, and dressed very nicely. Jewish stores were closed.
- 00:02:26** Jews worked in commerce and crafts (*e.g.*, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, harness makers). Saturdays were market days. Peasants brought products.
- 00:03:23** Leon's father died before the war. The Nazis killed his mother, Pesha, his 15-year-old sister, Blumale, and his 13-year-old brother, Heshel.
- Leon's parents had a dry goods store. His family lived in a mostly middle-class Jewish neighborhood. The town had four synagogues.
- The town was mostly middle class. Some Jews were Zionists and were very interested in, and active in politics. Poles and Ukrainians were rivals.
- Leon's Hebrew school, now a vocational school, was still standing when he went back to erect a monument to the town's Jews killed in the Holocaust.
- 00:07:30** High schools did not accept Jews. Leon went to a gymnasium connected to a convent. Until the Nazis came, Polish universities had 30 percent Jewish students, but when Poland was invaded, Jews were increasingly restricted from the universities.
- 00:09:10** Leon's family had settled in the area of Maciejów in the 1700s. Some of his ancestors had helped to build the town. His grandfather lived in Lyuboml (Polish, Luboml). Poles wanted to get rid of the three million Jews, but not by killing them. (highlighted by writer of time coded notes.)
- 00:10:14** Leon started attending Chedar when he was very young. He remembers being carried by man who was paid to bring young children to the school.
- In first grade, he attended a Polish school. He remembers the Polish students saying all Jews should go to Palestine.
- 00:12:13** Leon had a Polish friend, Eric, who lived in Leon's grandfather's part of town, which was mostly Ukrainian. Leon remembers being invited for dinner and watching the family eat meat and milk together. "I thought it was the worst thing you could do."

He was friendly also with the Ukrainian farmers and would watch while they milked their cows. When they were finished, they would give him a cup of fresh milk, and then Leon would bring milk back to his family.

One of the farmwomen loved Hebraic chanting, and would come on Holy Days to listen to the choir.

00:14:37 Leon spoke Yiddish, Polish, and Ukrainian. When he went back to Poland many years later, he could still translate most of the languages.

00:16:03 When the war broke out in 1939, Leon remembers seeing the Polish army quickly retreating on horseback and in wagons. They had no mechanized equipment. He was only seven years old and didn't really understand what it meant. The Russo-German pact had put the Ukraine off limits, so his town was not under German military attack.

00:18:08 The Russians marched into town in 1939. When they came, in they took everything out of the stores (mostly Jewish stores). All commerce died. Only Jews who were craftsmen were employed.

His mother's store went out of business, but she hid material in her house and used fabric to barter for food.

00:20:40 People felt a little freer under the Russians. Children could go to school and join youth groups. The Russians sent people who seemed rich to Siberia. The Russians wanted to discourage religion, but Jews could still go to synagogue.

00:22:36 No one in Leon's village knew about the German occupation of Poland. In the summer of 1941, the Germans attacked Russia. Because many Russian bases were near the village, Germans shelled areas nearby. Leon remembers his mother hiding him under a quilt.

00:26:55 Leon's grandparents urged Lyuboml family members to come to Maciejów, but soon they returned to Lyuboml.

00:26:55 Not much fighting occurred in Leon's town until the German army suddenly marched in. He describes how a Rabbi and another Jewish man sat at a table with bread and salt to welcome the troops. One Nazi turned the table over and told them to get out.

00:29:14 Germans took over the monastery near Leon's house to use as their headquarters. The SS ordered all men aged 16-60 to report to the headquarters so their passports could be changed from Russian to German. Those who did not report would be shot.

Leon watched from his window and saw men lined up in rows of ten and marched to the monastery by Nazis with machine guns. Then he heard shots and saw Ukrainians with shovels going to the monastery.

“Even though I was a kid, I somehow knew what was happening.” Leon later learned that the Germans held the Jews in rooms and made them dig graves. Then they were shot.

About 100 skilled Jews were saved. Nearly 400 were killed. One survivor, who now lives in Florida, **described what happened (?)**.

Leon ultimately returned, and built a memorial for the 400 who were killed.

00:34:45 Leon remembers being in front of a synagogue and seeing a fire burning. Jews were being forced to take holy books out of the synagogue and throw them into the fire. Germans took pictures for propaganda purposes.

00:36:31 Leon describes the winter of 1941-1942, and remembers one of his rabbis walking in the snow. Two German officers on a sled came by, threw the Rabbi into the snow, made him fill his hat with snow and then put it on. They abused and cursed him and drove away smiling.

00:38:12 One of his neighbor's daughters was married to a Chasidic Jew. Nazis saw him walking and hit him over the head with rifle butts. He dragged himself to his house, where he died a few days later.

00:39:30 “I was scared. We didn't fully understand the implications. Germans still had not made the “final decision” until the beginning of 1942.

00:40:34 When Nuremberg laws were put into effect, all Jews, except the young children, had to wear blue bands with Stars of David. Later they had to wear yellow stars, and all Jewish houses were marked. Leon was too young to wear a star.

The town had no running water, so people had to get water from a community pump. Because Leon was too young to wear the star, he volunteered to substitute for his brother and sister. Soon armbands were replaced by a yellow patch on front of clothes. All Jewish homes were tagged.

00:43:07 Jews were cut off from all communication and restricted to their towns. The Judenrat was charged with assigning work tasks. His mother worked in a big city performing garden weeding and cleaning.

One day, Leon's mother did not come home. He went through the garden and into the Nazi headquarters. An older German soldier stopped him and urged him to go home. He gave him a little knife to reassure him. "You go home and your mother will be home."

Later, Leon found out from his aunt that his mother and other Jews had been taken into headquarters and were beaten and humiliated with dogs. The Nazis took pictures.

00:50:20 By now, everyone knew something was going to happen. Jews had a curfew, were not allowed to travel, and they received very little news from outside the village.

"We were trapped. Not much that we could do. After 6 PM, we couldn't walk on the streets, we had no mobility. We knew things were not good."

00:52:40 When new SS troops arrived, Jews were suddenly grabbed off the streets and killed. Jews constructed some hiding places.

Leon's family went to his grandparents' house and hid in the attic. Leon and his brother stayed with their ill grandfather in his room and brought food to him and to relatives hiding in the attic.

00:55:20 When the Germans came, they promised the Ukrainians their own state. Ukrainians formed a militia as an arm of the German military. When young Ukrainians joined the militia, they were given rifles, food, and beds. During "actions", Ukrainians were glad to help the Germans because they wanted to get rid of Poles and Jews. Ukrainians knew who was Jewish.

00:57:52 Soon, the raids started. Many people were captured. Late one night, Leon heard Ukrainian neighbors flirting with German soldiers. Suddenly, Leon heard voices and saw a flashlight beam on the ceiling. The Germans knocked on the door and called for his grandfather, Jacob. Leon, the youngest, opened the door. Two giant Germans came in and searched the house and basement. Then they put a gun to Leon's head and asked if anyone was in the attic. They looked but could not find anyone. Leon remembers every detail and how terrified he was.

Nazis took everyone they captured to the garden and killed them. They kept score on who had been captured.

01:04:49 All was quiet until July 1942, when 15,000 Jews were killed in Kovel (Ukraine) and Lyuboml (Ukraine). Leon remembers that on Rosh Hashanah, Jews could not go to synagogue. Someone led services in a

house. The Nazis came and an old man grabbed the Torah and ran out the back door to save it. Everyone knew something was going to happen.

01:08:24 Mother then arranged to hide in a place with 50-70 other people. The next morning, they heard shots and saw Ukrainians kill a young woman. The Ukrainians did most of the rounding up.

01:09:30 Jews were taken to synagogue. When enough people were gathered, they were taken outside, lined up, and told to bring belongings or things like watches and rings. The German officers collected these possessions.

Leon later found out from his brother and another boy that they marched Jews to graves, made them undress, and shot them partially covered. Then they made a film, which Leon gave to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

01:12:25 One family in the hiding place had five children, and one of the children started crying. The child's mother took her upstairs in the house. The Ukrainians came into house. Everyone, including Leon's brother and sister, had gotten out a day earlier. His mother found a hiding place for Leon and herself. Two Ukrainians found his mother. One of them stabbed his mother with a bayonet. "I was frozen."

01:17:23 Leon saw a man who was the head of the Judenrat. Leon approached him on the street and identified himself. The man said he was looking for galoshes because he was going to the woods. The Ukrainians had taken whatever they had wanted of his valuables and left. Leon went with the man to a house and hid in an attic. The other man was taken out.

The town was empty except for Jews.

Leon knew Malka, the daughter of a rabbi, who had hidden many Jews. Leon went to the rabbi's house, and Malka hid him in one of two very small rooms. Leon volunteered to try and get food and water. He went to some gardeners he knew.

01:25:05 Leon describes several narrow escapes from the Ukrainians. Finally, he decided to walk to Lyuboml to join members of his family.

01:38:50 Leon arrived at his uncle's house after Yom Kippur. His family had built a Sukkoth. Leon's brother showed up a day later. He too had escaped from a hiding place. The two brothers shared a bed and vowed never to be parted.

01:42:16 During the first week in October, the Ukrainians and Germans started chasing Jews with dogs. Almost 12,000 Jews were killed in Lyuboml.

Leon and brother went from one hiding place to another. His brother was captured and Leon never saw him again. Leon left Lyuboml in the middle of the night in early October. The town was surrounded by police, but Leon managed to get to a Ukrainian cemetery where he fell asleep.

Tape 2 of 2

00:01:28 When Leon woke up, everyone was gone. He went to a nearby farm where he slept in a barn. A farm-woman gave him bread.

00:03:05 Leon went back to the cemetery to try to find his group. It was very cold. He walked at night. Leon describes how he managed to get food.

One time, he was spotted by a man with a gun. Leon started running and went into a drainage pipe under the road.

Very vicious policemen took others to the village.

00:07:17 Leon hid in a haystack. A farm-woman came toward the haystack with a pitchfork. Her husband came out. The husband knew Leon's uncle. He brought him food and allowed him to stay until dark.

Leon started walking through the woods to the village looking for a man named Shliva. He saw a light on in a house. The woman in the house let him sleep over, but she could not tell her husband. Leon left the house when her husband went to work. Leon found Shliva, who told him about Jews hiding in the woods. Shliva said he was going to a ghetto and Leon could come with him.

00:13:53 Most Jews in the town had already been killed. Only 2,500 people were left, most of whom were young men who could work.

Leon went to the Jewish police who helped him find place to sleep.

Another boy from his town also had escaped and had a story, including hiding in the same cemetery where he had heard Leon calling "Isaac, Isaac."

00:17:31 Leon managed to find clothes, sheepskin, and shoes. He got out of the ghetto and eventually found a Polish family who was hiding other Jews.

00:20:54 Leon got a job with the family from spring to summer of 1943. He helped with the cows.

When the Ukrainians realized the Germans were not going to give them independence, they started attacking the Poles. The Polish family Leon was living with decided to go back to their town, which was also Leon's town, so Leon went with them. They went to monastery in his hometown.

The Polish family gave him a Polish name. They were going to take him with them to another town. At the railroad station, a Ukrainian boy recognized him. When Leon saw the boy, he hid under the table.

Leon told the farmer that once they got on the train, he would separate from them. The train took them to the suburb of Chelm.

Leon was hired by the mayor to pasteurize the cows.

Based on Leon's Polish name, the mayor was able to get papers from the Germans.

00:33:15 Leon goes to confession with a boy he worked with. He describes sessions with a priest. He said he had disobeyed parents and was not nice to Jews.

The SS came into the town and took over part of the house where Leon lived. Leon stayed for a year and was always careful. The boy who shared his room with him saw that he was circumcised.

One boy who was friendly with Leon warned him and he left. Later, he found out that house was part of the Polish underground, and they worried that he was too close with SS troops.

Leon saw trains with Jews going to Sobibor.

He went back to the house of the farmer who had brought him to Chelm. The farmer told him to go to another village and get a job pasteurizing milk. After a few days, the farmer got him a better job.

The Russian army came through Chelm.

The SS divisions in small villages did not want to give up. One Sunday morning, the SS started shooting.

00:48:43 Then the Russians came in.

After the war, one of Leon's three aunts came to Chelm and found him when she was bartering for food.

Leon left with his aunt, then they heard from another aunt who was in hiding.

They went to the railroad station. He found his aunt who needed papers, which Leon got for her. But the papers were not good, so Leon stayed with her and got a job. She took him back with her to Lusk (Lask, Poland). They heard from another aunt who was still in hiding.

00:56:52 Leon stayed with his aunt for a year. In 1945, he went back to Lyuboml, then to Berlin, and finally to a DP camp.

00:57:48 Leon came to United States with a group of orphans. He landed in New York where he was met by his grandfather's sister. He went to Brooklyn Tech and then City College where he graduated from engineering school.

He met his wife in Rockland County, New York. They have three children. His older daughter is a psychiatrist and has three children. His son is married and has an eight-month-old baby.

The younger daughter graduated from Cornell and works on projects in Kyoto, Japan.

01:01:09 Leon's brother and sister were both killed. His father's three sisters survived.

"You cannot free yourself from the experience. You don't want to forget. How can you forget a beautiful 15-year-old sister? How could I forget not being able to help my mother?"

He gets very upset when he reads about Holocaust deniers.

"I'm proud of being Jewish, but my philosophy has changed from my Chasidic roots, which believed that the Messiah would come down and save you."

01:06:43 "I am very grateful to the United States. I feel that I belong here, not like in Poland or Ukraine."

Leon ultimately agreed to get some reparations. "But nothing can pay for what has happened."

01:08:35 He returned to erect three monuments for the 4,500 people who were killed including his mother, sister, brother, and other relatives. "I finally cried."

When Leon returned, the mayor and other people who were not anti-Semitic welcomed him. Without Jewish people, the village was not as prosperous as before the war. It was like a ghost town.

What bothered Leon the most is their neighbors turning against them. People moved into houses as soon as Germans came in. Ukrainians took whatever they could from Jews.

“I am very wary about the future for Jews in Poland and the Ukraine.”