

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Leo Schneiderman  
May 23, 1990  
RG-50.030\*0205**

## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Leo Schneiderman, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on May 23, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

**LEO SCHNEIDERMAN**  
**May 23, 1990**

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: We're...we're on. The camera's starting. Would you tell me your full name, please?

A: My name is Leo Schneiderman.

Q: Where were you born, and when?

A: I was born in, uh, Łódź, Poland, in August the 18th, 1921.

Q: Leo, tell me about your childhood. I want to know about your family first.

A: Well, my family, uh, was...I had, uh...two brothers and a sister. My father owned a very small store in Poland for supplies, uh, shoemaker supplies. We were not considered on the poverty level, but, uh, we were comfortable before the war. I went to a private Jewish school, because my parents believed in, uh, a Jewish education--but secular, not religious. We were never strictly religious; but I would call ourselves traditional Jews. When the war broke out, uh, I was eighteen years old.

Q: Let's talk a little bit more before the war. I want to know something.

A: Uh huh.

Q: Tell me about...what was Łódź like, pre-Hitler?

A: Well, Łódź was a industrial city, about the second largest city in Poland. It was...it had a large Jewish population. I'd say about a hundred and seventy-five thousand Jews used to live in Poland [**NB:** in Łódź]. Uh, most of the Jews were concentrated in uh...in one area. It was voluntarily, because they...they like just to live.... It was just, I would call it, a voluntary ghetto; because they like to, to stick to each other. They...they had a cultural life. There were three Jewish theaters, three daily newspapers. It was a publishing house. It was Jewish schools, which I attended one of them. It was also a very active religious life and a political life. Uh, it was swarming with the unions and, uh, political parties. It was really a bustling Jewish life, in the city of Łódź. A lot...most of the Jews were in textile industry. Uh, many of them, uh, used to take out work from the factories, and they did it at home; and by the end of the week they'd put it back together and they'd send it in. It was those...uh weavers, hand weavers, mostly. It was a large industry in...in Poland. After I finished school, you know, for a Jewish young kid, it was uh.... In, in our class, I could not afford any higher education. I went to learn a trade, as an apprentice. What...[some (ph)] went as weavers, tailors, shoemakers. Well, I choose to be a tailor; and for a few years I worked as an apprentice even without getting paid. Just for the

benefit to learn the trade. And later on, I start to make a little money. And then come the war. War broke out, I was about eighteen years old.

Q: Alright. Tell me what happened the day the war broke out.

A: Well, I remember...to, to talk about the outbreak of war, we have to go back a...a few weeks before. It was a war situation--like a war fever. We felt in our bones that war, war is coming. They dig trenches. They took away the young people to the...to the army; and we, we knew for sure that war is going to break out any...any day. We were preparing for war. We know. It's nothing we could do. We uh...we heard in the radio--for example, in our building it was two radios, and people were getting together to listen to the news. It was not like uh we know today, that every family has a radio or TV. It was one radio in a building, and it was enough. This, this was our contact with the world; and we heard the the speeches from...from Hitler. We, we heard the...the speeches from Polish officials, and we know that any day we're going to be in the war. And sure enough...I remember like today. It was Friday morning, September the 1st. We heard that this is war. And uh the same day we, we, we heard German planes already; and three days later--it was the 3rd of September--it came uh an order over the radio that all young people should move, get away in...towards Warsaw, to the east. Because the Germans are approaching, they will need us to go into the army. And we, we...we packed our few things and we left. I left my mother and...and my sister behind; and uh the men--even my, mine ten year old brother--what also we were going to...towards Warsaw. Like the order said. We found out later that this was a German provocation. The...the voice on the radio was not from the Polish government. It was from the German government, actually. Uh the Germans made...tricked us; and they want to jam the roads so the Polish Army would have difficulties to move. And sure enough...when we came on the road, we saw what's happened. The, the vehicles couldn't move. The the the the troops couldn't move. Everything, every road was jammed with refugees, with people going towards Warsaw. On the way--it was not far away from Łódź, just uh several kilometers--German planes start to bomb us. We...and many of those refugees were killed, right there on the fields. In a little town near... outside Łódź, [Bierzyn (ph)], it was like one huge cemetery... refugees [(ph)] laying all over the fields--uh, injured, dead. And this was our first day actually that we experienced the war. And uh whatever we took with us, uh we had just enough food for a day or so. Soon we found out, little by little, actually there is no sense of running anymore; because with the German planes controlled the roads. They controlled the skies. It was no defense whatsoever. Even the Polish army was disorganized. They could not understand where they had...they lost communication with each other, and we decided--uh, I mean, me, my...my brother, my father--that there's no point in running. Maybe we should return back to Łódź, to...to our family, to the mother that we.... And after another day, uh we decided there's no point in in running any longer. And we started to...to go back. On the way back, we met already the...the Polish Army like uh uh...like they would quit. There's no point. And we came back...this was, uh...we came back by Friday. It was...actually it was a Fri...the following Friday. After a week, we came back to Łódź. And the same uh evening, the German, uh, patrols already came

into the city; and it was a Saturday when they marched in... into...to the city of Łódź. At that day, we all stood and watched. Łódź also had a large German ethnic population, and immediately they came out and start to throw flowers and candy at them, to welcome them, finally, uh...like they would be liberated by the German army. For us Jews, the nightmare started that day; because, uh, here and there we saw already Jewish people were beating [NB: beaten] up. And uh even our Polish neighbors took advantage of the, you know, the long antisemitic feeling. They had a chance now to display, because nobody would protect any Jew anymore. And uh, religious Jews were caught in the street, and beards were shaved off. Uh, some beards were teared out from the faces, to the point that blood came out. And Jews were caught in the street like uh dogs, and taken to work uh in doing all kinds of things. Every German had the right to do this. The civilian German population, the ethnic Germans, uh immediately they...they took out of the swastika armbands and they put on; and they became the masters of the street. Uh Jews used to own in business. They...everything was closed. And uh they they also threw out Jews from homes, better looking homes. Immediately every German had the right to do this. He just came in and said, "Get out!" And they took over and it...all the rights were taken away immediately, the first day the German troops entered the city of Łódź. A Jew had no right whatsoever. And uh at...by us, we...after a few weeks uh official Germans ca...officers, they came into our home, to our...even to the apartment, the big apartment building that we lived. And they gave us five minutes to leave the house, to leave our apartment; and my mother said, "Where should we go?" He said, "You should...." It seems that he understood that question. Uh he said, "I would suggest that you go to Ba\_uty." Ba\_uty was a...a section, a very poor, it were the slum section of the city of Łódź. He visualized that this is going to be the area for Jews to live, where Jews would be forced to live. Uh so my mother start packing. He said, "You don't have to pack. You just take uh the...your, your coat, and you...you take just the bread, the food that you have. And you leave the house. Otherwise you will be thrown out." So my mother said, "But uh we...we have a family. I have to take a few things. My little kid, you know, he'll needs clothes." He said, "Well, if you stay and talking, what there's now you got only three minutes time." So my mother run to the...to the...to the closet, you know, and she start uh to pack. And then he saw that there was a fur coat. He said, "No, this you're going to leave." He didn't let her take. So we took just a few things. My father took uh a box of tools; so he went over and checked the box of the tools, and see if there is not anything uh is not hidden under there. And so when we were about to leave the house...you see, my mother stood there by the...by the door and looked around our apartment. And then he said that she should take off the pearls that she wore. So she took off the pearls and throwed away on the floor. And then he made her pick it up from the floor and put it on the table; so she took the...the pearls from the floor and just throw it on the table. And we walked out from our house, and here we stay on the street with no place where to go. So we start walking to Ba\_uty, to that section. And there already was some kind of Jewish organization. They call it the [Geminde (ph)], the [Gemeinde (ph)]; and they took all the refugees from--because they knew that building are coming to the ghetto--and they gave us some kind of a shelter. And we did get an apartment through the Jewish Council in that, in that section. We did get another apartment. It was a one-

room...we did not have a big apartment before. It was two, two rooms and a kitchen; but here we got one room apartment. And please, we were so lucky. Everybody envied us that we still had a roof over our head. And we start...we made that home; and later on, a few months later, this was the official section for Jews to live. It was the ghetto. And Jews were ordered from all of the sections in in the in the part of the town where we used to live, to leave. When we...we were a regular...thrown out actually from one building; but then all the Jews in the city were ordered to leave. And it was like an exodus, you know--like another war, where you could see through the city to the, to the...to the streets, storming people with their belongings, whole families. They took carriages and make uh little wagons. They took everything they could and load it up on those uh carriages and wagons, and it's on backs; and they stormed into the ghetto. And that's how the ghetto was formed. It was a very small part of town, mostly slums. And that's how a hundred and seventy-five thousand people were crowded in, in that uh.... Rooms had to be shared for families. We, we were fortunate enough to have our own apartment. We didn't have to share with nobody. It was that time uh...my, my father--I forgot to tell you--my father at that time took some of the belongings and...and went to a small town where his his sister lived and.... Just to put it away there. And by that time the ghetto was closed, and you could not come back; and he was separated from us all through the war and we never saw him again. Uh my brother decided, one brother of mine that's younger, decided that uh he will try his luck and go to that part of Russia...that Russia occupied, a city by the name of "Bia\_ystok." Well, actually he told me to come with him. So I just couldn't. My father was gone. And he...he went away because he had arrangement with some friends; and he tried to stay in Bia\_ystok. Now there was my mother, and a kid brother only ten years old, and...and my sister. I just did not have the heart to leave them. And I decided to stay in the ghetto with them. And by May the 1st,<sup>1</sup> the ghetto was...was closed. And was like...like a big prison, barbed wires around, armed guards every few feet. And this was our...our life, that time--1940. How did we live? Everybody still had some, you know, money. And there is, there was some food to buy here and there. But we could see the writing on the wall, what's going to happen next month, and a month later. The Jewish Council that was formed came up with an idea that we should organize shops and work; and this was the... the plan that the the elders of the ghetto uh came up to the German peo...to the German authorities: that we have tremendous resources in the ghetto. We got shoemakers--experts. We got tailors. We got weavers. We got such good craftsmen that maybe we can interest German industrialists to use, to make use out of those talents. And they did, for their...for their own reason. This, for them...a chance to have a big bureaucracy. They wouldn't have to go to the Front. They employed a lot of people. It's still better to guard Jews than to go to the Front. And uh and this was going on for...until 1944. But conditions were worsening with every month, because it was less and less and less food. You see, we understood that the German people...the whole ghetto was designed, actually, to starve the people out. Uh if the if the war would last another

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Hilberg, the order to close the ghetto was issued May 10, 1940. See Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews, vol. 1, p. 223.

ten years, they would liquidate the entire ghetto without firing one shot; because the statistics showed that every month more people died and died. Uh from families that used to be five people, there are only three; because people were dying out...and getting sicker...and getting smaller. And we could see they emaciated up to nothing. People start to look like skeletons. And it came to a point that people couldn't even work; and the work was (cough) compulsory. We have to go work. If you miss a day of work, you get less food; because the, the, the place of work provided one soup a day. So if you didn't go to work, you get one soup less. You have to just make with that little food that you got from the monthly rations.

Q: Leo, tell...tell me about a day in your life. What was it like for Leo Schneiderman?

A: During the war?

Q: Tell me what you did, and what your family did?

A: OK. When we get up in the morning, all four of us, we had to prepare for work. I start off with...with my mother. My mother worked at a...at the place where they used to, to, to... fuel, to distribute the fuel for the house. Coal. It's a.... So she had to go to work in order to get that pot of soup. My sister went to work in a...in a...a place where they used to make shoes out of straw; used for the German army on the front, so when they stood guard they shouldn't freeze their feet. So those big shoes she used to make out of straw. My little brother worked in uh one of the tailor shops, in the office; he was a runner. And I went to work as a tailor in the factory for uniforms. When we came to work in the morning, we start...we started uh by...by the machines, of course, and we were making the German uniforms. But uh the minute I sat down, un...until we finish, that's all it was in my mind at that time is twelve o'clock when we will go, we'll have a break and we'll get something to eat. Because I was constantly hungry. The...the hunger didn't leave me, because the little food that we had at home uh in, in the morning--it was one piece of bread that I ate in the morning, and the se...the other piece I took with me to have it in the shop. And I...I kept it in my pocket, or I kept it in in the pot that I took with me for the...for the soup. Everybody had a little pot with them. And we could not wait; and this was everybody. The whole day, it was in my mind. In the meantime, work has to be done. It was strictly controlled. And twelve o'clock, the minute we have the break we have to... everybody was running for the soup. This was the major event in the...in the day. After work, we came home. Uh if it was summer, it was bearable. In the wintertime, it was no fuel. It was cold. Uh, most of the furniture was gone already because we break, broke it up and burned it just to keep warm. And the minute we were ready with that little supper that we had from the...we, we finished it all together. And then we went to bed, to...even just to keep warm. Uh, and this...when it...most of the time uh, we stood [NB: stayed] in bed. The summertime, when it was warm, we used to go out. We also had to go to stay in line for the rations to...to get. And sometimes uh the staying in line meant hours. And me being the...the man of the house, it was up to me; because I would not have my mother standing in line, or my sister or my little brother, but it...it was up to me to...to bring in

the food from the rations. And uh it was very little left for social life. Me being eighteen, nineteen year old--for some people this is the golden age. Uh, I spent my eighteen and nineteen and twenty years in...in the ghetto of Łódź. Always hungry, always tired, uh overworked, and with no hope for the...for the future. I didn't see any hope. Later, after a few years, I got involved in...in, in some educational project. We started to...to write. I particular was interested in writing something about the ghetto. And I developed some... people say that I did develop some talent for poetry, which later on it was used by some Jewish dramatists like [Jonah Stogow (ph)]. I was also at one time involved in teaching Yiddish, because I was a student of the Yiddish school in...in Łódź, of the [Medem (ph)] school. And we taught. It was...this was illegal. It was not allowed to teach. My students were not the children, actually. It was young uh girls--uh, at the age of fifteen, sixteen--who were interested in knowing, because before the war they went to Polish school and Yiddish was strange to them. In the ghetto, they got that chance. They considered this part of the social life; and also beneficially, because they learned a language. And to me, it was very rewarding, very satisfactory for a while. And for the...for a few years, actually, I did that kind of teaching in Yiddish.

Q: You told me before about a particular man in the ghetto who was particularly cruel. Would you tell us about it and tell us the name you knew him by?

A: Yeah. Uh it was one German guard. He took some pleasure in abusing people physically. It was a part of the ghetto where you used to cross from one...from one side to the other, under guard. And this man many times stood there at those gates. And uh if he didn't like somebody, or he went too fast, or he didn't take off his hat in the right way, or he'd walked too slow, he went over to him (cough) and he punched him several times. And that's how (cough) he got the name of "The Boxer," because he used to box people. I looked at that man several times, and somehow he registered in mine brain. At one time--it was in 1942, before that action that we used to call the "Sperre" [**Translation:** "Closing," "Closure" (Ger)], that we were ordered for eight days not to leave the house and they selected all the people that got too weak to work anymore. The children--it were illegal to have children in...in the ghetto. The sick, the elderly [**NB:** elderly], that they considered useless people. But that...before this action actually started, they...they...all of a sudden, they attacked the ghetto. They came in like a surprise, and they surrounded the hospital. And like wildfire the news spread that the Germans surrounded the hospital on Lagowniecka Street. Before the war, this used to be the ...the....also a "ambulance"--like social...social medicine station [**NB:** perhaps "ambulatorium" (Pol), an outpatient facility of a hospital]. Kasa Chorych [**NB:** former National Health Service]. And we run over there. It so happened that one of my friends was a patient at that hospital; because he had an attack, they took him to that hospital. And when I heard, the first name that came to my mind, "Oh, my God, Jósek Feldman is in the hospital!" And I run over and stood there. I still had an hour before going to work, so I stood there for the hour and watched. What I saw, it's hard to describe, even. Wagons standing below the building, and nurses bringing out the patients and put them on the wagons. Uh some patients going on themselves; like uh I saw them, they're going to the wagon. And then I saw from the



second floor, they opened the window and people were throwing out sick people into the wagons. And who is there conducting the whole operation? That "Boxer"! Well, after the war at one time I read in the paper that somebody is looking for me, that the the.... It was to the Jewish World Congress that were looking for me as a witness for that "Boxer." Of course, I immediately replied; and I was called to the German Consul in Chicago and I was told that somebody gave my name that I know what happened in that...in that day. I said, "I certainly do." I still don't know until today who gave my name; but I went to Germany and I testified against that "Boxer," which I found out that his real name is "Krisom" because that's how they referred to him, "Herr Krisom." And I was asked by the prosecutor to...to tell what I know about him; and I told them the story about that hospital, what's happened in that...in that day. Uh, his lawyer asked me a question, if I know for sure that the people were thrown out from the windows into the wagon. He said how do I know for sure they were thrown out? Maybe they jumped out, out of fear, when they saw the troops. They jumped out by themselves. So my question to him was, "How about the stretchers?" People on stretchers. And also: belongings, packages, suitcases, bottles. Altogether were thrown out into the.... And then another question was put to me: "Weren't you afraid to stay there and watch all this, with all the Germans around--with that 'Boxer,' that you call him, around? Weren't you afraid to stand there? You told me that he used to beat up people he didn't like." So I told them that I think that they wanted us to stay. If they wouldn't want us to stay there, they would chase us away. They want us to stay and observe all that fear, all that cruelty, that I did. Then the only defense was, from the lawyer in that same, that I mistake him for somebody else. They never denied that such action happened there by the hospital. The only defense was: maybe it was somebody else, not him. And sure enough, this was forty years later. I said, "Looking at that man I don't know if this is the man. I only know the 'Boxer.' And if he was the 'Boxer,' he was the man." They showed me pictures from the past. I recognized him immediately. And then they showed me different kind of hats that he wore, and I picked his uniform. I picked his cap that he wore, and it was established that he was the one. And then the defense went--not referring to me, but referring to the prosecutor--that it was a cruel war and every man in the war had to follow the orders, and this was the orders. But I establish one point: that that action...that this man, Herr Krisom--or that one that we called "The Boxer"--was in charge of that operation.

Q: When and where was this trial?

A: The trial was in Bochum (Westphalia), West Germany. It was outside of Düsseldorf. It was in 1978. I don't recall the exact date.

Q: Thank you. Let's go back to the ghetto in Łódź.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: Are there any other stories or incidents that you remember from Łódź that are important that you want to tell us?

A: Well, the most important is during the liquidation when we were running from the transports, we were trying to stay in the ghetto, not to go away. Because to go away to nowhere, to a unknown destination, it's frightening. We don't know where. They...

Q: Tell us...excuse me, what...what happened leading up to the liquidation of the ghetto, so we know.

A: Yes. The the people from the ghetto was taken out constantly...five hundred, six hundred, thousand, and they...we were told that they going to be resettled in a different place. That they need--for example, at one time they need strong people, so they took all the strong men and they put them to work, and they send them away. For a while, their families used to get a letter or two--even money paid by the by the Jewish Council in the ghetto--to make us believe they're working someplace else, and that's is the pay the family is getting. But after a while, it stopped. There were no more letters. No more money. We didn't hear about them; like they were gone. And a few months later another resettlement program. They took away other people. They need another five hundred, or six hundred, or...or a thousand. It was little by little. The ghetto was getting smaller and smaller. The population dying, and putting...and sending away. Until it came to a point that everybody, the whole ghetto, is being liquidated. And everybody was going away. And ...and this was the the time that we tried, we tried very hard to stay. We hide. We built even uh hiding places underneath, uh underneath cellars. We...we kept on running; because uh it looked like uh the minute we leave the the ghetto from there, that there's no place left for a Jew to run. They even promised us that that we were going away we can take our tools. We can take machinery with us to establish ourself in the new place. But the question was: What is wrong with this place? Why, why do we have to be a new place? Our...this is not paradise that we are here. They promised us a huge amount of food at the train for three days. Everybody will receive a whole loaf of bread. This was a treasure. It was like a bait. But still we were...we would like to stay in one place, because one precious thing was left to us--the family was together. And this we felt, it's going to be...the minute we go on the train, we're going to be separated. The men probably will go to work someplace else. We did not imagine anything worse than that, that probably the men will work in one place. The women will work in another place, and the...the youngsters will work someplace else. This alone was frightening for us. And it came to a point uh that they used to hunt there from street to street. And transport was formed every day, and going to the train and sent away. People among us working at those transports, they told us what is going on at the train and how the people are packed in those trains. Unhuman conditions. And the question was: if we were sent to work, to do some work, and that's how you transport people going to work? And it was...it became clear that this is the end. And we used to run as much as we could and hide, to avoid those transport going away. It came to a point when our part of the ghetto was sealed off; and it was no more place to hide and no more strength to run. And if one member of the family gives up, the rest follow. My mother told us she cannot run no more. This is it. She would like to go to the train, and get at least a loaf of bread and go away. Lets happen what's happen.

Then she suggested that maybe I should keep on hiding with my little brother, and she with my sister would go with them. The minute she said that, my kid brother grabbed my mother's hand and start to cry. He said, "No, I'm going with you, too." At that moment we all decided that we shall go together. Either we're going to live together, or we're going to die together. We reported to the train depot. We came there. It was a huge crowd. The boxcars were waiting; and uh German troops, armed guards all around us. Some even had dogs on their leashes. And they divided groups of a hundred...a hundred to each boxcar, and we started to go to train. And sure everybody received a loaf of bread. Two kilo, will be around four pounds of bread. We never had so much bread since the war started. A lot of people started to eat even before they boarded the box car. You know, they start tearing the bread apart and eating. And in an hour when we all were in...in that box car, a hundred of them, he came over-- the one with the dog came over--and looked around, and he took some people from the other group and added to our train; because he felt that we have too much room. And this was in August 1944. It was a very hot day at that time. And after he added the other people, then they put those gates together and we heard that big noise that he locked the boxcar. And there we were in that train, over a hundred people. The only facility in the train was two buckets for over a hundred men, women and children; and the train was standing on one place. It was unbearable hot. Lack of air. So some people had an idea that the minute we start moving, it's going to get cooler. (Cough) But at one moment we heard that the gate opened up in the boxcar, so we thought maybe they changed their mind. They're going to leave us out. But instead, they brought a few dozen Jews discovered in a hiding place; they were all badly beaten up because they were hiding. I remember one young man, all his front teeth were kicked out. And one boy's face was so badly swollen, it was just a nose that we could see--no eyes. And they added to our car. And soon we started to move. It didn't cool off. And at one moment, we heard a young teenage girl crying. She had to go to the buckets in front of everybody. Her mother, her sister tried to shield her with a coat. A man was begging the people around to give a little more room his pregnant wife. Me being among the youngsters, I was asked to climb up those packages, and look out to see where are we going. I start to reading signs. One recognized those names. He said that we are moving south towards Kraków. I also saw some Polish peasants lining the road. They were probably used to those scenes, those trains. Some made signs to us, pointing to the sky. And some went with the fingers across this throat, the throat. I didn't tell the people what I saw; but I mentioned that later on, after the war, to the Polish alderman in Chicago, Mr. Roman [Pochinsky (ph)]. And he told me that, "They tried to warn you that you going to be killed, that you should try to run away." Well, I tried to believe that; but the expression on their faces told me something else. It was late at night that we arrived at Auschwitz. When we came in, the minute the gates [**NB:** the doors of the train] opened up, we heard screams, barking of dogs, blows from...from those kapos--those officials working for them, over the head. And then we got out of the train, and everything went so fast: left, right, right, left. Men separated from women, children torn from the arms of mothers, the olderly chased like cattle. The sick, the disabled, were handled like packs of garbage. They were thrown in a side together with broken suitcases and with boxes. My mother run over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders, and she told me, "Leibele, I'm

not going to see you no more. Take care of your brother." Well, my brother was twelve, thirteen at that time. Ten minutes later, Mengele, the doctor--I didn't know in that time...I saw a handsome looking gentlemen with white gloves--pointed to my little brother to go to the left. And before I realized, he was gone and I didn't see him no more. I didn't know at the time that I was the lucky one; because when I went into the showers, from the shower heads we got water. Other people got poison gas. But when we came out from the showers, the sky was red. The air was filled with smoke and the odor of burning flesh and...and hair. A man went over to those officials, and he asked one of those officials (ph)--he called them the "kapos"--he asked him about his wife and his little girl. And the man looked him straight in the eye. He said, "There is no more little girl. There was...there is no more wife." He said, "What do you mean? Where they are?" And he pointed to the chimney with that...that smoke bursting out. "That's their funeral. Here they go." Well, the man didn't cry. He didn't scream. He just stood there and stared at that chimney. We all stared at it. We would stay there probably for hours. But we started to be chased into the block, to the barracks where we were marched over. We couldn't even recognize each other. No hair. The hair was shaved off. Dressed in striped uniforms--too small, too big, too large, too short. We all looked like clowns. And then we were welcomed by a speech from one of those kapos. He said, "You saw that sign that 'Arbeit Macht Frei'? That means 'freedom through labor.'" He said, "Don't make any mistakes. Nobody needs your labor here. You did not come here to work. You came here to be killed. You're just waiting your turn. And remember I don't have any...I don't have to have a reason to kill you, if I want it. So you better do what you're told." Well, this was the beginning of Auschwitz. Every morning that we went out to be counted, we could feel the crematoriums burning. And that most disgusting odor is the burning of flesh and hair together. I decided to make every effort to do everything I can to go away from Aus... Auschwitz. Because they were forming transport to go away to labor; because Auschwitz itself was an extermination camp, not a labor camp. But for the time being, they...they used to send transport to go for work in labor camps. I didn't succeeded in the beginning, but I...I still tried. I still tried. Uh, at one time they asked, "Who knows, who ever worked in road construction?" The minute I run over, and I said, "I did." He said, "Where did you work?" I said, "Outside of \_ód\_, when they build the highway." I never saw any construction worked at all. So they put a few hundred together, and they put us in a site. So we were in the transport. All the rest start to get the tatoos to stay in Auschwitz, their number. And we were put on a transport; and I went to a labor camp outside in Silesia, in a place called Kaltwasser.<sup>2</sup> Kaltwasser was a labor camp under construction. It was a beautiful area. They were building uh new roads and a small railroad, and that's what we worked. The conditions that time: it was very hard. We didn't have adequate clothes; and starting to get cold in the morning, especially when we stood to be counted. We were freezing. There were no beds in our barracks. They just put uh some straw on the floor, and that how's we slept, in our clothes. And the work was very

---

<sup>2</sup> Administered by Wüstegiersdorf (subcamp of Groß Rosen). Located at Kreis Glatz, in Lower Silesia. Opened August 1944.

hard. But the.... We felt that we were chosen to live. It is not Auschwitz. So we, we consider ourself the lucky ones, that we got away from Auschwitz. The...we did not stay too long in that particular camp; because as work progressed, we were sent to a different camp called Lärche.<sup>3</sup> Was the same work, a continuation of the same work. And, uh, there we also worked at the same thing, but the living conditions were a little better. There were beds already--bunks--and we did receive, uh, warmer clothes. Uh, but fortunately that...that work, in...in that was finished in...in a very short time; and they decided again send us to a different camp, in a place called Wolfsberg.<sup>4</sup> Uh at that particular camp, I met some people--those officials that knew my family from before the war--and I did get a better job. I worked in the hospital, in the Revier, in that hospital in that camp. And my situation improved a little bit, and so did my physical uh condition improved. And there I stood [**NB:** stayed] until we could hear the Russian army already approaching. At night we heard cannon sound, and we felt that any day we're going to be liberated.

Q: At this point we need to stop and change tapes.

A: Yeah. OK.

---

<sup>3</sup> Administered by Wüstegiersdorf (subcamp of Groß Rosen). Located near Lehmwasser, in Lower Silesia. Opened October 20, 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Administered by Würstegiersdorf (subcamp of Groß Rosen). Located at Friedland, in Lower Silesia. Opened May 1944.

TAPE #2

Q: OK. You are in uh Lärche...

A: ...Lärche.

Q: Tell us about...tell us about working in the hospital there.

A: In the hospital, I worked in a place called Wolfsberg, not Lärche. Yeah. Well, uh, people, uh, if they had some minor accident or they got sick, they report to the doctor. Uh, they came in, and the doctor prescribed how many days he can stay in that hospital. Three days, four days. A lot of people, uh, tried to just get in to be away and to get some kind of a rest, and to be away from that hard work. They couldn't take it no more. And some legitimately got sick, and they reported to the hospital. They didn't get any treatment, uh, for anything. They just laid there, just to stay away from work. And after a few days, the doctor decided, "You're all right now, and you can go." If somebody got seriously sick, somebody made a report. And every few weeks they came and they took the people-- German people, you know, the Gestapo, whatever--and they took them away. They said they took them away to a real hospital where they can get better treatment. Actually, they were taken to Auschwitz to the gas chambers. And, for example, uh, people who knew that, uh, they were seriously ill, they tried as much as they could to stay away from the hospital; because the hospital...they know if they happened to be so unlucky and this is a time when the Germans come.... Because they come every once in a while to check on this hospital, and they could tell.... They didn't, they didn't care about those people who tried to get away from work for a day or so. Whoever was ill, they were taken away; and they...they said they take them to a hospital to be cured, but this was the end of them. Uh, the end station actually was Auschwitz, or any other extermination camp. My work in that hospital was, uh, to keep order. Uh, in the morning, uh, they come in. I had to count the people, uh, to get them ready to...for inspection; and after...and also the food. I also distribute the food for those people. Uh, in some cases, people who did not work received half of the normal rations. Not in that camp where I worked, but in other camps this was the case. For example, this was the case in the last camp where I was liberated, later on. This was the case that non-working people received half of the rations. But in that camp, uh, where I worked--in Wolfsberg--it was not too bad, you know. But the only thing is...three, four days was the maximum that, uh, a person was allowed to be sick. If there was a serious sickness for longer, they took them away. Uh, at one time, they they came in and they took away almost half of the hospital. Yeah, a lot of people. For example, in our...our barrack where I was, uh, in charge--it was some over eighty people--that they took out about thirty, thirty five people away that they considered actually they were not uh...they were emaciated. They looked so bad. So they took them away. And the rest of the people stood [NB: stayed]; and a lot of people were frightened, and they reported out that they said that they feel better. They want to go out to work already.

Q: Where did you go from here? Tell us.

A: That was like I said, that we fe...we heard already noise of the...of the Red Army approaching. And at one day the...we were told to assemble, and we started to march on foot. The clothes that we had, it was uh not adequate; because this was February already.<sup>5</sup> It was cold and snowing; and we were marching on these columns, quite uh...almost eight hundred people at that time, the whole camp. And we were marching through the fields; and uh...there was no food. We marched the first day, until it was dark. We passed a lot of hamlets, a lot of villages. People came out and they looked at us. They were probably used to that scenes already. And when we passed a place uh on the field. There were two huge barns, and that's...that how we stood overnight. In the morning we start marching again, the second day. And also until late at night; and it was no food, only that what we got when we started. It was a loaf of bread, and some uh artificial honey, it was a lump; and that's how we marched through two days. On the third day we were also put in...in barns, very big barns; and that's how we stood one day, and another day. And no food. The people was starving to die, from starvation. They didn't get up. In the morning we used to touch each other to get up, and some didn't. When we walked out, and we just walking around...I remember one instance that the other side of the wall was a horse. And I heard that that horse in a grubbing of some food. So I was by the wall. So I took away, I tore away a board from that wall; and I saw that the horse was eating beets, sugar beets. So I tried to grab one from that horse. He almost bit my hand off. He didn't let me. So I...I outsmarted the horse. I took a piece of straw, and I started to tickle the horse on the head. So the minute he picked up the head, so I grabbed a beet out from...and that's how I ate it. The German guards saw that they...they wouldn't have no nobody to march with anymore, because people were dying so fast--and so many of them. They slaughtered a few of those horses, and they told the people to cook some soup. And then we received a...a warm soup out of that horsemeat. This was the third day. The fourth day they assembled us. We start marching; and I saw that we are marching to a train depot, because it was railroad tracks already. We came there. And if we thought that the...the ride from \_ód\_ ghetto to Auschwitz was bad, this was even worse; because this was in the wintertime and the train car were open cars. Coal cars, out in the open. And there were we packed in. And also we received some bread, also a loaf of bread; and they told us to be careful with the bread because we don't know how long we're going to stay in those trains. And it took about five days. In every car, I would say about ten percent, fifteen percent of the people died. In our car, I remember it was a father and two sons. And the father survived; both sons died in that train. And the minute they...he start to move, the other grabbed his part of bread. We become like animals. But at this point, I would like also to...to mention it, we passed in Czechoslovakia one town. I even remember the name today, for so many years. The name of that town was Stará Paka. And it was a factory next to that train station. And people from the fac... factory run out; and everybody took those lunches they had and threw in in our train. Some people threw even apples, that we didn't see for years already. And they threw in our train. The

---

<sup>5</sup> 1945.

German guards started to shoot on them from their rifles. They shoot in the air. They didn't kill nobody. They shoot...they try to scare them away. They didn't react. I saw a young woman. When she saw us on the train, she went into those factory, start to ring a bell. And everybody came out with the...with the food, with lunches, and they threw in to our.... This was the Czech people in a town called Stará Paka. They took us...on the fifth day we arrived in Austria. And this was the end of our journey, a concentration camp called Ebensee. It was the overflow of Mauthausen. Mauthausen was such a cruel camp that the Germans themselves called it "Mordhausen," which means "House of Murder." When we came to...to Ebensee, the hunger and the labor and the way--especially for us Jews--the way we were treated, we were sure that not one will survive that camp. That this was it. The charge, the man in charge of our block was a professional killer. He enjoyed so much killing people. The...the people who went to the hospitals when they were sick there, hardly one came out alive. The people who were not working, who were in that hospital: Jews received half of the rations that the normal worker received; non-Jews they gave the regular rations if they were not too long in that hospital. The...we went, I remember, to the shower in that camp. It was the end of February or the beginning of March [NB: 1945]. It was still cold. When we came out from the shower, we stood outside...I don't know how long. Without clothes. Without...without wiping ourselves off. I would never believe that a person can survive standing in the outside in the wintertime without clothes for so long. We were waiting 'til we get our bundles of clothes from disinfection, and then we run back to the block. I remember standing on that, waiting for my clothes, like a pelican. I stood on one foot, and then I changed. I put down the other foot, and I picked up the other foot. I didn't realize that this is possible for a person to survive, but apparently it is possible. I did it. In that... in that camp we worked in tunnels. The...we built tunnels in behind...below the mountains. They decided to put the munition factories inside those tunnels to be away from the bombing. The work was hard, no food; because scared...even the German guards were fighting for food for themselves. The...it was the end of the war. Conditions were terrible for everybody. Many times the...there were bombings. Uh, we saw the planes coming. At one time, we stood; we can't work. Bombs start to drop; and uh the Germans were running, hiding. We didn't. I stood there, and I did not care if I'm going to get killed or not. I was just looked up in the sky, and I was just looking that the bombs should drop. Nobody even cared anymore. Sometimes people wonder, "Why are you not afraid to die?" Because when you are in such a condition that uh...that you really don't care no more, people are not afraid of to die. I was not afraid to die. When we were led to a...a place of work in the morning--it was around five or six kilometers--there was a pile of potatoes laying. The Germans knew that we're going to grab them. They stood with the big sticks, and everybody get near those piles was beaten. And uh we didn't care. And I saw, for example, that they drop the stick on somebody's head and the man started to bleed. And then I figure out that it must take time 'til they get the stick up. In the meantime, I--just like...like lightening--I jumped on that pile; and I grabbed two, three potatoes and I run back. So he could have split my head, too. And I knew it, but I didn't care. In the meantime, I ate raw potatoes. That's what hunger can do to a person. We can see what it does to a body, but it's very hard to describe what it can do to a person's mind. You gave up on life. I did. Until I was



liberated, we also experienced a terrible ordeal. At one morning, we were told that we're not going out to work. Is it in Ebensee, in this hell? They let us stay home? They said, "You're not going out to work." They said, "But the American army is approaching the camp, and we decided that we have to go and hide because they're going to bomb that camp. They might think this is a military camp. And that we should go and hide in those tunnels in the mountains." So one of those Kapos--he was a Frenchman--he got up, and he says, "No!" And he starts screaming, "No! No! No go to the stalls!" So people was confused. "What do you mean?" He said, "Dynamite in the stalls!" They had prepared dynamite charges, and they were ready to blow us up in the last minute. So that the...the ältester from the...from the camp said, "If you don't want to go hide, it's OK. You can stay here in the camp." And the next day in the morning, tanks came in. The American tanks came in, and we were free. Then I went to the hospital, uh, in the area to...I had at that time weighted a hundred, a hundred and seventy kilogram. Uh, this was almost a hundred pounds.

Q: Tell me about liberation, when the soldiers came in.

A: Well, people were crying. People were hugging each other. They climbed up on those tanks. They were sticking to the tanks like flies. And, uh, they...already they realized at that time the enormity of their tragedy. Especially for us Jews. People started to make the preparations to go home. Delegations came in from France, from Russia, from Poland; you know, to get their people together. Nobody came for us. Nobody even was interested what is going to happen to the Jews. We had no homes to go. Our homes were destroyed. There were no Jews. They came, and they explained it to us that "Soon you will receive some information how to get together." The Jewish Agency came and want to take us to Palestine. And they were told us Polish Jews, "You're not even welcome back in Poland." The French government wanted the Jews to come back, but there were very few. But the bulk of the Jewish population was from Russia, from Poland, from Hungary. Some did go back after the liberation, and some came back to the camps. They said, "There is no more place for us in our home." Especially in Poland. A Jew came back, and he said he almost got killed when he tried to reclaim his hou... his house. And we decided to stay there. We established some kind of a Jewish community in Austria, some in Germany or in Italy. I was in Austria. I worked for uh the Jewish Central Committee. My boss was the famous Nazi hunter, Simon Wiesenthal, who headed the political department. Also the documentation center. He published our bulletin, that I was also involved because the Yiddishe [Rundschau (ph?)]. I worked in the cultural department of...in Linz, Austria. Until uh.... By the way, I also met my wife, that I knew from the ghetto, in Austria. We got married and we lived in Linz, where I worked in the Central Committee of the Jews in Austria. Until we emigrated. We received a visa through the HIAS, and we came to the United States. But uh the memories of the Holocaust, from those camps-- especially that one scene that when my mother grabbed me by the shoulders and said, "I will never see you again," that I should take care of my little brother--this stays with me for all those years. And I'm sure it will never leave me.

Q: Leo, what...besides that memory, what has been the effect of the war on you, of the Holocaust on you?

A: The effect is that I got some, I feel that I have a responsibility to tell the story about the Holocaust. But I never dreamed that a time will come that I will have to convince the people there was such a thing as a Holocaust. Beside all the ...the fact and documentation and witnesses, there are people who denied it, that said there wasn't a Holocaust. This I never thought that I will have to do. I feel some kind of a responsibility towards future generations. I tell...I talk to my children about it. A lot of people--friends of mine--tried to spare their children, and their grandchildren, those horrible experiences that they went through. I think it was wrong. I feel that we should make every effort for the world to learn the lesson of the Holocaust, so such an event should never, never happen again. To no people. I'm very sensitive at the misery of other people. Mainly because I'm a Jew, and I know what it means. The Holocaust Museum that is being built in Washington now means quite a bit to me. Mainly, it is not a Jewish project. It's an official United States institution, I feel, just like the Smithsonian Institute or the Library of Congress. Because if a revisionist goes who say that the Holocaust is a lie, I can tell him that the government of the United States said it is true. And go to Washington, and see for yourself. Yad Vashem, it's also does a tremendous job, but they can say it's a Jewish institution. That boxcar who is in the Washington Museum, has...is significant because it was given by a Polish government. Just like the boat from Denmark was given by the Danish government. That's why this museum means quite a bit to me. That mean this is one more way that the world will learn the lesson of the Holocaust. It is a mission that's almost sacred. (Pause) OK?

Q: Thank you. Thank you, Leo. Very much.