

Summary of Interview With Leo Laufer (DMCHS)

Name?

Leo Laufer

Birth?

March 15, 1924 in Lodz, Poland

Background?

Ultra- Religious upbringing. Father was married twice-- two children from first marriage, six from the second including Leo.

In 1937, the ages ranged from 7-15. His immediate older brother died in 1938.

Standard of living was far below the average. They had two rooms, each about 10 x 10. No water, cooking facilities, or toilets. Can't remember any disputes between mother and father at that time. In retrospect, mother was like a slave. His father had no business sense or ambition. All he did was study the torah. Leo learned many good values from his father. Girls did not go to synagogue, boys did. His father always brought home an elderly man on Friday night who was less deprived than they were. Leo carried this into adulthood--"There is always room for one more".

Background of Country?

Leo lived in a very poor neighborhood. Leo saw a sign in 1937 that said, " Jews go to the Ghetto". He always felt that he and other Jews were second class citizens. Leo's father would not allow him to go to normal schools because of the abuse. He wore typically Jewish clothes and did not even learn Polish. He spoke Yiddish taught to him by his father.

In 1937 a lot of German Jews came in to Poland. They were more educated and intellectual. The Polish Jews found room for them and accepted them. They had the feeling that something was going wrong in Germany, but they were not sure what.

1939-- Germany invaded Poland. Leo's landlord was a Pole of German descent. Suddenly, all of the neighbors that they had known for all

of their lives were wearing swastikas and claiming to be Poles of German descent. His father refused to leave the house, but he was not bringing anything in at all. He would be pulled out of bread lines despite waiting all night because he was Jewish.

Before war broke out, Leo felt like the black sheep of the family. He also feels that this is why he survived. He cut off his curls and kept regular clothes at his friends house. If his father would have known about the clothes he would have kicked Leo out of the house.

When the ghetto's were "closed" Leo's family was able to keep there two rooms because they already lived in that area. The Germans had a limit on how many people could live in a room. Starvation was terrible.

Leo came up with an idea when the food situation was very bad in the ghetto. He had a friend that played soccer with him and was in the Polish army. He snuck out of the ghetto one night and went to the friends house to talk to his mother. He suggested that she could make money by selling him food to smuggle into the ghetto. It was a great risk for her to take but she consented. So, Leo was smuggling food from the Christian side into the Jewish side. Only food. He sold things and made money to pay his friends mother. He felt that his family was the best fed in the ghetto. He said he ate better then than he did before the war.

If he was caught he could have been shot. His friend's mother would put food under her stole and put it in some predetermined spot. There was a young man in the ghetto that wanted to be his partner. One time he approached Leo and said that he would turn him in if he did not agree to having him as a partner. Leo told him no. He could not believe that a Jewish man would turn someone in to the Gestapo instead of the Jewish police. The man did turn him in. The Gestapo took him from his house and demanded to know who was helping him do the smuggling. They beat him every night for two weeks. The man who had turned him in came and identified him as the smuggler. Finally, after a trip to the hospital , he went home. He went on with his smuggling but it ended when he and many others from Lodz were shipped to a labor cam called [Lahuskinace???].

On the way the people were guaranteed lots of food .They were in cattle cars, and it was nearly 200 miles away. It had cans of water for toilets, etc.

1940--Camp-- situated in woods. It was made up of houses and barns

Between the house and the barns there was a barbed wire fence. There were hardly any German Police, or Gestapo. The guards were basically all Poles of German descent.

Leo arrived at camp with nothing except the clothes he was wearing. Guards immediately gave them shovels and brought them to a barn -- telling them to clean up manure. Tragedy in this camp was worse than any human being could induce. No shooting, people just died like flies. When they left only one hundred survived. There were people working at a water mill. It was cold, like twenty five below 0, and they had no winter clothes, gloves, or anything. The job was to try and straighten out the river. Someone would be privileged to be able to take water in both hands and wash their face.. There was a toilet in the back of a barn, near the kitchen. We got one bowl of soup per day and sometimes coffee in the morning and a piece of bread.

Tape 2

Hunger was not the main killer. It was first, hygiene, and then, frostbite. People who fell in the river were pulled out with a hook and thrown into a common grave in the woods.

Leo returned to the farm in 1983 and it was exactly as he remembered.

Around 1941, those who survived looked and acted like zombies. They decided to strike and refuse to work. They thought that if the guards and the farmer could be persuaded to get a doctor that the doctor would see the circumstances and maybe send them back home. So. in the morning when the bell rang to get up, they refused to go to work. The owner-farmer came in, and one of the workers threw lice on him and he ran. They told him they were not going to work and that they needed a doctor. The doctor did not come for a few days. Food was cut to one bowl of soup a day. Finally the doctor came, he was German, not Polish. The men had decided to give themselves self-inflicted wounds for the doctor to see. They took rusty nails and punctured themselves and then rubbed salt on the wounds. They did other things like that.

The doctor looked at them from behind a gate. He would not get too close. He told the owner that they were not to be let out. He said that they were quarantined undesirables and that they would infest everyone. A few days later trucks came and took them to the city of Posner to be deloused. They were given their first shower

and had their heads shaved. They also found out that there were many slave labor camps , they had thought they were the only ones. From there they were taken to a quarantine camp. It was old camp for Polish soldiers thought they would be sent home or to another labor camp. The man who was in charge was named Galoska(ph). Leo looked for him after the war but learned he had died. He was a jewish man from Germany.

When they got there the camp was luscious green. After a few weeks there was no grass at all. When they were given their soup, they would pull up the grass and put it in the soup. Sickness, especially dysentery, occurred from this. People didn't care anymore. Selections were made to go to different camps. Leo went through five camps in the vicinity of Posner. Most of them were more humane than the first. In the case of some camps, you would never know that there was a camp there today. Until liberation, it was hard to know where a camp was. Leo mentions that a camp he was in, Lahuskielm(???), was only known about by the Polish people in the area, and they were afraid to ever talk about it. In 1983, no one knew anything about this camp.

One camp had Polish citizens as guards. The Poles were told that there would be reward for turning in escapees, etc. Two boys who were caught After escaping were blown up in a delousing truck in front of the whole camp. After this, no one else ran away. at another camp there was torture "from one to one" .One boy was sick and he couldn't make it to the toilet. He threw up behind the barracks and a guard saw him. They made they other prisoners bury him up to his neck, where he died. They buried him after they returned from work.(broke down}.