

-TITLE-LEON ZETLEY  
-I\_DATE-JANUARY 19, 1986  
-SOURCE-DALLAS MEMORIAL FOR HOLOCAUST STUDIES CENTER  
-RESTRICTIONS-  
-SOUND\_QUALITY-EXCELLENT  
-IMAGE\_QUALITY-EXCELLENT  
-DURATION-3 HOURS  
-LANGUAGES-ENGLISH  
-KEY\_SEGMENT-  
-GEOGRAPHIC\_NAME-  
-PERSONAL\_NAME-  
-CORPORATE\_NAME-  
-KEY\_WORDS-  
-NOTES-  
-CONTENTS-  
Childhood - 1940

1:02:47 Leon was born in 1924 in Sierpc, Poland. It was a small city. He shows pictures of his family.

1:05:10 The photos are all Leon has left of his family. They bring back lots of memories. His family was not wealthy but very loving. His father hired out a horse and buggy, sold the fruit from their orchard, and bought and sold cattle for a living. His grandmother had a butcher shop.

1:06:00 Poland was far behind other countries. Life was difficult. You had to prepare ahead for winter. His father did what he had to provide for the family.

1:07:10 Leon remembers one time when his mother waited for his father to come home from a trip. When he came home, he lit up the house. The closeness of their family gave them strength.

1:08:30 He remembers going to the market with his father. He learned how well known his father was, and this made him very proud.

1:11:08 His father's family was large - 6 kids. After church they would go to the Rabbi's house for a reading. Afterwards they would go to his grandfather's house for tea. He felt safe and protected.

1:14:00 His mother's mother was left a widow with five children. Two were twins, and the family in the U.S. took one of them. His grandmother had to choose which one. She ran the butcher shop by herself. She was very respected.

1:17:15 When his grandmother got sick she moved in with her family. His family was very loving. He remembers getting new clothes for Passover, cleaning the house, and playing soccer with his friends. He went to Hebrew school which also taught other subjects.

1:21:10 Leon remembers his Bar Mitzvah. He wasn't going to be able to have it in the synagogue he grew up in because it wasn't Kosher enough. His father convinced the Rabbis it was okay. Leon was the first to have his Bar Mitzvah in this synagogue. It was a big day in his life because his whole family was together. They were very proud of him, and he was very proud of himself.

1:22:05 Leon remembers how they used to fight the Polish boys, then play soccer with the same boys.

1:23:25 Leon talks about the pogroms in his hometown. The Poles would harass the Jews. They had to hire other Poles to protect their belongings. This was a way of life.

1:24:40 He used to spend time with his family in the country. There was a group of Poles there who used to cause trouble. He knew his father would always protect him.

1:26:50 In 1934 Leon's uncle came from the U.S. to visit his hometown. He was shocked at the conditions they lived under. It was a happy time though. His uncle left for Paris and eventually went back to the U.S.

1:28:57 When his uncle got back to the U.S., he shipped a large box of clothes. The duty was too expensive for his family to pay, and the Polish government sent the clothes back. His uncle didn't know and was very hurt.

1:31:00 At the beginning of the war, they didn't have very much information. When the Polish soldiers passed in front of their house, they felt very patriotic. His parents wanted to escape to Russia but there was no where to escape to.

1:33:30 Leon remembers seeing the first German soldiers. The mechanization surprised him. Some people went to sell the Germans water and lemonade. At this point, occupation didn't look so bad. He didn't know the Germans would take over the town and ruin their lives. He didn't know his neighbors would start wearing German uniforms.

1:35:55 His father hid silver money in cans. His father didn't trust the neighbors in uniform who were taking over the town. They liked to show off their power.

1:38:52 One night, his mother tried to talk to some of them. They ransacked Leon's house and beat his mother. His parents couldn't believe it because they used to be friends. He snuck out to get help, but none of the neighbors would help because they were scared. When he came home, the soldiers had left. His father felt he had failed in protecting his family.

1:40:10 His family discussed hiding in the country but the roads were blocked. They were told they would be moved out of their homes and taken to work. They knew they would have to adjust to a different life.

1:42:20 One morning, they were told that all Jews had to go to the market. They were told they would be taken to the Warsaw Ghetto. They had to march there, and everyone who couldn't make the trip was killed. His grandparents were left behind because they were old.

1:44:25 On the march, they went to Modlind. Elis father saw some friends of his there, and they hid his family. He and his father went back to their home town and discovered his grandparents living there. They went back and got his mother, sister and brother and returned home.

1:47:10 The Germans started Kommandos. They went to work and had to wear Yellow Stars on their clothes. His cousin and his family came back as well. They were forced to work very hard.

1:48:42 His father, brother and he had to work twice as hard so his grandfather wouldn't have to. They were beaten. It was hard for him to watch his grandfather and father beaten. Leon got pneumonia from working with coal.

1:49:15 They thought being in their hometown would make things easier. They could get food and they were tough because they were together.

1:50:47 All the Jews were forced into the square again. They left by train to Strcgonova (Ger: Striganau) because there was a large Ghetto there. They didn't know anyone there. There were Jewish councils who assigned work duty.

1:52:38 His friend Mottel and he smuggled butter, eggs and chicken to the Ghetto. It was easy for kids to escape the fence. They felt worthwhile because they were able to help. They considered it a game. Once they smuggled a cow.

1:54:39 The Germans said out of each family that one person had to go work in the country. Leon volunteered. He and twelve others went to a farm. He had no contact with his family except for once every couple of months.

1:56:05 All of them were moved to a new camp called Mpawa. There were new people ta get used to and a new place to stake out as your own.

1:58:24 They knew they would go to another camp. They still had strength as a family. In 1942, they went to Auschwitz by boxcars. He will never forget the train, how crowded it was and how it smelled. The trip lasted two days.

2:01:00 They arrived at Auschwitz. They thought the family would stay together. The Gestapo yelled at them and beat them. He thought he was hardened to difficulty but this was worse.

2:02:16 The Germans split the males to one side and the females to the other. They tried to push his brother to the female side but his father pulled him back over.

2:03:15 His grandparents were separated. When they arrived in Birkenau, they didn't know where the rest of the family was.

2:05:17 When they got in camp, they were shaved. They tried to find out where the women were. People didn't answer and pointed to the sky and the smoke. He didn't know the smoke was his mother and sister. They were given tattoos and uniforms. He still thought his family would get back together.

2:06:43 They were taken back to the barracks and to work. They kept asking questions and no one answered. They learned that the women were gassed, but he didn't believe it or understand it.

2:09:15 His father and uncle were picked for the Sonderkommando. (the killing squad) He didn't acknowledge what his father was doing. When he began to understand what Sonder was, it was horrible.

2:11:50 His father told him to take care of his brother. On Christmas, they didn't work. His brother had frostbite, and he tried to take care of him. The Nazis took them out of the barracks. They thought they would have to march.

2:16:05 Instead of marching, they were forced to run through a line of Nazis who beat them. Once they made it through the line, they had to fill their jackets with gravel and run back through the line without spilling the gravel. The whole process lasted a couple of hours and thousands died.

2:17:24 He never thought about God, just survival. The only thing he believed in were the memories of his family which he fantasized about.

2:19:20 They went to work in the women's camp to build trenches. It was close to the kitchens so they stole food. He knew for sure that his mother and sister were dead because he searched the camp for them.

2:23:35 One day they picked people to do different work duties. Some men were sterilized in medical experiments without being aware of it. His cousin was among them. In 1943, he and his cousin were chosen to go to Auschwitz.

2:25:58 His brother wasn't taken to Auschwitz. They were told they would be brick layers. His father told him that if they were all three separated, maybe one of them would survive.

2:28:28 They went to Auschwitz. His block elder was mean and rough, but he toughened them up. He tried to tell them to keep clean.

2:30:56 They began working at various jobs. Leon said that the more friends you had, the better off you were. He had lots of friends. He heard that his brother was burned. Leon realized that his father might have helped kill his son.

2:35:57 Leon talks about how having friends saved your life. A friend reminded him about how he saved his cousin's life by pulling him off a gas truck.

2:40:44 He was afraid for his life daily. Filth and lice were very bad. He became an "old timer" (someone who had survived a prolonged period of time), because he wasn't afraid to die and take chances.

2:43:10 His cousin was castrated. He tried to find ways to take care of him.

2:46:00 There was going to be a rebellion which would begin with the Sonderkommando. The Germans found out and the Sonder were killed. This ruined the leadership and strength of the revolt. They were getting very tired. Sometimes people would just break and die. You had to carry them back to camp and go through their pockets. You lost feelings for them and became like an animal.

2:51:12 Once they were involved in a Polish underground plan to steal food from the kitchen. He was put in a concrete cubicle which dripped water on his face. He thought he would die, but his friends rescued him.

2:53:34 In 1944, Leon saw planes go by. He thought they would be bombed. He ran outside and yelled to the planes to bomb them. They weren't afraid because bombing would be better than their existence.

2:55:50 Prisoners from Birkenau arrived in Auschwitz. A transport was formed to move all the prisoners. Leon went to the food center and loaded a pushcart with provisions.

2:57:50 Whoever couldn't make the march was killed. You had to walk over all the dead bodies because you couldn't stop. Leon remembers the red blood on the white snow.

3:01:10 He and some others saw a chance to escape. They walked away from the group. When they heard gunshots, they ran. They fell in a ditch, and the Germans thought they were dead.

3:02:20 They were free. They saw a house and didn't know whether to ask for help. They lived in a pile of straw and stole food from this house.

3:04:14 They heard the cars and trucks of an army. Leon didn't know whether the army was German or Russian. They realized they were Russian, but they didn't know if the Russians would believe who they were.

3:07:00 The Russian soldiers discovered them. Leon told the soldiers of their experiences. They met a Russian officer who spoke Yiddish.

3:09:35 The Russian soldiers gave Leon and his friends a party. They were happy because they were free, but they had no home or family.

3:11:30 Leon got some ID which had a name instead of a number. He became an interpreter. He worked at finding Nazi leaders and interrogating them. He wanted to tell them he was a Jew but he was afraid.

3:13:10 A Jewish man returned to get his belongings back. Leon went to his house, spoke Jewish with him and felt secure. Leon volunteered to transport Germans to a camp. He wanted revenge for what they did to him. He could beat them, but he couldn't kill them. It gave him comfort to transport them to Ausostovitz.

3:16:50 Leon went to Katowice and learned there was a Jewish community there. He find out his cousin survived and had gone back to Auschwitz to live. Leon went to Auschwitz. He was happy to see the camp doors open, but the memories overwhelmed him.

3:18:25 Leon brought his cousin and some others back to Katowice. He found lodging for them. He went back to Wiesk and interrogating Nazis.

3:20:54 One night Leon was out on patrol and he met a Russian officer who wanted his boots. He refused and they started shooting. A Polish undergrounder caught one of Leon's friends and accused him of being a Nazi spy. He included Leon in his accusations.

3:24:10 Leon and his friends were put under house arrest and were interrogated. Leon saw his cousin get out of the Subway. He motioned to his cousin not to come talk to him. At that moment, a truck pulled up to arrest Leon and took him to prison.

3:27:30 Leon and his friends were put in prison with German soldiers. The prison atmosphere made him feel like he was in Auschwitz again. They were then taken to prison in Katowice. One of the guards was Jewish and they spoke to him. He told them they would be released if they went to Polish officer training school.

3:31:40 When they went to Wiesk, Leon met a friend from Auschwitz on the street. His friend told him where Leon's cousin was.

3:34:15 Leon's friend took them to a hotel. He told them Leon's cousin had taken their money and went to Breslaw and started a bakery.

3:35:38 Leon and his friends didn't know where to go. He didn't want to go to officer school. He was angry with his cousin for not helping him. Leon went to see his cousin in Breslaw. It was difficult for him to change his mentality from an animal to a human being again.

3:39:40 Leon lived in a Jewish community with an old Jewish woman. He doesn't remember or think about his family unless something brought the memory out. He doesn't know why he was the one that survived. He remembers his father wanting them to separate so one of them would survive. He decided to go to Germany and look for survivors.

3:41:40 He went to Zautzeim, a camp in Frankfurt. He saw many friends from Auschwitz who became like his family.

3:44:40 When he lived in Zautzeim, he learned no one from his family survived. In Sierpc, a friend told him his life was in danger. He did not know why, but he escaped back to Germany.

3:47:30 He got a job in Frankfurt as an interpreter for Americans. They helped him locate his family in the U.S. Leon's uncle in America learned about him and sent him a ticket to come to the U.S. but he couldn't because of quotas.

3:48:44 Leon went through an examination and was told he couldn't go to the U.S. because of medical reasons. He had a spot in his lungs from working with coal.

3:50:49 He came over to America on a warship. Leon made many friends on the ship. He came in to New Orleans and took a train to his family in St. Louis.

3:51:39 He tried to make a life for himself. Leon ended up working two jobs.

3:54:05 Leon went to Dallas and recognized two people from the warship. He introduced himself to them, and eventually ended up marrying one. They made a family. This made him very happy and it was easier to cope with the memories because he belonged somewhere. Then they had a son.

3:55:35 Leon and his wife tried to become Americanized. It was difficult because the past stays with you. Leon says you can't live with the past because it's not healthy. They decided not to talk to the children about it. As time goes by, the less and less you talk about it.

Leon ended up having a daughter and two sons. His son stopped talking German because he felt like an outsider in school. They tried to raise them in a nice Jewish atmosphere with security and protection. He didn't want to burden the kids with the pain. Leon will never be rid of the pain. This interview brought it all back. Sometimes it doesn't bother him because of his family and he belongs in a community. But he won't ever hurt his family by telling them of the past. He must protect them because they are his richest possessions.  
.END.