

GEORGE LAUER

Place Interviewed: PITTSBURGH

Date: August 8, 1989

Transcriber of Tapes: Jan Masal

Hamburg, Germany's attitude towards Jews in the 1920's -

Tape I 4:00, 5:00, 7:00

Terezin -

Tape I 24:00 - 37:00

Tape II 2:00 - 20:00

Taking Orphans from Terezin to England -

Tape II 21:00 - 25:00, 35:00

George Lauer's feelings about Germans today -

Tape II 28:00 - 30:00

George Lauer's conscious and unconscious reactions to his life during the Holocaust -

Tape II 35:00, 36:00

September 25, 1991

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

Name: George G. Lauer

Date of interview: August 8, 1989

George tells of his experiences in the Terezin camp in Czechoslovakia. He speaks of how parts of it were "fixed up" to impress Red Cross officials and how he and his wife were extremely lucky to be able to hold skilled jobs there and, therefore, were not transported. George also relates how he and his wife were able to escort 300 orphans from Terezin to a new life in England.

George G. Lauer was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1907.

1:00 George states where he was born.

2:00 Both parents came from Czechoslovakia. They met visiting relatives in Hamburg. They married there and George lived most of his early life in Germany. They kept in touch with relatives in Czechoslovakia. His paternal grandparents lived in Moravia and they'd visit them every Passover. His maternal grandparents lived in Prague. There was a bond with Czechoslovakia all through his childhood.

3:00 Before the war, George's parents were middle-class people. His father had an export business in Hamburg. He had spent 8 years in England during his adolescence and he had a love for the country and the English language. He had built up connections with many countries with his export business.

4:00 They had many international visitors. George went to boarding school in central Germany for 3 1/2 years. He spent his last 2 years in high school in Hamburg. There were very few Jews. He had a good relationship with his classmates. George said there was very little anti-semitism at that time in his circle.

5:00 He graduated from high school in 1926. It was after World War I when there was a general "blooming" of democracy. Since his high school was brand new and ultra modern, he felt that maybe there was a higher percentage of Jews than normal. Hitler was, in 1926, just a "shadow on the wall."

6:00 His family was not religious and his only connection with religion was when he visited his grandparents in Moravia. They were liberal but kept the holidays.

- 7:00 Hamburg was a city-state in the Federation of Germany. It was oriented towards England, very progressive and truly democratic. So the atmosphere was different from the rest of Germany. George emphasizes it was still the late Twenties and even Berlin's atmosphere, as far as Jews were concerned, was not bad.
- 8:00 George's father served in the Austrian Army during WW I since they were Austrian citizens. His father had been born in Austria and lived there until he was 16 and was sent to England. George's father always retained his citizenship and was drafted into the Austrian Army in 1915.
- 9:00 The Army was short of high school graduates and so made his father a lieutenant. He was stationed in the Alps and helped supply ammunition.
- 10:00 His father died in 1932. His mother was still in Hamburg. His brother was 11 years younger and not quite 20 years old in 1928. His brother went to the U.S. (to Chicago) and his mother went to England.
- 11:00 This was 1938 or early 1939. They thought of emigration because of the Munich Pact in Germany. In the spring of 1933, the professor for whom George was working at the University of Freiburg was kicked out because he was a public servant and Hitler decreed no Jew should be a civil servant. George decided he wouldn't wait until he was kicked out.
- 12:00 George said he actually, at this time, experienced very little anti-semitism because he was in Freiburg which was predominantly Catholic and very much anti-Hitler. They later were different. He went to Prague at the University in early July 1933. He had an ideal life the 1 or 2 years he spent in Prague.
- 13:00 There was a bit of tension about anti-semitism in Prague. In 1918, after the Czech Republic was founded, many of the Jews maintained their love for German. They liked the German language. This did not concern any of the Jews who were born where Czech was spoken and were considered Czech. At this time the only anti-semitism was against the Jews who were more German. This was a peculiar division. This was in the mid 30's. He got his doctorate degree at the University and then got a job in industry.
- 14:00 This was in a town called Ausseig (ph). It was very near one of the main coal regions of Czechoslovakia. He worked for the chemical industry. It was about half-way between Prague and Dresden and right in the heart of the Sudetanland - ethnic German. George was here from 1935 - 1938 when the Germans conquered the Sudetan territory. By this time he was married. He thought of leaving Czechoslovakia only when the Sudetanland was gone. The rest of Czechoslovakia would be very weak without that land. There were high mountains surrounding Czechoslovakia.

- 15:00 Hundreds of thousands of people beleaguered the American Embassy in Prague. George knew it was a question of time though he still didn't think things so terribly serious at first. In hindsight he knows better. But, at that time, he felt life was too good. George was approached by a man who had found in England a chemical industry similar to the one George worked for in Prague. The man asked George if he'd go over and provided George, through the British Embassy, with a visa to go to England. He flew there, his passport was checked, he was put in jail, and the next morning was put on a plane back to Prague under police escort.
- 16:00 The next morning the Germans were marching through the streets. The reason George was sent back was because the man who wanted him to go had bribed someone and the British knew this. When they saw George's passport they knew who he was. The Germans started giving street names German names. Within one week, the Germans switched driving on the roads to the opposite side as it was in Austria.
- 17:00 It was a mess since the main transportation was streetcars. This was in MARCH 1939. Troubles began gradually. The Jewish Community became the agency of the Germans to deal with the Jews. In Europe everyone registered with the police. When you gave your street name, you also gave your religion.
- 18:00 Jews had to register with the Jewish Community. This was 1939 - 1940. Many Jews escaped. Even after the Germans were in control people escaped and even emmigrated. They were allowed to then but had to leave all their money behind. They had to find a country to accept them. Most countries wouldn't. This was the problem.
- 19:00 George said it was like a see-saw. There were times he and his wife could have gotten out but couldn't find a country where they could go. He had an offer from Sweden from a famous Swedish chemist who wanted to hire him. Then the Germans decided they wouldn't let chemists out of the country. So sometimes his profession was an advantage and other times it wasn't. By this time the Jews were without money.
- 20:00 The Jewish Community center started re-training classes to school people to be accepted by South American countries. Doctors and lawyers weren't being accepted. Technical people were needed. George and 2 other chemists worked doing this. They taught adults what laboratory technicians do. All high schools were closed and Jews couldn't go to school at all. George and his friends organized a group.
- 21:00 They taught the group chemistry - strictly underground. Then everything stopped when the transports began. George did not hear much of the Czech resistance. George mentions his wife's parents were politically quite active.

- 22:00 They were social democrats. Through this party many were able to get out. There was also an underground railway done through the social democrats.
- 23:00 The Czechs had freedom from 1918 - 1938 and they had developed a passive resistance. They had learned to "bend in the wind." The Czechs were sympathetic to the Jews but were passive in their underground work.
- 24:00 George was asked to join a group that did technical planning. A famous engineer from Germany named Sokar (ph) was the boss. The plan was to design a city starting from nothing to house 5,000 people.
- 25:00 George heard several thousand people were sent to this town to start a Jewish town. It was Terezin. Terezin was a fortress that was isolated. There was even a moat around it.
- 26:00 There were 5,000 Jews in Terezin. Then transports started. The Jewish Community Center would notify 1,000 people to be at the armory in Prague at a certain time. They would stay there 1 or 2 nights and then they were put into cattle cars and taken to Terezin.
- 27:00 Terezin was 60 miles from Prague. George believes all Jews from Czechoslovakia were first sent to Terezin. From there they were sent to the East - Auschwitz, etc. This started in 1940. His wife's parents were sent to Terezin. They got a postcard from her mother saying her father had died of a heart condition. Later they got another postcard from her from somewhere in the East just saying "I'm alright." After the first 5,000 Jews were sent to Terezin, predominantly older Jews were sent.
- 28:00 People were tortured and killed at Terezin. There was no sanitation and people got typhoid. Then whole families started being shipped. They never left part of a family; the whole family would go together. The Jewish leaders had to choose those who went on selection from Terezin.
- 29:00 George explained that the typhoid was caused by unsanitary conditions. He said typhus has to go through the body of a louse. You get infected from the sting of the louse. You cannot get infected from person to person. There were several leading Jewish men in the camp who felt if any people were sent in from Eastern Europe where lice abounded, they would have a mass epidemic. In order to protect their own people, these leaders went to the Gestapo and explained to them what the danger was. The leaders wanted anyone shipped into Terezin to be deloused and the Gestapo agreed as they themselves did not want typhus.

- 30:00 All their belongings had to be gassed with hydrogen cyanide to kill the lice. This gas was later used in Auschwitz to kill the people. The people arriving were shaved as well.
- 31:00 When George first got to Terezin he would work on destroying lice and fleas. He worked with the exterminator who was Jewish. George always wore a gas mask because he was everywhere gassing clothes, etc. Everyone knew George.
- 32:00 There were many famous Jews in Terezin. One was Leo Beck who became a friend of George and his wife. George's wife worked in the youth welfare department of which Beck was the titular head. A Dr. Epstein was a leader in Terezin for many years but the Gestapo killed him because he knew too much. George said maybe he was always too busy but he wasn't aware of the artists of Terezin. The people who worked for the Czech gendarmes, being good Czechs, would bring them news from the BBC.
- 33:00 They knew of the Invasion of Normandy from the gendarmes. It was too hard to escape. Even the gendarmes were guarded. One of the main Nazi munition plants was the famous Shkoda (ph) Works. Somebody thought to sabotage the plant. Every tenth shell was a dud. The Nazis figured it out. So one day everyone was lined up and every tenth one was shot. That was the end of the sabotage. That was one reason why the resistance could do so little.
- 34:00 George realized rather late that transports were going to Auschwitz. He and his wife were sent to Terezin in Feb. 1942 and liberated by the Russians in May 1945. It was late in 1943 that George learned where the transports were going. One night he was summoned by the foreman to the baths. There he saw two women who had been brought in by the Gestapo. They were full of lice - all over their bodies.
- 35:00 They were a mother and her daughter. It turned out they were from society in Prague. They had been walked through the countryside by the Gestapo and were brought to Terezin. They came from Auschwitz and for some unknown reason were marched out of there. He heard for the first time about Auschwitz not being just a labor camp. They learned that hydrogen cyanide came out of the jets instead of hot water and everyone would die within a few minutes. He learned of the crematoriums and when in full swing 5,000 people could be "processed" in 24 hours.
- 36:00 George and his boss told their wives and told the top man in the Jewish administration. The top man was appointed by the Gestapo. Dr. Epstein was the first, then Mermelstein (whom people hated). The administration got categories from the Gestapo as to who was chosen to go to Auschwitz. For example, they might want 1,000 elderly people. George said he and his wife had been chosen for one of the first transports.

37:00 However, George's boss, Epstein at that time, told the Gestapo that George was the one who laced out the rat poison and was the only one who knew where it was. He and his wife got out of the transport. Because of their work, they then were indispensable. When the Russians came later, George's boss and his wife escaped and left George "holding the bag." He had to supervise everything and his wife had the 4,000 children. George said his day during this time in Terezin was like doing a job.

Tape II

- 1:00 Most of this first minute is a repeat of the the end of Tape I.
- 2:00 George had to train the transports of people coming in for work. It was hard because they were all half starved including George who weighed about 135 lbs. Before the war he weighed 170 lbs. Living conditions - everybody lived in barracks. The men and women were separated and couldn't even visit each other. When George got his job, he told his boss that his wife had several illnesses and he found a little room somewhere in the corner of the delousing bar.
- 3:00 He found a small bed to fit and he and his wife moved in there together secretly for about a year. Later they got a larger room in the same building. The man in it before had been shipped out. This camp operated like a work camp.
- 4:00 But, the Gestapo would come through at any time. George said that many of the worst Gestapo were from Austria.
- 5:00 George had little contact with the Gestapo. The camp was completely run by the Jewish Community. This was different from other camps because Terezin had to maintain the image that this was a home for the Jews.
- 6:00 George said weeks were spent fixing up the camp so that the Red Cross would be impressed. No one could talk to them though as they were surrounded by the Gestapo. Some people here were allowed food parcels from family or friends in other countries. George said he had a bit of sausage once and it was "absolute heaven." All food was rationed at the camp.
- 7:00 It was cooked in a central kitchen and then transported on man-drawn carts in big vats. It was mostly soup. Once a week you got about 1 1/2 lbs. of bread and sometimes a bit of potato. George got a bit of milk because of his work with poison gas. The hydrogen cyanide was absorbed through the body.
- 8:00 The milk helped. There were never more than 50 or 60 thousand people in Terezin. Sometimes they were down to 5,000 then up to 60,000. People were always sent out to labor camps, to Auschwitz, to Birkenau.

- 9:00 Other than Leo Beck, there was the son of the Danish chief rabbi. He was kept there under orders of the King. Most of the Danish Jews were protected and never sent out. Red Cross officials came through Germany to Terezin before the Russians arrived to escort the Danish Jews back to Denmark. Many things were heard over the BBC. They heard when Roosevelt died.
- 10:00 In 1944, George saw the first American bombing. The planes flew over the camp into Germany. He saw the first flight of American fortresses. It was in the middle of the day.
- 11:00 George recalls he and another guy climbed up on a building and saw the silver reflection of the planes from the sun. They heard a lot of bombing at this town about 5 miles away. It was completely German and there was an underground airplane factory (the town was called Leitenritz (ph) ). The Czech underground was able to tell the British of this factory. The British passed this on to the Americans who came in the day-time and "bombed the hell out of it."
- 12:00 It was completely destroyed. George actually saw the Germans shoot down one of the fighter planes. This was about 1/2 mile from the camp.
- 13:00 Shortly before the Russians came there were less than 10,000 people in the camp. The Germans started to send in at least 25 - 30 thousand people. It was complete chaos and there was no question of delousing as it would have taken a month. There were large "underground gangways" all around the camp. The idea was to put everybody in there and take the stores of cyanide gas and kill everyone and run away.
- 14:00 But, the Russians came so fast that the Germans just ran away. There was hardly any fighting; the Germans just disappeared. At this time there were 30 - 35 thousand people who had come from the East where typhus had been rampant in all of those camps. There was the worst typhus epidemic imaginable. They immediately told the Russians what the situation was. The Russians tried to keep people with typhus separated from the others. They took them in baths by groups of a thousand.
- 15:00 It took a month or more. The whole camp was under complete quarantine. No one was let in or out. George said he lost several of his people as they had no antibodies for this. However, the people from the East had antibodies and could handle it better. The rule was that anybody with a high fever was considered infected and taken to a hospital. But they had no care after the war - no doctors, no medical care. George got bitten by one of the lice. He was one of the 10 people to whom the vaccine for typhus was given. He was still very sick for a few days.
- 16:00 They were free now and here they all were in quarantine. A young Russian doctor talked to George.

- 17:00 He came in with 25 husky men and women to help George as he was so tired. His experience with the Russians was good. He said you have to understand the Russians. The Russians wanted things to move faster so the people could leave.
- 18:00 George talked with a Russian major. He wanted to know what he could do to help. George said they needed better food and all the help they could get. It worked beautifully. There were many adolescents in the camp. They had been there for years and had seen terrible things. They began to get rowdy and restless. George talked about that with the major. He said he'd see what he could do to help the adolescents. A big truck came and a whole gang of young boys got a ride into the countryside of the former German territory.
- 19:00 They got to bring back apples and steal things to bring back. One boy brought back a horse which he stole from somebody. The Russians were very smart; they knew how to handle things. The quarantine ended in August 1945. Anyone who was deloused got a certificate and was transported away. Maybe a 1,00 a day or less. Things got better. They got food and some money. George and his wife were actually employed by the new Czechoslovakian government.
- 20:00 The Czech government took out all Czech orphans as soon as they were deloused. They were taken to Czech homes. There was a hard-core of war orphans, mostly from Poland, Germany and Austria, who had nowhere to go. At that time they got a visit from Unnra (ph). (Leo Beck had been taken out very early and brought to England). The Unnra told George's wife they wanted to take in a total of 1,000 orphans to England and bring them up as British. They would take 300 from Terezin.
- 21:00 They asked George's wife if she would consider going along with the kids. She said she would if George could go. Around August 10, they were to escort the 300 kids to Prague, put them in a school there and that they'd bring over a squadron of 10 British bombers and transport them to England. That's how George and his wife got to England. They actually left on August 14th, V.J. day and there were still war conditions. Some high British attache came to the airport in Prague. The attache told George there was a little difficulty.
- 22:00 He said these planes were bombers and if you lifted what looked like a lid you'd fall right out as they were bomb bays! He was worried that the crews would have too much trouble as there was only the pilot, the co-pilot, and 2 or 3 men. So 5 or 6 adults were collected who were acceptable to go to England. There were only 9 planes so the kids were divided into 8 of those planes and an adult with them. And for the 9th plane for George and his wife were the smallest children from age 2 - 10. One of those children is now 50 years old and George and his wife still correspond with her. She lives in London and visits the Laus.

- 23:00 The kids on the plane were very excited.
- 24:00 They had no food, but the crew had big pieces of white bread and coffee and they saw the kids looking at them. ( George is overcome here and unable to continue for a few moments). George went up to the captain and was told the war was over in Japan. He told everyone on the plane. They landed in England. There was a bit of trouble because of the typhus. Everybody had to be guaranteed and every stitch of clothing had to be disinfected. George quieted the children down. They were settled down in an old airplane factory that was abandoned.
- 25:00 An important director of research hired George immediately. He had been his former boss in Germany. His wife stayed with the children. Many were picked up by relatives in England, America and Australia. The others went to childrens homes. George's wife worked with the children in one of the homes. George and his wife had reactivated their visas for the U.S. They left for the U.S. in the Fall of 1946. They landed in New York. His mother lived there.
- 26:00 Her brother and sister had run a progressive boarding school for many years. First it was in Germany until Hitler came to power. Then they fled to Switzerland and did the same thing. Then their friends, among whom was Eleanor Roosevelt, managed to get them to the U.S. They had a school in Vermont and then near Tanglewood in Massachusetts. George's mother who had been in England during the war came over then and was the matron in their school. After the war, his mother took George and his wife up to stay at the school in Vermont for a while. George was looking for a job and got one with a petroleum engineering company with headquarters in Manhattan and a research lab in Jersey City. They lived there for 3 years. George said his first boss was very nice but was promoted and his new boss looked just like Mermelstein, the leader in Terezin! George couldn't handle it.
- 27:00 George hated him. He was let go. George then got a job at the Mellon Institute in Pittsburgh. This was the last job he ever had. George was asked that other than his wife's parents, had he had any other relatives that were exterminated. He said his grandfather from Prague and his 3 sisters. His uncle in Moravia and his wife were also killed. All of his wife's uncles, aunts, and cousins were killed. They were all from Czechoslovakia. Even the younger ones they had been with at Terezin were shipped out.
- 28:00 When asked about what it means to George to be a survivor, he says he and his wife were both very, very lucky and were dedicated workers. Being able to stay in Terezin saved them. George says he's not angry today but when it comes to Germany and the Germans he has very strong feelings. Neither he nor his wife will willingly buy anything manufactured in Germany. His son, many years ago, wanted to but a V.W. car.

29:00 He wanted to know if his parents would mind. George told his son he didn't have to take over their emotions. In the late 60's, George was sent to Germany 4 times to pick up something. It was very bad. He had an accent in German because he hadn't spoken it for so many years. George said hearing German spoken now hurts him, hurts his ears. He says its illogical but that's how he feels. After all those years he's still sure that out of 5 Germans, 4 were Nazis.

30:00 When he was taking his business trips to Germany, he said maybe some younger ones weren't Nazis. But, the older ones were. George, on his trips, was treated as an honored guest. He said his American colleague felt as he did, especially after a big executive pointed to a cemetery and said to George, "That's where your people are buried." George calls America "the promised land." He said with all its faults and everything he'll still take it before every other place in the world. He has 2 sons. One is a school psychologist who lives in Detroit. His younger son runs a fish business in Minneapolis.

31:00 George has visited Israel. His wife's brother went to Israel on an illegal transport in 1948.

32:00 As far as being religious, George feels he isn't. Judaism for him is the culture. He feels he's a Jew.

33:00 George said some people became anti-religious, some more religious. He said he has become much more conscious of his Jewish culture since the liberation. His wife is not religious either. George says he has discussed with his sons about what happened in the Holocaust.

34:00 Both sons are married to non-Jews. His older son has become more religious than he ever was at home. His wife goes along. His younger son married a Catholic and they do the same thing. Their kids are being brought up without any religion. George wouldn't call his sons practicing Jews, but they are more "Jewish" than when they lived at home. His youngest son has joined a group for children of survivors.

35:00 George and his wife tell their sons more and more details. Sarah Moskowitz, a psychologist in California, has written a book about what happened to those children his wife brought out of Terezin. She followed many of them all over the world and spent time with George and his wife. The book is called "Love, Despite Hate." George says he has had to live through what happened to him in his own way. He says he thinks he and his wife have both been too successful in establishing new lives. He had seen many people in Israel who had been in Terezin and he found they tend to think what was, not what is or will be.

36:00 They were completely oriented to the past. George and his wife don't forget. He had for years had wild dreams about being persecuted by people in uniforms. He would run but couldn't escape from them. They were like devils. George would end up kicking his wife in his sleep. For the last 3 or 4 years, the dreams have disappeared. He feels these things should be told. George says he 82 years old, blessed with a good memory and fairly good health, but how long will it last. He says he is one of the dwindling number of survivors.