

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	LEO RZEPKA	
Name of Interviewer	Abraham Kay	Date 12/12/84
Name of Abstractor	Michelle Heyer	Date 5/8/87

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Leo Rzepka was born in 1913 in Ruckzyn, Poland, a small town between Warsaw and Bialystock. The town was approximately half Jewish, with two synagogues and one rabbi. Leo was one of nine children - five girls and four boys. His father was a wagon-wheel maker, and after finishing school at age 13, Leo worked for him.

After the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Leo's family fled to Russia, where they lived for several years. Leo went to chauffeur's school, from which he graduated two days before the Germans invaded Russia.

At this point, life became difficult for Jews in Russia, so Leo, one of his brothers and one sister tried to return to the home of one of his sisters in Poland. This was the beginning of many months spent living in the woods and staying with farmers in exchange for work.

Finally, in late 1942, Leo went to a small concentration camp in Zembrov with his sister, his brother and brother-in-law. They remained there for three weeks, until January 1943, when they were deported to Auschwitz.

While in Auschwitz for two years, Leo worked as a carpenter. He also spent some time in the adjoining camp, Birkenau.

In January 1945, Leo was evacuated to Mauthausen and then to Ebensee, Austria, where he worked in the stone quarries. He was liberated by the Americans on May 5, 1945.

After liberation, Leo went to Israel illegally. He was intercepted by the British and spent 21 months in Cyprus. After this time, he was able to go to Israel, where he spent five months in the army and got married. He came to the U.S. in 1956.

Leo currently lives in Cleveland, Ohio. He has a wife, a son, a daughter and one grandchild. He is a retired carpenter/remodeler.

## ABSTRACT

### VIDEO 1 OF 3

#### PRESENT LIFE

Lives in Cleveland. Was married in Israel, has two daughters, one son, one grandchild. Is retired - was carpenter/remodeler.

#### EARLY LIFE

Born March 13, 1913 in Ruckzyn, Poland - between Warsaw and Bialystock. Remembers that Jews never had any security.

#### LEO DISCUSSES BOMBING OF RUCKZYN, 1939

#### JEWISH LIFE IN RUCKZYN

Of 800 families, 400 were Jewish. Two synagogues, one rabbi. Leo went to Jewish school until Bar Mitzvah. Brother went to Yeshiva.

#### FATHER OWNS A SHOP

Was wagon-wheel maker, Leo was assistant.

#### FAMILY STRUCTURE

Five sisters, four brothers. One brother married, also a wheel-maker.

#### LEO WORKS FOR ANOTHER MAN OUTSIDE RUCKZYN

Man warned him to leave before things got really bad. Leo told his family - they tried to leave, but it was too late.

#### FAMILY IS RELIGIOUS

After war, Leo no longer religious because of his experiences.

#### ZIONISM IN RUCKZYN

Leo knew of Zionist sentiments. Thought of going to Israel, but too difficult.

#### ANTI-SEMITISM BEFORE WAR

Jews often beaten if on streets at night. Police refused to help.

## LEO TEACHES DANCING

He won a dance contest.

## POLISH ARMY ENTERS RUCKZYN, 1938

Attacked Jewish houses. Attacked a house where Leo was dancing. Chased him, but he escaped. Caught him and beat him. Soldiers also destroyed a bakery.

## MORE ON ANTI-SEMITISM

Many fights between Jewish and gentile boys. Signs on Jewish stores not to shop there. Picketing of Jewish businesses.

## 1935-36 GERMAN JEWS FLEE TO POLAND

Polish Jews heard about what was happening in Germany from them.

## GERMANY ATTACKS POLAND

Happened so fast, Leo not even called to the army.

## LEO AND TWO BROTHERS FLEE ONE DAY BEFORE WAR BEGINS

Left on bicycles. Went to Ostrov.

## GERMAN PLANE SHOT DOWN, JEWS ARE BLAMED

They were taken to a shul, burned alive.

## GERMANS COME TO OSTROV, ROUND UP JEWS

Leo not taken because he didn't look Jewish.

## LEO RETURNS TO RUCKZYN

Near town, saw group of Jewish women. Heard his neighborhood was destroyed. Warned by neighbor that all Jewish men had been rounded up so he left.

## JEWS OF OSTROV ORDERED TO MEET AT FLEA MARKET

Germans announced curfew. As Jews were leaving, Nazis began shooting. Later, the army robbed Jews.

## ALLOWED TO GO TO ZEMBROV, IN RUSSIAN ZONE

Lived there as a carpenter until 1941. Whole family was there.

1940, HAS TO MOVE DEEPER INTO RUSSIA TO SLONIM

Russians didn't treat Jews differently. Leo remembers standing in line for food, clothing.

LEO GOES TO CHAUFFEUR'S SCHOOL FOR THREE MONTHS

School near Minsk. Got chauffeur's license two days before Germany invaded Russia. Returned to family.

GERMANS HAD TAKEN OVER SLONIM

Jews couldn't get food.

1941 - JEWS ARE GHETTOIZED

Many rounded up, supposedly to work. Instead they were killed in woods.

LEO, A SISTER AND BROTHER DECIDE TO GO TO SISTER'S HOUSE IN ZEMBROV

Took a train, but it was stopped. Took different train, then a wagon. In Zembrov, things were better.

## VIDEO 2 OF 3

JEWISH HOLIDAYS, 1939

Observances held in secret.

LEO RECALLS TIME IN ZEMBROV

Worked as a carpenter. Many Jews there. 1941 - Germans took Jews for work. 1942 - all Jews between 16 and 40 ordered to gather at a flea market. Later Leo learned they were shot in the woods.

JEWS OF ZEMBROV GHETTOIZED

Much panic. Jewish police organized work brigades.

PROBLEMS WITH GERMANS

Leo was staying with brother. Gestapo came every day to terrorize them. Valuables gradually confiscated. One man shot with BB gun, took two days to die.

## MIDDLE OF 1942 ALL JEWS TAKEN TO GHETTO

Guarded by Poles.

## LEO ESCAPES OUT A WINDOW

Poles saw him, but let him go. Went to next village, warned them. Went to Zembrov - didn't know all Jews had been taken away.

## LEO TAKEN IN BY GENTILE MAN

He advised Leo to join partisans. Next morning Leo heard dogs, shouting. He hid. Later, man told him it was partisans who had come to help him.

## LEO MEETS A MAN FROM RUCKZYN

Leo, this man and two others live in woods a few days, then split up.

FOR APPROXIMATELY SEVEN MINUTES, RELATES A STORY OF ESCAPING AND ELUDING CAPTURE. IT IS SOMEWHAT CONFUSING AND DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND.

## LEO REJOINS HIS FRIEND FROM RUCKZYN

They slept in woods or with farmers. Soon they separated.

## LEO RETURNS TO SISTER IN ZEMBROV

No one was at her house. Leo hears noise, hid in closet - it was a German soldier. Leo was not discovered. Sister returned, found him in closet. She told Leo of hiding in woods with her baby. The baby died in her arms and she dug a grave for it with her hands.

## LEO STAYS WITH JEWISH FAMILY

Stayed one week, then family decided it was too dangerous.

## WENT TO STAY WITH ANOTHER FAMILY OUTSIDE ZEMBROV

Stayed one week again, had to leave.

## FAMILY ADVISES HIM TO GO TO CONCENTRATION CAMP IN ZEMBROV (GHETTO)

Said they knew the mayor, it would be all right. He could live in the camp and still work for them.

## LEO GOES TO CONCENTRATION CAMP ON CHRISTMAS, 1942

Found sister, her husband, brother. In the ghetto, people restricted to blocks organized by home town. Leo stayed three weeks, leaving every day to work.

## DEPORTED FROM ZEMBROV - JANUARY 1943

Taken by train with sister, brother-in-law, brother.

## ARRIVAL AT AUSCHWITZ

It was evening. Made pile of those who had died on train. Had to leave all belongings on train. Men and women separated.

## LEO TELLS GUARDS HE IS AN AUTO MECHANIC

Sent to another side of fence. Brother-in-law sent with him. Sister and children killed.

## TAKEN TO BARRACKS

Slept seven to eight to a bench. Given soup and bread.

## VIDEO 3 OF 3

## DAILY LIFE IN AUSCHWITZ

Worked as carpenter. Got up at 5 a.m. Given coffee. Twice per week given salami. After work could go outside, socialize.

## LEO WORKS AT FACTORY ONE MILE OUTSIDE CAMP.

FOR APPROXIMATELY FIVE MINUTES LEO DISCUSSES HIS WORK IN A FAIRLY DISJOINTED NARRATIVE WHICH IS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND

## LEO'S BLOCK IN AUSCHWITZ

Not heavily guarded. Gypsies, Russian gentiles also housed there.

## LEO SHOWS INTERVIEWER HIS TATTOO AND EXPLAINS THE SYMBOLS USED AT THE CAMP

## DESCRIBES SELECTION

Numbers placed on one of two lists. At end of the selection, both lists were read. One group stayed in camp, one was taken to gas chambers. Leo recalls one selection where 2,000 men were designated to be killed, but not sent immediately to gas chambers. They were locked in a barracks without food or water. After several days those still alive were let go.

## RECALLS BEING SENT TO BIRKENAU

Worked in Birkenau with bundles of wire. Also raised timbers. Many people beaten to death. One man got typhus, so all taken back to Auschwitz. When they arrived, had to take showers. It was -5 degrees, so many tried not to get wet. They were beaten.

## DISPOSAL OF DEAD BODIES

During the day bodies were piled up, covered with a powder to prevent infection. At night, prisoners loaded them on trucks to go to crematorium. Leo did this work once.

## JANUARY 1945 EVACUATED TO MAUTHAUSEN, IN AUSTRIA

Saw planes, parachutes. Marched for two days to trains. Nazis followed on motor bikes.

## AT MAUTHAUSEN FOR TWO DAYS

Shirts and shoes were only clothes. Barracks so crowded they were sitting on top of each other.

## SENT TO EBENSEE, AUSTRIA

Worked in stone quarries in mountains. Beaten often, given little food. Weighed 70 lbs. at liberation.

## FOR FIVE MINUTES RELATES A CONFUSING STORY ABOUT A RUSSIAN IN HIS BLOCK AND ABOUT BEING IN THE HOSPITAL

## LEO BECOMES ILL AND GOES TO THE HOSPITAL

Four men to a bed. Leo so weak he couldn't stay in bed, so slept on the floor. Constant selections.

## LIBERATION - MAY 5, 1945

Americans entered camp. Leo went outside hospital, saw piles of bodies. Americans were photographing bodies. Leo had to share food with another man who took most for himself.

## NEVER WENT BACK TO POLAND

Now, however, wants to go back as a free man.

## TWO BROTHERS SURVIVE

Found one in refugee camp in Austria. Another was in Russian camp.

## LEO TRIES TO GO TO ISRAEL - 1947

British and Americans said he could go anywhere he wanted - except Israel. Went illegally to Italy. Captured with 500 others. Taken to Milan.

## ILLEGALLY SAILS FOR ISRAEL

Captured five miles outside Haifa, sent to Cyprus. After 21 months, went to Israel. Served in army for five months. Got married.

## COMES TO U.S. IN 1956

## THINKS OF HOLOCAUST OFTEN - DREAMS OF IT A LOT

## DISCUSSES EXPERIENCES OFTEN

Shares experiences with family and friends.

## DOES NOT THINK WORLD CAN FORGET THAT HOLOCAUST WAS ALLOWED TO HAPPEN

Not only Germany - Allies never bombed railroads to camps.

## FEELS HE SURVIVED BECAUSE HIS TWO YEARS IN AUSCHWITZ WERE COMPARATIVELY EASY

Not beaten, given relatively good food.