I'm Doris Ladan. Today, we're interviewing Danny Lieberman, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland chapter. Mr. Lieberman, I'd like to begin by asking you about your life today. Today, how is your life?

Today, my life is fulfilled. I have a wonderful life. I have a wife, a daughter, and a granddaughter, son-in-law. And I'm very, very happy. And the happiest thing is to be here in the United States.

Thank you.

Are you currently working or are you retired?

No, I'm retired since '70-- since 1980. I retired in August. And I'm under disability.

What type of work did you do?

I used to work as a order filler for independent beauty and barber supply for 28 years. And I got the job the same day as I got married.

Oh, really?

On October 28, my wedding was at 1:00 and my interview for the job was at 11:00.

Oh, that's very interesting. Did your wife also work?

She used to work, yes, for a floral secretary at Brentwood Hospital for 15 years. She retired two years in February.

OK. What are you currently doing with your time since you're retired?

Currently, I'm doing not too much because I am disabled with my heart. I can't do any physical work. But I was very active when I could. I was a soccer official for 32 years and used to run the field, soccer field, for an hour and a half. And I enjoyed very much. I officiate little kids, high schools, colleges, amateurs, professionals. And I was very active in it. Matter of fact, in 1968 and '69, I was picked as the top seven officials in the country.

That's wonderful.

And I had a big honor by being Jewish to officiate a game between Israel, where they traveled here in the country, and Yugoslavia, the Red Stars.

Oh, that is phenomenal.

I was picked as the official.

OK. Are you involved with your temple at all?

I'm involved with my temple. I'm the president of the men's club. And Sunday morning, I'm a cook. I make breakfast for the worshippers. And then we kibbitz around. And then I go back to my family.

OK. I'd like to begin going back in time now to when you were very young. What country were you born in?

I was born in Lithuania. As they call it, I'm a Litvak. I was born in Kovno. That was the capital of Lithuania. And I have very good and very nice youth life in Lithuania. I went to a private school, where I graduated in 1930-- '37. And I was going to start college, but the Russians occupied Lithuania. That was in 1938, '39. And they said, we don't need the educated people. We need workers.

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I see. Can we go back in time a little bit to when-- to before the Russians occupied Lithuania?

Yes.

I'd like to know a little bit more about your family. Did you have brothers and sisters?

No, I was the only one.

You were an only child.

Yes.

What did your parents do?

We had-- my dad had a lumberyard.

Did your mom also work?

My mom had worked in a-- we had a grocery store where she was occupied in it. Because we had to make a living.

Yeah. I see.

We had property. We had three homes. And life was easy.

Yeah. Did anyone live with your family besides your mother, and your father, and yourself?

No.

OK. Did you have any close family nearby?

Yes, we did. I had my uncles. I had my aunts. I had my cousins, my grandfather. My father's parents were living near Vilna. And we only used to see them once a year, on Tisha B'Av.

OK. Were you a close family? Did you have contact often with the people that were close?

We always had contact with the family. We were a close family. I had seven cousins. I had five aunts. And I had two uncles. I had a grandfather who taught me the bar mitzvah. And as I mentioned before, I had a happy life as a youth.

Does sound like that. OK. Can we go now to where you said the Russians were occupying Lithuania in 1939?

Yes, yeah. They occupied Lithuania. And as I guess you know, the first thing what they did is took over the property, what you had, and put you to work. You had to go to work for-- in your line. I didn't have any-- no line at all. I went to work for in textile. And my dad went to work in a lumberyard.

And then life was pretty hard. And my mother opened up a restaurant in the house, in an apartment. And we started out with a few people coming to eat. And then she had to hire help because she was a very good cook. And people used to come and enjoy the meals. And it was more or less like a family affair. My dad worked and I worked. And that's the way we survived for the Russians.

OK. And then what happened in your life? What changed in your life when the war actually started? What year did the war actually start for you?

For us, it started in 1941, when the Germans came into Lithuania and took over Lithuania. And a lot of people started to

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run, thought they'd be able to escape the Germans.

But my father's wisdom said, well, we'll sit right here in the house and just wait. There's no place to run because they'll catch up with us anyway. And that's what we did. And that was in 1941. And I think it was in September when they built the ghetto. And they moved us from the city to the ghetto.

Where was the ghetto?

In Kovno. It's a suburb of Kovno. They call it Slabodka.

Was that on the countryside?

That was not a countryside. It was a very small suburb, but a very religious. We had a lot of yeshivas up there. And they went in there, in the Slabodka yeshiva. And we had to go and look for a place, to find a place where to live. And there was a date when we had to move out. And we moved out.

In fact, we gave away almost everything what we had because we couldn't take nothing. And when we moved, I broke a mirror. And they say it was bad luck. But I looked out. And it came out that we have-- it was good luck, not bad luck. We were all alive.

We went through the-- in ghetto. And we stayed in ghetto all together. And we had a lot of days where they-- especially before the holidays, the Jewish holidays, they used to make up a date, and take people on a big field, and sort them out, like the German used to stay with his hand on his chest and show with his thumb where people walked by. And he showed them right and left.

I mean, we didn't know the difference. But then we noticed, they used to break up families, like one on the left side and the other on the right side. And then they used to take the kid-- the people from the left side and transfer them to another place.

And then next day, they used to take them to a-- it's like a countryside, and they killed them. Then we had-- I don't know-- not to say that I remember the date, actually. But then after, we made up the date of our wedding.

There was a big day where they took out 10,000 Jews from Kovno. They call it in Jewish the Big Aktziya. And they separate the same way. And they took 10,000 people, whom are some of my aunts and my cousins, went to the bad side, and they were killed the next day.

And life wasn't easy in the ghetto. We had a fence with a gate. We used to go out every morning to work in all kind of labor. And then we-- when we came back, they used to check us if we bring in any food from the outside. If they found any food, they used to punish you. Punishment was they used to hit you with a rifle, the German soldiers.

One incident I had, I was standing in line-- to go in line. And they told that that was for food. And they told that I came out from the line. I was going back in the line again. And they pulled me out.

And they hit me with the rifle, with the heavy-- the wooden side towards my back. They brought my back. It was between the 13th and 14th vertebra. And I healed with any there doctors or medical care, hospital care. And I'm suffering now. I have a pinched nerve between the 13th and 14th vertebra.

And we used to go out every morning to work. And then after sundown, we used to come back and go to the homes, if you call it homes. We lived in a little room, as big maybe as the office here. We were five people.

My mother was an excellent cook. She did everything. She made everything. Matter of fact, I remember, she made chopped liver from peas. And we didn't know the difference.

And we used to hide at night because they used to come and pick some people out and take them out from the ghetto.

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We had basements covered with a door to go down to the basement. It was covered with a rug and a piece of furniture on top. And when the Germans used to go in the houses, she used to hide. My mother used to hide me and my dad because they actually-- they went after the male.

And we stayed in the ghetto until-- I would say it was 1943. Then they took us to a labor camp. It was also not too far from the ghetto. But up there, it was a building where they used to have for prisoners.

And they-- we used to-- the same way, I mean, lived to-- separate, the men separate and the women separate. And we used to go to work. And that incident what I told you on October the 28th, when they took all the children, the little children away, and I came back from work, and there were my cousin, who was a very talented, beautiful child. She was taken away.

And I checked. And I asked my father, where is my little cousin, Louise? And he told me. And I went upstairs. And I start pounding my head against the wall, brick wall. I thought I'm going to-- I was crazy. And my dad came up. And he tore me apart.

And I mean, life went on in the labor camp until they took us-- it was the end of 1943. They put us in cattle train with-- where they carry cattles. And they took us to Germany in a camp. It was the name of Stutthof.

And there, we stayed two days. And they separate us. And they took away the women and the men. Then in two days later, they took me and my dad to Kaufering. There was a labor camp, where it was affiliated with Allach-- with Dachau. And we were there till 1945.

When you were taken to the labor camp, do you know where your mother was at that time?

No, we didn't. Matter of fact, I didn't know my mother was until we got liberated.

OK. So you went with your father to this labor camp.

I went with my father, yes.

OK. And then what was life like there?

Miserable-- worked in the same clothes in the rain and snow. Shoes-- we had wooden shoes. My feet were frozen bitten three times, what I'm paying now. Then I don't have to tell you-- by not washing myself and I didn't change my clothes for so many months, I don't want to mention the name lice, but it was written all over my body. But that's the way it went on.

Were you given food in the labor camp? What kind of food were you given?

Yes, the food was-- if we were lucky, you could find on the bottom of the Kessel, was a big pot. And they cooked-- used to cook horse meat. And if you were lucky, you used to get a thick pot. It was like a little can.

And if you find the right person, they used to give you from the bottom. Most of the cooks in that camp were Jewish girls from Hungary, from Poland. And I found one girl who was good to me. And I used to go-- every time, I used to go to her. And if-- when you're hungry, every meal was good.

What type of labor did you do?

We used to work on a-- they built an underground airport in that camp, where I used to-- I was. And we used to go in the morning and did-- and build the ditches. And then we found out that they were going to make up a underground airport. Every day was a different job.

Do you want to drink some water? How long were you in the labor camp?

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Since end of '43 till-- no, beginning of '44 until 1945, April the 24th.

OK. How was your health during this time?

When I was in camp, my health was very bad to the end. I didn't care anymore about my life because I lost my-- I mean, I lost my interest of life. My weight was 73 pounds. I couldn't walk. And as I said, I was bitten by lice. My feet were frozen, frostbites.

And my dad watched over me because many times, I went to the line for the sick people. And my dad came up and he pushed me out. Because I told my dad, I said, I don't care about my life.

And then to the end, when there was a 1920-- 1945, on April the 24th, we start marching from the camp because the Americans came close. I told my dad, I says, I'm not going anymore. I don't care what's going to be. I said, that's the side I'm going, to the weak people, sick people. And my dad said, he says, I'm going to go where you going.

It was in the evening. They put us on trucks. And they took us to Dachau. When we came to Dachau, at night, was then 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock on April the 24th, the gates were closed because they took us to the gas chambers. But the gates were closed.

And they took us to a camp right across the street by the name of Allach. That was a camp for prisoners, Polish prisoners and different nationalities. And that was on April the 24th, 1945.

And 4 o'clock in the morning, we got up. And we couldn't find a German anymore. The Polish prisoners took over the gate. And maybe an hour or two hours later, the American Army walked in. And we were liberated on April the 25th, 1945.

OK. So you found out that the war-- that the Americans--

Americans are close. But we couldn't do nothing. I mean, and we were weak. We couldn't run. We couldn't escape anything. And I guess it was from God's hands, and we got liberated.

When the Americans came to liberate you, exactly what happened at that time?

It was a mixed emotions because we were not human beings anymore. We had no feelings. We didn't know what's going on. You're not a person. I was-- at that time, I was more than 21, I was 24. And I weighed 73 pounds.

And as I said, I didn't care anymore. Because my life was nothing. I have nothing to look forward, the only one I had is my father. But at that time, I was so sick that I didn't know if it's good or bad by having my dad. I was, I would say now-- they would call it maybe brainwashed.

How was your father's health at this time?

Two days after we got liberated, we were laying in a room with single beds. My dad, then was me, a cousin of mine, and another cousin, his son, my age. And they-- my uncle and my father got typhus. And we were on the both ends other side. We didn't get sick.

Yeah, drink some water. When the American Army came to liberate you, did they move you to a different location?

Not right away.

Did they bring beds and sanitary supplies to where you were?

That's right. And they took us to get cleaned up. But they didn't know how to act with us. See, we're not-- we weren't

used to rich food. And the first thing what they did, they feed us rich food. And some of the people who were in camp, they started to eat. They got typhus. They got diarrhea. And they died.

My dad-- I don't know if he was a smart man or what. We used to go and cut up pieces of potatoes and put it on the stove to bake and eat. And little by little, our stomachs got used to food. And then we ate good food. I guess I got a cold.

Yeah. When the Americans came, did they have doctors? Did anyone treat you medically?

Yes, we had places. They had German doctors. They had American doctors. And the extremely sick people were transferred to those places, like a sanitarium, where they were treating by doctors. And until they came to there, to their own stand.

You were 24 when you were liberated. So you were looking at what was going on more from an adult standpoint than a child's. You said that the Americans that came to liberate you didn't really know how to relate to the prisoners. You OK?

Yeah.

Yeah? You said that the Americans had difficulty relating to the prisoners. Did-- were the Americans-- did they understand what had happened to you in your life?

They saw it. When they came to camp, they walked in in Dachau. And they found the skeletons from the gas chambers. And they knew what's going on. Now, the Americans were very nice to us, were beautiful. I mean, thanks to the Americans, we were alive.

But they didn't know how to handle us as far as food is concerned. They thought that if they'll give us rich food to build us up, it help. But it wasn't the right way. And then I guess they found out. And the gradually started to feed us with different food.

OK. How long was it after you were liberated that you actually left the camp?

It was in '45, April, I got liberated. And I would say, in August, I came more or less to my-- to a weight with my body what I could start to do something. The Jewish organization Joint-- it was the Joint and UNRRA.

When they came to Munich, I worked for-- as a teacher in a school. And then I worked there for a year and a half. Then I went to a camp where they had the-- we had different camps from the refugees. We had in-- we had Landsberg, we had Feldafing, we had the-- in Munich.

And thanks to my parents, I had a little education. And I started to be a teacher in the school, where I used to get paid-- not with money, but food, cigarettes-- what I didn't smoke.

And I was living with my father. Then I was-- when we got liberated, some of the people started to travel back to Lithuania to look for their families, their relatives. My father decided not to go.

First place, he was just out from the hospital with typhus. And he said, we're not going to move. We're not going to look for anybody. We'll stay right here. But some people went.

And they-- one girl, she went to look for her husband. And she found my mother in LÃ³dz. And she told my mother that my father and myself are alive. And we are in Munich. And if she-- my mother told her-- she will go back-- to tell us not to go anyplace. And she'll try to come to Munich. And it was the end of '45, think in September, she came to us.

OK. How was your mother when you first were reunited? How was your mother's health.

Without hair, very skinny, and-- but very happy.

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Yeah.

Can I take a little break?

I--

OK, we'll go.

Four more minutes.

OK.

OK. We're going to close this segment pretty soon anyway. When your mother was reunited with your father and yourself in Munich, how were you living at that time?

We were living as a border with a German family. We had a room, where we used to be-- we were all three of us were together.

You were living with a German family?

German family.

Were they a Jewish family?

No, they were Germans.

What was their reaction to you and your parents?

Very good, very nice. And I must tell you that some of the Germans were very nice people. And some of them were big liars.

Who belong to the party. When I used to come in and ask them questions, I used to take out the paper and let them sign, they didn't belong to the party. After they signed the papers, the men had a SS tattoo under the left arm. The women had the tattoo under their left breast. After they signed the paper, they didn't belong, I used to check them. And there was a big tattoo, they had, the men and women. And they all belonged. They belonged to the Nazi Party--

I see.

--to the SS. And from then, I used to give it over to the MP. And they did what they had to do. But I couldn't take that job because I was aggravated. They were liars, people who live, like I would say, from here to Carnegie. And there was Dachau, Allach, and they used to say, they didn't know that they had concentration camps. They had crematoriums. They had gas chambers. Now, how can a person not know, by being on Carnegie what's going on on Euclid?

I see.

That's why I say. Some of them were nice people who helped us. But some of them were killers.

Yes. That is a historical fact. How long did you remain in Munich before coming to the United States?

I was in Munich till '49. Then my family-- that's my mother's cousins-- who found out that we are alive, and they started working, send us papers. And they brought us over.

I came here to this country in 1949, April-- no, March 10, on my birthday, and with a very good family, who took care

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of us, gave us shelter, gave us food till we found a job. My dad worked for Ellis until he passed away in 1967. My mother didn't work.

I worked for different companies until I got my job at the Independent, where I got my job on the same day, my wedding day. On October the 28th, I had my wedding was at 1:00. I went for an interview at 11:00. And I worked there for 28 years.

Did you marry a survivor?

No. I married an American girl, a [INAUDIBLE]. And we had a very happy life. Matter of fact, we just celebrate October the 28th 33 years of marriage.

That's wonderful. Is-- you said that your father had passed away. Do you still have your mother?

Yes, my mother is alive. She is in bad health. She's 83. And my father worked for Ellis, I said, who made pretty good money. And he left my mother in pretty good shape that she could afford it to have a person in the house to be with her.

OK. What do you think your survival has meant to you in the scope of your life? How do you think your being a survivor has affected your life?

I don't feel no different. I feel like I'm American. When I turn out to be a citizen, five years after I was in the country, now, I have no feelings that I'm a survivor because I arrived. I love the country. I was too old to go to the army. But my life is wonderful being an American citizen.

I'm going to close. You said that you feel very much an American. Do you have a lot of friends and close ties here in America that don't relate to your being a survivor?

Well, I have a lot of American friends, American-born, who don't make any difference to them if I speak English with an accent or I speak English like I'm American.

Were you ever able to talk with them about your experiences in Europe?

I'm trying not to because I don't want to come up with memories. When I talk about concentration camp, most of the time, at night, my wife has to wake me up because I cry, I holler, memories come back. But I don't want it.

I didn't even talk too much to my daughter. I mean, I didn't tell my daughter too much. She knows. I tell her what I went through. And I hope that no youth and no person in the United States should go through the experience we went through as being a Holocaust survivor.

Yeah. Did it appear to you that your daughter understood your experience?

Yes. She knows. She knows what I went through. She knows what life I had. She knows my youth in the old country. But I didn't want to show it to her too much of the experience what I went through. After all, it's not helpful.

Right. Well, I would like very much to know if there's anything that you've been thinking about as you were preparing for this interview that-- I don't know what I want to say. Do you do you have a feeling about why you survived when other people didn't? Did this make a difference in how you live your life?

I tell you, I think all of us are in God's hands. I mean, we don't know what tomorrow can bring. And we enjoy the life now. But we can't blame anybody who went through Because if you-- I mean, we're reading the paper. And we see, we have plenty of Nazis here. And we hope that anything like that will never repeat, no place.

Now, you ask me the question if I feel that-- I feel that-- how should I say-- that I'm sorry that some of the people didn't survive. I answer you that we were in God's hands.

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It could happen to me the same thing. I wouldn't be able to be here, but I guess, thank god, God want us to be here. And I should be happy, have a family, and look forward for a better life for all of us.

Mr. Lieberman, I want to thank you so much for participating in this program. I know it was difficult for you, I'm very sorry.

Oh, yeah. I have a cold. And my breathing is heavy. And it's kind of hot. I would be able to-- if I would be able to give you more of my time-- and if you want to, call on me. And I'll be more than willing--

On a day when you're well.

--to do it.

OK. I thank you very much. This is Doris Ladan. Our Holocaust survivor today has been Danny Lieberman. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Thank you, Mr. Lieberman.

I thank you. And I hope I give you more of this information--

Yes.

You needed and wanted.

Yes. Your story was very complete.

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