

William Luksenburg

Tape 1, Side A

May 26, 1998

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Abstract

William Luksenburg explains that he was on the death march to the Austrian border when he got liberated. He fell and a German took care of him and took him to the Allies. He recovered in a women's prison that was used as a residence. William did not return to his hometown as he knew what happened to his parents and to his older brother. He was able to go back and forth to Czechoslovakia to bring people from Poland through Czechoslovakia as he had a special entry pass. He met a friend from his house who told him that no one returned. William was reunited with his cousin and other members of his Polish family. He never went to a DP camp. As a prisoner in the concentration camp, he was given a pick and shovel and had blisters by the end of the day. Through his elder brother's friend, he was placed in the sick room. He realized that he must have some value in order to survive so he learned to use a steam roller. His friend, Helen came from Poland and boarded a streetcar in Prague where a man yelled, "He is alive." Someone told William that Helen was in Prague and they found each other. William and Helen got engaged and he gave her his watch. They drove to the German border and sold the uncle's car that enabled them to get married. President Truman signed into law that 100,000 people could enter the US and William and Helen made the quota. They attended ORT Technical School. They arrived here in September, on Labor Day 1949. William was angry that the Nazis got a fair trial at the Nuremberg Trials. The Jewish Social Services Agency gave them \$30 a week until he found work. He worked as a journeyman and later a Master Plumber He saved money to build a house and buy a gas station. They went to Americanization School for a year and picked up Yiddish papers to learn the news. William was against the Viet Nam War but did not say anything as he did not want to be against his country.

Part two focuses on William Luksenburg's philosophy of life. His major concern is that he desires there will be peace in this country and the world. He feels he helps toward this by volunteering for the Holocaust Museum and talking to people about his Holocaust experience. He gets upset when he reads about genocides happening. Also, he is worried about weapons so wants them banned. He experienced anti-Semitism in the construction industry and when he was a landlord. He tried to give his children some tradition to have a sense of belonging. He feels that it would help if he had his grandparents silver candlesticks. He wishes he had \$1 million to donate to leave a memento.

Summary

00:00 This interview starts with the liberation. William was on the death march from Ravensbruck to the Austrian border. He was not aware that the War ended while he was on the march. The Hungarian SS with them did not care. If a prisoner was at the rear of the column, they would get shot so everyone kept shoving forward. His feet got tangled up and he fell down and a German with oxen came by. He picked him up and took him to a big barn and gave him bread, butter and milk but his stomach could not take it. He was breathing heavy so he was taken to a doctor who thought he had TB. His clothes were removed and he was given a different set of clothes. They had never seen such a bony person. The next day they placed him on a hay wagon and

took him to see the Allies in Luban (?). They undressed him and put DDT on him. All of a sudden the world stood still as he felt fortunate to be liberated by the American Army. .

- 05:00 The Woman's Prison took in all the survivors and treated them. He lay on a white sheet and the doctors saw him. He felt bad as his heart was palpitating. William had not slept on a white sheet since his parents left in '42. He cried as he thought that he was dying. The German doctor said that he should not cry. The next day the American officials came and showed him how a human body should look like. William could not stand looking at himself. Someone took his photo and he tore it up. He was fortunate that he had no disease. A few months later he felt better and could not stand being in jail with bars. He went to the Army and heard people speaking Polish and he was given the task of distributing coffee to the soldiers. He did not feel like returning to his jail house home. The Germans gave him a room in the attic and he was fed good food. The food was cooked in aluminum kettles including chocolate cake and turkey. He saw them dropping food in ditches and told them not to do it as some people could use it. Every day he went to the courtyard of the prison and brought everyone food. He recalled that he left his coat with the Germans. He drove around and found the farmer who asked him if he wanted soup but he said he was just picking up his coat.
- 10:00 William has kept that coat all these years. He plans to give it to Yad Vashem. One day he rode a motorcycle to the jail and saw people in front of the office. There were many Jewish girls and he had not seen any since January. He saw his cousin who had hitchhiked and asked him to come with them. William felt liberated. He knew that he lost his parents but did not expect to find any relative alive. He lost his older brother at Auschwitz. He traded his motorcycle for a watch and hitchhiked and got a nice room with other survivors. They organized a kibbutz for Israel and he felt at home as he had a place to go. William indicates that he has some pictures. He said that Steve was given a lot of crystals and beautiful furniture for Passover. He felt good to be there. It was his first Passover after liberation and meant a lot. William was very sick so saw no action. He just remembers the preparation to open the women's jail. He was placed in a big gymnasium to clean up. They looked pretty good and included two SS men who were soon killed.
- 15:00 Someone tried to take off his ring and watch. Two people were fighting for the ring and lost it. Later on the Germans came. If he had been liberated in January, he would have joined the Russian Army. He felt close to his mother and he would have killed them. After the War, there were long lists of survivors that people would look at. William did not return to his hometown as he knew what happened to his parents and to his older brother. He would go to Czechoslovakia as he had a special entry pass. The Americans occupied Prague and he would go back and forth to bring people from Poland through Czechoslovakia. He met a friend from his house who told him that no one returned and that the synagogue and the cemetery were pulled down. William had experienced a lot of anti-Semitism when he was young. His wife lived in a Jewish neighborhood so it had Jewish schools. His school was run by priests and he was called names all the time as few Jews lived there. On Wednesday the children were excused for religious lessons. All the Jewish boys from all the grades walked together as a group so they would less likely get beaten up. His wife went to Polish school but he could not go.

- 20:00 He remembered his father removing his hat for a Polish boy. William was reunited with his cousin and other members of his Polish family. His cousin was looking for a husband. She got married and he died in '67 and he saw her in Israel where she is still grieving. They stayed together in those days as they needed each other. The Jewish community stayed together. They had hidden in the basement big boxes of silver used to make ice cream. William received special treatment from the Germans. He was given a home instead of a barracks. He never went to a DP camp. He was in the Women's Prison for a short time and met Polish soldiers from Chicago. When the cousin came, he moved out. William met a young woman. He was mechanically inclined. He realized that people with skills were able to survive. When he first came to the Prison Camp, he escaped once before being sent to Germany. The camp was a horrible experience. They served food in a bucket. There was no room to stand up or sit down.
- 25:00 People were screaming all night long. They pulled him up and placed a leg chain on him. In Auschwitz, there were 50,000 prisoners. His brother returned from the prison camp. William was put in barracks. A man who was limping on one leg was there. William was bored. They came at night with lights and dogs at the first camp. The next day he was given a pick and shovel. He had blisters by the end of the day. His older brother had a girl friend in the kitchen and told her that William will be killed. They placed William in the sick room and placed grease on him to appear feverish. The Germans told him to perform surgery so he got away from the shovel. He realized that he must have some value in order to survive. There was a steam roller incident.
- 30:00 You had to push it hard to stop it and turn it left and right. It was a very heavy piece of machinery. He pushed it downhill. A German broke the shovel and removed the handle. He hit William who put his arms over his head. His teeth got hurt as did his eyes and lips but the next day he returned to work with only the use of one eye. He finished the row and had to build a factory so looked for a welder. He found an older person from home who was a welder and taught him. He turned on the steam roller which was three feet in diameter. The Germans liked the way he laid a beam and they turned on the steam and hardly had a single leak. After the factory was built, he looked for a sewing machine. He was given an electric cart and moved it to where the women worked in the factory. He would carry materials back and forth. He took the cement bag and threw it to someone else. The women worked three shifts and the men had two long shifts. He would speak to the women when they opened the gates or speak to them through the fence.
- 35:00 William traveled by cattle wagon. Helen was in one wagon with no food but they got water from the snow. They went to Czechoslovakia. He was resourceful and did not fight for the bread. He sat at the edge of the wagon and caught the bread in mid-air and gave part of it to Helen. She leaned over and stretched her arm and he threw the bread. **Tape 1, Side B.** Helen was the woman who eventually became his wife. They were separated in Flossenburg and sent to prison camp. On Sunday William would hear church bells in the valley and wonder what happened to Helen. It was very cold. He volunteered to work outside. The Allies were coming so they watched for them at night. After the cousin found him, Helen came from Poland and boarded a streetcar in Prague and a man yelled, "He is alive." Someone told William that Helen was in Prague. There were huge barns for horses in Prague and the liberated Jews layed there so William looked for her there. Helen found out where he was and sent him a note. He took the

train to her town. All the doorways to the apartment were locked and someone dropped a key so he could get in.

- 40:00 William and Helen got engaged and he gave her his watch. His uncle who he worked for thought him too young to get married. When the uncle leaves for the US, they decide to get married. Helen's family is orthodox so they have to buy new pots and pans. There were no caterers so Helen cooked all the food for the wedding. Helen did not want to live in Germany. They drove to the German border and sold the uncle's car that they inherited. Food was scarce after the War and there was rationing. They had to pay a lot of money to get married under a Chupah. They survived with help from UNWRA who gave them eggs and milk. There were always lines for everything so if they saw a line, they would jump into it and then find out what it was for. One day he got in line to register for the US and did so. The US doors were closed, Israel did not exist and they did not want to live in Poland so they had nowhere to go. Then President Truman signed into law that 100,000 people could enter the US. William and Helen made the quota. They attended ORT Technical School. What he learned help him earn a living later in the US.
- 45:00 They arrived here in September, on Labor Day 1949. He followed the Nuremberg trials closely. He felt the Nazis were given a fair trial while the Jews were not given a fair trial. He thought it was unfair that the Nazis had attorneys. The Nazis blamed others on their crimes. At that time William did not understand the American way of life. He thought they all the Nazis should have been hung without a trial. Now he realizes that they should have been treated fairly. Then he was angry that they got a fair trial. He could not understand how justice could be served by such brutal murderers going to trial. Hanging them would not have been enough. Many blamed only the older generation but he thinks that the younger generation should have suffered, too. Then it was announced that Israel had become a State. As a child, when they talked about going to Palestine it was like talking about going to the Moon. It had seemed impossible to establish a State of Israel. It seemed unbelievable. He questioned how the gentiles could allow it. Now when he speaks to children, he says that those living in the US should be proud that Israel was established.
- 50:00 William came to the US instead of Israel where life was hard and he had enough of a difficult life. He did not have to take any tests to come here except when he arrived, he was x-rayed for TB and they found marks on his lungs. They were seen in Hamburg and he had returned to make a big picture. Israel takes everyone but not the US. When they arrived, they only had \$20 between them but they never felt poor and had a zest to work. They went to the Jewish Social Services Agency, his favorite charity, and were given \$30 a week. After three months, he felt that he could not take it anymore and he went to work. He worked as a journeyman and later a Master Plumber. Then he became a foreman and met a home builder and got \$16,000. He went to Mr. Berman who thought \$16,000 a lot of money and assured him a new home. He picked out his lot, did his own plumbing and dug the ditches while his wife held the light at night. In America money talks. William knew he had to build something and go into business.
- 55:00 He received \$3,000 from Germany and saw a service station was being sold so bought it and went to school to learn how to repair cars. Later he moved to a better neighborhood and bought a bigger station. His station became AAA and an Inspection Station. He worked hard for

ten years, arising at 5:30 AM and working until 11 PM. One day he lost consciousness and was taken to the hospital. He slept for a week. From then on he went home at 6 PM. Helen kept the books and kept up his morale. William was worried and Helen brought him parts and was a good housekeeper. They had a good life with three nice kids. When he arrived, he did not know English and it was hard to understand. Now he can't understand those in North Carolina but suddenly began to understand and speak English. He made friends who showed them how to manage money and how to cook. He made friends from Austria, Buffalo and Philadelphia (those spoke Yiddish). He was occupied with wrestling.

60:00 They made him a cake which said, "Mr. America." And for Helen, bought an old iron. They went to Americanization School for a year and picked up Yiddish papers to learn the news. In school, they only spoke English. Between their friends and jobs, they got assimilated. They met a German couple. No one believed what they went through. The Austrians brought them furniture and spoke German but they did not comprehend what they said. Ten years later, the Austrian couple flew to Europe and bought a car and drove to Munich where they visited Dachau. Seeing such exhibits as in the Holocaust Museum, helps people comprehend. When they returned they called Helen in tears as they had seen ovens and apologized as they had not understood what they told them earlier. A woman with a tattoo looks like a criminal and a man is OK but it is hard to tell their story to others. He did not press too much on his past to tell the children and did not speak Yiddish or Polish as did not wish to sound like a foreigner. His oldest child was intelligent and read. All his children are nice human beings and contribute.

65:00 They are all professional, all educated and all read the newspapers. The parents are involved in charities. They made a home, always knew where the children were. Now he is retired and enjoying it. His oldest son is Dr. Harvey Luksenburg and his son, Stanley is a psychiatrist in Cleveland, Ohio and the youngest child is his daughter, age 31 who has three children. She is very religious and has a good life. He is thankful to the US to give him a chance as Polish children would not have such a chance. He slowly told his children as they saw tattoos when they got older. They never had grandparents and miss it but took it in stride. His grandchildren jump on him. He is in close touch with his children and they are close to each other. He enjoys visiting them. He thinks the Vietnamese War was fighting Communism so it was right as the US is the leader of the world.

70:00 The man on the street has rights but in other countries, they do not. He felt bad about the War but did not want to be against the US government. War is wrong but did not want to do anything against the US so he did not speak out against the War. He tells of a bad experience when he came to the US to be free and could sit down and have a cup of coffee. He felt bad that other people should have spaces so he is glad that now everyone gets more rights. You should have the right to chose and the right to vote as long as it is not abusive.

72:00

William Luksenburg

Tape 2, Side A

May 26, 1998

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Abstract

This part focuses on William Luksenburg's philosophy of life. His major concern is that he desires there will be peace in this country and the world. He feels he helps toward this by volunteering for the Holocaust Museum and talking to people about his Holocaust experience. He gets upset when he reads about genocides happening. Also, he is worried about weapons so wants them banned. He experienced anti-Semitism in the construction industry and when he was a landlord. He tried to give his children some tradition to have a sense of belonging. He feels that it would help if he had his grandparents silver candlesticks. He wishes he had \$1 million to donate to leave a memento.

Summary

00:00 William starts out by stating that he would like to see peace. He loves this country; it is a part of him. Also, Israel is a part of him. He has a favorite charity (Jewish Social Service Agency) and supports it. There should be peace in this country. There are all kinds of knives. He believes that someone out there wants him to be a witness. He works for the Holocaust Museum. He talks to people and tells them what he saw during the Holocaust. People will remember they spoke to a survivor who has been to hell and back. He does service to all mankind so a Holocaust should not happen again. When he reads about genocide occurring in the world, he feels the pain. William is very concerned about what is going on in Russia as the people are hungry and life is unjust for them. He worries that Communism can become powerful again. He is concerned about what is going on in the whole world. William is worried about weapons. He is concerned that some people will jump into a grave and take others with them. He wants the weapons to be banned or there will be no future for his children or others. He experienced anti-Semitism here when he worked in construction. Some people did not know he was Jewish. He was fired because he was Jewish. He owns property and was an exemplary landlord. Most people would invite him in to have a glass of wine. Once an electric motor burned up and the inspector said, "Damn Jew, he don't take care." The inspector should have checked with him first.

05:00 All the wires in one apartment were burned. William wrote a letter that put the tenant out and she apologized. He asked her to make a donation to his synagogue and she did so and he sent a letter back indicating the donation was received by the synagogue. He felt the Holocaust influenced him. For one thing, he missed the things he had at home from his grandparents and great-grandparents. When he got to Israel, he saw a picture of the Wall and wanted to have his great-grandparents silver candlesticks to give his children. He gave them an education so they could be somebody like he could not attain. He tried to build a home life like he knew, to respect his wife and children. The Holocaust taught him that people should be good to one another. He wants to give his family a soul, something higher, tradition such as Friday night Shabbos dinner or attend synagogue. He wants to give his children a sense of belonging and they will give it to their children. He is not disappointed with life in the U. S. where you make your own bed and lie in it.

10:00 He feels great living in this country, with only small disappointments. Here a poor man cannot be the President and he wants to see that changed. He likes having individual rights. There could be a Jewish President. He enjoys his rights and freedom. William would like to earn \$1 million so he could donate it and leave a memento. The whole world – men, women and children—were involved. He cannot forget the way his parents died.