

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with William Luksenburg
May 26, 1998
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PREFACE

The following interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

Transcribed by Nancy Dee Updegraph, National Court Reporters Association.

WILLIAM LUKSENBURG

May 26, 1998

Question: This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection

Interview with William Luksenburg conducted by Esther Finder. Today is May 26th.

We are in Silver Spring, Maryland. This interview was part of the museum's project to interview Holocaust survivors and witnesses who are also volunteers with the museum.

[technical comments]. And I am going to start with your liberation experience. I'd like to know where you were when you realized that you were finally free.

Answer: I was, before liberation we were on a death march. The death march started in Regensburg, all the way to the Austrian border. I was actually, they let me go, they didn't shoot me. I describe it later on. My liberation came in a little town Liebenau Bad Abbach (ph) along the Austrian border. On the way, during the March we didn't know it was the end. We kind of seen that these guys didn't care much. They were older, like Hungarian SS, and so on. And as you march you, whenever you, you find yourself at the rear of the column you know you get shot so everybody kept on shoving forward. In other words, they didn't have to tell you to press because whenever you find yourself at the end of the column you knew that most likely get shot for not keeping up with the group so you push forward. You push, what I mean, you schlep your feet with the shoes, you don't pick your feet up anymore. So somehow or other my feet got tangled up and I fell. And I closed my eyes and I expected a shot. It didn't come. And I looked the corner of my eyes, I seen the column going down. And it felt good, I didn't have to walk.

And I was laying there and a friendly--must of make some moaning noise or whatever, and a German farmer with a oxen came by, picked me up, put me on his wagon, hay wagon, and brought me to a big farm. And I remember sitting there and they gave me a piece of bread, big piece of bread with butter, and a big glass of milk, and I could not, my stomach couldn't take it. I threw it up. And I sat there and I was breathing so heavily. And they had the doctor come in and look at me and he thought I had tuberculosis, he hardly touched me. What happened also while I was there I was--uniform was completely covered with lice. We didn't bathe or clean since May--since January till May. So they took my striped clothes off and gave me some of their own old clothes. And there was some German woman would open up the gate of the farm, took one look at me and cry. Never seen anything again look like that. I weighed about 65 pounds, had a beard. And so next day the farmer comes over. He says, "The Armies are here." I didn't know--they call the Americans "The Armies." He put me back on the hay wagon, brought me to the town Liebenau, to the Americans. First thing, they undress me and pour the brown, yellowish-brown powder, which I later on found out was DDT. Only people who went through what I went through can understand all of a sudden the heat from the lice eating your body completely stopped. All of a sudden the whole world stood still. And I was very fortunate that I was liberated by the American Army because there was some colonel who took the doctors from the small town Laufen and pressed them into service. And there was a women's prison there. They took the prisoners, women, and they moved them. And they, they, all the survivors were taken in, they were treated there. And I

remember the first morning, the first round, I was laying on a white sheet and I have seen the doctors on the first round. And I felt, I felt so bad. My heart was, like, palpitating and I remember seeing--I was laying on a white sheet which meant a lot because I hadn't slept on a white sheet since my parents went to Auschwitz in 1942. And I felt I would die. And I really felt sorry for myself. I knew I was liberated and I start to cry. And a German doctor went over to me and he felt my pulse and he said in German, "Wein sie, wein sie, sie ghense scraper home ich (ph)." "Don't cry, don't cry, you are very much undernourished." And I remember the next day they came in and they would, some other American officials came in, they would uncover me to show how a human body looked like, and they would uncover me. I couldn't stand looking at my own body because the biggest part was my knee and the bone and everything was just, just dry bone. They kept uncovering me, I kept on covering me. I couldn't stand looking at myself. As a matter of fact, one soldier took a picture of me and I took one look at it and I tore it up. I couldn't stand it looking at it. Wish I would have kept it today. And I was very fortunate that I didn't get any other, you know, diseases. Some people had typhoid and so on. I just was undernourished. I was fed intravenously and the nurses would walk out with me holding my arms, get me into the sun, and a few months later I came to. But I could not stand being in jail. I still had, was in a jailhouse with bars out there. So I heard that some--the Army's, the American Army's down the valley. So walked out, went down there. I shouldn't have. There are some people from Chicago speaking Polish, because Polish is my mother tongue, so. They took me in. I remember they gave me first aid to help out the _____, because all the--I couldn't hold them up. So they gave me a job to

distribute coffee to the soldiers, to hunt the coffee for them and distribute. And I felt I am not going back to the jailhouse. So I was, I was given by one of the Germans a room on the, on like an attic and, you know, I came back quickly because I had good food. And I remember one day that the food was cooked like big aluminum kettles. We had chocolate cake, turkey and so on. And they were digging a ditch and I see they are dumping that, that food, that good food into the ditch. I said, "No, no, no." I said to him in Polish, I said, "We have some people up in Liebenau and they don't get that kind of food." He said "No, no Frauline, no German Frauline." Want to make sure--they are giving me food but I shouldn't give to the German girls. I said, "No, no." And I had some coffee so I bartered the coffee for a motorcycle. And I came every morning, every day, after chow time, all strings and bags and so on, came rolling in, into the big courtyard. The prison had a big courtyard, the office in front of it. I used to roll in and all these guys was yelling at me, "Here, here." They wanted some food. Which was nice and I did that for quite a while. I--but I remember somewhere in the neighborhood there's my clothes, my jacket is somewhere there. I have to get--I had a motorcycle. I thought I am going to try to retrieve it, maybe some people want to see what we look like. And I was cruising and cruising. I remember when the farmer put me on the hay wagon, kind of made it--tried to remember. The barn had a special roof and a special look. And I kept on driving for maybe a week and a half, and I almost gave it up and at the last minute caught my eye and I drove in. And at that time the Germans were very, they were not as secure as they are now. She came in, she said, "Mchten some soup," "I want some soup"--soup means potatoes and some milk. I said, "No, don't be afraid of me, I just

wanted to dig up my clothes, my jacket, go back to the station." We made a fire outside and a kettle and boiled it out. Came to a boil, I took it off, rung it out, threw in my backpack and drove off. And I kept it all these years in my closet. Once in awhile my friends would come in, I tried it on, and the first time I tried it on I ripped it. That's how I recognize that's my jacket. And I put it back in the cupboard. And I kept it all these years and actually I was intending to give it to Yav H'shem (ph), before was any kind of talk about museum. Yav H'shem. When I heard the museum was being built I said to my kids and my wife that's where I'm going to bring my jacket. And I made appointment. I came down. And I kind of felt like very comfortable. I didn't expect make a big deal out of, take so many pictures out of me, made me feel comfortable. I just came down to make sure that someone is there to receive it. So that's the story of my jacket. I want to come back. One day came in, riding on a motorcycle, on that big--jail, and I see a lot of people standing in front of the office. Was big office like, on the, on the mound. And I said, "What's going on?" "A Jewish girl is here." Well, I hadn't seen a Jewish girl since I left in January, we weren't together, I forget my first _____ and look at Jewish girl. And I getting closer and I am looking at my cousin. My cousin was looking for her husband. She was traveling all the way up from Bayreuth from north. Those days they didn't have any kind of transportation, you just hitch-hiked on trucks to trains, trains go for half an hour and they stop. And so, she said, well, you come with us, because this is my--this one uncle by marriage. So of course I want to have. I mean I felt, you know, after we're liberated I didn't, I knew I had lost my parents because went from--I knew where they went. But I didn't expect really anybody alive. I knew my older brother went to

Aushwitz. So I kind of felt lost and I didn't think I had anybody left, but that felt real good. So I traded my motorcycle for a watch. In those days watch, was a big price to have a watch. And we hitch-hiked back to Bayreuth. In Bayreuth I was given a nice room in a villa and we had a lot of other survivors and they were already organize kibbutz for preparation to Israel, and I felt really at home because I had someone. But I-- we had the government, huge government in New York, his name was Captain Cooley (ph), and I--he got off my wife some pictures of a lady who was acquainted. She was older. She knew how to keep a household. She was given a beautiful villa from a big Nazi that had a lot of crystals and beautiful furniture. So I remember the first Passover and I got those pictures. We invited some Jewish soldiers. And the crystals and, you know, just beautiful. It was such a nice, nice thing to be there. I felt so good, felt my Jewishness was coming back. You know, I just--as an oppressed person we're very much alive.

Q: I have a couple of questions that I'd like to ask you before you go further. After the war was over did you witness any acts of retribution or retaliation against Germans or collaborators?

A: Well, the only thing we've seen--I've seen not really. I myself was very sick so I did not see any action because I was really not there. Because the only thing I remember, when, for the preparation to open up that jail, the women's jail, they put us in a big gymnasium to wait till they clean up and so on. And there were quite a few survivors. Some of them looked pretty good. And the Americans didn't realize they caught two SS so they pushed them in. I don't know why they did it. And at that time these guys, you

know, they had so much, you know, was so much bad blood, and they, and they killed them, in no time. And, as a matter of fact, the American was surprised, angry at them, thought maybe they get some beating or something. I don't know why they pushed them in between us people. And I remember they tried, somebody tried to take off his ring and his watch, and I was laying in the corner. I was just half dead. And the two guys must have been fighting for the ring, where the, where the toten cuff would be, and by fighting it they lost it and the ring just swung toward me so it came around and I just kept it out and I kept it. My son got it. He wouldn't give it to me. He said it was his ring. That's the only thing I saw, because later on the Germans were very, you know, you'd see those white flags all over, they're serious, and they, they always blame everybody else but not themselves. They always pointed out to Hitler. I did not really, although I myself felt if I had been liberated in January, like some other people did, I'd have been volunteer for the Russian Army and I would have been the first one to go in to fight. I was so close to my mother and I always remember that she was with me all the time and I could actually, I couldn't kill a fly now but I could actually kill a lot of people dead, just remembering my mother, how she died.

Q: You told me that you knew what happened to the members of your immediate family. After the war did you make, did you initiate any attempts to find any other relatives or friends from before the war?

A: Well, after the war every community you encounter as you travel you put your name. You have--and every Jewish community has a long list and people read them and most of the people remember, when you meet them say, hey, I've seen this and this in this town

on the list, he's alive. So that's how actually people find themselves. At that time we didn't have communications as we have, know now. Especially right after war in Germany there was none. So that's how people kept on traveling and looking and leaving their names on lists, different cities. People would remember. That's how slowly, slowly people got together.

Q: I wanted to make sure. Did you go back to your hometown after the war?

A: No, I did not. I knew what happened to my parents. I knew what happened to my older brother. And I met--I was going to Czechoslovakia a few times. I had a special entry permit to go but those days the Americans were occupying Prague under the agreement, under Allies agreement, then had to pull back. And I used to go back and forth and bring some people from, crossing from Poland to Prague, Czechoslovakia, and I had a entry system to bring some few people with us. That's what I did.

Q: Okay.

A: And I met a friend of mine who actually lived in the same home, same house where we lived, and he told me not only nobody's there, they don't, they even bulldoze down the cemetery, they bulldoze down the synagogue, there is nothing absolutely there hometown. And coming back I myself, as a young boy, I experience very much anti-Semitism calling. Unlike my wife who lived in the Jewish section, so they had schools, the fact of--Jewish school because the neighborhood was Jewish, where I grew up we had very few Jews, a lot of Polish people, and the schools were run by priests. And as a kid I experienced, I've been called really all the time Jew. And you're not--I had bad experience as long as I remember. We had a religious lesson once a week, on

Wednesdays, I remember. So all grades Jewish boys would walk together because if you walk singly you get beaten up by other Polish boys. So we usually walk groups all grades together. As a group, you know, we had more power, then nobody would beat us up. That's how, you meet in one place then walk to the school as a group. So I really didn't have good memories living in Poland. And my wife and my oldest son and my daughter went to Poland. I couldn't go back to Aushwitz. I couldn't go back to Poland. I remember incident when my father was _____ was stopped by Polish policeman. He stood in front of him. He took his hat off in front of him. And whatever the Polish policeman said you'd say, "Yes, sir, yes, sir." And I stood a little boy holding my father. And I could not, I said to my wife, I could not stand, as a free man, for somebody call me again what they called me originally, so I rather not go because I might get in trouble.

Q: When you became reunited with your cousin and the other surviving family members can you tell me what that reunion was like and what you spoke about?

A: Well, first of all, the cousin who was looking for her husband, they finally got together. They were sweethearts before the war and it was quite, you know--as a matter of fact, she lost her husband in the '67 War. Whenever we come to Israel, she is a widow like he died yesterday. She takes us today to his grave and so on. So that was nice to have somebody. There was a uncle by marriage but, you know, those days, you know, we kind of kept together. We needed each other. There was a group of people and were organized like a Jewish committee and, as a matter of fact, the Jewish community was the richest one. A small incident. A lady who lived in Richard Wagner's home went downstairs in the basement and they found big wooden boxes full of silver. So the poor

woman has been trying to make a living, was making ice cream. And so she would sell the ice cream with expensive Wagner, Richard Wagner silverware, was one of the things. But we had a, like a community-like. We got together and, you know, we were given from Germans different special treatments like. They actually, you know, they give you nice homes and so on. But unlike other places, people stay in their barracks and they would stay in those barracks, because when I went to Bayreuth I lived in a nice villa and everybody has nice villa so it actually wasn't such a trauma like other people had, where they had been behind barbed wires and living in barracks and so for.

Q: So are you telling me you were never in a DP camp?

A: No. No. The only one, I was in that women's prison and I couldn't stand because I've seen those bars, I figured that's not the place for me, and I went down and I met the Polish, Polish soldier from Chicago, spoke Polish and so forth, and then my cousin came in and I moved out. So I didn't have such a bad experience.

Q: Did you have any reunions with other people that you met before or during the war?

A: Definitely yes. We--I met a young woman in Ryswick, and there was no touching. I, you know, I always was mechanically inclined. I realized when I came first day in prison camp that people with some kind of know-how have more of a chance to survive. And I was always a kid that was mechanically inclined, always doing, making something and so forth. So I want to describe my first, my first day when I came to the, to that new camp. Can I describe my first experience when I came to prison camp? I remember when I was, I was--I escaped one time, before they sent me to Germany. In Germany I jumped, escaped from school where they kept me before they sent us to prison camps. And I was,

I was caught and they put me to the bad prison. And ?misloyalty? put me in solitary. That was the most horrible part of my experience. Slide you down. You can't fight. And they serve you food in a bucket down there. There is no room to sit down, to stand up. You just rest your buttocks on the one part they cut out and your knees on the other. You hear screams all the time. It's night all the time because there is no sun. I don't know how I got through it. And I--they pulled me up on the chain. I really didn't feel sorry for myself but I was thinking about my mother, she should see that I'm walking in my leg chains, and I figured she, she wouldn't believe that. But instead of Aushwitz they send me to the big prison camp, Resamay (ph). And my older, my older brother, he came back from prison camp. Was a dentist. They sent him back. And he was telling me who he knew, who he met, and I remember he was telling about they using a _____+, Demarek (ph). But here I am in a prison, a huge prison, about 10-, 15,000 prisoners, and I see Demarek walking by. So I yelled out to him, "Herr Demarek." He was a German youth. Luxembourg. If he remembers we were friends or were on the same room with my older brother. He said, "Come sie here, come sie here." He came in, took me to his barracks, right away gave me a bowl of soup, and he says, "I know a good prison camp, I'll send you." I didn't know I already was bought. There's a guy who called the Lumen. This guy was like limping one leg. He would buy like blocks of people, like 500 people for different kind of factories. I was bought already, sold to him, but he says, "I know a good prison camp, I'll send you." And he put me on that list. And I remember I came to that prison camp, came at night, all the dogs and lights, and it was quite an experience coming first prison camp. And I went next day, they put me in the pick and shovel. And

I never held a pick and shovel in my hand, so at the end of the day I had blisters on my hands, and had just blisters here, I had blisters between my fingers, and I knew next day they kill me, they hit you over the head. I remember even the company I worked for was Bengera (ph). So I had a friend, she was actually a friend of my older brother, Wola zu Polska. And I walked over--she worked in the kitchen. I walked over to the window and I says, "Wola, tomorrow will be my last day because they going to kill me, I can't hold a shovel." So she knew someone that put me in the sick room. And they apparently afraid some infectious diseases so they make like a fever and they put some kind of grease on my hands. And then she said, "Can you do something else?" I said, "I will do anything." So they looked for steam roll operator. I was a kid. I have seen a steam roller operate, I never operated one. So I came over and the German came in, said, "You a steam roll operator?" I says, "Really, I don't know how to operate." He says, "You must be honest Jew because only Jews only lie." So he showed me how to use it. And that was one nice thing. I didn't--I got away from the shovel. That's when I realized from then on I must be some kind of value because otherwise you will never go on the list. When you stay with a pick and shovel you don't have no chance to survive. At the incident with the steam roller, the steam roller had--like today hard drive brakes--had mechanical brakes. I had to push very hard to stop the steam roller and to turn, some turn it to the left and right. And the steam roller is a very heavy piece of machinery and here I go down the hill, straining myself, pushing the steam roller and trying to make a right turn at the same time. I couldn't do it. I went straight. So the German took the shovel, hit over the wheel and broke the shovel off so he had just a handle, and he kept hitting me as hard as he could

and all I could do is put my hands over my head, protect my head, and the guard stood there with a gun just waiting for me to make next--any move. He kept hitting until he got tired. He knocked my front teeth, he knocked my forehead, he knocked my front lip, and I thought I lost an eye. The eye was like this. And next day I came to work like nothing to it, you know, with one eye, and I worked for that company for a while and even the guy who hit me, sometimes he couldn't eat, he'd point out with his eye where he had a piece of bread or something for me to eat. So you can't figure this thing out. And then we finish the road and they build a factory. So they, they were looking for welders. So I found somebody who was older. He was a welder from home. I said, "Will you please show me." So he showed me how to do weld and I became a welder. And a good welder. When we turn on the steam I had hardly a leak. It was huge big pipes, like three feet in diameter, and you climb on ladders and you weld up, you know, like a makeshift ladders and so on. And I remember I would lay a bead. That means it looks like a machine, piece of machinery. The German always liked my work, the way I laid the bead nicely. And then they came in and turned on the steam, you know, everybody would get praises or yelled at you because you didn't a good job. I hardly had a single leak. And then this finished.

Q: Before I let you continue I had, I wanted to ask you or I had asked you if there was feelings you had after the war for someone that you had during the war.

A: Well, after the factory was built, everything was finished, they were looking for sewing machines. I said, yes, my grandmother had. So by that I was given electric car and I was able to move in the part of the factory where the women used to work. Other

people could not. I had, you know, prior to movement I used to pick up materials on factory and back and forth, and I start talking to the young woman. There was no touching, God forbid. But we used to take a cement bag, old cement bag, write a letter, throw it to her, and she would throw it to me or somebody else. See, women used to work three shifts, eight times three. Men used to work 12-hour shifts. So once in awhile we would go to work and the women would come back, we would wave at each other. And at one time there was open--no, that was before the access came. They would open the gate and I would talk to her or sometimes they would let us come into the fence. There was a dividing fence between us, men and women. I would talk to her. And I told her, said, you know--whatever I said, I didn't believe I am going to survive. I said--I was young. I said to her, "After the war we'll get married." And I can't remember. I remember on the, we went on the wagon, on a transport wagon. Helen was so--the men was in one wagon so she jumped from the other wagon to be close. And we didn't get, we didn't receive any food, any kind of provision. We just lucky. We were open cattle wagons. There was snow. We drink the snow, and we had some kind of--you know, at least you got water, you can survive. And there were--we went to Czechoslovakia. The people really, they were very brave to stay on the bridges and throw some bread, because they were shot at. So I am always resourceful. Rather than fight with everybody--and can you imagine when you throw a bread between 50 people who are hungry. But, so I sat on the edge, high up on the edge on the train, on the cattle car, cattle wagon. Somebody was holding my leg and when they throw bread I caught the bread in mid-air. And I, I wanted to give to Helen half the bread. But you cannot throw the bread over to

other side, give it to Helen. Everybody's hungry. You'll never get it. So she lean over one side. The train was moving. I lean over another side. And we were long time with holding out to stretch your arm and I threw the bread, and of course she didn't catch it. She was never forgiven for that. But that was one time episode.

Q: We're going to have to pause now while I flip the tape and then you can continue. Just one moment.

(Pause to change tape)

[Technical comments]

Q: And you were telling me about your encounter with the woman that was eventually to become your wife, and I'd like you to continue.

A: Well, we were separated in Flossenburg, in Rheinsberg, excuse me, and I was sent to the terrible prison camp at Flossenburg. And I was staying on Sunday, listen to the church bells down the valley, and I was looking at the moon and I was thinking what happened to her, was she alive. Well, it was so cold. And I realized that I won't be living long so I been volunteering for work outside. And of course I was sent that time to Regensburg. Regensburg. And the Allies, unknown to us, were coming. We were walking nights and resting daytime. And of course, you know, coming back I was found by someone. Now, after my cousin found me we were in Bayreuth. Helen, in the meantime, coming from Poland, following a street car, some former cop, I remember she said she saw me in Prague. So she yelled at them, she told them that I am alive. So Helen knew I was alive. And then on my trip back somebody said that she was, too, told me that she was alive and she was in Prague. You know, people see each other. So the

next time I was going to Prague they were housing some refugees where used to have stalls for horses. They were huge, big barns like for horses and some people would lay there on the hay or some--I just remember open up the big gate and yell, I said, "Helen, Helen." Some people there say, "No, nobody here by that name." And, anyhow, circumstances got so that Helen found out where I was, so she sent me a note that she is in, right in Oberhaus, would I like to see her. She herself didn't know after all we were engaged or, you know, there was no kissing, no touching, no nothing. And I tell you, a young person, you know, a young person, even circumstances like this, you think ?ank? ?nolow?. And so I was away and I came in that weekend and I got dressed and I boarded a train, and on the train I found somebody who knew the town. He took me in. And in those days the curfew, all the doorways to the apartment always locked. So somebody came with me, and Helen had dropped the key to open the gate. They say, "You know who is here, follow me." She got so excited she couldn't find the key. So, anyhow, we met and embraced. And I told her again, I said, "I would like to get married." And that watch which I traded for my motorcycle I gave her as well. That was a big thing. And we kept on courting ourselves. I had that uncle by marriage. He left, he left to America. Apparently he had some relatives here. And he didn't think I should get married, that I am too young for it. So after he left, I was by myself, I said I'm master of my destiny, so we decided to get married. Got married in '47. And Helen's family had somebody who was strictly Orthodox so I had to run and get pots and pans, Kosher pots and pans, but the sad part, you know, Helen cooked all the food. We didn't have caterers. And the pots and pans. And so, and I brought up Helen--I had some money. I bought right after the

war a big junk yard. But Helen says, "No, you are not going to live in Germany." So I sold the junk yard. And I had on, in the junk yard a car from Hermann Goering, burnt up inside. And the only thing I pulled out before I sold it, the Hermann Goering car. And the Russians, who would buy anything had four wheels and a steering, so I restored the car. I drove up to Hof. That was the German border. And I got a lots of old German marks. I came in loaded. But that's how we got, we had money to get married. Because you have to remember, after the war there was no food and anything you had on the rations wasn't enough, so you had to pay a lot of money if you want to get married. So finally after work, both days we were fasting, of course. That's traditional. Before you get married you fast all day long. And under the huppah those days the tradition was to take _____ to pray for the dead, which was hard. We were surviving by the UNRRA, who had given powdered eggs, powdered milk. And those days there were, there were lines. So what the really funny part of it, what you do first, you jump in the line, then you ask what the line is for. Because you actually need everything. Sometimes would have toilet paper. You get two. Well, first you get in line. You don't want to go in line--I was on business in Munich and there is a long line, so I jump the line. What's the line for? The line is to register for America. So I stood and I registered. And sure enough three more--you got to realize, we were liberated there was no Israel, America the doors were closed and, you know, nobody wants to live--after the Pogroms in Poland people were coming from Poland--nobody wanted to stay in the god forsaken camps. And so, well, there was nowhere to go. There was--President Truman was a great

president. He sign in a law to send in a hundred thousand dispersed persons. That doesn't mean just Jews. There were all kinds nationalities. We came on that corridor.

Q: While you were still in Europe, before I had you coming to the United States, you mentioned that you got some help from the UNRRA. Were there any other organizations that offered you any help by way of food assistance or educational assistance or anything like that?

A: We--I went to school for a while, technical school, and I remember we had our teacher from a big factory from--he was in cell completely, he run away from the Russian front and he was teaching us.

Q: You want to take a break?

(Recess taken.)

Q: You asked for a break and we're back now.

A: Yeah, actually that was a, organized by the ORC school, and I had some technical training there. That helped a lot when I came to this country. I had some kind of idea about technical work and so on. And--.

Q: When did you come to the United States?

A: Labor Day 1949. September the 9th.

Q: Before I have you leaving Europe and telling about your experiences in the United States I wanted to ask you about two events that occurred while you were still in Europe. The Nuremburg trials. I want to know how closely you followed the Nuremburg trials and what were your thoughts during that time?

A: During the Nuremberg trials I was following closely but somehow I felt that they were given a fair trial but all our people never got any kind of fair trial. I felt it wasn't fair for those people who killed millions of people get a fair trial with lawyers and so on. Somehow or other I felt it was so unjust that they can, they can have attorneys and they can blame everybody else except themselves. I was really angry. I was following, yes, but I didn't understand American justice then, the American way of life, and I just, I just felt they should be just string up, but that is not the way it is, but at that time I had different kind, I had no idea about justice, you know, because when I left Poland we have different kinds of laws and regulations, different kind of way of justice. Kind of felt funny for me that they treated them in a nicer manner, nobody gets hit and they get nasty. Throughout all the time I was angry really that they getting somehow trial, asking questions, they have chance to blame somebody else, not themselves.

Q: Did you feel that justice was served by the Nuremberg trials?

A: I can't even understand how justice could be served. Actually those people committed the most heinous crimes the world ever knew, that they, men, women, children, and murder them in such a brutal way. I, I really, I really--even to hang these people wasn't good enough for me. A lot of people blame the older generation, not the younger generation. I felt they should suffer for a long time what they did to us. Maybe it's not right to blame the younger generation but I just cannot forget, cannot forget.

Q: Also while you were still in Europe there was a U.N. debate about the partition of Palestine and also the birth of the State of Israel. I would like to ask you to reflect upon that experience, those experiences.

A: I remember it was announced establishment, 1948, the State of Israel. I remember as a kid that belonged to Zionist organization talking about Palestine was talking about going to the moon. It was so far away, something I couldn't believe could ever, ever materialize. It was, it was such a, a, such a far away thing to, even to think about that could be possible. So when they announce the establishing a State of Israel I'm kind of believe it and didn't believe it. It was such a utopia, you know, the State of Israel. How could it be really? Would the Gentile world allow something like this? But I myself, when I speak to children, I always tell them even living in America we are part of Israel, we have someone we can be proud, they establish and they establish themselves with all the technology and everything else. I give them a lot of credit. But at that time I decided to come to America and so, you know, we decide to go to America, not to Israel. So that's the way we want to do. Israel at that time, things were hard to get and so on and I felt I've been through such a horror, maybe I can have a better life.

Q: Did you have to take any tests, any medical tests or intelligence tests or anything like that before you could come to the United States?

A: No. I didn't have--only thing I had a bad experience, before we came to United States we had to have x-rays, whether have tuberculosis, so on. And I, apparently I slept with a lot of people with tuberculosis and I had some marks on my lungs. In those days they had like a .35 millimeter small film. When I came to Hamburg they saw those and they told me I can't enter United States. So I have to go back and make a big blow-up, a big picture, and everybody said wasn't tuberculosis. And there was a little bit of trauma

too because I felt that something happened I can't go, although when you go to Israel your mother take everybody and to America you just could not.

Q: What were your expectations of America?

A: I really--when I came to America we had \$20 between us but I, I seen it was a open world and I never felt poor. I was, I had so much zest to work and I felt good. I came to the Jewish Refugee Service Agency, which was a great thing. That's one of my favorite, favorite charities. They really, it really means a lot. A child, like Jewish Refugee Service Agency, when you come they gave me, everyone, they gave me \$30 a week. It's such an enormous thing when you come, I have _____. And after three months I could not take anymore. I wasn't raised that way and I said I need a job. I went on construction. And I worked pronto. Everybody liked my work. As a matter of fact, later on I became a journeyman, a journeyman, plumbing journeyman. I went to school here and I became a master plumber here. But when I was German I used to run the big jobs. I was the foreman, the foreman of the job, and I met some people was building homes. And those days homes were like \$16,000 which was to me a mountain of money. So was great and sitting and talking to the builder I said, you know, Mr.--name was Berman (ph). I said, "You know, Mr. Berman, I never build before a house like that, \$16,000, my God." So he says, "You know," I says, "I'm start building a new, new part of my building experience and I will always make sure that you get a home." I remember he came in, showed me the blueprints, "Pick any house you like." "Well, I'll take a lot." He said, "I'll make sure that you have a down payment." He gave me a slip of paper that I gave a down payment, but actually he did. He did not give salesman's commission. He gave me

his commission rather than that. And the plumbing company let me do my own plumbing. I did my own plumbing in the house so I had a certain discount on the house. Then I even didn't have any labor. I dug my own ditches and my wife and my oldest son were holding the light till midnight. I was doing my own plumbing. I have so much zest, I want to have a house. That was a big thing, I felt, you know. But in America money talks. So I became a master plumber, I couldn't get financing. And I knew I had to build my family and build something and you cannot build when you work for someone. So I decided somewhere or other I got to go in business. So one Sunday morning I looked up in the paper. And, by the way, we got first money from Germany. I got \$2,000 and Helen got \$2,000. I didn't want to risk Helen's \$2,000 so I risk mine. And I went down there and there was a service station. The guy asked me how much money I have. I say I got \$2,000. Those days was enough to buy a load of gas. Monday noontime I called Helen, I went in business. And I worked very hard at it. I went to school again. I became a master mechanic again. I went to repair cars. And from there the people saw, who were running the oil company, that I am able person. They gave me in a better neighborhood, a bigger station. And I made success of it. I start to rebuild different things. I became a rebuilder in addition to station. I became with Triple A and I became inspection station. I did all these things. As a matter of fact, I worked so hard the first 10 years, I used to get up 5:30 in the morning, get home seven o'clock for dinner, went back, stayed till 11:30 at night. It caught up with me. Driving, I lost consciousness and they took me to the hospital. What actually happened to me, I slept through the whole week. I was so much short on my, you know, sleeping. I work so many hours, my nights were

very short, my days were very long. But then I realize that, you know, I am not made out of steel. So from then on I was going home six o'clock. I told my help don't call me unless the house is on fire. But, see, being married to Helen, she kept my books, she kept up my morale when I started up. You know, when you started up on a string you, you really don't know how things going to work out. You worry you might lose it. And she kept my morale. In the beginning she used to come in and she used to bring me parts if I needed parts. I mean, she was a great help all these years. And she, she was a good housekeeper. She was--we had respect each other. We had a good life together. We brought up three nice kids.

Q: You are running ahead of me but I am going to back you up a little bit because you're giving me too much too fast. When you first came to this country, I wanted to ask you if you spoke any English and if not how you learned English.

A: When I came first to this country all I understood, yes and no. Was hard because when you, on the construction those people think that you are not a normal person because you don't speak and they would pick on you. So instead sitting in the shed eating with everybody else, like rain or something, I would go outside, because it was very hard. Many times I got home, I said to Helen, you know, I never understand English, because it sounded wah, wah, wah, wah. As a matter of fact, I worked with some people from North Carolina I couldn't understand them now when they speak. And so, but all of a sudden--in the beginning it just goes in one ear, comes out the other. All of a sudden it gets in your brain, just like that. As a matter of fact, I spoke, whenever I went with Helen Helen would stay behind and say "you speak." Now it's reverse. But then I was, you

know, in construction. I spoke English. Then we made some friends. We met some young couples. They took us under care, showed us how to, how to manage money, how to cook American way, how to live American way, which meant a lot to us. We made some friends from Austria. Came from Buffalo, all over, young people came to this town to start a new life. Young married couples. We was there like a toy. There was one person who was from Philadelphia. He spoke Jewish. So we spoke to him Jewish, he translates to the other guys in English. It was a lot of fun. I was very much preoccupied with wrestling. So the guy that had a television, he let me watch the wrestling. So on the first anniversary we came here they made me a cake with written down--at that time there was big wrestler was Mr. America. They cut Mr. America. And for Helen, we brought an old iron. The girls couldn't understand because they--your family must have real muscle over there. It was, you know, real heavy iron. So they felt sorry for Helen to schlep that heavy iron, they got us on our first anniversary an electric iron. But then we went to Americanization school for a year and, you know, when you have some education you can learn another language. Our education was interrupted but still we had education. So we started to pick up some Yiddish papers. We weren't fluent. So we were going to try some. People that had Hebrew, we want to have some news. So we picked up some Yiddish papers. We slowly got fluent with that. And then with, in school, the school was great because they did not--they forced us to talk English, they did not talk any other language to us. You had to learn. And it was great. And even when I had, between our friends, between the job, we really master our language pretty good.

Q: When you came to this country did Americans ever ask you about your experiences in Europe and in the Holocaust?

A: Yes. We met a German couple from Austria. I want to point it out that it felt so far-fetched that if we told people what we went through people felt they were like make up story. How can be possibly something like this? People really--and we stopped talking about it. We were talking something unbelievable, nobody can understand. The best example I have, we met that couple from Austria, and mother didn't send her _____ but she sent her furniture. They lost a lot there. But she didn't realize yet the extent of it. And we're talking, the name is _____. We tell her, all the time we spoke through a German man, we are telling her all these things. She did not, she did not get the complete picture what we were saying. But 10 years later, or less, they decided to go back to Austria, Vienna. They flew to Europe and they bought a car and they would drive. And they are driving from Munich and all the way to Munich there is a sign: Dachau 33 kilometers. She said, "Sam, make a right turn, let's go see." The difference is the people when they say and they touch they have more pain understanding. That's how the Holocaust Museum actually is very important. It's, best example, when she comes back to the States she called Helen crying and apologizing. What she saw actually, you know, when she saw it so many years later Dauchau was all cleaned up, but still, she saw the ovens, she saw all these things. She apologized that she did not understand what we were saying. She felt very bad and she cried, she apologized. Now she knew. So for long time we didn't talk. Helen had a number, want to take it off because with a woman have a tattoo you look like you committed some kind of crime, but a man nobody pay attention.

And somebody ask me to take it off. I wear it with pride right now. But it was very hard in the beginning to tell people our story.

Q: Tell me about your family. You have children. I'd like to know when they were born and how you chose their names.

A: Our children were born and we did not press too much on our past. We also, maybe a mistake, we didn't speak to them in Yiddish or our mother tongue, in the Polish. We didn't want to sound like they are foreigners in this country when we spoke with them. But our oldest one, he is very intelligent kid from the begin with. He knew, he read, but he didn't ask too many questions. Once in awhile he asked some questions. But all my children grew up nice human being, contribute so much, you know, to--is good people, intelligent people. They are all professionals. There's one thing in my house, there was no question, everybody is going to have high education. All was spread up. Everybody read newspapers. We are all avid readers. And, you know, it's a background we came from. We had families, we had parents, we had grandparents, great grandparents. My mother and father were involved in different kind of charities. You know, we were not, so we were not just coming from any home. So same thing, we made a home, we build a family, we gave them a good home, we make sure we knew always where the kids are, and so, we're retired now and we enjoy our--they're all adults with families and we enjoy them very much.

Q: You haven't told me their names.

A: My oldest son, Dr. Harvey Luksenburg, doctor of pathology/oncology. My youngest son, Stanley Luksenburg, he's a doctor of podiatry. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio, has two

lovely kids. My youngest daughter is 31, Amy Luksenburg Strachman. She is attorney. She got three kids. And she became very religious, which I--very nice because my father was a religious man. And she got a good life and nice family. I really, whatever I got left I'm just, I'm thankful to United States Government and the people who gave us a chance. Me--not for just me, for my kids, because in Poland my kids would never had opportunities if we came back. It's a great country. We treasure it.

Q: I'm not sure I understand something you said a moment ago. Did you speak to your children about your experiences in Europe? What did you tell your children about your life even before the war? And kind of go into that.

A: Well, we're telling them slowly, once they are growing up, because they've seen the tattoos and they would ask questions. And when they were young we tell them why don't you wait until you get a little older, it's not a nice story, we'll tell you when you get older. And we told them. And they knew, they never seen, they never had a grandmother. My children grew up without grandparents, which really I feel bad for them. Everybody, you know, every child should have a grandparent. I know my grandson come in, he jumps on me. And they missed it. They don't have any grandparents. None of my children had grandparents. But they took it in stride and they grew up nice people. And I'm really thankful for them and they, you know, we keep close touch and they keep close touch with each other. And me and my wife enjoy going, visiting. That's about it.

Q: You were in this country during some big changes. You were here during the Korean War and the Vietnamese War and for the conflict with the Soviet Union. Did you have

any comments that you want to make about what you saw and experienced in this country with respect to those events?

A: Well, being citizen of this country, I felt whatever this country does, I felt, you know, it's right, because they're leader of the world and they, you know, the men on the street got rights but other countries did not. And I felt bad, especially on the Vietnam War, because I realized that we really don't fight for the Vietnamese, we really were fighting communism there, the spread of communism. I remember telling about the domino theory and so on and so forth. I did not want to be against my government because I, I always treasure and appreciate what they done for me. So I felt that this government, my government, decides to go to Vietnam, although it's wrong, but I would not do anything against my government. I was, I want to be exemplary citizen and even though my heart I felt wasn't right, but I felt this country was good to me and I would never speak out about this, my government United States, no matter what.

Q: You were also here during the civil rights movement and the women's movement. Did you as a survivor have any thoughts on those experiences?

A: Yes. Definitely. Civil rights movement, I had bad experience because when I came to this country I came to the country of the free. I came to the people's drugstore and the counter, I could sit down, have a cup of coffee; the black man next to me could only have to go. I really questioned it and I really felt bad. Absolutely every--just like me, I always felt should have a place in the sun, so other people should have a place in the sun. I'm really, absolutely I'm glad the way things turned out that everybody gets more and more

rights. As long as it's not being abused then everybody should have the right to choose, the right to vote, and that's the only way intelligent civilized people should go.

Q: I'm going to pause now and change a tape.

(Pause to change tape)

[Technical comments]

Q: I wanted to ask you what else has been of interest or concern to you in your years in this country, besides the wars and social movements that we discussed. Is there anything else that sticks in your mind that was of particular interest to you?

A: Really, particular interest to me is Israel. I would like to see the day, literal day when Israel will be in peace. Although I love this country, I am part of this country, Israel is also part of me, and all I go through, all the pain, all the death, I feel it. I--that's actually my favorite charity. I support them in every way I can because my friends, some family still live there, and they need some peace too, and I feel for them. Interested in this country? Yes, I am interested make sure that something like that would never happen again. There's all kinds of denials in this country and I want to make sure and that's the reason I feel that somebody up there wanted me to live to be the eyewitness. I work as a volunteer at the Holocaust Museum. I talk to people, let them touch me. It makes so much impression. I tell the people who come, especially young people, to the Holocaust Museum, and I am a survivor of the Holocaust, I tell them what I have seen, what I have heard, all the truths, and they some day, after I will be gone, they will still remember they spoke to a Holocaust survivor who had been to hell and back. I, I really feel that I, by doing so, speak to children, work at the museum. I do it not only service for the Jewish

people, service for all mankind that something like this should not happen not only to the Jewish people and the others, I really feel whatever any kind genocide being committed all over the world, I feel it personally. When I read the paper I don't just turn the page, I feel the pain. I understand what's going on. And I'm very much concerned, very much concerned what's going on in Russia. I am afraid because people are hungry, things are unjust for them, and they might turn again, became again some kind of communist or whatever, fascist power come to power and then we start all over again. I'm concerned about the whole world what's going on. I read the paper and I'm interested what's happening in this world. And I hope that people, especially I'm concerned what's going on with the weapons of mass destruction. I am afraid some crazy people some day, they'll be glad to jump in the grave knowing they take a million people with them. I would like to see ban all these weapons of mass destruction. Otherwise it's no future for, not my children, for children other people.

Q: Have you experienced any anti-Semitism in this country?

A: Yes, I have experienced some anti-Semitism in this country. When I work on construction those people don't know I was Jewish and they would, you know, point out to me various jokes. I used to get fired. When you come in on construction you are the last man to go. I wasn't the last man to go, I was fired because I was Jewish.

I also own some property and of course all my tenants know I am Jewish. And I one most exemplary landlord because mostly people invite me, come in, have a glass of wine, so. But sometimes something happen, like one time electric motor would burn up with cinder and the air conditioning stopped work. When the inspector came in the woman

said, "That damned Jew, he don't take care." So I got angry at the inspector. I said, "You should have come checked with me, why, why do all these things happen, before you go upstairs and check the apartment room that is 90 degrees heat. You should come down, I'll show you that the whole wiring and the whole motor burnt to a cinder." Well, the one lady, one of my tenants, heard the woman, you know, giving her anti-Semitic remark, so I wrote her a letter, I appreciate tenants and I am going to put her out. So she wrote me a letter apologizing. I still kept the letter. And she asked me what can she do. I said, "If you want to I would like you to make a donation to my synagogue." And I took that check and I went to my synagogue and I stamped Israel from the side, on the front, on the back. When she gets that check back that she knew that she gave donation to the Jewish synagogue to Jewish causes. So it is a lot of anti-Semitism in this country. Of course it is. It is a great country but there are all kinds of fish in the water. But we want to make sure and be always on guard so something like this couldn't happen in this country, too, that should not happen.

Q: How has the Holocaust experience influenced some of the choices that you have made over the years?

A: The Holocaust influenced me in a lot of ways. I want-- first of all, the things I used to have in my home, in my grandparents' home, in my great grandparents' home, when I go to Israel, when I have seen the picture from the Western Wall, I want to have one. When I have seen silver candelabra like my great grandfather had, I want to have one. I grasp these things what I lost. I just want to bring them back to life, bring them to my home.

Also, I want to give my children what I couldn't--I could not be a doctor. I want to--I am so proud that I gave them education. _____+ my experiences. I want to give my children not the good things in life, the education to become somebody, which I could never attain when I was young. Otherwise, you know, I'll try to build a home life like I knew, respect to my wife, respect to my children, respect to everybody else, that taught me, that the Holocaust taught me a lot of things, that people really should be good to one another and to respect each other. Another thing, I came from a religious home. During the war what I have seen I really question if there is a god. But then when you have a family you want to give your family some kind of soul. You got the sense of the longings. You are afraid something, you know, you are not, just can't go out and kill another, you are accounted for, in this way you are accounted for something higher. So you gave--we had a, not a tradition at home, but Friday night Shabbos dinner, early to synagogue, to give the children that sense of belonging, and they do the same thing their own home. So that's what the Holocaust taught me.

Q: What has been your best surprise or your biggest disappointment about life in America?

A: Well, I'm not really disappointed in life in America because you got, you are master of your own destiny. You make your own bed, you sleep in it. I really like living in this country. I feel great. I don't have really any big disappointments. Some times I've--the only small disappointment, the trials were held, the jury trials, they really, the jurors are not voting with their heart, they are voting as a group of people just, I'm afraid it's not going to be bringing justice to this country. Politically also, it's, I think that president

should not have millions for this position to become a president. A small man or a poor man cannot become president. I would like to see that change. And otherwise I like the rights, individual rights for individual people and especially as a Jewish person we enjoy very much rights and freedom in this country.

Q: What would you yet like to accomplish?

A: I would like to win a million dollars because I would like to have--when I went to Brandeis and I walked with my wife I said, you know, some day if I made a lot of money I would like to donate, have one of those buildings in my name. I would like to leave some kind of real memento that the Luksenburgs was walking on this earth and left something behind.

Q: Is there anything you would like to add before we conclude, anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to mention?

A: I cannot and will not understand why the whole world stood still and allow such a horrible crime to commit on men, women, children. Up to now I cannot understand why the whole earth stood still. And I have sleepless nights and a hard time because I cannot forget the way my parents went to murder.

Q: I thank you for interviewing with me today. And this will conclude the interview with William Luksenburg.

Conclusion of Interview