

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Leonard Gordon
October 24, 2000
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Leonard Gordon, conducted on October 24, 2000 by Peggy Garrett on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The 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.

LEONARD GORDON

October 24, 2000

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: -- Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Leonard Gordon, conducted by Peggy Garrett on October 24, 2000 in Silver Spring, Maryland. Mr. Gordon, will you give your name at birth?

Answer: My real name?

Q: Your name at birth.

A: Right, okay. My name was Lazar Gordon and they called me Lazarken in Yiddish, Jewish.

Q: And your date of birth?

A: June the eighth, 1925 and my Hebrew name is Eliezer Mordechai.

Q: And your place of birth?

A: Tilsit, Germany.

Q: Now, you moved f -- after -- at what age did you --

A: I don't think I moved, I think -- I'm not sure whether my mother was visiting or what. I really don't know what happened. That's all I know, that my brother told me that I was born in Germany.

Q: So you were born in Germany, but --

A: Actually my -- really I grew up in Lithuania.

Q: In Lithuania. And where were your parents born?

A: I just found out that my dad was born in Lithuania actually before 1918, was -- was part of Russia.

Q: Mm-hm. And your mother?

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A: I don't know where she was born, all right, we didn't have any trace of her, but I -- probably in the area. I'm not really sure.

Q: You think she was born in Lithuania also?

A: I think so. Probably in the area.

Q: And what were their names?

A: Well, my dad was Jude Gordon, or Yudel we call him in Yiddish, and my mother was Miriam Goldberg.

Q: Okay.

A: And I think her -- her brothers and sisters were religious people and they published books, but I can't find any trace, but I didn't look too deep.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about your childhood, your family?

A: Actually my dad was very prosperous. He had various business. He would import oil tankers. He had a soap factory, we had a lot of property. And I grew up sort of with a silver spoon in my mouth.

Q: Mm-hm. What was the town that you --

A: Siauliai. Siauliai. Shauloh. It's about 30,000 people. Was a big [indecipherable] hub. And I went to grade school, I went to high school pri -- was private Jewish high school and was separated.

Q: Now what di -- grade school you went to a Jewish school also?

A: Yeah, it was, it really was -- I think it was -- must have supported by the state or the county, but it was sets -- separated. Lithuanian people went to their schools, we went to our schools. And like on the holidays we would go to a tailor and have clothes made, you know, they would

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measure us and we'd have to pick out the fabric, all stuff. And summertime -- we always had a maid in our house. My mother -- my grandmother lived with us. In summertime we'd go to the lake, the cottage. Played basketball, had a bicycle. Til 1933, things start getting a little bit hairy. Hitler came in power.

Q: Now, you were about eight.

A: I-I was about eight, it was about 1925.

Q: Now before -- before 1933, you were going to the Jewish school.

A: I -- I went to school all the way to 1941.

Q: Okay, but -- but when you were younger, when you were --

A: I went to kindergarten --

Q: -- eight.

A: -- at five, yeah.

Q: Yeah, and so all the children in your school were Jewish?

A: Yeah, right.

Q: And were all of your playmates Jewish and so --

A: Right. We -- I didn't have really any Gentile friends. Maybe a little bit. Really most of them were Jewish.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Now -- imagine all of them were Jewish. And why my parents didn't leave, I don't know. I know they were talking. My dad said he [indecipherable] to go to Australia. But what happened 1933 they -- the oceans were mined, so --

Q: The what?

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A: The oceans were mined, you know, were mined. I mean, it was dangerous for boats to go because they would go in -- into a mine. And another thing happened that Lithuania restricted taking out money out of the country. So some people did, they would give the [indecipherable] money to deposit upon -- to deposit in a Swiss bank. And it was whether he did it or not. In fact one person in our town borrowed money and he disappeared. And everyone said gee, this guy is not really honest. But his wife stayed behind and then she sold the property and she paid back his debt. So that was a story. Now in 1933 we had another problems. Lithuania is very pro -- very anti-Semitic. Very much anti-Semitic. Like, we had a big steeple in our town, Easter we would stay inside because the priest would tell them the Jews killed Jesus. You know that story still [indecipherable]. We had -- soccer team was called Maccabee. And any time Maccabee would win, we would leave the soccer field much sooner because it would be big fights. But it was very much anti-Semitic and some signs were in Jewish and they start -- Lithuanians start breaking them. For instance my dad was going to a customer of his to collect money, but somebody [indecipherable] his front wheel and his shoulder got dislocated. He never fixed it up. But that happened. Then, in 19 --

Q: So these were Lithuanian --

A: Lithuanians, right.

Q: -- people who were doing these things?

A: Right. Actually it was -- the Lithuanians were Catholics and Jewish people, we had a few Russians -- Russian Orthodox, but that's how it was. Our town was about 30,000 people, probably 8,000 Jewish people. We had eight synagogues. Frankel was a person who had a big leather factory with about 2,000 people. He would process leather. Was a really big factory. Our

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-- in the house we owned, Singer Sewing Machine, they were our tenants, and they were the headquarters for the three Baltic states, Lithuania and Latvia and Estonia. We lived well. We had in our house running water, plumbing. And that wa -- meant a lot because the wa -- the winters that time very severe like northern Canada. In fact the doctor said the rich people are smart because they didn't get -- they get less colds because the other people have to go, during the night go to the outhouse and that's the source of -- and my dad did a lot of building, he -- even til 1938, as a matter of fact, after Lithuania became independent, I [indecipherable] permits for po - - they had archives. All the building he had, he had -- we had a big house like [indecipherable] big house, two story house. We had -- he built -- we had -- one of the tenants was a printing office with what, maybe 20 or 30 people. And the other one that makes sweaters. He had storage tanks in different places on the railroad. St -- warehouses which he built. We weren't -- not in American standards, but under European standards we were considered well-to-do.

Q: And in your home, what was the religious atmosphere?

A: Jewish, very much. My dad [indecipherable] being a rabbi here, you know, but that was a way of life. It was a way of life. We observed all the holidays, we kept kosher. We mo -- we wouldn't cook on Saturday, we would go to synagogue. As [indecipherable] older, on Saturday we would sneak away, we'd got to court and I li-listened to civil cases. And my dad looked the other way around, he wasn't so fanatic. But he would drop himself off. He'd pray every morning and Friday night we would go synagogue and Saturday we'd go. And Friday was sort of interesting, you know, in the wintertime the days are short and my mother had -- we had a maid, but she had to knock herself out to prepare everything for Sabbath. And everything was done by hand, she would bake bread and fish. Friday night was the biggest, you know, very large meal. So that was

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-- was -- you know, I -- what happened to us, at home we speak Yiddish. In high school it was the Zionist movement, we speak -- we had to speak Hebrew, because the teacher from that in Lithuania was actually our language which we had to learn. So that was the language problems -- not problems, but that was the situation.

Q: Now, you had siblings?

A: Yes, I had older sister.

Q: Older sister, and what was her name?

A: Esther.

Q: And how much older was she?

A: Six years.

Q: Six.

A: And I had a older brother, four years, Abraham.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And we all survived. We all survived the concentration camp. My parents did not make it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So really, that's the story. But it was -- it was -- what happened farther down the line, the Russians came in in 1940, in Lithuania. And we f --

Q: Now that was the first occupation?

A: Correct.

Q: The Russians --

A: The Russians.

Q: -- in 1940.

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A: And what happened is really, people, Jewish people in Lithuania were very, very anti-Semitic. You couldn't go in medical school, it was [indecipherable]. So people would go to Switzerland and come back and laws were very much restricted. I-I'm not sure accountants or engineers, but I don't think --

Q: Now, in 1940 you were 15 years old.

A: I was 15, yeah.

Q: And you were in high school --

A: I was high school.

Q: -- Jewish high school.

A: Jewish high school. Actually they -- the Jewish high school was -- the Russians had a different program. I -- I would have been graduated about 17, but something happened, my dad finally [indecipherable] with high school and he took me out and then, you know, had private tutors [indecipherable] other thing. All my classmates was accelerated program, they got to graduate at 16, but I didn't make the cut because I was just -- I was taken out [indecipherable] came back. But what happened then, being so anti-Semitic when they're -- the Russians were very poor and they tried to impose quotas in the farmlands, they had to give so much bacon and bread. And o-of course farmer will rebel. And I don't think Lithuanian people are too educated, it's -- a big, large amount is really illiterate. And rumors were that the Jewish people are imposing on the farming, because the Russians would make raids and make sure that farmers meet their quota. So that went over like wildfire. And in '41 --

Q: Now, how did it affect your life --

A: It's affect my --

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Q: -- in 1940?

A: -- it affect my life because our -- our -- our school wa -- my schooling system was interrupted.

We had to comply with the Russian schooling system. Instead of going, I don't know was

[indecipherable] eight years, they -- I think they -- the Russians meaning, they had a 10 years

program. It affected that they made us go to school in the holidays. S -- as a matter of fact, I

think I was a fairly good student, out of a class of 40, I was number seven or six. And I

remember one time in history, I knew the -- the subjects called, but the teacher called me to the

board to make presentation and I re -- you know, I refused it. Another week I applied and got an

A. So they made us go to school on Saturday. We stayed there but we are not participate, we are sitting there. That's how it affect us.

Q: Now, did you go to school a-at your same Jewish school, or did you --

A: It was the same Jewish school, but different program.

Q: Okay.

A: Different program.

Q: Okay.

A: A different program. Also --

Q: So it was the same students --

A: Yeah, the sa --

Q: -- the same --

A: -- the same class.

Q: -- the same teachers.

A: Same -- well, the sam -- they took in some other stu -- teachers who maybe -- you know, the

high school I went, it was a very good high school, and I think most of the teachers were PhD., well qualified. When the Russians came in they sort of watered it down. Teachers came in who was less -- less qualified. We also had to study Russia -- Russian, and Yiddish before we spoke Hebrew, because what I was [indecipherable] was that Jewish or Yiddish is a jargon, it's part of German, which is not true, but I mean in the -- and you have to learn Hebrew, which -- and that was the modern Hebrew, not the religious Hebrew like [indecipherable]. So it affected me that respect. On this other hand I start learning the Jewish literature which t -- and they had poets and writing it. I had to study Russia -- Russian, and how else did it affect me? Well, oh they confiscate our property, they confiscate our property, everything, the Russians. I don't know how my dad survived, I remember leaving the house, but he was very energetic person and I'm sure it start hitting him hard. Prior to that, actually, when the Russians came in there was a big sack of money. And we were afr -- I don't know how he made it and when he made it. And we burned it because it's a raid, they feel we might be bourgeois, which is the upper class. And tears were in his eyes, I was a child, I didn't realize it. But that's how it affected me.

Q: So he burned the money?

A: We burned the money, it was a lot of them, a big bag and crisp bills on a -- I -- we all encouraged him to do it because it's a raid, hey, you're part of -- part of the Czar or something like that. So it affected us also, it was confiscated -- I think being -- my dad was very well liked, but I think also confiscated because I had to go into a sort of a [indecipherable] had to strip naked and nurses were sitting there and boy at 15, I was sort of intimidated. And they decided that I should maybe not continue with -- with school, I should go some sort of a trade. And I think was also a -- also was because my dad was well-to-do.

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Q: So the Russians decided this?

A: Yeah, I mean the Russians -- the Russians or the government installed a -- they installed like [indecipherable] government, it was a puppet government.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm, mm-hm. And so did you then go to study a trade?

A: No, no, because -- the reason I didn't, because the Germans came in --

Q: Oh, okay.

A: -- i-in -- in '41, but if I would have been in the Russians, I don't think, who have decided -- probably they would not let me continue with school.

Q: So how -- what happened when the Germans came in?

A: Well, before that another thing happened, very interesting. My dad was very well liked, was very well liked, I don't know what happened. He got along with everyone. But the Russians tried to take away the management of the town. And they had freight cars with straw and [indecipherable] them to Siberia. Our family, somehow they didn't do it. And one of the guys, by the name of Walpen was sort of -- he said, remember, he said, the rich people have the luck. And what really happened, after the war, those people, whoever fought in the war would s -- they got an education. You know, they send them Siberia, I am sure they were drafted in service, but they got educated. Several of them showed up in Israel with nice degrees. So I think even they were sent in Siberia they didn't have the harsh treatment that we encountered later on by the Germans.

Q: And wh-why did they send them to Siberia?

A: Because they were [indecipherable] and that was the method in Russia.

Q: So it was a punishment?

A: Punishment, uprooted -- uproo --

Q: Degradation.

A: -- uproot them, outroot them. In fact, all system is like that. I tried to analyze why the Russian people are drinking so much, and they do a lot of drinking. And I think what happens there, once you start acquiring some property, that proved you -- you did -- you come in the middle of night, pack in two or three hours.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And after awhile it in -- discouraged them to do anything because they have to leave it behind. Also, I sort of found out at that time -- the Russians, you know, any time, the system they had, the fear. Like we spoke -- a widow of some Russian person told us, she said -- her husband was sent to Siberia. So what happened, she said well, he was [indecipherable] always claimed that Stalin was god -- Stalin was the leader of Russia -- and he said, in Russian he said he had a dream, he said before Stalin he [indecipherable] he couldn't get a replacement. And he said in Russian, before Stalin came in, everything fine, but now Russian's -- Stalin's son came in and signed so much that his rear, his ass can see the sun. [indecipherable] just for that he's sent away to Siberia. So then in '41, it was like when the Russians came in their army was so dilapidated, so dilapidated and now he thought I didn't have anything. And [indecipherable] you know, baking bread and send to Russia, but when they were treated in, I think it was June, the middle of June I was on a picnic and all of a sudden we were bombed. It was surprise attack and the Russians were having a party on the border and -- and I think -- Tilsit was a border town, I think we were maybe a hundred kilometers or 60 miles from the border. They start retreating in a hurry. Now our house was a very big house and very -- very enforced basement, you know, it's reinforced concrete. And we thought it's a bomb shelter. So what happened then, my

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dad and his brother decide they're not leaving the town, so they'll stay there, and the corner of our house was bombed, but they survived. My brother, who was older, he wanted to go to Russia. So he and a few refugees from Poland went to the Russian border and they came back, said the border is closed, they wouldn't let anyone in. My mother and my sister, we also walked out of town towards Russia. We didn't have any food. We stopped to some relatives, they abandoned their house. We had some sour, you know, yogurt, we find something to eat. But then we were bombed with machine guns by the Germans because that what's army, I was laying in the trenches. And then after that we felt we didn't have the chance, so we came back to our house. And another thing, sort of people asked me about it and myself --

Q: No, so that -- you came back to the house.

A: Right.

Q: You were 16.

A: Right.

Q: You were with your mother and your sister?

A: And the whole family. The whole family.

Q: And your father.

A: And my brother, all of us.

Q: And your brother.

A: All of us.

Q: So everybody was there.

A: Right.

Q: Okay.

A: And then -- then Germans came in. The Germans. It was -- Germans came in already in 19 -- in '41, and it was raids. Before they even -- Germans came in, they took -- they raided people and put them in prison and never came back. They made them deep --

Q: They put who in prison?

A: Just raids would come the middle of the night --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- take away the men. And they would move them -- m-make them dig their own graves and shoot them. Thi-Thi -- the --

Q: Any particular men, or just random?

A: Leadership. The rabbi, lawyers, prominent people. Prominent people. Again [indecipherable]

Q: Now this was just Jews, or --

A: Just Jews, absolutely --

Q: Just Jews, okay.

A: -- just Jews, just Jews.

Q: Prominent Jews.

A: Yeah, leadership.

Q: Okay.

A: They're afraid for seven to 80, we never heard about them. They -- we heard in our -- Lithuania had -- was known for being educated among the Jewish community, we had a lot of seminaries. They -- the seminary students were shot and what I heard, were shot by Lithuanians and the journalists took picture. And their reward was golden teeth, their clothing with [indecipherable]. And really, what happened in Lithuania, a funny thing, my dad told me that.

When things were taken away, he say watch. Those people never made anything and they'll be the same thing. They would drink. Maybe the Jewish people didn't make any more money, but they tried to acquire like candelabras, a suit. They wouldn't drink. Lithuanians did a lot of drinking. He said look, here they have all the property. In a couple of years they won't have anything. And it was true. So that started off, in 1941 they start running out of people. And eventually they got us in ghetto. It was a dilapidated area next to a lake.

Q: Now this was in the same town?

A: The same town, Shavel, Shavel. They surrounded it with barbed wires. We sort of felt we couldn't escape because I was dark-headed -- dark-haired and blue eye -- dark hair. My -- I had sort of an accent, my R was not sharp enough because I even knew the language, but people speak, they could recognize that I'm not a Lithuanian. Plus, I was circumcised. So we -- the escape thing wa-was not in our favor. The send away my dad, send away my brother to work in a farm, you know, as a farmhand? But they start rounding of people on the farm, but the farmer got word, and those guys were killed right away too. So the farmer got word of that, he put them back together. So we stayed intact and what happened, having a soap factory, my dad felt -- was self-employed. So even -- to make soap you need fat, but we didn't have any fat. So we got under and barter and sell for food, and we'd get --

Q: Now where -- where would you go to barter?

A: If we -- in the same town, but we would leave the ghetto and go to our f -- f -- to our soap factory, so we're employed there.

Q: I see. So in the ghetto, were you free to move in and out of the ghetto?

A: No, wa -- sort of, sort of, I mean they -- people would work. They would take out people and

work. For instance, my mother worked in the hospital, in the German hospital. In the beginning we all stay together and we supposed to work in the soap factory which my dad and if -- initially owned it, but he made it fictitiously gave some Lithuanian who was the owner, so we worked for him.

Q: I see, so you were allowed to go out to work in the soap factory?

A: Right, right. And -- but we couldn't do much, you know, get a [indecipherable] but primarily we would barter. And then Lithuanian person decided to, rather than keeping our place -- I don't think he was all right, I think he was like the F.B.I., he inherited a big house who was the -- the guy who does the slaughtering [indecipherable] and he moved the factory in his area down there.

Q: Who was this that inherited the house?

A: That -- thi-thi-thi -- that's the person that my dad assigned the factory to.

Q: I see. Now, he was Lithuanian, not Jewish.

A: Right.

Q: And --

A: He was a friend of my father.

Q: -- he'd been a friend of your father's, so --

A: Sort of, so my dad said, okay, you be the boss. Here, I signed you over, here's the property, and --

Q: Okay.

A: -- we'll be running the show.

Q: Okay.

A: But that didn't last so long. I was in ghetto about four years, from '41 to '44.

Q: Now what were your living circumstances in the ghetto?

A: Very bad, very bad. We -- it was a small house, maybe smaller than this one, they put in five or six families. The problem was the stove. Everyone wants to cook a little bit on the stove. My mother stayed home --

Q: And each family cooked separately?

A: Well, what happened, we were one -- it was our family, it was a pharmacist who took away three girls and the mother -- the father took away. We had two people from Czechoslovakia who were son-in-laws and they lost their family, they stayed in the house. And two brothers [indecipherable] they were rabbis and they lost their families. So we all stayed in that ghetto. My mother was a very nice lady, but everyone tried to cook their one little pot, and there was no food, really was no food. We'd get frozen potatoes. My mother would make sort of a potato kugel, which is sort of potato pancake. We'd get horse and she wouldn't eat because it wasn't kosher, but she would make hamburgers for us. And --

Q: A-A -- she got -- she wouldn't eat the horsemeat because it wasn't kosher.

A: Right, but she --

Q: But --

A: -- right, but she would make it for us.

Q: I see, for the children?

A: Yeah.

Q: An-And it was okay for you to eat?

A: Well, it was a matter you didn't have any food. We ate it. We ate it. We ate it, you know, whatever. Tried to make a garden there, we had a little area. Was pretty rough. But then that

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didn't last long and they took them away to build a German airport in -- not too far, you know, the observation towers.

Q: They took who? They took --

A: They took me.

Q: Yeah?

A: They -- and I was out of the ghetto and I walked in camp.

Q: And when was that?

A: Also during the period of the fr -- while I was in ghetto. In other words, after soap factory petered out, we were assigned to do labor.

Q: Okay. I see. So did you go out just during the day --

A: No, I stayed there.

Q: Oh, you stayed out --

A: It was already [indecipherable] camp. My brother was working a sugar factory --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- which makes sugar. My mother worked in a hospital and my dad -- my dad worked in railroad, you know, loading cars or whatever it is.

Q: Now, where was the factory where you worked?

A: Also in Lithuania. They --

Q: It was the same town?

A: The wa -- the one we [indecipherable]

Q: No, no, you said you worked in --

A: Oh no, that was on the airport.

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Q: [indecipherable]

A: That was the airport --

Q: The airport.

A: -- airport.

Q: So the airport of your town?

A: I think the airport of the town a -- they -- I didn't walk, you know, I always [indecipherable] border.

Q: But you stayed there.

A: I stayed there.

Q: But was it far away?

A: Well, that's right, it wasn't far away.

Q: Okay.

A: It -- it's true, it wasn't far away.

Q: And -- and the Germans were in charge --

A: Right.

Q: -- there. Okay.

A: Actually, very sad happened there. What happened, a girl from -- a friend of my brother, he said, why don't you say you're a carpenter? So they ask what are you doing, I said, I'm a Zimmerman, I'm a carpenter. So they assigned me to build observation towers, prefab homes. But the person in charge of it was a sergeant, German sergeant and he was a nice guy. He said I'm like a rabbit. I don't see what you do, he said, I'm looking other way. You got a birdie?

Q: I thought I heard --

A: I heard a bird.

Q: Yeah.

A: I hope he didn't fly inside. So what I did actually when I was in camp, I would risk my life and I would go in the farmers and then barter. I would get bread and some food. People gave me clothes, I would give it to them. And was very risky you know, they could shot me [indecipherable]. And -- but I knew the people and they knew me so they didn't want to be seen that I'm coming there, but somehow we [indecipherable] arrangement.

Q: And what did you have to barter with them?

A: People would give me some clothing.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: Or bring some clothing pri -- to exchange for food.

Q: Now who were the people?

A: In camp. In this camp, the one [indecipherable] the people who build the airport observation

Q: [indecipherable]

A: They were men and women.

Q: Yeah.

A: And they had -- they took clothes with them. And since w -- food was --

Q: Were they -- were these non-Jewish people?

A: Not -- all Jewish, all Jewish.

Q: They're all Jewish.

A: All Jewish.

Q: And they had extra clothes?

A: Well, when -- it were -- when we went to camp you could take your stuff --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- it was not a tr -- concentration camp. So they have extra clothes and was no food. So would say okay, here is a blouse, here's a pair of shoes, take it out, maybe you'll bring me some food.

Q: So they would give some to you.

A: Yeah, and a --

Q: Because they had more than you had, and --

A: Well, they had clothes and we didn't have any food.

Q: Okay.

A: So we did that. Before that, I also risked my life, my -- we walked the railroad cleaning out sludge, and that was very rough, my brother, my sister. And she had already two years of commercial schooling. So I risked my life and I got -- managed to get out of this gate, and there was a young German fellow, I had a Bar Mitzvah watch, I bribed him. I said, take it. And then he took in my sister to work in an office as a -- whatever she did have, but she didn't have -- allowed this -- this particular job. Also was very sad as I was going to exchange, it was a ch -- Russian camp and the Germans would patrol, of course, tried to avoid them. This was very, very sad. It was so sad, they had the Russian prisoners there. And the people -- again, they would starve them to death and then they would take people very weak, they call them musselmens, you know, just like skeletons, and they would make him go to Russian cemetery to bury them. But then the people -- and there was so many people buried there, the whole ground was soaking. Terrible. And then people -- they would shoot the guys who t -- who took them away. Fellow said, here's my wife and kids, they would just shoot them. The Russians lost 30 million

people during the war. You probably heard before. Was really, really sad. The Germans would come in and rape the girls, burn the farmers. So the Russians came back and took revenge to [indecipherable] I don't think they did nothing, you know, just -- of course the Ukraines, the people who [indecipherable] and they participated with Germans. They would -- so that's the story there. I was a carpenter in Lithuania also in Siauliai. Fix up steps, you know, I learned how to do it.

Q: Now, you -- you told them you were a carpenter.

A: Ye -- right.

Q: And did you know carpentry?

A: I didn't know [indecipherable] we were high school kids.

Q: So how did you --

A: They [indecipherable] carpenter, took my word for. And you're not -- th-they didn't give him a test anything else. And a carpenter, you know, I didn't have to be -- you start off with boards, and then, for instance, you pulled a big [indecipherable] you have 10 foot hammer so you knock it two or three sometimes [indecipherable]. In fact, I think the fellow I was under [indecipherable] was Catholics priest. So -- and he would -- they have a little bit extra soup after they wouldn't have enough, they would give us, and then we sit around. But we were not starving too bad in get -- in get -- in ghetto, we were okay food-wise. So --

Q: Yeah, some of these people working at the airport were not Jews?

A: They -- the germ -- they were tradesmen, German carpenters, but we were their helpers.

Q: I see.

A: They were not in the army, they were sort of like a -- army engineers or something like that.

Q: So they were German --

A: Right.

Q: -- but they were not in the army.

A: Right, they were not in the army.

Q: And did they have some Lithuanians --

A: No.

Q: -- who were not Jews [indecipherable]

A: No, they -- they -- the Germans were there and we were there, we worked for them.

Q: Okay, okay. So it wasn't as bad --

A: No.

Q: -- there, as it was later.

A: No, but -- but what happened --

Q: Did you -- did you see your family while you were living there?

A: We st -- yeah, w-we would -- no, at th-that time I didn't, but it was about maybe five or six months. But what happened, the reason again, people got very jealous of us because we were one of few families who survived. But my mother also went -- but then we came back -- several times would be raids. You know, people in ghetto, and they would take children and women. In fact, the person who stayed in our house, his wife disappeared, you know, and his three kids disappeared because he sent them away to the farmer and the farmer didn't bring them back, and that was it.

Q: How do you think it was that your family was able to survive that?

A: I think plain luck, plain luck --

Q: Yeah.

A: My dad was very -- first of all we -- the Russian didn't send them out. He got along, he was very well liked. But I think it was sheer luck.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Sheer luck and was really big jealousy because we were only one of a few. The family now, I really don't know. I really don't know how we survived, but I know we survived.

Q: Okay.

A: An --

Q: And -- and so you -- you could go back to visit your family in the ghetto occasionally, or --

A: No, but I was away for six months, eight months --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- and my dad and my mother was there, I don't know what they did. We couldn't commute, we di -- couldn't write. But I n -- I -- I did think about, but I knew they were there and then I came back, they were there.

Q: Okay.

A: And my brother was sent away, I don't know what happened to my sister when she was sent away, but she worked in German office in town.

Q: But you -- so you came back when the job was done --

A: Well --

Q: -- or they released you, or you escaped, or --

A: -- somehow, somehow, somehow I got back, I don't know what was [indecipherable] because we were then shipped to Stutthof, which is a concentration camp around Leipzig.

Q: Okay, I have to turn over the tape.

A: Right.

Q: So it will stop for a stop for a minute.

A: Well, good.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: -- of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Leonard Gordo, tape one, side B. Mr. Gordon, you were -- you started to say how you left the ghetto and were sent to the concentration camp.

A: Right. They separated the men and women.

Q: Now how did you know that you were -- what was the first note -- notice that something different was happening? What did they tell you?

A: I don't really remember.

Q: Okay.

A: I really don't remember. I really don't remember. I know it must have -- well, during the raids my sister was about [indecipherable] the German officers would come in and I don't know what happened [indecipherable] or not, but they -- not in the ghetto, we didn't go in th ghetto right away but we were living in the town. They came in and I don't really know what happened, but sh-she was attractive girl and was not a [indecipherable] what happened [indecipherable] come over there, she never took the [indecipherable] I don't know.

Q: Do you think they exploited her sexually?

A: She -- she would ne-never tell me. I really don't know. She was --

Q: So you don't know.

A: -- she was very tight lipped about it. She never talked anything about it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: At that time I was too young to think about it, but right now I really don't know. I really don't know what happened.

Q: Mm-hm, okay.

A: I really don't know, it just -- she -- and my mother never talked to me about it. Of course I wouldn't really want to be consulted.

Q: Mm-hm. So you don't remember how you were told --

A: We -- we were probably told that we're being transported, I'm sure.

Q: Okay, and that you'll have to go to a central place?

A: Right, and there were freight cars, you know, like freight cars and we got in Stutthof. Stutthof was on Leipzig, a concentration camp, and we had to strip --

Q: Now, di -- were you able to take any --

A: No.

Q: -- did you take anything with you?

A: No, whatever we -- we didn't take anything, and whatever we took we didn't get a thing, I didn't have a single syllable.

Q: Okay. And was it like a cattle car that you were in?

A: Right, yeah, freight cars, cattle cars.

Q: And --

A: I -- I don't know what they did for plumbing, whether there was a hole in the ground or not,

you know, during the transporting. And we were separated and --

Q: Do -- do you know how long you were in --

A: Well, probably Leipzig f -- I -- I'd have to look at a map, I thought it was about 24 hours at least.

Q: And this was what year?

A: That was 1944.

Q: Okay.

A: 1944.

Q: Okay.

A: And we were separated. My -- I didn't see my mother and sister, that was it.

Q: Now, separated how?

A: Men and --

Q: Men and women?

A: -- men and women. And then we had to strip and we went to --

Q: Now, were you with your father?

A: I was, my father and my brother.

Q: Okay.

A: We were together. It was not gas chambers, obviously. And in camp we slept three or four in a bunk to --

Q: Oh, you had to strip and then what?

A: And then they -- they took away everything and I think they gave us the clothing which is striped, you saw the concentration camp. I think they also cut our hair and have a läusestrasse, as

you know, he cut you like the Marine Corps, but the middle one is sort of a strip they call the läusestrasse, which is -- in German means the street for lice, but you -- like prisoners, you know, was just a big strip in -- in the middle and assigned us numbers. I-I lost my name.

Q: Did they give you a tattoo?

A: No, they didn't. At that time they stopped tat -- stopped st -- tattooing.

Q: Okay.

A: And I remember being people from Holland there in camp. Why did -- I liked them, they were very gentle. But we were starving to death, you know. The ration maybe was -- I don't know how many calories, maybe 500, and so forth. And I don't how long we were there. You know, we didn't work. We were just -- we start -- we were still starving, you know, just -- and then from there --

Q: So you were just there --

A: Just as a try -- a tr -- temporary assignment, temporary quarters or something like that. And then from there they sent us to Bavaria. Dachau. But Dachau is a hub, we were in the [indecipherable] camp. I -- I was in a camp called Mildorf, and --

Q: Now you went by train to Dachau?

A: Yeah, I didn't walk. So somehow -- probably by train.

Q: And do you know how long that was, on the train?

A: Well, I don't know, in Germany it's probably a couple of days, at least. And there again, they stripped us, and they took away the shoes. Even before that they took away the shoes because I had a broken toe. A big broken toe. What happened while I was in Lithuania was you know, the snow and this -- the wooden soles and heels, but no rubber, so the snow would stick to it, so it

formed like [indecipherable] corner, and we walked in the railroad and I lift up a rail beam and somehow my leg twisted and the -- the rail came on big toe and it broke it s -- dislocated it. They took me to camp, the doctor was drunk, and by the time he woke up, maybe three or four days, he said, well, it's grown together. So that was it, I have a dislocated toe from account of that. But then we were in -- in Mildorf and -- terrible. We got paper clothes, no [indecipherable]

Q: Paper clothes?

A: Paper clothes. And it was cold, no clothing, you know, we were freezing to death. And was a lot of raids, U.S. raids. And I was so --

Q: You mean bombing raids?

A: Bombing, right. And I was so miserable I didn't care. I would just sit -- everyone would run for shelter, but I was so miserable I would just delouse myself. Really. And next to the border was a four engine German plane, but everywhere bombed by allies, but they left us alone, you know, they would raid, the sir -- excuse me -- the siren would -- is okay?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: The sirens would, right, but I just -- you know, I was just miserable. And then they separated us again.

Q: Now, were you with your father?

A: I was with my father and my brother.

Q: And your brother.

A: And brother. And we were working -- we were building actually Messerschmitt, which is the German underground airport.

Q: Now, you -- you had been on the railroad before. Working on the railroads?

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A: No, we were -- repair the rail tracks.

Q: Yeah, you were repairing the rail tracks.

A: The rail tracks, but this time we were actually doing construction. We are building an underground airport for Messerschmitt, which is the --

Q: So this was in the same work camp?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: No, the railroad was in Lithuania, repairing.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: Railroads are in Lithuania but in Germany -- after being in Stutthof they transported us to Mildorf --

Q: Right.

A: -- which is a part of work camp [indecipherable] Dachau, but was not really Dachau.

Q: Okay, and that's where you were working on the underground --

A: Right, as a carpenter. And my dad and myself and my brother, we worked together and we had to walk in -- you know, back and forth and -- but we -- and there were a lot of conveyor belts and people would carry cement sacks on their back, but the conveyor -- conveyor belts were not used. Hungarian Jews -- and in fact I picked up to -- picked up a little Hungarian because they would always worry about what's evening, and I couldn't imagine why people had to peel potatoes, the potato shells taste so good. Or back home my brother and I would think, all the crumbs from Friday night, we could have had a meal. And my dad got very disappointed, said, let's commit suicide. He really -- he felt it's not making it. But the end they left him in the one

camp and took my brother and me in another camp.

Q: When -- when your father said let's commit suicide, what did -- how did you take that?

A: Well, he was just miserable, he just --

Q: Yeah, and how did you take that?

A: I -- I -- it didn't bother me. I was young, I just -- I didn't -- it's just -- it -- it didn't register.

Didn't register, but he already, because he lost from the Russians, you know, all his possessions, now they took everything away from him so he really was -- and he wasn't an old man, he was probably in the 40's, I just found out, he was [indecipherable]

Q: But it didn't affect you mentally --

A: No, no --

Q: -- as much --

A: -- no, it didn't affect me. And I know -- I didn't know how my father took it, but it didn't affect me at all.

Q: You think because you were younger?

A: Yeah, absolutely. Right now probably would hit me. And we were carpenters, and --

Q: N-Now this is you and your brother?

A: My and my brother, and --

Q: And you're separated from your father?

A: From my dad. And then what happened, we -- they moved us in the camp and they -- the housing was like bunkhouse, they dug a hole in the ground and they put a roof and put dirt on for insulation. So it was just like in the ground because it's cold out. But I remember they had kapos, which was a leader of the camp, and he said that he needs electricity for his bunk. And I had

tools, I had axes and so forth. And one time I went home and saw wires, so not thinking about, I took my axe and cut it. And the whole camp -- the construction site got dark. The Germans run around here, it must have been a power line, right now I thought about it. And I took the wire, [indecipherable] wrapped around all the wires and brought it to the camp. He never turned me in, they would have killed me right there. It was about -- they didn't know what happened. And he got electricity and a -- and our reward was he would give us ex -- a little bit extra soup. The soup was really watery soup and there probably was a couple slices of bread. Another thing happened to me once. I came back -- I was 16 and very skinny, and used to have selection. Selection is you strip half naked and a gentleman says -- there's left and right. Selections are very sensitive [indecipherable] among people who are in concentration camp. And somehow I sized up that he send me with the weaker ones. So I run away. I really run away in this particular camp. And the kapo ran after me. He beat me up, but I know how much, but in meantime he got somebody else, so to meet a quota. And we were with a lot of Hungarian people, Hungarians Jews, and they were very naïve, I thought. They -- I knew the people [indecipherable] crematorium, I knew that's gas chambers there, I already knew about it but nothing you can d-do about it. And somebody said the Scharführer [indecipherable] big pope or rabbi, he said it's too hard, the work is for hard, you'll be sending more people -- and s -- oh yeah, the Scharführer said something like that, but anyway, I was spared, I really was spared. And so one time I fell down -- I walked the scaffolding and a four by four was there, the whole scaffold collapsed and I was underneath that but my brother pulled me out, I wasn't hurt. And then became -- so I think we were there in camp maybe a year or so.

Q: Now, did you know anything about your father's whereabouts when you were separated?

A: Oh, I knew about my father's whereabouts, we would try to send him some food with some other people. I don't know how he got it. I knew it was November that he was beaten to death. I knew that. We got word and I start crying and the kapos give me a -- gave me a big kick in my rear, said look, you have to go on. He said, you can't bring him back. We knew that, that he was separated. I didn't know anything about my sister or my mother. Didn't know anything about them. So it's a story fact, when we were liberated we di -- we didn't know the right day he died, so my brother and I decided -- arbitrarily we picked a day because in our religion once a year we say a -- services for the person who passed away. And just recently I got record from my ca -- from a nephew. Now I knew when he was born, knew when he passed away. Which I didn't know before. And actually, in 1944 he was 46 years old. He was born ninete -- he was f -- he -- '44, he was 45 years old.

Q: So he was fairly young.

A: Very young. My mo -- okay, talking about I found out then I was -- I was -- you know, he pulled me out and then when the Germans retreated it was a famous march, you know, they tried to crew people together and we supposed to march. But nobody wanted to walk -- walk with me because they figured I would be a liability, I would collapse and they'd have to carry me. They put my brother in the former hospital and they beat him up and his whole leg was really cut up, you know, like a Y and they put him as sample patient. But luckily for us, I think it's sixth or seventh or the Third Army, U.S. Army came in three days before the camp management and [indecipherable] us to come. That's why we survi -- survived. And General Eisenhower --

Q: Now, so you never started the march?

A: No, the march never took place.

Q: But you were scheduled to.

A: We were scheduled -- we were scheduled to it. And general -- so -- and then we were liberated.

Q: Be -- before the liberation, before you knew you were going to be liberated, what kept you going?

A: Oh, it ha -- kept me going, two things. First of all, my brother and I were together.

Q: You were together the whole time.

A: All the time. We were not separated. Then, a friend of his who was in the sugar factory, she became a hostess to the German -- you know, whoever the management they had at camp, and whether she liked him or not she would throw over the fence her ration of bread so we would have more than the rest of them. So, you know, we were -- whatever it is, we felt we have a little bit more. Another thing happened. Whatever the slice of bread is, we would divide it in three sections so we'd have three meals a day. Some people would eat right away. Some people smoked, so that they trade the bread for some cigarettes. A lot of people had the runs, dysentery, and that kills you right away. We would drink the coffee beans, we felt it helps us. For instance, my arms swell up like that, and was a fellow said he was [indecipherable] must have been a surgeon, he cut me right here. He cut in, let a drainage go. I was frostbitten. But my brother had a good sense of humor, so guess what he said? Things are going good, now we're being liberated. Meaning that we have bread and everything else. Kept us going because we were together, we have a little bit more and we're carpenters. The people who were not carpenters, they would die by the droves, because they would work nights. In the morning you'll see the whole -- just two eyes full of cement. They would run around the kitchen, maybe something

leftover, so they wouldn't get any sleep. And the Hungarian people are very naïve, it really would make them mad. Like, we didn't have anything but probably shoes and a cup, and you see a person died, people were so -- see that all the teeth will move, you know, loose like. And [indecipherable] you don't need this -- you don't need the shoes, you didn't -- you don't need the -- the spoon, why don't give it to me? And I would get mad, I said look, this guy is -- you don't know how long he's live, leave him alone. I mean, how rude can you be? But that kept me going because we had a little bit more. But after the war was other problems, too. It's the [indecipherable] People -- we were starved to death so people ate so much and they died from that.

Q: Now, let's go back to when you were liberated. How -- how did that happen? What were you doing when you found out that --

A: They -- what happened then -- our being transported in Feldafing, which is not that far from Munich --

Q: No, this was after you were --

A: After liberated.

Q: Yeah, but before you were liberated, how -- what was the first news you had that you were being liberated?

A: Well, no -- the guards disappeared.

Q: The guards disappeared.

A: Disappeared, the gates opened up.

Q: That was the first thing you noticed?

A: Right, right.

Q: Until then you didn't know --

A: I didn't know anything.

Q: -- anything was happening.

A: But we did get word -- my brother did get word about invasion of Normandy. I don't know how he got it, but he -- we knew that the allies are coming soon. We knew that. But that kept us going. But other than that, it was routine, you know, we'd work every day. Work in the morning and come back at night and stay, get a little bit soup and bread, and --

Q: So the guards disappeared and the gates were open --

A: Open.

Q: And then what?

A: And the American -- the -- the G.I.s came in and I took pictures and I'm sure I'm in a lot of them. Because I was, in 1945 I was 20 years old, I think my weight was about 90 pounds. And you know, we had a Sing Sing clothes with a läusestrasse.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: We di -- I mean they were very upset, very, very upset, but -- and they transported to this camp, which Feldafing initially --

Q: Yeah, well now before that, what -- what did they do for you when they came in?

A: They -- they didn't do much, but I think they started giving us more food.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I'm sure that we -- I don't know where the food came from, from the kitchen or something like that, we -- I really don't remember the way that -- what happened.

Q: Okay. So then you were transported how?

A: Again, I don't know whether by cars or you know, the army trucks and we -- at that time we were taken care of by UNRRA, which is the American relief org -- an-and ORT, a Jewish organization.

Q: What was the Jewish --

A: ORT. ORT, it's -- I think was a trade organization which they -- and join -- Joint, which is Jewish something. Relief organization of United States. And actually, it was American G.I.s Jewish, just spoke Jewish and ask us [indecipherable] but were put in rooms. You know, maybe bunks, but we -- we got some clothes. Maybe army [indecipherable] but we didn't have the uniforms. And we were free to move around. In fact my brother started University of Munich, continue his e-engineering degree. And we were moved on, in fact have a -- being in camp you don't have any -- any documentation. I didn't -- I couldn't prove anything because everything was taken away. But one thing I have right now that [indecipherable] who is the mayor of Feldafing wrote a letter for me to the railroad people for me and my brother to get free passed to go to [indecipherable]. In fact, I think we even rented a room in [indecipherable] because he had to study there. [indecipherable] I don't know what happened. And [indecipherable] a train, we'd go -- min -- Feldafing is on Garmisch-Part-Partenkirchen, which is the German Olympics in the Alps. But that really happened. Really things were very bad, very, very bad, you know, we just ... other than that, a lot of people -- we were one of the worst camps. We had the rate, people would just die by -- by the droves. Other camps, lager 10 was a little bit softer, but ours was one of the worst ones. So --

Q: Now, when you were in the camp, what -- felt -- felton --

A: Feldafing, tha -- after liberation, yeah.

Q: Yeah, yeah. How long were you there?

A: I wa -- I couldn't live in Germany. Somehow I felt I have to get out. I really had -- I sort of felt I -- I sort of felt that I have to get out. And what happened, I speak Hebrew, and my brother speak Hebrew, so they made me a leader in movement to go to Israel. They made me sort of a manager, and they gave me a card so we'd go there. But then the Israeli brigade -- a soldier disappear-appeared, name of Ithzak, I don't know where from. And we had meetings and I think I was in Germany, must have been about a year.

Q: In this same camp?

A: Same camp.

Q: For a year?

A: Yeah.

Q: And during that time you were recovering and --

A: Well, I was recovering, my brother started going to school. I start to read [indecipherable] you know, I probably had other people read, study a little bit. I'm not sure whether I start to study English or not. But I was involved in this organization and I was really free.

Q: And you were t-trying to get ready to go to Israel?

A: Well, I really didn't know what to do. I have a very rich uncle in Africa. My -- but here --

Q: Where -- where in Africa?

A: Johannesburg, South Africa. And my brother wrote a letter to him, and he [indecipherable] and it wasn't really nice. He said look, the war is over, I'm not making as much money, and we felt how dare you, here people are getting killed. Your brother got killed, your whole brother.

Q: This was your father's brother?

A: Brother, in Johannesburg. And he sent us five pounds, which is -- you know. And he said go back to Lithuania, at least you have a bed to sleep in. We did not, we never sent him another letter. We felt we are really -- so we were free. I don't know what I did really except being there. I remember getting skis, skiing, we got a sailboat and had a washing machine. We lived in a villa. In fact, we lived in a villa [indecipherable]

Q: And how many people were living in the villa with you?

A: I'm not sure, but we weren't crowded. We weren't crowded, we lived -- we had -- I remember having washing machine there and then we found a sailboat, but [indecipherable]

Q: Was the villa within the camp, or --

A: No, it was outs -- outside.

Q: Outside, but related to the camp.

A: Right, in the area. In the area.

Q: Okay.

A: And then -- then I think I was -- I was in th -- in Italy probably in March.

Q: Now wait a minute, how did you get to Italy, you were --

A: This [indecipherable] this very brigade I think the -- the [indecipherable] the German and the Italian guards and they smuggle us through the Alps. They had the British army cars and they took us over there. [indecipherable]

Q: Now this was when? This was --

A: That was probably spring '66 -- '46.

Q: '46, so the war was over.

A: The war was over.

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Q: And you went to Italy on your own?

A: No, it -- organized. I mean we were sort of --

Q: Oh, okay.

A: We were sort of -- we were organized to go to Israel.

Q: Okay.

A: We were organized, and we would follow --

Q: Oh, so this was the first leg of your trip to Israel.

A: Correct, it was a -- we were trained to go to Israel.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: And we were to follow -- end up in Cyprus, because you know, they intervened and people end up in Cyprus. And then in Italy, once I decided I didn't want to go to i -- to united -- to Israel, or to --

Q: This is at Castle Gondolfa?

A: Castle Gondolfa.

Q: And was that sort of a --

A: It was a hotel -- it was a hotel that we stayed there.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I don't know about UNRRA, ORT paid for it.

Q: Okay.

A: In fact, [indecipherable] it's next to [indecipherable] I remember it.

Q: Right, okay.

A: In fact, I have a picture. We had a kitchen on there. And ORT decided -- asked me I want to

trade. So I was going to school learning how to be on the radios.

Q: To be a?

A: A radio technician.

Q: Radio technician, okay.

A: And we hired an English teacher, start reading English, but my English was lousy.

[indecipherable] but then I would take newspaper, and I bought a -- a dictionary and try to interpret the letters. And we stayed there til I arrived in this country --

Q: Now, you stayed there and while you were staying there, waiting to go to Israel, you decided you didn't want to go to Israel.

A: Right, so I sta --

Q: And why was that that you decided you did not want to go?

A: Because I got disappointed they -- their presentation of -- the Israeli who came over talk to us, I felt they're not sincere.

Q: Okay.

A: I just felt they are just -- they are just using the -- just -- I -- I -- it's just -- just lost faith in them. I just felt that I just -- I just didn't like them after awhile. I mean, I felt they shouldn't be in the black market. I mean, I shouldn't have seen it. You know whatever it is [indecipherable]. The American woman came in, they were all done with all make-up, I never was used to that. And now again a bad presentation, but -- so I was pretty busy and my brother was busy, he -- I th -- I'm not sure whether he was going to school [indecipherable] studied English and we st -- go to school, both of us went to be radio technicians or electronic technicians. And we stayed there til I came this country in November '47.

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Q: Now, how did you get to this country?

A: I have a cousin who lives in Washington and her mother -- I really don't know to this day, but I think her mother died and my mother was very nice to her. She raised her. And her dad came to this country and remarried, so she -- and finally he sent her papers. So she came to this country when she 15, was very smart. She sent us pictures when she was 16, graduated from high school. And she kept ri -- writing us letters and send us 10 poun -- 10 dollars and said --

Q: Now this was before the war, or --

A: No, after the war.

Q: -- after? After.

A: After the war, and said come to United States and I don't have anyone, I don't have a family, and she kept send us clothes and --

Q: And how was she your cousin?

A: She -- ma -- her -- I don't really know, I think her mother wa -- and my mother were sisters. And her mother died --

Q: Okay.

A: -- so my mother raised her, and I --

Q: In your house?

A: No, I don't remember it, but she must have been in our house because --

Q: Okay.

A: -- in our house, I remember, we'd always have guests for a month or two, from [indecipherable] Friday night, my dad would always pick up a guest from si -- from synagogue. Saturday morning we picked up a guest. We always had a lot of people staying in our house. I

guess we were considered well-to-do in [indecipherable] small town. So she actually bombarded us to come this country.

Q: You and your brother?

A: Yeah, my sis -- she also took over my sister, but my sister was smart, Anna was smarter than that, she knew she didn't want to go to Israel. So she stayed in Germany and came from Germany directly to United States. And she came the year -- she bo -- must have arrived in '46 or '45. She came earlier. So my sister already was in United States.

Q: And did this cousin help your sister get here?

A: Yeah, yeah, she did.

Q: So your sister was in touch with this cousin?

A: Right, right.

Q: And how did you find out about your sister after the war?

A: I got word of her, she was somehow -- she was in Russia, but somehow the borders were not permanent and she managed to come to Czechoslovakia back in our camp. In fact, I had a coat for her, you know, a nice coat which I gave to her then. But she knew, my sister knew that she didn't want to go to Israel. She didn't -- she didn't want to, she -- she knew.

Q: And how did you learn about your mother?

A: I never did. I never did. I learned through friends -- my sister never spoke about it, and -- but other -- you know, the march that never took place in our camp, took place in Poland, it was very cold.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And the story I got, that my mother and my sister were together, and they were walk -- and

my mother was younger. She -- she always -- anyway, what -- the story I got that my mother felt she couldn't make it, and she had a sweater. So she gave the sweater to my sister for protection and she probably fell back, and she froze to death. But she could have been, if my dad was 45, she probably was two or three years younger.

Q: Mm-hm. So, you had this cousin in Washington, and she said come.

A: Right, she sent us papers.

Q: Okay.

A: What -- what did she spend -- I think we also had -- I have friends, not relatives who very, very much proud of my mother from a small town of -- I'm not sure who send the money, but my cousin was administrator, she went to embassies and everything else, sent us the papers.

Q: And that was in '46?

A: '47.

Q: '47.

A: '47.

Q: So you came from Italy to Washington?

A: New York, was Staten Island -- Staten Island?

Q: Yeah.

A: And then they met me on a train, and I came to Washington.

Q: Mm-hm. So you came through New York, but you came directly to Washington?

A: Right, right. As a matter of fact, it was -- my cousin, she's a nice person but she -- I never saw corned beef in my life, you know, I didn't know that. She gave me corned beef sandwiches, but right now she's not telling me how expensive it is, I didn't know that. And even in Italy we had --

we -- somehow we had a suit made there and they put in lining to your knees, you know, you -- and I had a suitcase and we dyed sheets -- they have a cover for the suitcase [indecipherable]. So that was it, and so we stayed. We didn't stay wi-with my cousin at all, she had five kids. She lived North Capital, you know, where the printing office is, here under Union station. But we stayed with the friends of mine who had a small grocery store where Griffin [indecipherable] is, there where the [indecipherable] start, on Peace Street and Georgia Avenue, tiny little store. And we stayed with them and they were so -- I don't know, you know, we sleep -- slept there and --

Q: Now, were these people that you had known in Europe?

A: No, they knew my mother. I never knew them, they knew my mother.

Q: Okay, but they were from Europe.

A: Yeah, they were from the same town.

Q: Okay.

A: And then someone knew the owner of Giants, Greer Conn. The rabbi of my cousin knew Conn and they need people. So I got a job in Giants putting up stock.

Q: And did you continue to live with these people that you started with, or --

A: No, I lived with them for a month, but then I lived with my sister for about -- til I got married. I got married in 1950. And my brother-in-law and my sister, she didn't have children, I would give my whole salary to support her. And my cousin Esther had a grocery store on the same street, so -- and after awhile I felt, I said I need a little bit more money for myself too, you know, I can't give all that. I started to working 54 hours a week for 27 and a half dollars [indecipherable]

Q: Well now, when you came to this country did you know some English?

A: I thought I did, but I spoke very fast and I probably still do. I thought I did, but obviously I didn't. And then I started going to Americanization school, yeah. And I got [indecipherable] Central High. And they liked me, they gave me a good recommendation, they told me [indecipherable] would take the streetcar [indecipherable] the streetcar.

Q: And how did you meet your wife?

A: Youth Community Center, 16 [indecipherable] Street, it was a dance. She liked my red cheeks. And she was true American born, from the navy, and --

Q: American born?

A: Yeah, very much, very patriotic. Pittsburgh. She came in '42, they drafted her to work for the navy, and we start dating and -- and I didn't -- I didn't really like to leave my sister. I didn't like my brother-in-law, he -- he made me sort of uncomfortable. Any evening I would eat, he would tell me how much a meal like that would cost outside. I just -- it's just that I didn't [indecipherable]. And he got a good break, because -- but I didn't like it, he -- he would just go -- we didn't have any money [indecipherable] washed and his nails done. I said gee, something's not right here neither. So I stayed with them til 1950.

Q: So you stayed with them til you got married?

A: Right.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And then we moved out to a rental apartment in southeast Washington.

Q: Mm-hm. Now you were working in the grocery store, and then what happened from there?

A: Well, what happened was there people liked me. And what happened, I was putting up stock, but then I got wind if you be a cashier and if you worked a whole week and you come in within a

dollar, you get five dollar bonuses. So I became a cashier. I liked that. But then they promised me to make me assistant manager, or manager, but that never happened. Once [indecipherable] from United States run out, people from Canada came in. And I always was first fiddle, but I never could lead the band, you know, it always bothered me. And the hours are terrible. If they don't like you -- first of all, leave money, you can't -- if you have to go to the bathroom you can't do it, because it's money. And the managers play games with you, they don't like you. Like you would work from nine to nine, with two breaks. If they don't like you, they send you for lunch half an hour at eleven and then three, from three til nine, it's a long day. So I complained to my wife and she never told me what to do, but I cannot complain because I was [indecipherable] and one time she said, you know what, she said, you'll be gray and old and still be smiling to the womans down there. Because now a young fellow would come the summertime with shorts two sizes too small and throw yourself at him. So that's the register. So I went up at school in the Capital Radio Engineering Institute, on 16 and Columbia, and I said look, I have a high school diploma, I can't prove it. And I took the radio school, is there any chance for me to enroll in your night school? They say oh, we'll think about it. And then they called me up, said we'll you exam. And apparently I did well on the math part, because I'm sure my [indecipherable] was lousy, and they accepted me. So I told the manager I'm going to school. He was a good guy, he said I hate you. I said why do you hate me? He said, I have to rearrange the whole -- everybody's schedule to meet your school schedule, whole school -- oh -- and store [indecipherable]. But he did it. I mean, he complained, he did it. And I started going to school but I found out I didn't have the language, so I really was struggling the first two years, my grades were lousy. C minus, barely made it, but they didn't get mad. They didn't get mad, and

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after two years I got the nick of it, I picked up very nicely. So I quit Giants and worked in various repair shops like Phillip's and George's and they fired me.

Q: So what was -- what was your training in the school?

A: It's sch -- o-official training?

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, I think I'm equivalent to high school from back home.

Q: And well, i-i-it was a trade that you studied?

A: I studied a trade in Italy, how to make radios.

Q: No, but at this --

A: No, that was a junior college, the --

Q: A junior college.

A: Junior coll -- a technical.

Q: Technical.

A: Technical college, very good with [indecipherable]

Q: And so when you finished you had?

A: You got associate degree [indecipherable]

Q: In?

A: In electronics.

Q: In electronics.

A: In electronics.

Q: Okay. That's what I --

A: And we had more electric --

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Q: -- wanted to understand.

A: -- more subject than you get from a B.S. in college.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: I mean, you got 80 credit hours. Strictly, the school didn't concentrate so much in math and -- but really to the point, you know, electronics lab, transmission, the whole nine yard.

Q: So a lot of practical stuff --

A: A lot of very practi --

Q: -- you could get a job with.

A: More than practical stuff. Maybe not high powered math, but we could design th-the -- well.

In fact I was so naïve I thought I can buy a television station now.

Q: We have to turn over the tape.

A: Sure.

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Leonard Gordon. This is tape number two, side two. And did you have more schooling, or --

A: Yes, I had quite a bit more schooling after I went to Capital Radio Engineering Institute, which I thought was a very good practical electronics school. I got a job in the navy, the David Taylor Model Basin, which is a resource organization. And I went to GW University and I took courses in math and physics and I became a professional person, I became electronic engineer. And during my third year I took awful lot of courses. I took courses in acoustics in Catholic University, American University. A lot of courses were given at our campus like speed reading, English, management. I was a government representative for contracts. Actually my career was very s -- very colorful, and I think I -- probably if I add -- add up all my courses, probably equivalent to a Masters degree in electronic engineering.

Q: And what was your primary job?

A: In the navy I was a electronic engineer and my job was to design special equipment that we couldn't purchase. And it took quite a bit to do, I had to do some research development, because I was in acoustics and a lot of equipment was not available. In fact, I dese -- developed a system which I applied for a patent, but tat -- it so happened with [indecipherable] I never received it. When -- and I was in charge of abs -- obtaining the whole system for the scale model equipment which we performed at a lot of experience in the [indecipherable] which is a [indecipherable] pristine lake. My -- I was charged with the work with the whole data acquisition system and analysis system. And this project turned out to be a very big success for the navy. As a matter of

fact, they're testing right now on the new submarines, the future submarines on the navy.

Q: Could you talk about your religious life after the war?

A: Yes, my -- I grew up the religious family, but that was a way of life back home, my dad, we didn't work on Saturday, went to synagogue, my mother would prepare all the foods on Friday. But when I came to this country, not that I was not religious -- religious, but we kept a kosher home, but we would eat out -- out, and I would not attend as much the religious services as I guess was expected of me. Of course my son was Bar Mitzvah, my daughter was confirmed, we had a party. But after my wife passed away -- also, my son was going to Hebrew school, and then after Hebrew school he was going to meet [indecipherable] which was part of Hebrew academy. And I really never knew how much he knew as far as religion is concerned. But when my wife passed away I stayed with him for about a month and he observed -- in the Jewish tradition if we -- someone loses a parent, he observe for a whole year and say special prayers. And here our son, in Orthodox synagogue conducting services, and I was very much impressed by it. And after that I thought, since my son can do it, I should be able to do it too. And as a result of it, I'm training, I'm doing various parts of the religious services in our synagogue. I'm conducting services in the evening. I attend Friday night services. I'm going in the morning for services, maybe not every day but I turned back to -- towards religion.

Q: Have you been back to Europe since you left?

A: No, I -- I went in 1950, it was our 25th anniversary, we went to Israel. It was a very successful trip but in Europe I didn't have desire to go back. I was in business in England and one time, but I've -- really don't have any desire to go to Germany or to Lithuania. Reason being, I somehow cannot -- feel very uncomfortable being in Germany. In Lithuania I'm actually afraid of my life,

because even wa -- even though I was very young, I know the town. We were in a town about 30,000 people and I think about 8,000 Jewish people and I'm afraid that I'm living evidence that I'm alive and people might not be happy about it and I'm really afraid of my life.

Q: And about your trip to Israel, how was that for you?

A: Well, I was in Israel twice. The first time I was with my wife and we were th -- there I think a month, and we were in [indecipherable] which I was very comfortable. We took tours. Of course, I did not live with the Israelis, we lived in hotels. But I was very comfortable, I could read a paper, I could understand the newspaper. And I was very impressed that people, Jewish people are sweeping the streets, and are doing maintenance and building equipment. Like the day we left, a person came in four in the morning and said, I'm a Jewish [indecipherable]. And he brought us coffee, I was very comfortable. Now, just last year, it's I think '98 I went to Israel, B'nai Brith for a month. And something happened to me, I got sick, Marge got sick, so I could not -- I could see but not as well, but I thought that Israel changed quite a bit. More competitive and I think I just -- it's really different when I thought it should be. People are more interested in what they can get out of you and which house do you live, they live in a villa. It just did not impress me that -- that's the country should be run like that.

Q: So would you say you were disappointed?

A: Somewhat. I really was -- what -- I was happy, I met a friend of mine who is a professor in Haifa University and he lives in Hallal, which is north of Haifa, which is a small farm. He was very happy to see him. Also, a friend of mine we see there, a lady friend, she gave me a picture from a high school, which I never had and she drove me around. She was very nice, but generally the fabric of Israel, it's, in my opinion it's changed quite a bit.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: People are more materialistic which you know the fir -- after two minutes, how much money do you make? And I felt it's not proper.

Q: Mm-hm. What about reparations?

A: Well, being in concentration camp, the German government I think was Eidenhower, decided to pay back for the atr-atr-atrocities that they did to people being in camp. But at that time I felt it's bloody money.

Q: Wha -- I -- you said Eisenhower decided to do that?

A: And a -- a -- no, Eidenaur -- Edenauer.

Q: Oh, Adenauer.

A: Adenauer, Adenauer. And I felt that it's bloody money, I didn't want any part of it, therefore I didn't apply. But recently, after I retired I felt well, a little bit of money would help. And I applied the commission, I wrote an essay, my experience in camp, and after several years it was accepted. And the people ask me for income tax return, and I read in -- in the Washington Post that if your income for a single person 16,000 dollars and a family 21,000 dollars, that your claim will not be honored. So even though I'm entitled to it, I doubt I'll get any money.

Q: Mm-hm. Do you have some feelings about that?,,

A: Yes, I felt my being in camp does not have anything to do with how much money I earned.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I-I -- I don't know wha-what's the si -- situation is in New York, who is the executor and wh-who-who makes the policies, I really don't know.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: In fact just recently I spoke to my accountant and he said well, your income, it's old a -- old age pension and social security. And I felt I meet a criteria but he send away my papers and I was rejected saying under my circumstances they cannot pay me any remuneration for -- because I was in camp.

Q: Can we go back to when you came to this country? Did you speak English?

A: I thought I did. After deciding that I didn't want to go to Israel, I tried to learn English. I was in Italy then. I think my brother and I hired an English lady, which she gave us some le-lessons. But I'm not sure how much I knew about it. For instance, five [indecipherable] I spoke very fast. But I tried to interpret it, I would buy a new -- an English newspaper and a dictionary and try to make sense out of it. And then when I came to this country I si -- I thought I could speak quite well, but apparently people did not understand me too well. And then I tried very much, I took Americanization school, I took college English. I t -- I tried to learn as much as I can. I also tried very much to lose my accent, but apparently after pu-puberty, y-you don't have too much of a chance.

Q: So you worked hard at it.

A: I really did. I married American -- person who was ma -- born in the United States, who spoke English at home. And she was American as apple pie. All her family are veterans. But -- we didn't speak any other language at home but English. And I didn't speak as much Yiddish, which is Jewish, with my sister, you know, occasionally we would do it. But I c-c -- I could not lose my accent, but I tried to be as American as -- as possibly I could be.

Q: Was it difficult for you to learn and adjust to American customs?

A: I don't think so. I think it's -- I'm very appreciative towards the country. I think they were

very helpful to me. I mean I -- they didn't help me that much, but they didn't hinder me neither.

For instance, I worked in Giant food stores and I told the manager that I'd like to go to school.

He had to rearrange the whole schedule, I don't know whether 50 people, 100 people. He said he hates me, but nevertheless it was just a matter of speech, he did it, and I had a chance to go to school at night, which I was very much appreciative of it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Now that -- probably I would not remain an employee of Giants. So in general I think this country was very nice to me. I became a citizen after being married, without any difficulty. I didn't have any -- I did -- I wasn't -- I never felt I was being discriminated because of my belief, I worked for various jobs, on assembly line and never was mentioned that well, you're Jewish or something. I never felt discriminated, ever.

Q: Mm-hm. Did you have friends who were survivors?

A: Yes, in the beginning we had friends because we went to Americanization school and we sort of huddled together, but after awhile these sort of -- each one went their own ways and -- I had a friend that moved away to Boston and then he ended up to Israel, he -- and I -- each -- after we got married each one sort of [indecipherable] friendship dispersed.

Q: Did you talk about your experiences with your wife and other people?

A: Not really. We -- it was not -- no secret, but we never dwelled on it at -- I was in camp there for [indecipherable]. If I would not have been in camp I would have been this and that. I was busy going to school and trying to do good on my job. And my wife worked all the time, she also tried to -- we had -- we had a little bit money problems raising a family, our incomes were not as big and we tried to get a -- our children as much education we can. For instance they went

-- they took piano lessons, they took dancing, they do everything which kids are doing. And we were involved into that but we never dwelled because we -- I was in camp, that -- that is just the past time and you just go on with life.

Q: Your wife worked?

A: Yes, she worked her whole life actually, she started off -- she was with Pittsburgh [indecipherable] and they recruited her in 1942 for the navy. And she would work late hours to support the fleet, typing by hand, you know, three and four pages, before we had a word processor, for [indecipherable] make sure that the [indecipherable] fleet has all the parts. She worked for, I think the air force -- I mean, the air -- the navy air in the temporary buildings [indecipherable] the Constitution. And then she worked there, but at that time I think women were not considered equal. And no matter what she did, all those people from the naval academy, or whoever they were s -- they took all the credit. So she actually got mad and got a job at the labor department and they recognize her ability and she did very well. She worked in personnel and she moved herself up very nicely.

Q: Mm-hm. Back to talking about your experiences. Did you tell your children what you had been through?

A: No, I ne -- I never -- I never shied away with it, but we never went to a lengthy discussion that I was in camp, or what happened. I -- they knew they didn't have grandparents and I'm sure they figured out, but it was never brought up. I heard my son one time wrote a very nice paper about the Holocaust. It was very -- I think he was a teenager, 13 or 14, I really don't remember how old he was. It was very thorough. I don't know where he got the information, but I wasn't the one who supplied him with the information.

Q: Have you been to the Holocaust Museum?

A: Once. I was in the Holocaust Museum because being a survivor I'm getting -- and occasionally I contribute a little bit when asked, for fundraising. And oh -- I have sort of trouble, I get very emotional about it. But I was just recently where it was made a film about the Jewish brigade. People from Chicago and it was one soldier who was in the brigade. The film was okay, but after there was commentary and I thought that they said that General Eisenhower said that he would send people back where they came from. And I don't think that was true because I feel that I'm -- my life I'm -- my life to General Eisenhower. We were in camp, and we were liberated. I'm not sure whether it was the third or Seventh Army, but three or four days prior, the time that it -- people -- the camp authorities, so to speak, thought th-the -- the allied forces would come in. I don't think I would have made that three or four days. And General Eisenhower came to our camp, Feldafing was a hith -- Hitler youth camp, and after that they put in refugees they called displaced persons. And I was away from him maybe an arm's length. I was very much impressed with him. He was tall, handsome, with army boots and he was very much disturbed, his eyes were filled with tears. So I really don't agree what people said, that he want to send people back to where they came from. And also they mentioned that in the camp they were not Jewish and they were very upset. I'm not sure which camps the brigade came in, but our camp was solid Jewish. We were part of Dachau.

Q: Mm-hm. Well, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

A: Well, shall we talk about my children?

Q: Oh, okay.

A: My wife and I raised two children, Mark and Marcia. They were -- right now they've bor -- my son was born 1956, and my daughter in '59, and we're very proud of them. I think -- they're pro -- they are professional now. My son is a surgical oncologist and my daughter is a dentist. He went to Northwestern University and was a biomedical engineer. And then he had several acceptances to medical school. He went to Northwestern University Medical School, and then he did his surgil -- surgical residency in Cornell, New York for five years, and then he did a fellowship in Sloan-Kettering and now he's private practice in White Plains. I feel he is a very good surgeon and is a very good man. He published several papers. His paper was one the first ones International Congress in Toronto a few years back. I'm not sure where he's publishing now. My daughter again, she went to Washington University and she was double major, she had a teacher's certificate in biology and she was accepted in several -- early admission to several dental schools. She ended up going to nor -- Northwestern University and then she did a internship for the navy, I think [indecipherable] for -- for the navy, I think, there were about 90 - 100 applicants for one person to accept it, and she was the one. And she published several papers there. And right now she is practicing with her husband who is also a dentist in Baltimore. And I think -- maybe I'm prejudiced, but I think she is a crackerjack dentist.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I have grandchildren right now. My son has three children. In fact, I was -- just came from Bar Mitzvah for my grandson, th -- his name is Benjamin, I think he did a fabulous job. He's a good kid and my daughter has two children, Rebecca and Adam and I'm very proud of them.

Q: Mm-hm. And your son has one child?

A: Three.

Q: Oh, three, and --

A: Yes, three.

Q: -- and who are the -- what are the names?

A: Oh, the other one, then he -- the oldest one is Benjamin, then he has two girls, the oldest one is Samantha and the younger one is Molly. Molly is really a tomboy, she is not -- she is not afraid of anything.

Q: Mm-hm. Okay, is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

A: I don't think so, I think we --

Q: Okay, well thank you very much for giving your testimony. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Leonard Gordon. Thank you.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Conclusion of Interview