United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Guenter Lewy
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PREFACE

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GUENTER LEWY
March 18, 2013

Gail Schwartz: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Guenter Lewy, conducted by Gail Schwartz on March 18, 2013 in Washington, DC. This is track number one. What is your full name?

Guenter Lewy: Guenter Lewy.

Q: And that is the name you were born with?

A: Right.

Q: When were you born and where were you born?

A: I was born on August 22, 1923 in a town at the time called Breslau, the capital of Silesia in Germany. Now it's called Wrocław and it's part of Poland.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family, about your parents, who they were and their names.

A: My father, Henry, was born in **Mamel** [ph] which is in, near East Prussia. It's now a military base of Russia I believe. And he moved to Silesia, at some point. I don't know exactly when. And eventually landed in Breslau where he was in business. His name was Henry because his father had been an Anglophile and that led to all kinds of complications to which we can return perhaps for Kristallnacht. Would you like me to talk about it now? Let's talk about it later. Yeah, my mother **Rosa Lipziger** [ph] and her maiden name, was born in a small town in Silesia, called **Schlictenstein** [ph]. At some point she must also have moved to Breslau and my father, they got married. I don't know the exact date.

Q: And what kind of work did your father do?

A: My father was a small businessman. I don't think he was very successful. I'm not sure exactly why that was so because at the times he was a Jew and it was getting difficult to do business in Germany, obviously, during the Nazi period in particular. He had a wholesale store for stockings and socks.

Q: And your mother, did she work?

A: No, she did not. We were two children. I had a small brother who unfortunately died in an accident at an early age. I think he was eight so I was the only child. But my mother did not work.

Q: And your brother's name was?

A: Franz.

Q: What kind of neighborhood did you live in? Was it a Jewish, a non-Jewish mixed neighborhood or was it predominantly Jewish?

A: I really don't think there were Jewish neighborhoods in Breslau at the time. Things were very intermixed which is quite typical of course for German Jewry who as you know were well assimilated by and large. We lived in two locations. I went back to **Velatslav** [ph] some 15 years ago, the first neighborhood where we had lived, didn't exist anymore and the second one hardly at all either. So we lived in two locations. We had an apartment and we had a maid which was kind of expected for any middle class Jewish family, even though my father could hardly afford it but he did have one.

Q: So your neighborhood was made up of Jewish and non-Jewish children whom you played with I assume.

A: Yeah, I went to a regular German public school. Whether there were any other Jewish children in that class, I can't remember. Certainly, possibly not. Certainly in the, in the

elementary school. Later on I transferred to a gymnasium, a high school and there probably were other Jewish children in that class. Now I think I was allowed to stay in this German high school because my father had been a what they call a **frontkempfer** [ph], somebody who had fought in combat in World War I, and Jews who had that status had at the beginning certain privileges. One of them was that while other Jewish children had to leave the German schools, I was allowed to stay in that gymnasium for a little longer. But eventually we all had to leave anyway and I transferred to a Jewish gymnasium and I went to that school until 1938.

Q: Do you remember when you transferred, what year it was when you transferred?

A: I'm not sure. I would think it probably was 37.

Q: 37.

A: Something like that.

Q: Let's talk a little bit more about your family. Were they very assimilated?

A: Quite, yes. My parents did go to synagogue on high holidays. I think the synagogue, the largest in Breslau, was probably conservative. There was Pesach in our family which my father could not conduct but we had an uncle who did know the ritual and he usually conducted the Seder. And there was a large gathering. I would think perhaps about 12, 14 people at Pesach time. But that was about it. I was bar mitzvah. But that was kind of expected. It was socially expected so it was more a social ritual than a religious one. I certainly had no strong religious feelings one way or the other. I liked the bar mitzvah. I got lots of presents. So basically our family was yes, assimilated. My father belonged to an organization called **Risebund Judische Front Soldaten** [ph] . That meant the national organization of Jewish combat soldiers in World War I. He was very proud of that. And again that was a fairly typical attitude on the part of German Jews at that time.

Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: What did you expect? German.

Q: Let's talk also now about your extended family. You mentioned about your uncle helping to conduct the Seder. Did you have a large extended family?

A: We had a large family yes.

Q: On both sides. On your mother's –

A: On both sides. Very large family, including grandparents. I enjoyed visiting my grand – one of my grandparents lived in a town near where my mother had been born, also in Silesia. I enjoyed visiting there. I had some friends there. The most successful in our family was my mother's brother. He had a business, wholesale business in woods and was very successful. He was really quite rich. And he had been a, also an officer in World War I. He was altogether a very stately German appearance, tall, straight. There is an interesting story connected to him which I think would be of interest.

Q: His name?

A: His name was **Friedel Lipziger**. Lipziger was my mother's maiden name. He considered himself even more German than anyone else in our family because of his background and I remember a family gathering, must have been around 1936 and I, being all of 13, dared to say, I was in a youth movement. I'll come back to that later. I dared to say that perhaps one should think of emigrating and you know this was 36, three years into the Nazi regime. My uncle took me by the scruff and shook me back and forth and said what do you understand about such things? Ok, that was in 1936 I believe. He very soon however must have had, begin to have second thoughts. So to be on the safe side, he started to ship out money, illegally of course and one of the couriers who had my uncle's money was caught and he had a list of names. So one afternoon, my uncle got a telephone call from the police chief of Breslau. Now mind you, Breslau was a city of 600,000 people so the police chief was quite somebody. It so happened that

he was a war comrade of my uncle. And he said Friedel, this and this has happened. I give you three hours. You must get out of town. Otherwise I will come to arrest you. So my uncle took his family, his wife and daughter and got on a train and left for Paris. So that was the end of my uncle who had thought that it was stupid to think of emigrating. He then from France got to Brazil where he again opened a highly successful wood business, which was very appropriate for Brazil and he became perhaps even richer than before.

Q: Let's talk about your life from 1923 to 1933, until Hitler came into power. What memories, I know you were a child, you were only ten years old but –

A: I have memories. I have rather –

Q: Talk about some of those memories.

A: Well for one thing, I belonged to a youth movement and that is important for me.

Q: At that young age?

A: Yes, I must have joined perhaps when I was eight, nine, very early. This was a youth movement which called itself German Jewish Boy Scouts. And German Jewish was more German than it was Jewish. We sang German songs and we had a little uniform and flags and we would parade up and down and go on hikes and so forth and so on. It also was kind of romantic. It, the German youth movement has been described by writers like **Walter Laqueur** and others and it had this romantic flavor to it. You were opposed to the philistines and you dreamt of some wonderful future in which you would be important, intellectually perhaps. And so this I think in many ways was very important for my own thinking and, and future life. It sort of shaped me quite significantly I believe. Then came Hitler in 33 and we were forbidden to use uniforms. And then we were also forbidden to go on hikes and on the last hike that we had staged we were attacked in the middle of the night and had to leave and go home.

Q: Attacked because you were a Jewish group?

A: Because we were a Jewish group, hiking which we were – and, and having a camp which we're not supposed to have anymore. But they hadn't informed us that formally so we still were doing it. So that was the end of hiking and –

Q: Who was the leader of your group? The adult leader?

A: The leader of my group was someone called Walter Laqueur who was quite known as an historian. He was all of two years older than we were in this group but he was our leader. That's how he was known. And we would get together and several times a month and read things and discuss things or listen to classical music and so forth and so on. Then about 1934 it must have been, perhaps 35, our organization merged with a Zionist organization called **Zichloiter** and that organization in turn eventually became part of **Hashomer Hatzair**. And the Hashomer Hatzair is something that eventually became known in Israel as **Mapai**, as you probably know. So our, the character of our life changed in many ways. We all of a sudden started to sing Jewish and Hebrew songs and learn something about our Jewish background of which we were frightfully ignorant until then. And we became kind of Zionists, gradually. And this went on for a few years. And then came Kristallnacht in November of 1938.
Now shortly before that I had gone to a farm in southern Germany in preparation for going to what was then Palestine. And it was called **Hasharav** [ph]. That term means something for you. And we were there, about 30 Jewish kids and we were learning agriculture. And on Kristallnacht the first thing we heard things over the radio. And it was too late to leave so we sort of barricaded ourselves and hoped for the best. But sure enough a large group of storm troopers eventually appeared and attacked and beat us up rather badly. And some people were hurt. And the event dispersed and everyone went home. When I came home my father had been arrested, like all German Jews at the time, all male German Jews and taken to a concentration camp. He was taken to **Buchenwald**. And now I come back to Henry, my father's name. As I said his father had been an Anglophile. He had been called Henry. Came World War I and my father volunteered for military service to fight against the perfidious Albion. You could not be called Henry. So they changed his name to Heinrich. So some of his papers were Heinrich and some of his papers were Henry. And of course that became a cause Celebrex for the German

bureaucracy in the camp. They didn't know what to make of it. And he therefore was one of the last to get out.

The procedure was that you would, they would let people out from the camp, if they had a place to go to, to emigrate. The whole, one of the main purposes of the arrest of the male Jews was to put pressure on them to leave the country. At that time, and that is also confirmed by written documents that we have. The main idea was to push the Jews out, get rid of them. And so if you had a place to emigrate to, they would release you. But because of my father, with this mix up of names, he was one of the last to get out, even though we had a possibility to leave.

Now this is, this involves the following. My father's brother and sister had been early Zionists. They had belonged to a German Zionist organization called Blue White, **Blau Weis**, very well known. And they left for Palestine in the 20s already and had become well established in Palestine. My aunt, my father's sister was a librarian at the Hebrew University. My, his brother was a well-known architect in Jerusalem. And they tried to get permission for my parents to come to Palestine.

Q: Their names?

A: Bruno Lewy and Alma **Shunami**. She married a man who became quite well known after World War II, Alex Shunami, because he was sent by the **Yeshuv** to Europe. He was a librarian as well to recover stolen German books and became quite well known in that capacity. He was very successful. He got a Jeep and an American chauffeur and he was able to move all around and recover German books by the thousands, stolen Jewish books by the thousands. Anyway that was my aunt's husband. They tried to get permission for my parents to come to Palestine but the British did not let any adults in. They let young people in, but not adults.

Q: Was your father a Zionist?

A: No, not at all but you know by that time he had realized. I mean after Kristallnacht in particular –

Q: Preceding that, he had not been.

A: They may have been thinking about emigrating but nothing concrete had happened. The problem, as you probably know, was to find a place to take you. The problem was not to get out of Germany but to find a place to take you. There was legal emigration out of Germany until October 1941. So the problem was to find a place, not to get out, get permission to leave the country. The Nazis were pushing the Jews out.
So he had no place but my uncle in Jerusalem worked very hard on this and it didn't move forward. So as an interim measure, they came up with the following. My uncle's wife was from Vienna and her brother was Grand **redam** [ph] de Luxembourg so the chief rabbi of Luxembourg, the chief rabbi of Luxembourg. So they arranged for a permit for my parents to go to Luxembourg. And so I left in March of 39 for Palestine with Youth Aliyah, because I wanted to be in a kibbutz there. And my parents shortly thereafter left for Luxembourg. So I came to Palestine in March of 1939 and went to a kibbutz.

Q: We'll get to that. How did your parents feel about your desire to go to Palestine?

A: They were not crazy about it. They would have preferred if I had stayed with them, but they respected my wish and accepted it.

Q: And you were 16 by then?

A: I was 15.

Q: Let's go back in time a little bit.. You were ten years old when Hitler came into power.

A: Right.

Q: What did he mean to a ten year old boy? Did you have any, do you remember any speeches he made or appearances?

A: I remember speeches. I attended the Olympic Games in 1936 where Hitler spoke. I have relatives in Berlin. I was interested in seeing the Olympics.

Q: Let's start in 33.

A: In 33.

Q: Did he mean anything to you? You were only ten.

A: Well it probably took a little while for things to become clear and very soon of course, the anti-Semitism was known but the concrete manifestations became clear. I mentioned the problem of staying in the school. My father started to have even more difficulties in his business than before.

Q: Was this something you talked over with your parents, the anti-Semitic –

A: Probably, with their kids.

Q: Do you know how they handled it with you as a child?

A: I'm sorry.

Q: Do you know how they explained it to you as you were a child.

A: I don't think it required – we matured rather early in those years. I mean in those days. One didn't, it didn't require any great explanation. It was quite clear. The Nazis would you know march through the streets and have their songs that meant --

Q: How did you feel as a young –

A: Well one felt a little helpless.

Q: Was it frightening?

A: A little bit probably. Not terribly so. I don't know. It didn't seem to – I mean I think it led more to a relatively quick recognition that there was no future for us in Germany and that I should get out, more than anything else. I don't think I was particularly frightened.

Q: Was it something you talked over with your friends?

A: Probably, I'm sure yes, yes. That's why I became a Zionist and wanted to go to Palestine, like most of my other friends in that youth movement.

Q: What did Palestine mean to you as a youngster?

A: Not terribly much really because I didn't know very much Jewish history, but I mean, I had some general education so I knew quite basically that the Jews started there. My Zionist conversion it was sincere, I think, if not terribly powerful, probably. There may have been mixed in it something about I had to get out of Germany. And that seemed to be the next best, but it was sent to a certain extent I guess I consider myself a Zionist and I wanted to live in a kibbutz. And I thought it would be a nice thing to do. Something worthwhile. Again this is in line with what I mentioned earlier, the ideal of the youth movement that one should lead one's life with some meaning and some significance and do something positive for mankind as it were. So living in a kibbutz probably looked pretty attractive in that light.

Q: You must have been a very independent young – a teenager able to leave your parents at the age of 16.

A: We all were. Yeah, but we all, 15. We all were. I mean that, we were very independent and I mean I remember reading Marxist literature, in my teens. I mean in this youth group, that was one of the things we would read. I remember one day Walter Laqueur gave me a travel book on Africa. He said take it home and read it. And I said I'm not going to read about Africa. I'm not

interested. Take it home. Look at it. I took it home. I opened it up and filed into it, sewn into it was the Communist Manifesto. So you know we were, we matured early. We were interested in serious matters. Earlier perhaps than otherwise would have been the case. So yeah that's, now you asked me how did I react to the Nazis. I do remember in addition to the one occasion which I mentioned before when our camp was attacked, the youth movement camp and we had to leave in the middle of the night. I also remember some other cases where we would bicycle, I with several friends, one or two and Hitler Youth would stop us and call us names and try to beat us up and so forth and so on. there were several incidents of that sort. So I think it became quite clear at that point that one had to get out. There was no future.

Q: You wouldn't describe yourself as specially fearful type of person.

A: I don't remember fear as one of the sensations of the period, no.

Q: To hear Hitler's speeches over the air and –

A: Sure, one heard that. I heard him in Berlin, at the Olympics. Sure.

Q: Talk about the Olympics. You –

A: Well, I was interested in sport, especially in soccer and I had relatives in Berlin so I traveled to Berlin in 36. I was 13 years old I guess.

Q: With your parents?

A: No, no, no. Alone. I stayed with my relatives there and I went to the Olympics. I got a ticket. I don't' know who paid for it and I happened to be at an occasion when Hitler was there. And forgot what, what the sport was. But, well it was –

Q: When you saw him, did you have any visceral reaction?

A: I don't think so. No, I don't think so. You know when you see him now especially when he gave his speeches, you ask yourself, well how could this man ever be taken seriously and that style of speaking is sort of strange and, and wild. Charismatic. He wasn't perceived that way at the time. And I think that may be one of the reasons why no one really expected what eventually happened. He seemed like pretty much an – nothing perhaps, most ordinary politician but a German politician. A bit more aggressive, a bit more belligerent, but not all that different from anyone else perhaps.

Q: Did you feel very German when you were at the Olympics?

A: At that time, probably yes. I mean as I say, our youth movement was German Jewish but basically it was German. The Jewish was a kind of added on.

Q: You were still proud of being a German? At the Olympics?

A: I'm not sure that I was proud to be a German in 36. Possibly not but I still considered myself basically German probably yeah. But as I said this was the time when I was beginning to move into this Zionist thinking.

Q: Let's move along a little bit, it's 38, 39.

A: Well I mentioned Kristallnacht before and arrangement had been made that I would leave in March 39 and my parents agreed and so I left with a trans –

Q: You came back obviously after Kristallnacht to your house.

A: Right, my father was not there. we were waiting for him to come back and as I said, he was, he came back very late and he must have been in Buchenwald for two, three month. And he was in rather bad shape when he came back.

Q: What did he say to you?

A: Well he had been instructed of course not to talk about it. But that was the standard procedure that you were not supposed to talk. But of course one knew and one just had to look at him to realize that treatment hadn't been very good. When they arrived they were, in the middle of the night. A transport was given herring and no water. And the living conditions were very difficult. Beatings. There was no clear program of killing of course at that time. But it was rough. And a number of people died in the camp. My father survived but he was in rather bad shape when he came back. He had lost a lot of weight.

Q: What was your mother's reaction when she saw him?

A: I don't recall specifically. I am sure she was appalled. I mean he looked very bad, but of course at that point, the population started to get out of Germany as quick as possible. And that, I think that's when my uncle arranged for us to go to for my parents to go to Luxembourg. I left –

Q: What about the damage in the town from Kristallnacht?

A: The synagogue which was a beautiful large building had been burned. Like all synagogues in Germany. And –

Q: Again, as a teenager what is your reaction to –

A: Well and my father's business had been smashed to smithereens. And I saw that, we saw that and I mean I don't' remember any particular specific reactions but I'm sure you know it just emphasized again that the time had come to leave. One had to get out. Very few people still had the illusions at that point about what would happen if they didn't leave.
So I left in March of 39 with a Youth Aliyah. To Palestine with a group of youngsters. We, it was March and Hitler had just marched into and take the rest of Czechoslovakia. And our train

was held up at the border for several hours. It was not clear whether they would allow us to leave or not but eventually the train left.

Q: These are all teenagers.

A: Yeah we were all 15 years or 16. The boys and girls yeah. It was a large group and we were on a train to Trieste. And in Trieste we got a boat, a ship and –

Q: What was it like to leave Germany? After all, here you are German and you're leaving your home country.

A: Well by that time, as I said we had very few illusions. I mean I had been badly beaten up at Kristallnacht on that farm so I don't' think I had any great strong positive feelings about Germany anymore.

Q: Did you fight back when you were beaten up or did –

A: I don't believe so. I don't, I think we tried to cover ourselves, but no we did not fight back. It would have, I mean we were young kids and these were you know storm troopers. I mean there was little chance.

Q: So you're on the train. Did you take anything specific with you from home, something that had special meaning?

A: I don't –

Q: What did you bring with you?

A: Hardly anything. A fountain pen and a wristwatch which I had to then surrender in the kibbutz, because in the kibbutz there was no private property and such things. So it was given to those who needed it. No, I did not take anything in particular with me.

Q: What about saying goodbye to your parents?

A: I have no particular recollection, didn't leave any large imprint. I guess we had hopes to meet very soon. As –

Q: They would come to Palestine?

A: Well, they would come to Palestine or I would meet them some – yeah the expectation still was that they would be able to come to Palestine. Yeah. They never did and I will come back to that later perhaps.

Q: Ok so you're on the train.

A: So we're on the train and --

Q: How big a group was it of – do you remember?

A: I don't remember. Well a large group, large group yes. And we came to Trieste and we were put on a boat and we were, we got off in Haifa. And there my uncle and my aunt greeted me in addition to, of course, the Youth Aliyah people. And I was very glad . I had never met them before. They came from Jerusalem to Haifa to greet me and I, after that, frequently visited them in Jerusalem. It was always a very nice thing to do because they had a real house and food in the kibbutz in those days was not very fancy. In my uncle's house I saw the first toaster. I'd never seen anything like this to toast bread. That was quite a, made quite an impression on me. and we had –

Q: You had some toasters in Germany?

A: We had, there was no toast in Germany. You had you know what we would call here rye bread or six grain bread, but there was no toast no. no. But here I saw my first toaster and was

very impressed and altogether he had a villa, a house in Jerusalem. He was quite successful as a garden architect. And I would visit them. His wife also was a librarian. They were very nice people and I always had a very pleasant visit there. so we were taken then –

Q: What kibbutz?

A: To **Tzarad** which is in the Ameg, Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz because I had been at Hashomer Hatzair so one not moved to a kibbutz off that same movement.

Q: Did all the kids go with you to the kibbutz?

A: I don't' recall. It's very possible that they also went to other kibbutz's. I don't recall. But we were a group of about I don't know 15 perhaps who, maybe 20 who were you know people from various parts of Germany. And we went to kibbutz Tzarad and we were there as a youth group for two years. Now that meant working in the morning and schooling in the afternoon. Hebrew, Jewish history and so forth. Now most of us, I think practically all of us where we had no knowledge of Hebrew at all at that point. But it came quickly because we were in a Hebrew environment and we were 15 and one learns a language relatively quickly.
I do remember that at the beginning they would have something called **Yom Evri**, that means Jewish Day that we are supposed to talk only Hebrew, but that too became superfluous because you could talk in Hebrew anyway. So we learned Hebrew, Jewish history. I don't think of any other subjects. Just those two I believe in the afternoon.

Q: And you slept in a dormitory type –

A: No we slept in tents of two, three I believe, yeah. Yeah. And we worked half a day and we were able to choose where we wanted to work and I chose to be a shepherd. And that meant getting up at half past three in the morning and taking the, a large flock of sheep, at first with somebody else, with one of the senior members of the kibbutz, but eventually by myself about 300 sheep and goats. Quite a responsibility and you know I learned how to do that. We had no dogs so it meant a lot of running around to keep things under control. It's not easy. I do

remember one instance when out in the field the herd was attacked by wolves. And there was nothing I could do. I had no gun, nothing. I had a staff, that's all. And I ran home, tried to get help. By the time we came back the wolves had killed and eaten several sheep. I had a flute, very romantic. I would spend, I had time to sit, I would play the flute. And I was a shepherd for two years. And then normally what would happen –

Q: Were you in contact with your parents?

A: No, not at that point. No, there was no contact possible cause the war had broken out. There was no contact. I didn't know where they were. I mean I had known that they had gone to Luxembourg and that's the last I – at some point I don't know when, we got into contact again after they had come to America. They came to America in 41. What happened was that when the Germans invaded Luxembourg in May of 1940 my parents together with all the other refugees, they fled through France, then to Portugal. And from Portugal my parents were able to come to this country. And they were given what was called an affidavit, the right to come to America by a Catholic nobleman in America of German origin, who was very charitable and provided lots of help for Jewish refugees.
Yes, it's rather interesting because what my first big book which I wrote was the Catholic church in Nazi Germany and I had to deal with a lot of different Catholics who stayed in Germany of course, and who became Nazis. But he was a very fine man, apparently and provided a large number of affidavits for Jewish refugees and my parents were one of the beneficiaries.

Q: His name?

A: I have his name somewhere possibly. I don't remember now. And so my parents came to the United States in 41, late 41 I believe and it must have been shortly thereafter probably that we got into contact again. There was mail then from Palestine to America.
Yeah so after two years, our youth group – the procedure was that after two years Youth Aliyah meant two years. You were together as a group for two years. And after that what normally happened was that the group would stay in the same kibbutz and become part of the kibbutz in which they had been for two years as regular members of the kibbutz. In our case, I don't know

why but our, somehow our group did not cohere well. We didn't get along too well with each other. The group dissolved so we did not stay there. And people went to different kibbutzim. And I and some others went to a kibbutz in the **Emek Beit She'an** called **Tel Amal**. And we must have been there for a relatively short time and then from there I switched to another kibbutz, **Ma' Barot**, which is near Hadera in central, in the center of the country. And I was there perhaps for half a year.

And that was the time, must have been early 42 when Rommel, perhaps a bit later. Rommel stood at the gates of Alexandria. Things looked rather ominous. The Nazis were in Iraq. We, large numbers of us volunteered for the British Army and I did too. So I joined the British army and it, the unit was first called Palestine regiment. There were several Jewish companies and one Arab company. And we were together made up the Palestine regiment. And we were used for guard duty in Palestine and Lebanon, on convoys and so forth. Not a terribly interesting time. And we wanted to get into combat of course, to fight the Nazis. But the Brits opposed. It was the same situation as in World War I. They did not want to give the Jews political capital by accepting them as combatants. So time dragged on.

But eventually as a result of various endeavors in England, the Jewish brigade was formed, out of the units, companies from the Palestine regiment and several other companies, engineering, Jewish engineering companies and so forth. They became the Jewish brigade. And we were taken to Egypt for our last combat training and then transferred to Italy where we became part of Montgomery's Eighth Army and we participated in the final push. That must have been late 44, early 45.

So that was my time in – altogether came to four years because when the war ended we were in April of 45, we were in Italy and at that point the Jewish brigade was transferred to Holland to guard German prisoners of war who were clearing mines. I didn't think it was terribly interesting. So.

Q: Back up a little bit, about those four years. Did you know what was happening in Europe at that time?

A: We started to find out really. One heard rumors, one heard stories. What, we found out of course once the war had ended. Because the –

Q: No, but I meant before the end of the war.

A: Before that, nothing precise. I mean one heard all kinds of things, but I don't think it was very, information was very precise no. One knew that things were bad for the Jews, but I don't think we knew about gas chambers. At least I don't recall, I don't remember. I don't think so. One of our favorite past times was what we would do if we could get ahold of Hitler and how we would treat him and what we would do to him to make up for things. But other than that, one felt rather impotent. There was nothing one could do.
When the war ended of course, on the other hand, we started to see the first displaced people, displaced persons, survivors of the camps and the brigade as you probably know. This is all a matter of record, was instrumental in organizing the illegal migration of survivors to Palestine. And we were involved in that. And there I can tell a very interesting story.
We were at that point, I think in Austria in some small –

Q: To back up before you tell the story. What was your reaction at the time of liberation?

A: Well liberation. We did not experience liberation at any clear sense of the date. The war ended, the war ended. We started to see displaced persons, survivors. And at that point one begin, you know we started to hear more precise stories of survivors who I was told about the camps and so forth. Some of them we saw in their original clothing, the striped clothing. And large numbers of them came across and they f –

Q: Do you remember any emotional reaction you had at the time. You were in your early 20s.

A: I don't recall any particular reaction, other than what I said before. One felt very, had strong feeling about Hitler, about Germany. In fact when the brigade was moved, we moved by, with our own trucks from Austria to Holland. Some of the drivers, they amused themselves by running down Germans on the highway. And we probably thought that was ok at the time. I feel bad about it now. I don't enjoy that memory but I know it happened.

And it was kind of a natural reaction because of what we had seen, and what we had heard and what we had encountered. I should say a little about something else, namely our participation in combat, as part of Montgomery's Eighth Army. We were, we occupied a segment of the front and right next to us was a Polish unit, And these were the Anders soldiers who had left Russia and come to the Middle East and who also then became part of the British army. And they, hearing that there were Jews next to them, they amused themselves by cutting our telephone wires. Occasionally. So there were no good feelings between us, even though we were fighting the same enemy.

It so happened that I was on a patrol that took the first German prisoners. And that came about kind of fortuitously without design. We went out on a combat patrol towards the German lines and got, went a little further. We were about a squad perhaps of eight with an officer. And we moved a little further ahead without intending to perhaps. And all of a sudden found ourselves in the German line and there was a German shelter, a dug out and we heard voices inside. And I was the only German speaking one. And I shouted down **Raus, Juden en dar** and that became a big story because this was the first time that the brigade had taken German prisoners. And my shouting Raus, Juden en dar made all the newspapers and became –

Q: Which translates into?

A: Out, out, the Jews are here. And they came out about ten of them, scared, when they heard that they would be captured by Jews. We took them back to our lines and they were interrogated I presume. And that became a big story because the first time that a brigade had taken prisoners and it was a big item in the newspapers and pictures and my cousins, my uncle and I have two cousins there who were children of my uncle and my aunt in Jerusalem. They were very proud of course about their cousin who all of a sudden was supposed to be a big hero. It was a heroism that as I say came about fortuitously because we really hadn't anticipated to get that far but we did and it worked out well. They shot at us on the way back but we all got back with no problem. So that was that. And other than that it was not, there was no close combat. The lines kind of moved gradually. They moved back. We moved forward without any clear contact. There was artillery shelling on and off.

One other thing which is kind of interesting. We were living in an abandoned farmhouse for a time, on floor, that's one slept, perhaps ten of us. And one day there was a call to send one of us to a course for some further training. I don't know what it was. And they chose me and I was sent back so I was not there anymore. And apparently that same night somebody smoked and the thing went up in flames, the store went up in flames and everyone died. So if I hadn't been sent to that course, I wouldn't be sitting here today. But that's one of those things that happens.
The war then ended as I say and we were, we moved up to Holland and I –

Q: Were there any celebrations at the end of the war?

A: I don't recall. I do recall one other thing and that is interesting. When we were billeted in the small Austrian town for a time, the illegal migration required quite a bit of money. One had to bribe, one had to get ships. They used our own trucks. I mean it's an amazing thing. There is a tape about the Jewish brigade which describes this with pictures. It was amazing. We used our official trucks to transport these people to Italy. How we got away with it I don't know but we had our own military police, that's why. We had our own military police. There was no one who could stop us. I mean so that was done. But it required money, lots of money. And we all contributed as best we could. We didn't have very much money.
But so one day three of us in this small Austrian town thought well maybe we can liberate some money for the good cause. So we went through the town and we came to some very fancy house and we went in and right in the living room was a big picture of an SS man and a woman was there, his wife and daughter. We searched the house and then we found a large sum of money which we confiscated and liberated and handed over to the captain of our unit who was in charge of collecting money.
Well the woman went first to the mayor of the town. And then the mayor of the town came to the company commander and said three soldiers had robbed this woman of all her money and that's unacceptable and the commander had to agree, yes it's unacceptable. So it was decided that next morning the company would be lined up on the town square. The women would try to identify the culprits. Well our commander of course had heard what and why what had happened and why, what had happened to the money. So when the company lined up on the village square, the three of us, we're not part of the lineup. We were allowed to go up into the mountains a little bit

and we watched the whole procedure from top. That is described also in the book called The Brigade. There's a book called The Brigade where the incident is described. It was kind of fun to look down how she went around and tried of find us and of course we weren't in the lineup.

Q: She didn't falsely accuse anybody else?

A: I'm sorry, no she did not. No, no she did not, no. Ok so to come back to -- we were in Holland. The brigade was in Holland and I found guarding these German prisoners when they were clearing the mines not a very interesting occupation, a boring and I thought it would be nice to get to Germany. So I went AWOL, A-W-L. It meant you know leave without, leave without permission and I hitchhiked to Berlin to the headquarters of the British occupation and presented myself and said here I am. I know German and I think I could be more useful in this capacity. He said yes it sounds good. So I was transferred to a military police unit in **Wuppertal** in the Ruhr as an interpreter. And I must have done this for about half a year. That was much more interesting and we would occasionally pick up some people. You know and so forth and so on. It was a much more interesting time.
But then came demobilization.

Q: What was your gut feeling talking to these Germans? Were these German soldiers or –

A: No, no. Civilians.

Q: What was your gut feeling in talking to them as a Jew?

A: I don't know. I just found it interesting to be there. I don't recall any – I mean as I had mentioned before when first we encountered these survivors, we had rather strong feelings but Germany was smashed and the town in which we found ourselves, Wuppertal, probably wasn't a house standing. And it was kind of hard to have any strong negative feelings to these people who are scratching around, trying to find enough to eat and who were obviously in miserable shape at that point. So I don't think we had, I had any particularly strong feelings at that point.

Then came demobilization, That is to say what came from the brigade that my turn had come to go back. We are all being sent back to Palestine for demobilization. I was sent back and the demobilization camp was in a small town called **Holon** which is near Tel Aviv.

Q: When you were in Germany did you feel like you were back home?

A: No, I don't think I felt that being back home but as I say I don't have, I don't recall any particular strong feelings one way or the other just that it was an interesting time and good time. I mean I was well paid and I had my own room, in contrast to before. I actually I forgot to mention. I was promoted to corporal while we were still in Palestine. But again I one day decided to go to Jerusalem to visit my family and I had a girlfriend there. And the bus on which I was traveling was stopped by military police and I was caught without a pass. And I ended up overnight in jail and the next morning I lost my stripes as corporal. And I was a private again. But when we were in the brigade after that episode of the capturing the German prisoners, I was promoted and eventually became a sergeant.

Now being a sergeant in the British army is nothing great. I mean you're a noncommissioned officer but it's no great fanciful existence and in Italy particularly the food was very bad and never enough. We would sometimes smuggle ourselves into the mess hall twice even though it was risky because we just didn't have enough and word had it that our cooks were selling out the food on the black market in Italy and making a fortune. But yeah so I was a sergeant and as a sergeant then I was the interpreter in Germany and that was another good existence. Had my own room. Eventually I got back to Palestine. The demobilization camp was at **Rehovot** and I remembered that there was a young girl, from Rehovot had been in the kibbutz, in the first kibbutz where I had been in Tzarad during the summer. She had been part of Hashomer Hatzair in Rehovot and the youth group from Hashomer Hatzair went for the summer to Tzarad where we were for the whole two years. And I had not become particularly friendly with her but I remembered her. And I remember her being from Rehovot and I made some inquiries and I looked her up and she eventually became my wife. We became engaged several months later. And she had been studying medicine since there was no anatomy, you know real study of medicine at the Hebrew University at that time. She had studied at the American university in Beirut. There was a medical school there. But then when the war broke out and after the end of

World War II, all the Israeli students had to leave. And she went to Geneva Switzerland where she completed her MD. And we became engaged before that. Let's see where do we go from here?

I was demobilized in 46 and I decided at that point to visit my parents because I hadn't seen them since 1939. And I eventually got a visa. Yes, one other thing I can relate -- two things actually. One I was still in uniform. I would be able to leave the demobilization camp. The procedure was rather lengthy and bureaucratic. I don't know why but it was, took a long time. So we were allowed to go back to our place where we had lived. I went back to the kibbutz, kibbutz Ma' Barot. And I remember one early morning the kibbutz was surrounded by British troops and they searched the kibbutz for arms, because you know it was known of course the Hagenah had arms and they were confiscating arms at that time. And I protested against being held in a kind of a stockade because I was in uniform but it didn't make any difference to them.

One other thing, I was in Jerusalem visiting Walter Laqueur actually and we were together, walking in the street, not far from Hotel King David. And all of a sudden there was a big explosion and the King David blew up and we were maybe 300 meters away from there. Just by chance. That's another recollection I have of that time. That must have been late 46. Yeah, must have been yeah.

Well so I got permission to go to America. And I arrived in New York. In late 46 and my parents welcomed me. My parents had come to New York. They first worked as orderlies in a hospital, both of them. Saved some money. And eventually my father went to cut diamonds and apparently was quite remunerative, did well. He got himself an apartment in Central Park West and had done well, saved money and eventually they bought a small hotel in Atlantic City. So by the time I came they already had this hotel in Atlantic City. Small hotel, maybe 20 rooms, 25 rooms, catering mostly to German Jews who were very happy to come to a place where they were you know together and could speak German and so forth. I did not like the idea of sitting in Atlantic City. And my father wanted me to help him in the hotel and I didn't like that either. So I went back to New York and some friends explained to me well they said why don't you – there were some people from Breslau who in the meantime had come to America from the youth movement. I met them and we had a nice reunion and they said well you should go to college. You should study. I had no idea what college meant. I mean my life in Breslau did not extend to university study. I may have known that there are universities but it never became anything

personal. And of course I had not completed high school anyway, had no diploma. Oh they said, that's no problem. Now with reference and they make all kind of special arrangements. You can enroll at City College and it will work fine.

Gail Schwartz: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Guenter Lewy. This is track number two and you were talking about the possibility of going to college.

Guenter Lewy: Going to college, yeah. So they can explain to me you can go anywhere, at City College as a special student and if you do well you matriculate. And I started in the evening session. And liked it and did well. And also was very active in their student movement. I was a sergeant at arms of the student council at the evening session and became a student politician. I enjoyed that. And eventually transferred to the day session. And graduated with honors in 1951.

Q: What did you study?

A: I studied, I started in psychology, moved to, from there to sociology and ended up in political science. And eventually after that went to Columbia for graduate study in what was then called public law and government, today political science. And got, earned my PhD at Columbia, my MA in 52 and my PhD in 57.

Q: What was your parents' reaction initially about your going to college and not helping them out in Atlantic City?

A: I was helped by my rich uncle in Brazil who provided me with a stipend $120 a month which was not very much, but just about enough at that time to get by. I had a furnished room that costed me seven dollars a week, I believe, and I somehow managed to get by with hundred – I also worked part time. I worked in the library and did various other odd things. I remember once

when I was really bad up, had no money, I donated blood and made some money that way. I got by, with -- my parents eventually were able to give me a little extra money as well.

Q: But they were happy that you were going for –

A: I think so.

Q: Extended education.

A: I think so, I think so yeah.

Q: They understood?

A: I think so yeah.

Q: And they stayed –

A: They were in Atlantic City and they stayed there until I think sometimes in the late 50s when they sold the hotel and retired to New York.

Q: What were your thoughts about Germany then in the late 40s and in the early 50s?

A: I don't know. When was watching what was developing there with interest. Very soon they became two Germanys and I was interested of course. I don't recall any, anything in --.

Q: In connection.

A: I don't know. Perhaps I still was, I may have corresponded with somebody whom I'd met in Wuppertal. I'm not sure about that. And yeah I graduated from City College in 57, went to Columbia and finished Columbia in – I'm sorry. I finished City College at 51, finished Columbia at 57. You have my curriculum vitae there. The dates are there. And I did well at

Columbia. I was a student of Franz Neumann, a very well-known professor at that time of German origin. Very charismatic teacher. And –

Q: Did you feel more comfortable among other quote refugees than American born students?

A: Not really, no. I felt very much at home at City College in particular and later on at Columbia. As I say I was a student politician and I had no particular, I may have known some, yes, I knew as I mentioned, I met in New York some of my former friends from the youth movement and I saw them. But I also had other friends and –

Q: And you were very comfortable about native born Americans.

A: Very comfortable, very comfortable. My English by that time was pretty good because you know I had, actually I had studied some English in high school in Germany and then I was in the British Army for four years and even though we mostly spoke Hebrew, but we also talked English, so my English was pretty good. There was no problem in school. In fact my grammar probably was better than many of my co-students. I had an accent which I still have. I recall that at City College, one of the requirements at that time was a one credit course for four semesters in public speaking. And if we had a very bad accent and some kids coming from Brooklyn had a very bad accent, you had to go to something called the speech clinic first before you could start these for one credit courses.

Well I had a German accent so but it was kind of a borderline case apparently. The instructor made me read something and then he turned to the class and he said well shall we accept him or not. And they all shouted yes so I was, I passed and I was able to take public speaking right away without having to go to the speech clinic. Even though I had an accent, but apparently it was relatively minimal so I passed muster.

I enjoyed City College. There were some wonderful professors and I enjoyed Columbia and decided on an academic career. And well I forgot eventually a very important event in my life, namely I got married. Elsa, my wife, had studied medicine first in Beirut, as I mentioned. Then in Geneva, Switzerland. When she finished, I was instrumental in getting her to come to the United States. At first it was difficult because the German quota was oversubscribed and we

were told it would take several years before there would be an opening. But then something interesting happened. Congress passed a so called McCarran Anti Communist act, national security act. And under that act, one of the small side provisions was that no one had been a member of the Nazi party in Germany could come to America. All of a sudden the German quota was wide open because hardly any German who wanted to come had not been a member of the party, very few. So there was all of a sudden place in the German quota. And in December of 1950, my wife, my fiancée arrived and we got married several days later.
I had an apartment in a student housing project in the East River. Do you know New York at all? Have you heard of North Brother Island?

Q: No.

A: Have you heard of Riker's island? Ok, right next to Riker's Island is a small island called North Brother Island where Typhoid Mary was incarcerated. And that had become a student housing project. And that's where I got an apartment and so when Elsa came we had a small apartment, one room, studio. And several days later she started her internship on what was then called Welfare Island, now called Roosevelt Island. Now in order to get to work she had to do the following. A ferry back to the mainland, to the Bronx. A bus to the subway. Subway down to 59th street, cross town bus back to the East River. Another ferry over to Welfare Island. Another bus on Welfare Island. All this could be done under optimum conditions in one hour. Rarely though. If the captain was drunk or there was fog one of the ferries wouldn't run. So we didn't see each other too much. She had an income of $44 a month, free maintenance. She was allowed to bring guests I think and we ate there to save money. We had very little money. I still was on my $120 and a little money from my parents so for two people, plus 44 from her that was not very much in 1957. It was more than today of course but it was not very luxurious. We had a lot of meat pies and pasta.
Eventually after I had done well, I became an instructor at Columbia College for the last three years of my graduate study. So from 54 to 57 I was an instructor in Columbia College. And with that came an apartment. So I got a nice apartment on 118th street and eventually we had our first child. And that was rather nice. The apartment was nice and the -- altogether now –

Q: Was your wife still doing that traveling?

A: She did a – when she finished her internship with all the travel, was, we then moved over to Manhattan. Eventually she started a residency down at Willard Parker which was at NYU medical school. It was not too difficult. When she finished that I was still studying. So she had no possibility of working but she had no license. So she tried to get a license. Are you interested in that? It doesn't involve me directly but it's an interesting story actually.
She applied for a license in New York State and on the basis of her credentials, she had been told she's eligible. She was turned down and when she asked for a reason, she was told we don't have to give you a reason. It was the Board of Regents of the State of New York who were handing out licenses and deciding the licenses. A friend of ours was a young lawyer. He said you should insist on a reason. Ask for a hearing. They have to grant you a hearing. So she was granted a hearing and there sat this Board of Regents. They sat around the room and listened to her story without much interest. And then they said go outside and she went outside and then the secretary of the Board of Regents came out and said sorry, petition denied and that was the end of that. So she made a little money by doing medical translations and nothing much, made very little money.
Now in 1961, 62, I was at that time already an instructor at City College. I got a fellowship to study, to do research in Germany and she came along. We lived in Munich and we read the American papers and one day I just happened to see there was a story that Dr. **Esele,** the secretary of the Board of Regents of the State of New York had been arrested for selling licenses. So there was the story. He, we had not offered him any money so there was no license. And we didn't have the money to bribe him but that's apparently what was expected unless you had American credentials and it was a clear cut case. Anything else, he made money that way. But they caught him eventually. And so my, we wrote to Albany and by return mail came a letter saying Dear Dr. Lewy, please let us know to what address you want us to send your license and she got her license which came in handy eventually because with that license she then got a license in Massachusetts. Because after teaching at, when I got my degree in 57, I got a job at Smith College in Northampton.

Q: I did not ask you, but I'd like to ask you now. Your experience when the state of Israel was, into existence, what were your thoughts at the time?

A: I was in, by that time a student at City College, in 48 and I pretty early on had decided I probably will stay here and do, get, pursue an academic career.

Q: Stay in the United States?

A: And stay in – my parents of course badly wanted me to stay and I had not come in order to stay but I very quickly seeing what was available here and all the possibilities and –

Q: No, but I meant that there was now a state of Israel, a country, recognized. What –

A: Yeah, I, again there was the war of liberation and some Israelis did go back, it's true. I had never become an Israeli. I left before the state of Israel was created. I left on a British Palestinian passport which eventually became a piece of paper when the mandate was liquidated. When I went to visit Elsa once in Switzerland, I had a big problem getting there because I had no passport. I was stateless.
But no, I did not, I was I may have played with the idea of going back. I don't think so no. For that I was determined to stay here.

Q: What about the sense of pride, did you have a sense of pride?

A: I'm sorry.

Q: Did you have a sense of pride when the state was declared?

A: I think every Jew has a certain sense of pride about that. I don't think mine was particularly strong. If it had been stronger, I might have gone back. I did not go back. I stayed here and decided I'm going to be an American. And I've been very happy with that decision. I think that as far as I'm concerned, it's God's country. If you have what it takes you can get somewhere. I

mean I came with nothing. I didn't even have a high school diploma and eventually became a professor emeritus so I cannot complain. I found this country hospitable and I have been very happy here.

Q: Let's go back to your professional and –

A: Ok, so I got my degree and was on the market. The market was good at that time. The university, college system was expanding rapidly in the 60s. There were a lot of jobs. So I got a job at Smith College in Northampton. And I enjoyed that. I taught there for three years. The problem was that in my specialty there was no room, but next –

Q: For political science?

A: Political science. Political theory, particularly my field was the history of political philosophy. They had two other people in that field. They didn't need another one. So, but at that -- fortunately right next door was the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, across the river. And they were expanding rapidly and they were more than happy to offer me a job, a professorship and so I moved over there and that's where I was from, I guess from 63 til 85, something like that. And then I retired, as I said, took early retirement in 85. Yeah.
I enjoyed teaching. I enjoyed research even more and –

Q: Did you talk about your background or your childhood? Was that --

A: I talked about Germany after we had spent that year in Germany in 61, 62. I had a social science research **Constant** (?) Fellowship to do a book about the Catholic church in Nazi Germany and having spent a year in Germany at that time, I talked a lot, I gave some lectures on Germany, the new Germany and whether it was new enough or not.

Q: Gave the lectures –

A: At Smith College, yeah.

Q: Where were you living when you were in that year in Germany?

A: In Munich.

Q: In Munich?

A: It was a very interesting year, difficult in some respects because the old generation was still around of course in 65. And you constantly ask yourself when you saw one of these older people, what was he doing during that time. So it was not the most agreeable time in that sense but it was interesting professionally so that made up for it.
I spent 20 years later another year in Germany because the University of Massachusetts had a junior year abroad in Fribourg and I was appointed the director of the program there in 82, 83. And that meant teaching in the University of Fribourg, German students. And by that time things were completely different. Twenty years on, that older generation was hardly in appearance. The new younger Germans were no problem whatsoever and I continued to hold this view that Germany has made an exemplary successful attempt to come to grips with its past, the cross which they feel they bear through no fault of their own. People who after all these horrors are settled with the responsibility for it which they shoulder and they have proven it in many different ways. Some of the best scholarship on the Holocaust is done in Germany today. Some of the best scholarship on Judaic studies is done in Germany today. So –

Q: Did you visit any of the camps?

A: Yes, I visited Buchenwald and I visited Dachau yeah.

Q: And your thoughts when you were there?

A: Well sure, I mean that's. One necessarily has reactions to that. Eventually some years later I also visited Auschwitz. Clearly this is something I feel that one has to do and one has to see it and can't help being affected by it of course.

Q: The fact that your father was –

A: Right, my father, right, right yeah sure.

Q: Must have been a painful experience.

A: It, it's an experience. Painful perhaps is a bit too strong but an experience sure, yeah. Yeah I was mentioning the distinction, the difference between being in Germany in 63 and 83. It was a really complete different experience and I find contact with the German faculty there, colleagues and the students were eager to learn about America. In the first semester I gave a course on modern revolutionary ideologies. It's part of my interest in political philosophy. And I had a very large group of students, about 50 of them, and they some of them –

Q: You lectured in German?

A: Yes, yes. The course title attracted all the radicals, the Maoists, the Stalinists, the you name it, the Trotskyites. Everyone was there. And they tried to take over the course which they did not succeed. But it was an interesting experience. The second semester I taught American constitutional law, civil liberties and I had complete different students who appreciated and welcomed the subject and it was a pleasure to teach, easy, nice.
I've been back to Germany several times since on research grants. Last year I had a Fulbright in Berlin.

Q: What would the Germans, when they knew obviously where you were born and what your experience was and how you had to leave, what would they say to you when you came back as a professor?

A: There is a lot of phylo-Semitism in Germany these days. It's not a relationship that is completely natural. As I said before they are certainly the intellectuals you'll meet, academic people are incredibly burdened by this feeling of guilt and therefore it doesn't make for a natural

relationship when they meet a Jew. As I say there's a lot of phylo-Semitism. But still I try to adjust as best I could and it was not a big problem really.

Q: Did anybody ever apologize verbally?

A: No, none of that but no, no, no apology but as I say it's just a somewhat, it's not completely natural relationship I think. That may change in time perhaps but it hasn't' changed yet. Because when I was in Berlin now, I still experienced it. Yes, I've been back to Germany several times and sometimes, a couple of times for a year. Then last year on a Fulbright grant for four months. And it was a very interesting time and I always enjoy being there. I find it very interesting. And I have no problems with the new Germany at all. These people are beyond reproach as far as I am concerned. They are, Nazi, the neo-Nazi movement. They know that but they are a fringe whom nobody takes very seriously or at least it doesn't it's not a real political factor in endangering German democracy.

Q: Do you feel German when you're back there?

A: No, no what I do is –

Q: Do you feel American?

A: Sure, of course. Look, I have lived longer in America, 60 years than I've lived anywhere else. And when I am in Germany, my name is Guenter Lewy (different pronunciation) and when I am in America I am Guenter Lewy because the name Lewy in America is like Sinclair Lewis. Naturally has to be pronounced Lewy.
There is a little story attached to that because when my father received his legal papers, he knew very little English and he was summoned to some big gathering where 300 people were being processed. And he was the last one and he said told us his name hadn't been called. So he went up to this official and in his broken German said I am, showed him this paper. He had been summoned to be there. How come you haven't called my name. He asked what's your name. Henry Lewy. Henry Lewy. Henry Lilly, we called your name all the time. Well from that point

on it became Lilly for him. And eventually for me of course has to be Lewy. But in Germany I am Guenter Lewy (different pronunciation). I don't want to have any sense. I don't want anyone to sense that I am denying who I am. So in Germany I always, when I am introducing myself, I say I have two names. I am Guenter Lewy (different pronunciation) and Guenter Lewy in America.

Q: Tell me about becoming a citizen.

A: A what, pardon me.

Q: When you became an American citizen.

A: Yeah, that must have happened about four years into my stay here. Nothing in particular about it. It was a formality. By that time I felt quite American anyway so it strictly a formality. Yeah. I mean I was glad to have a passport finally and be able to travel more easily but the first time I traveled to Europe I was stateless and I wanted to visit Elsa who was in Switzerland studying. And I went to the Swiss counsel and I said I'd like to travel to Switzerland. He says what nationality are you and I told him my tale of woe. That I am stateless. He said well I'm sorry there's nothing I can do for you. And he said, however, he said, how do you plan to travel. And I had made arrangements to fly with a cheap airline to Luxembourg and I was going to take the train through France to Switzerland. He said if you have a transit visa through France, I will be able to give you a visa to Switzerland because he knew that he could get rid of me again. So I went to the French counsel and I said can I have a visa, standard visa to, I want to travel to Switzerland. Oh he said sure, you get me a visa to Switzerland, and I'll be glad to give you a transit visa to France. So finally I come to the counsel of Luxembourg, had no problem giving me a transit visa. Then I got the French and then I got the Swiss visa so it's a lot easier to travel when you have an American passport.

Q: So you appreciated that.

A: Yeah.

Q: Have you been back to Israel?

A: I've been back to Israel many times because my wife's parents, my uncle and aunt died relatively early. But my, Elsa's parents lived in Rehovot. And they lived much longer and we visited them several times and after that I've been back visiting my cousins. My, one of my cousins was a professor of literature at Bar Elon and my other cousin taught at the school of social work in Jerusalem. And at the ripe age of 63 got herself a PhD in social work. Quite a lady. I also have been back for a lecture. I was invited by Ben-Gurion University some years ago to give a lecture on one of my books. So yes, I've been back to Israel several times. Also been back to the kibbutz. To Tzarad and to Ma' Barot. And it was interesting to visit some of the people whom we have been kids. When we met again we were all seniors. We recognized each other more or less. But it was interesting, yes.

Q: You said you had one child.

A: We have two children. I have a son and a daughter.

Q: And their names.

A: My son is Peter. He's a professional cellist in New York. And my daughter, Barbara, lives in Seattle, Washington and she just retired, believe it or not. I found that hard to believe. She took early retirement. She had wanted to switch to a nonprofit. She was a budget director of the department of social services of the city of Seattle. At the end. And she retired from that position and wanted to switch to a nonprofit but the nonprofit went belly up. So now she is retired and happily so. All of a sudden she has developed much interest in our past so she visited us in Berlin and she went to the town where my wife was born and she –

Q: Which was, what town was that?

A: **Fara** in **Tirolia,** central Germany, on her own, even though her German is not that great, but

she somehow managed and she established contacts and she wants to write about it and she reads about Nazi Germany. She is all of a sudden preoccupied with that subject, which is really very interesting because in previous years none of our kids showed any particular interest.

Q: That was going to be my next quaestor. When you were raising your children, did you talk about your childhood with them?

A: We never talked very much about it because they never asked about it. They didn't' seem to be interested and as I say we both felt very American and I mean they knew who we were of course but they never had any particular interest. And my son to this day has no interest. But my daughter, as I said, all of a sudden I don't' know why, how, developed this interest and she came to Germany, stayed with us three weeks and traveled and she, in Berlin she visited all the memorials and there are plenty of them. The Holocaust memorial, the Jewish museum. I mean she just made it a point to visit every single place and it made a big impression on her and she is all fired up to learn about that and try to undemand it and why it happened and I have been referring her to literature and she does nothing else at this point. She has no job. She is retired so she has time.

Q: Do either of them have children?

A: My son had a child. He is divorced and has one, he had a daughter who is unfortunately handicapped. She had cerebral palsy and she lives in Boston in a united cerebral palsy facility. She is mentally perfectly fine. She graduated from Sarah Lawrence college but she physically is severely handicapped and problems of mobility. And she at one time had talked about graduate school. I don't know what will become of it at this point. She is not ready for it I don't believe. My daughter is, was married and got divorced and one day came to visit us and declared she is now a lesbian. And she has a very nice partner, of whom we are very fond. It took us a while to get used to it, to be honest. But by now we are very, very happy. She is our daughter in law and she is a very fine person. And it's a fine relationship, very good.

Q: Do they have children?

A: No, no.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about some of your thoughts and your feelings considering your background. Do you think because of what you went through as a youngster and seeing things and what happened to your father when he was taken away, influenced who you are today?

A: Well I think, what I think as I mentioned this earlier, what really influenced me was the German youth movement. It gave me the incentive to do something to invest in myself so to speak and that's why when I came here, I mean that's why I went to the kibbutz and that's why when I came to this country and people started talking about college and academic careers, that's what caught my enthusiasm because I wanted to do something significant as it were. And yes and in that sense I would say the German youth movement probably was the most important influence on my life.
What one went through, I don't know to what extent. I think it, we matured earlier, I mentioned that. One became a bit more resilient perhaps and able to take things. And handle hardships, yes, perhaps.

Q: You left your parents when you were a teenager?

A: Yes we lived alone, yes, sure, sure. Yeah. So in that sense, yes it was had an impact of course but beyond that as I say, for many years I considered myself an American academic Jewish, yes of course. Never made a secret of it but it didn't mean anything in particular. I've never belonged to a congregation. I consider myself a Jewish agnostic. I have written on religion. Some of my books I've always been interested in social ramifications of religion. But my Jewishness, we used to talk when we were graduate students we would sit way into the night, talk what does it mean for us to be Jewish and it was always an interesting discussion because it never was very clear. We, none of us were religious. At the same time we certainly felt we were Jews, but what does it mean even. So you know it was always an interesting subject where we would talk about should we send our children to Sunday school and some did and some didn't. I didn't.

Q: You did not?

A: No, but one year my daughter came and said she had met some friends and they, among some youngsters who belonged to the Jewish youth group in Northampton and she wanted to join. So we inquired and we were told that we had to pay one year's membership, a lot of money. Well she wanted to be a member of it so we paid the membership. Three months later she lost interest and the money was down the drain. (laughs)
And then she showed no more interest in her Jewishness until as I say most recently when all of a sudden and I don't know what brought it about, she developed this interest in the Holocaust and our background and now researching it and reading, doing nothing but that, very interesting.

Q: So did you observe when the children were young any holidays at all, like Passover or –

A: No, no, no.

Q: No observation in the home?

A: No, no.

Q: Totally secular?

A: Yes. I think for an academic that's very easy. The academic environment is largely secular. I mean there are of course religious people, but the overall atmosphere is secular and so we never felt any need to belong to a congregation let's say because our home was academia. You know the college or the university where you were affiliated with. Your friends, their colleagues, some Jewish, some non-Jewish. Some of my best friends, I can truly say are not Jews. I mean in the most literal sense. I have very close friends who are not Jewish and whom we met, whom we met teaching fellow colleagues in other fields sometimes.

Q: Tell me about the books you've written. You mentioned the first book.

A: Well I've always had an interest in you might say the moral dimension of politics and history and so some of my books involved the kind of moral dilemma of the Catholic church in Nazi Germany. Second book yeah and then I did several other books on Nazi Germany. The Nazi persecution of the Gypsies and mostly it's the, wasn't there was something else. Oh yes, I'm going on book censorship in Nazi Germany and I had a Fulbright for that. So I had an interest in Nazi Germany, the Holocaust. I've written some other things, on Vietnam which came about during the Vietnam war period when I was interested in the problems raised by our involvement there. I was the first one to be admitted to the military classified records as a researcher, an outside researcher and that enabled me to write a very interesting book and became kind of a standard. And I've written on religion several books that interest me.

Q: On different religions?

A: No. Well for different religions too. I wrote a book called Religion and the Revolution which is kind of comparative religion but I have been interested in the moral issue of can you be a moral human being without being religious and that has interested me. I have written two books about that. And the last book is called If God is Dead, Everything is Permitted, question mark. You know the saying from the Brothers Karamazov by Dostoevsky, but I put it with a question mark. Dostoevsky felt yes, if you don't believe in god, you cannot be moral. My position which I developed in this book. I said yes you could, you can. So that has been a lot of my interest yes.

Q: I'm sure many people have asked you, has the world learned lessons from the Holocaust? What your thoughts are on that.

A: We have had episodes of genocide, numerous since 1945 so that problem is not solved. Pretty horrible episodes of violence have taken place. I think the Holocaust was not unique, precisely because more genocides have taken place since. It was in many sense, cases unprecedented. It was unprecedented that they, cultured nation in the center of Europe would organize this program to exterminate an entire people, man, woman and child and hunt them down all over the continent. In that sense it was unprecedented. It never happened before. The

Jews were not particularly hostile to Germany. On the contrary the German Jews were better Germans than many Germans. And yet it took place in Germany. So in that sense it was something quite unprecedented. It was not unique as I say because we've had genocides since and we unfortunately are, haven't solved that problem yet. And we may never be able to solve it. If, when I'm finished with my book on book censorship in Nazi Germany, if I still have what it takes to write another one, I want to do something on the perpetrators, the Nazi perpetrators, why they did it, how, various explanations that have been put forth. And I sort of want to bring all that together. There is some interesting work being done on this in Germany today.

Q: You said you had done some work at the Holocaust Museum in Washington.

A: I was a volunteer. That's, for a time I did some projects for them. Yeah.

Q: What kind of projects?

A: I did a project on the bombing of Auschwitz. And I felt that their exhibit was misleading. And I think they have changed it a bit since then. There has been some other writing on this by other researchers as well.

Q: How was their exhibit misleading?

A: Well they sort of implied very strongly at the begin – in the original exhibit that it was a serious dereliction on the part of the Americans that they did not bomb Auschwitz. And I tried to show that A, the ability to hit Auschwitz with any precision was strictly limited. We didn't have the bases close enough to reach Auschwitz with any great numbers of bombers. Hitting with precision was altogether impossible at that time. All one could do was carpet bombing. That's why the German cities looked what they looked after the war because there was no precision bomb. They, so it would have been pretty impossible really to, to hit the Nazis in Auschwitz without killing off all the Jews and it probably would not have really done very much. So my feeling was that the decision not to bomb Auschwitz pursued because Roosevelt wanted, felt that the most important thing to do was to win the war as quickly as possible. And all the resources

available probably was the right decision. And the exhibit implied differently but I think they have possibly adjusted this a little bit. I haven't checked it out.

Q: What were your thoughts during the Eichmann trial? Anything. Did you follow it?

A: I did sure I did, yes. I have done some work, some articles on war crimes tribunals and so forth. I am not particularly proud of the Eichmann trial. I think it did not follow the highest possible standards. I think he got what was due him, needless to say. He was guilty as can be. But I think the trial was not the most dignified and the, especially in the role of the prosecutor. I've forgotten his name now. It was a little bit.

Q: Hausner?

A: That's correct, Hausner was his name. Yeah. Was, so I had some problems with that but basically of course, I think the Israelis were perfectly justified and legally justified in seizing him and trying him. There was – I had no problem with that. It was interesting. It sort of focused the attention of the world again on this issue. Until that time, don't forget the issue of the Holocaust had sort of receded into the background. But it was the Eichmann trial that all of a sudden revived interest. And ever since of course we have had tremendous output of scholarship, interest, movies, you name it. The Holocaust Museum. Oral history. Everything.

Q: How do you feel about having the Holocaust, a holocaust museum in Washington, DC?

A: I think it's great. I had some problems with the leadership at one point. They organized a symposium on the Gypsies, the prosecution of the Gypsies. And they did not invite me because I had written the only book in English on the subject but my position was that the Gypsies had not suffered as the Jews had suffered. And I developed that in a fairly, a very carefully researched book. I spent a year in Germany, collecting material. The official view at the Holocaust Museum was because, that the Gypsies had been treated like Jews and deserved to be, that this was an instance of genocide and so forth. And the symposium was supposed to be focused on that. And they didn't invite me. And an American Gypsy at that time was a member of the Holocaust

Council. And he was kind of a pseudo scholar who propagated that view that the Gypsies had suffered genocide. And the Museum bought it and I objected and I said it's not a matter of my personal pride or my prestige to be at this symposium. But I think you are going on the wrong track and you should at least listen to my position. So they at last course invited me. I gave a paper which was then published in the, in the series there.

I don't know to what extent they have changed their view. They, another issue that I found problematic was the treatment of the Armenians. I have written a book on that as one of my last books. And again I did not, I concluded after careful research that while the Armenians suffered terribly and lost 40% of their people in massacres, it was not a state sponsored program of genocide. And that too is not the conventional wisdom and apparently also was not the view of the museum. They occasionally have had exhibits on the Armenian genocide which I don't accept.

So I've had my differences with the museum, but I think basically of course they are doing very good work and it's a very important institution.

Q: Do you receive or did your parents receive reparations?

A: Yes, they did. And I did too. Not very much but it helps, every little bit helps. And we felt all of us, it was our due. That's the least they could do, give us some money.

Q: Are you still receiving reparations?

A: Receiving anything. No, no. These were one time payments. My father had event, but I just had several one-time payments, and so did my wife.

Q: What were your parents' thoughts about Germany? Do you remember when they settled here and did you talk about that when you were an adult with them?

A: Probably not very much. I probably should have talked with my parents more than I did. You know we all feel that way after our parents are gone. So I don't think I have talked with them about this very much. My parents were fortunate that they came here at a time when it was

relatively easy to sink roots and get jobs and they did well. Not every immigrant has had it, has had that fortune. So yes, I think they were quite happy to be here too.

Q: How was their English?

A: Well it improved gradually a little bit. It was not very good but it was all right more or less. I mean my father was able to run a little hotel in Atlantic City. It was ok, eventually.

Q: Did they stay within the German Jewish circles?

A: Yes, very much so, very much so yes of course. That generation they did not, they did very little spreading out. I mean I should qualify that. Let's say if someone came here as a physician from Germany, and then got a license and practiced medicine he may have started to socialize with non-Jewish physicians and so forth or for other professions perhaps, just like I did in the academic scene in the university scene. But my parents' generation, these people they stuck very much to themselves. Yeah, my parents eventually retired. They sold their hotel and retired to New York and had a nice retirement existence in New York. They traveled. They even visited in Germany a little bit, were not anxious to be there, I think.

Q: Oh really.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: They were uncomfortable there?

A: I think so, probably yeah, yeah. Less I mean much less comfortable. Of course that was still the 60s, the first time that I didn't feel all that great myself. That was not a great time to be in Germany. I mean as I said –

Q: Too close to the war?

A: Yeah, not very comfortable no.

Q: Were you active at all in the civil rights movement in the United States considering you came from a country that deprived the Jews of their civil rights?

A: Not so much the civil rights movement. I was a student politician at City College in the -- it was called SLID and it was known as Students League for Industrial Democracy. It was part of the Norman Thomas' Socialist party. So I was active in that. And I wrote my masters essay at Columbia on a German socialist leader, Rosa Luxembourg. So I had an interest, an academic, theoretical interest really, later on a bit, but then it was – no, I was not active in the civil rights movement. I was active in the cause of civil liberties, because A, I had studied it. It was one of my specialties at Columbia. And I became very active in the American Civil Liberties Union. I was, I chaired the Hampshire county organization of the ACLU when we lived in Northampton for a time. I eventually abandoned, left the ACLU when they declared in Massachusetts at least that there was a constitutional right to smoke marijuana or to oppose the Vietnam war and I felt one could oppose the Vietnam war but there was not constitutional right to do so. So we parted company. And I have not been a member of the ACLU since. And I have written about their, what I consider their erroneous direction in one of my books. I think they changed and not for the better in my view. I have not, I don't know more recently what they have been doing. I have not had any great interest in that.
So I was interested in the issue of civil liberties. I taught it and I was active in the ACLU for many years. Civil rights, not really. I had -- there were black students at City College. We were on good terms. I had no problems with that. One of my students at Columbia was black and I became very friendly with him and stayed in touch with him for many years. Almost at the end, I found out that he also was Jewish. I had no idea that he was both Jewish and black.

Q: Are you still in contact with the other Jewish brigade?

A: No they are -- I don't think there are very many left. You see I'm almost 90 and I am fortunate to be in good health, but I'm afraid most of my fellow soldiers are not around anymore. So no there isn't any –

Q: Did you have reunions?

A: No, no I don't remember anything about that. There may have been in Israel but I don't know. I never heard of it, no.

Q: Is there anything else you would want to –

A: I'm trying to think. I think we covered a lot of ground and we've spent a lot of time. Perhaps more time than you had wanted. I don't know. I –

Q: Any thoughts?

A: I am just thinking. I think I have really covered pretty much everything that I can think that is of interest.

Q: As you say you plan to write more books.

A: Do I intend to? If I live yes, I surely will. I find it very interesting and rewarding and you know it's -- as one gets older, one not only has to do physical exercise but it's good to keep the brain in good oiled shape as well, and so in that sense. I find it very interesting. I have done research ever since I became a graduate student. I published my first article when I was still a graduate student. And I enjoy doing research and so yes.

Q: As you've gotten older, do you think more about the painful times in your childhood like the time you were in the camp and –

A: No, not really, not really.

Q: Or your father's experience. You don't think more about that.

A: No, not more than I – no, no. I mean I have worked in German documents, Nazi documents and you know constantly you see the, that some of the stuff, some of the horrible things that were going on were sort of described matter of fact. One develops a certain distance which enables you to write about it as a scholar. So I can deal with it in a fairly sober manner by now I guess. I have not lost a sensitivity which one ought to have about this material but I can deal with it, without, without acute suffering. No I sleep, I dream about it occasionally. I am a big dreamer altogether. I dream every night. I don't always remember but I frequently dreamt about you know being caught again by Nazis and things like that. That, yes, that has happened and continues to happen actually.

Q: More as you've gotten older or that was always throughout your life?

A: Possibly more since I, I seem to dream more since I am older. I don't know why but it seems to be the case yes. Yeah it seems to be yeah, yeah. But it's always nice to wake up and realize that. Actually the funny thing is that sometimes even while you are dreaming you, all of a sudden, you were I really don't have to worry. It's not real. It's a dream. We have that sensation. Not always but frequently. I, sometimes I wake up screaming but most of the time I sort of wake up, it's all right.

Q: When you hear about similar incidents, does it give you a flashback to what you went through?

A: Not really. I can't say it does no. As I say I've developed kind of a detached clinical, almost clinical attitude towards all of that. I know it so well. I have read all the descriptions. The Holocaust for me has been an experience. I've lived through it again much more than I experienced myself. I never was in a concentration camp or a death camp, but I've read so much about it I have lived through it as it were vicariously. But I've developed kind of a clinical attitude I guess by now. It's the only way you can deal with it as a scholar. Otherwise it would be impossible.

Q: But you obviously feel because of your background as opposed to an American professor –

A: Perhaps yeah.

Q: That you bring a greater understanding.

A: Perhaps. Perhaps yeah although as I say –

Q: You were there.

A: Yeah but some of the best scholarship as I said about the Holocaust done in Germany these days. These are people who were kids. They were born after the war by now and there is some wonderful work being done, sensitive, insightful. I, a couple of years ago a guy wrote to me and he's writing about the German youth movement in Breslau. And I had some material which I sent him and he was overjoyed of course to get all -- and we corresponded a little bit and he had developed an incredible insight into the whole atmosphere of the youth movement and so wonderful, better than anything I've read here in America. So some of these people are doing great work. People who have never lived through it. It can be done. I mean there you know sometimes you hear this. That only blacks should write about blacks. Only Jews about Jews. I think it's nonsense. No. On the contrary it may sometimes mislead you. You become kind of biased and prejudiced about it. No, no I don't believe that.

Q: Do you have any final thoughts about –

A: Final thoughts. (laughs) My -- a book which I had published five years ago is entitled Assisted Death in Europe and America, four regimes and their lessons. I deal with the issue of physician assisted suicide which began to interest me and when you reach a certain age it's of more than theoretical interest, obviously. How one dies. I found that a very interesting subject and I am an advocate of physician assisted suicide given sufficient safeguards. And I think the legislation that was passed in originally Oregon, later on the state of Washington is of that kind and is responsibly done and has involved very few people. It gives people control over their lives when they've lost all dignity and there's no point in their living. Yes that has been an interest of

mine. That is age related I guess, although again you don't have to be of a certain age in order to write about it obviously.

Q: Do you have relationships with German Jews who are living in Germany now?

A: No.

Q: That community?

A: No, no. When we were for that year in Fribourg, the Jewish community of Fribourg at one point invited us but I don't think we did much with it. We've never been a member of a congregation so we didn't join there either. No I've not been in touch with any. I've been, I'm in touch with German scholars, related interests. One of my good friends in Germany is a professor **Eberhard Yeakel** who was instrumental in bringing about the memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, famous memorial. And when I was in Berlin now I met a woman who worked with him in getting the German parliament to establish that memorial. Her name is Rose, a journalist. I thought she was Jewish. Her name is Leah Rose. She was born a different name and she didn't like her German name, chose the name Leah. She is also very phylo Semitic one could say but she was highly effective in, together with Professor Yeakel in this, leading to this establishment of the memorial. Eberhard Yeakel is a good friend of mine.
And I've been in touch with other German scholars with whom I share interests so. But not, there aren't that many Jews after all in Germany. Today many of them are Russian rather than of German origin. And the survivors by now have all died certainly most of them probably.
Well I guess this lasted longer than you and I perhaps expected.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You are most welcome.

Q: Doing the interview. This concludes the United States Holocaust memorial museum interview with Guenter Lewy.

(end)