

The name again?

This is Abigail Lewet, interviewing Leslie Niederman at the Holocaust Convention on April 12, 1983. Can you begin by telling me where and when you were born?

I was born in Pátróha, Hungary in August 26, 1929.

OK. Can you tell me your mother's maiden name?

Amalia.

Amalia. OK. Can you tell me about your childhood, any memories of your grandparents?

I don't have too much recollection of my grandparents. They died when I was relatively young. My mother's parents died before I was even born, right after World War I.

Were you brought up in an Orthodox home?

Yes, I was.

Did you go to a cheder or to a gymnasia?

I went to cheder. And I went to day school, a Christian day school.

Could you describe that experience for me?

Well, it was a tough life in American standards because I had to get up at 6 o'clock in the morning and go to Hebrew school till 8:00. At that point, I went to the regular day school until 3:00 in the afternoon. I went home, I had a quick bite, and back to Hebrew school till 6:00, 7:00 in the evening. And this was continued until I was bar mitzvahed, about the age of 13.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

I have two sisters alive, and I have three brothers. I had three brothers, whom I lost during the Holocaust.

Do you have any memories of family interaction or--

Yes. I have very fond memories. I was the youngest one in the family. And my three brothers, who were older than I was, they babied me quite a bit. And being the youngest member of the family, I guess I was a favorite. And I had a very happy childhood.

Do you remember any of the holidays? I would think that you might remember Passover, especially being the youngest.

Oh, yes. I remember every Shabbat. That was really, in a true sense, that was a total rest, nothing to do but to go to temple and have our Shabbat meals. And there was, in the afternoons, especially in the winter when we had very early day turned into darkness, and there wasn't totally finished with Shabbat yet, so we could not light-- we could not put out light because we had no electricity. It was lighting a lamp, which was not permitted in the Jewish religion.

So we were singing of Shabbos afternoons and the whole family together. It was good times.

OK. Can you describe the events leading up to your internment in a concentration camp?

My father was in the shoe business. He was making shoes. He had about 10 or 12 people working for him. And my

brothers, who were active in the business, were drafted into service in the Hungarian Army to perform manual labor because, as Jews, they were not trusted in the armed services. They were actually being forced into armed-- without arms, they were in the service, performing manual labor.

And most of the burden fell on me at a very young age, when I was 14, 15, running the entire operation because my father wasn't in the best of health. And they were taken in the year of '41. One of my brothers was sent out to Soviet Russia. And he disappeared at Stalingrad. They were using the Jewish boys to pick up live mines. And that's where we lost him.

My other two brothers were in a work camp, also near the Russian front. And later, during as the war progressed, they were brought back to concentrations camp-- concentration camps.

The pre-war time, it was-- the ghetto area was not very fond memories that I have from it. We were collected by the Hungarian gendarmes.

Who was at home when this happened?

My two sisters, myself, and my parents.

How did it happen? Did they break into your house?

No. We were told to be ready on a certain date, and we were to be taken to a ghetto in a small city of Kisvrd, which was about 10 kilometers-- 10 kilometers from our town. And we were gathered and taken into this small city. And a certain section was set aside for Jewish families. And each room, which normally would hold a family, they packed in four or five families.

And we were there approximately about five or six weeks, in very crowded condition. But at least the families were together. At which point they told us we would be relocated in labor camps, where the families would stay together, and everybody will be safe and sound. It was a big lie, of course, because without our knowledge-- we have not been able to listen to any radio broadcasts because radio wasn't as freely available as it is over here. And we were totally ignorant about the situation.

One nice day they told us to be ready. We are being shipped to a new labor camp. And that was the time they put us on a cattle train toward Auschwitz.

How many people were in each car?

Approximately about 100.

And were there any comforts, anything in the car that would--

None whatsoever. They told us to pack enough food for a couple of days to last and just take a minimal amount of clothing and all our valuables. Evidently, they were hungry to take our valuables away from us once we arrived to Auschwitz.

And how long did you spend in this cattle car?

We were in the car for about-- we arrived the third day in Auschwitz, in Birkenau.

Did you have any idea of where you were going at the time?

No. None whatsoever. All they told us is we were going to a labor camp, that the families will stay together.

Can you tell me about how it was when you disembarked from the train? How was it? What was it? What was the first

thing that caught your eye, and what was going through your mind?

The first thing that caught my eye is it was a bad land. People were screaming because they were being separated. First they separated them-- they announced men and women will have to go in separate directions. I was with my father. My two sisters went with my mother.

And as we were being pushed to a certain direction, I naturally followed my father, at which point I was shoved to the other side. I didn't accept that. And I attempted again to go after my father.

The German SS threw me again to the other side. And he hit me with a stick right across my back. But I thought that he split my back open. And he shoved me, and he told me in German, you go that way. At this point, I did not realize that, had I followed my father, I would have wound up in the crematorium.

They took us into a barrack. First they took us in to have our hair cut. And they issued us clothing. They told us to leave everything, and we're going to find all our belongings when we come back. When we came back, there was nothing.

They issued us prison clothing. And we were put into the barracks, which approximately three decks, in each deck about 8 to 10 people. And we were totally at a daze, in a daze. It was-- a lot of things entered my mind.

When I smelled the burning flesh in Auschwitz, I said to myself, this is a place I must get out at any cost. So when the next day they announced they were looking for technicians, mechanical engineers, electrical engineers-- I had no experience whatsoever in these areas, but I volunteered. I felt it will get me out from Auschwitz. And I was selected with 800 others, mostly people in their late teens, in their 20s, in their 30s.

And one night, about four or five days later, at 2:00 in the morning, they announced that they will-- everybody line up outside the barrack. As we did, the first 300 they cut off. And they said, you are going forward. There were some brothers, there were some fathers with their sons, who wanted together. And they tried to exchange each other. They weren't able to.

They cut off 300 of us, and they took them away. I remained there for approximately two more weeks. And we were told the following day we would be leaving for a work camp.

And they asked for four volunteers to take some bread from one barrack to the other. Now this bread was the bread that came off from the trains. And we were pretty much hungry by then. And I took a small bread and put it under my jacket. I felt it was the bread that we brought with us, not the bread that was issued to the prisoners.

One of the kapos, one of the German foremen have seen that from the window. And as I walked into the barrack, he says, you have something under your jacket. I said, yes, I have a bread. With that he says, you know, a year ago you would have been hanged for this. Today you are lucky. You're only going to get 25 lashes.

There was an oven going through the barrack. I had to put my head into that oven. This was an oven that they used for heating purpose in the winter. It wasn't the crematorium. I had to put my hat into the oven. And one of the German political prisoners, who was a real brute, a real heavyweight, he gave me 25 lashes. He says, well, for the fact that you did not scream, I'll let you get away. Otherwise you would have gotten 50.

The next morning we were packed into a cattle car and we were shipped off to France. Well, the fact was I could not possibly even sit on my behind because I was totally bruised up from that beating I got. And for three days, I had to sit there and suffer.

Once we arrived to France, the Germans were supposed to build a factory underground. It was an abandoned iron mine. And we were supposed to work eight hours in the mine and eight hours building the camp because the camp itself was not completed yet. So we worked for 16 hours.

But we were in relatively good health yet. And it was a torturous existence, but at least we were getting some food,

some decent food. This was in the summer of 1944. The Allied invasion came. And by the time September came, the Allied forces were advancing. And they were shooting over us. And we were thrilled every time we heard the planes fly over. Every time we heard they were shooting over us, we were excited to no end, hoping for a liberation.

At 2 o'clock in the morning in an early September night, they told us to line up outside the barracks. We were-- at that point, there was only a few people who died from us because, as I said, we were in still relatively good health. We decided that we're were going to jump the guards. And no matter what cost, we're going to get ourselves liberated.

They made us sit down. And we were sitting in front of the barracks. And we decided each two will go for one guard. We had one guard in each end of-- we had five in a line. The two guards were on each side of the five. So we figured two of the prisoners will jump on guard, and that-- Well, in the middle we'll go to the head of the one needs any aid.

When the sun came up, word was passed, don't start anything. There was machine gun nests all around us. We were like in a valley. Mountain is all around us. And we were surrounded by machine guns, the whole camp.

They packed us up in cattle cars again, and we were off to a new journey. They shipped us to Kochendorf. That was a labor camp about 60 miles south of Stuttgart. Over there they had a salt mine. And in this salt mine they were trying to create a U-boat factory.

Conditions were nothing like in France. We were being beaten brutally. And we were really-- we were being abused to no end. I was working in the salt mine approximately till around December, when I got very sick. I came down with a temperature. And well, I don't know-- it would be equal to about 105-degree temperature. I have that nature. I run a very high fever.

And I went into the so-called hospital. And they gave me a thermometer. I put in my mouth. And he's says to me-- and he looked at it, and he says, you must have been fooling around with that thermometer. And he smacked me, the German foreman. I said, I didn't do anything. He says, I'm going to see that you-- whether you did or not.

He put it in my mouth again. He was standing with me. And he seen that I didn't fool around with it. I had actually 105 temperature. So they rolled me in a wet blanket. For about 36 hours I was in wet blanket to bring down my temperature. And I pulled through.

I was sent back to the salt mine. About two weeks later, again I came down sick. That time my temperature wasn't that high, but I felt very sick and very run down. I went in again, and they gave me one day off from work. In desperation, I went ahead and I put a zero after it, after the one.

And about two hours later-- there was about four or five other people besides me who were left home, who were allowed to stay in the camp. And there was a German political prisoner, who collected the passes, called the schonung papers. Schonung meant that they'd be able to stay in there. And he took it in to the German foremen who issued them. And he didn't notice it, that it was an extra zero after mine.

Well, he came back about three hours later. I think I must have died 10 deaths because someone was hung only a few weeks before for the very same reason, that he falsified papers. And by the time he got back, all kind of thoughts went through my mind. The only other solution that I could have done is to run against the electric wires and electrocute myself. There was no other escape.

We were in this camp until the beginning of March, when the Allied forces were advancing again. And they took us to Dachau. They put us into a boxcar. And at this point we are already in our last leg. They packed us in, about 100 to a boxcar. By the time we arrived to Dachau, there was 36 who didn't make it. They were dead.

We just piled the dead ones into one corner of the car. And there's nothing else we could do about it. For six days and six nights we were sealed up in that car without any sanitary conditions, without a drop of food, without a drop of water. When we arrived to Dachau, actually we crawled off from the boxcars. And it when they applied some kind of a disinfectant on my head and under my arms, I passed out cold.

I thought this was it, was the end of me, finished. I had two personal friends.

Hold on one second, please. Please, continue.

As I passed out, two personal friend of mine, very good friends, they started to hit me. They started to beat me and kick me till I came to myself. And at that point, we went into the camp. We were trucked. By trucks they took us into Dachau. And they gave us our first food in six days. And someone among us who had the previous experience warned us to be very careful because it's a dangerous point, not to eat fast.

And there was some people who didn't listen to the advice. There was quite a few who died on the spot by trying to eat fast and consume the food fast. Well, Dachau was a hell hole. At that point, they were bringing in the prisoners from every part of Germany. And in a barrack which was built for 100, there are 600 or 700 people crammed in.

I'll never forget the morning when I woke up, and the fellow next to me was dead on the right side, and the fellow on my left side was dead. We took out the dead bodies in the morning, and we just piled it up like so many slabs of woods until the wagons came, and they took them away.

Sorry, what did the bedding arrangements look like? What were they?

That was triple-decker bunks. And where normally they would have, let's say, 10 in the bunk, they crowded in double and triple. That was really--

Was it a hard shelf, or were there mattresses?

No mattresses whatsoever-- it was just boards and blankets. The blankets were full of lice. You didn't even feel like pulling it over. You tried to protect yourself at night and pull the blankets on top of your head so maybe you could get a little quiet. But the thought of having the lice on top of your head, that was-- it kind of turned you off. Even if you didn't sleep, you didn't cover your head.

We were in Dachau until towards the end of April. And at this point, again the fighting caught up with us. And they told us they would take us and turn us over to the Swiss Red Cross.

Well, we didn't believe them, but nothing we could do about it. At this point, we are totally-- we were total rags. There was no strength left in us. I think the only thing that kept us alive is the willpower to see some revenge and to see whether our family have survived. Certainly, the food did not keep us alive. The empty coffee that we got once a day and the empty soup at lunchtime, maybe two ounces of bread and a little piece of margarine, that wasn't enough to sustain us.

Toward the end of April, they packed us up in a train again. And we started out. And the next day we came to a point near the Austrian border. There was a river there, which was bombed out. And they ordered us off the train. And everybody had to gather on the river bank. There was about 1,500 prisoners.

Well, this didn't look good at all. And when it turned dark, myself with two other fellows, he crawled away. He crawled approximately about 100, 150 feet. Then we took off as fast as we were able to, and we escaped.

We were hiding out for about three days, until the American Third Army came in. And the happiness that we felt, I don't think anybody could explain when we have seen the American tanks rolling again. And we knew we were free.

On the second side of the tape, tell me more about liberation. What was your first reaction when you saw the American soldiers?

Well, it was 2:30 in the morning, and we heard some rumbling. And he walked out. And we have seen the American tanks. We screamed out of joy. We hugged each other. We were jumping and dancing.

At this point I was approximately 70 pounds, although I was about 5' 11". Before I went to camp, I probably weighed about 150 pounds. We were like living skeletons. We haven't seen a mirror from the time we were imprisoned. So when I first had a chance to look into a mirror, I could not believe it was my face. Every one of my teeth, I would have been able to yank it out because it was loose from lack of food, lack of vitamins.

Our thoughts, our only [INAUDIBLE], to obtain some food, which we did in ample quantity. And we came to ourself within a few weeks' time, a few months' time. And once I learned I had two sisters who survived from someone who came back from Hungary, I decided to go back and find out for myself just what happened. And I went back to Hungary.

Of course, the situation with the Russian Army there, it wasn't at all to my liking. I seen the same thing. I seen the same faces. And they turned us out so brutally to the Germans. I decided this is not for me. So I escaped with a cousin of mine to Czechoslovakia.

And went to East Germany, and then went into West Germany. And that's when I registered for a group to come to the United States. President Truman had passed a law to the United States Congress at that time to let in 10,000 orphans. And I was fortunate enough to be among the first ones to be admitted. In 1946, July the 26th, I arrived in New York.

OK. From New York where did you go? Did you meet relatives?

No, I had--

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

Oh, he's getting excited.

[LAUGHTER]

It's all these modern conveniences. OK. You were going to tell me about coming to New York and your experience in the United States.

Well, I came with the children's transport. And we arrived to New York. And we were housed in the East Bronx, called [PLACE NAME] to be exact. Well, I did not have much of a stomach for the regimented life as they gave us over there. So I was fortunate enough to meet up with some friends of my oldest brother. And he took us out on a nightly basis to different restaurants.

And he was just discharged from the Air Force, and he had a little seaplane down in New Jersey. And we used to go flying on the weekend. So the first few weeks was a lots of fun, at which point I decided to go to Bridgeport, Connecticut.

I landed a job at a cleaning factory. This family who knew my people from back home, they gave me a home. They were very, very nice, except for the fact, they had five daughters. I figured, if I'm going to stick around, it might be too late to get out. [LAUGHS] And at which point I came back to New York.

And I started to work in a department store, Hearn's-- Hearn's Department Store on 14th Street, in the liquor department. And I was there for a short while. Then I decided to be a waiter in Florida. Money I didn't have, to go to Florida. So I decided to work my way down on a banana boat. But I couldn't get no passage.

So somebody lent me the money, and I went down. And I found a job, a very good one. And I spent two winters working down there.

How did you end up in Englewood Cliffs?

Well, that's another story.

OK.

When I arrived to the United States, six months later I seen on the list in the children's home that a party by the name Sarah Neiderman is coming with the next transport, with the same name. The Neiderman name is very rare name. I decided I would like to see who she is.

So I went down, and I met her. And here is this young girl about 17. And I walked over to her, and I said, your name Niederman? She says, yes. I said, so is mine. And we struck up a friendship. And two years later we were married.

So her name is Sarah Niederman Niederman.

Right. As a matter of fact, our children had problems when they sent away their Social Security papers. They wrote down the mother's maiden name as Susan Niederman. And usually they send it back, at least with the first one. The second and the third of our children, they knew already better. They marked down, by the way, our mother's maiden name was Niederman.

So we were married. And after working as a waiter for two years, I decided this is not for me. I wanted to have something more solid in my hands. And I wanted to be in business for myself.

And after carefully scrutinizing various things, I decided that I want to be in the retail business for the simple reason, manufacturing requires a lot of capital, which I didn't have. And the only retail business that had a five-day workweek was the kosher meat line. So I learned a trade.

And I believe it was about four years when I was in this country when I went into my own business. And I am very grateful to this country for giving me this opportunity. I have today about eight people making a living in my store.

My son is with me, which makes me very happy because I see a continuation of what I have built, what I have worked for to be continuing.

OK. That is great. Do you have any last words that you want to say about your experiences?

For example, something that you'd like your children to know. You know, anything that you'd like your children to know.

I would like my children to remember where they came from and to fight bigotry and not ever to tolerate prejudice. That's something that poisoned mankind in all their history. And I feel, if they could overcome that, there could be happier lives for everyone, even that's poison. I think that sums it up.

OK. Thank you very much for the interview.

It is my pleasure. Thank you for having me.