

Interview with Mr. James Loewenson  
By Stuart Markoff  
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League  
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

- Q: In Saint Louis Park, it is December 26, 1984. I'm Stuart Markoff, and I'm here to interview Mr. Loewenson in connection with the Holocaust Oral History Project with the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota. Mr. Loewenson, why don't you tell us your name and your place of birth and the year of your birth?
- A: James Loewenson -- or Loewensohn. I dropped the "h" when I came to this country -- exactly 31 years ago. I was born in 1908 in a little town in the province Posen of Germany that after the First War became Polish.
- Q: Were your parents also born in the same town?
- A: Yah. Several generations. They were born and all were jewelers. The oldest son -- not me -- the oldest son of this family was a jeweler.
- Q: So your father was a jeweler also.
- A: My father was a jeweler. Very well known. And he was elected alderman. The family was very well known.
- Q: What was his name?
- A: Jacob Loewensohn.
- Q: And your mother's name? Do you remember her maiden name?
- A: Rosendorf. Gertrude Rosendorf. From a little town nearby there.
- Q: Do you happen to remember your grandparents on either side of the family? Like your father's parents?

A: I don't remember my father's parents. I know only they were very religious, and when my father was 14, he took over the jewelry store -- and his father spent all day in the synagogue -- in a shul. My father was not religious. He always knew and said he was Jewish, went to the synagogue on the High Holidays like everybody else, but he was rather a little bit socialist, I think. He was not a big talker. He didn't talk about it. And he was pretty old when he married -- I think 50. I'm not sure. He was born in 1866, all in this little town.

Q: And what about your mother. Was her family also from the same town?

A: No, they were from a little town somewhere else. Maybe 100 miles.

Q: But also within the German-speaking area?

A: Yah. In a German town called Usch. Not very well known. And I knew my mother's father very well.

Q: What was his name? Do you remember?

A: Rosendorf.

Q: But his first name. do you remember his Jewish...?

A: Gustav Rosendorf. His Jewish name, I don't remember.

Q: How about your own Hebrew name? Did you know if you had a Hebrew name? Or were you given a Hebrew name?

A: I suppose, but I don't know. Jacob....

Q: And your mother -- would you call her a religious woman in the sense of synagogue going...?

A: Not at all. But after the war, when all these towns and provinces became Polish...

Q: This is after the First World War.

A: After the First World War. Many or all Jews left and went to the real Germany, because they were all assimilated Jews.

Q: Your family stayed? Or did they go also?

A: No, my father went in 1920, I think, or '21. He left. And I remember how we went to the station in a wagon and went to Berlin -- in Germany. And my mother's family, too.

- Q: They all came.
- A: Her father and their two sons -- my mother's brothers. They went to Germany and that's why I saw them and knew them.
- Q: So you lived in Berlin then.
- A: Yeah.
- Q: After 1920 about?
- A: '20 or '21. Till Hitler came. And then something very tragic happened. My father was a jeweler again -- of a little store in the center of Berlin -- and the Nazis bothered him. He had to come every day, I think, to a station where they called him dirty Jew. I don't know the real reason. Maybe they wanted me.
- Q: Before you moved to Berlin, you were pretty young. Do you remember anything when you were growing up in your city? Did you meet mostly other Jewish people or mostly non-Jewish, German...
- A: Jewish people. I know as little children, we played in the garden of a lodge where my father belonged.
- Q: Like a Masonic Lodge?
- A: Yeah, but I know the names still exist here. It's a Jewish lodge I think. I forgot the name, but I saw the name; it still exists here, too. And there this lodge had a house and a garden, and there the children played. They were all Jewish.
- Q: How about any Jewish education when you were growing up? Do you remember if you got anything like that?
- A: I was Bar Mitzvah and like all Jewish kids, a year before that I had to learn Hebrew. I can read. I don't know what I read, but I can still read Hebrew, only I don't speak it.
- Q: How about brothers and sisters. Did you have brothers and sisters?
- A: Yeah, I was the second of three boys just a year and a year and a half apart. And my older brother still lives in Argentina. He is a jeweler, the oldest. And the younger one, he died. He had, when he was about 18, 19, around 1934, a stomach operation and died in Germany. My father, he didn't like to go on living like this, being called by the Nazis all the time. He killed himself.
- Q: Did he say anything to you, the children, or that you remember about this experience?

- A: He made a will and he wrote in the will we should liquidate everything and go outside Germany and start a new life.
- Q: Do you remember reading this, or hearing this told to you from the will?
- A: We are reading or hearing it.
- Q: Did your family have a discussion about this?
- A: I don't know. My brother who worked before my father's death in this store, after he learned the materials, the profession, he worked with my father. So he took over. He liquidated everything. I was the only one who left pretty early. My father died in July, 1933.
- Q: So that was very shortly after the Nazis came to power!
- A: Yeah, they came to power in...
- Q: ...'32.
- A: In January or March. They came to power legally. And around Christmas of the same year, '33, I left. My brother's passport was...I didn't dare ask for mine. I went to Czechoslovakia.
- Q: Oh, that's when you went to Czechoslovakia!
- A: And we didn't need a visa. A German didn't need a visa. So that's where I went.
- Q: Now you went alone, not with other members of the family; like your mother stayed in Berlin?
- A: My mother stayed and the two boys stayed. He was still living. But I went with an uncle of mine who went for vacation with his family to Prague. But he didn't run away like I did. He went back after two weeks, but I went with them. I didn't need it.
- Q: What was your experience? Did anything lead up...did your father, when he grew up in the city near Posen...did we establish what city, by the way...
- A: No, I didn't say the name. It was a little town of about, then, 20,000 people, mostly Polish. And the German part were the Jews. The so-called "better", the merchants. Gott, all this was in Jewish hands, mostly.
- Q: Did they speak Polish as well as German?

A: No, not at all.

Q: In your home, also, mostly just German.

A: Right. Never Polish and never Yiddish. German. And there the whole family -- my father was, I think, the tenth or eleventh of twelve children. And they all lived in that town for a long time.

Q: But did you hear any stories before this tragedy in Berlin? Did you hear any stories or experience yourself what you could call anti-Semitic incidents? Or were you fairly free from hearing about this?

A: I can say that here, because I was very Leftist. I belonged to a union, as a boy in Hohensalza, this little town near Posen. It's a German name. The Polish name is Ino Wroclaw. That means New Breslau. There I belonged as a boy starting this, maybe ten years, what was called in Germany the Youth Movement. Jugend Bewegung. That was all over Germany after the First War.

Q: I know. It was a very, very big and important.

A: One student, a little bit older than I was, he started it. And he was a friend for many, many years. He lived in the town, too. So every Sunday we went out in the woods and other towns singing. And after this, too, I belonged to another group of this Youth Movement, and we became pretty soon interested in politics.

Q: Now this wasn't just Jewish people in the Movement. This was all kinds of people?

A: No, I belonged to a Jewish part of the General, called Kamaraden. Very, very old. I have books. In all towns of Germany existed groups of this German-Jewish Youth called Kamaraden, not Zionist. Not at all. We were Germans and Jews. And so I thought the Nazis were after me. I had reason to believe it. I didn't live in my parents' home. I had a room with some workers in the workers' neighborhood.

Q: And this was in Berlin.

A: In Berlin, yeah.

Q: When did you leave your parents' home, actually? Somewhere in the 20's?

A: 28, 29, when I became an apprentice in a library. And one day, maybe in May, June, I don't know when, I saw trucks with Nazis piling up there in the street where I lived. They came to my house. I saw them from the window. And they took people out --not Jews -- but they were after Communists, I think. They didn't find me. But I saw them going up on the roof and taking these people out.

I thought I'm in danger. My father wanted us to move, leave Germany anyhow, so we decided I will leave right away.

Q: Was it at this time your father was not experiencing the harassment yet? For himself and the jewelry store?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: That already had started.

A: He killed himself for some reason. He didn't say why.

Q: But he left you, he told you in his will to get out.

A: He says he wants us to liquidate the store, leave Germany -- all the family -- and start a new life. So I went to Prague, starting a new life, and got a job as an editor...a business. Very, very well known. Malik Verlag.

Q: Sure, very well known.

A: And they ended very tragically -- at least the movement's founder, Vedont Herzfelder. He was a Communist. And he was called to Russia. He went by himself. Never came back. I didn't stay so long, because I went there with a false passport. My brother's. I didn't know that that was such a crime. I thought I was a free man in Czechoslovakia. But when you take a room somewhere, you have to go to the police and declare where you are. When you move you have to go to the police again. So they found out. Christmas my mother came visiting me in Prague, and brought me my passport. Then I used my passport. The police found out. And I had to come to the main headquarters of the police. And they yelled at me first in Czechoslovakian -- I didn't understand -- then in German. They spoke perfectly German. And then put me in prison -- because I tried to "cheat." And this Herzfelder from Malik Verlag, he took a lawyer and brought me out, but I had to leave the country. They gave me one week. I was very sorry because I loved it in Prague. Beautiful city. And so I had to leave.

Q: Where did you go?

A: To Zurich, where else? That was nearest. I couldn't go to Austria, that was German. I didn't want anything German anymore. I went to Zurich. But they didn't like Jews without money. Rich Jews, maybe. But they didn't like Jews. They were afraid of Germany.

Q: You felt this very strongly from the Swiss authorities and just ordinary people?

A: Oh, yes. They told me after two months, three months -- they told me right away, "you can't stay here." I couldn't stay. A man came, after two months, I

think...that was the beginning of '34, maybe April. They brought me to Basel, to the French border, and then we walked around the cemetery at the end of Basel of Switzerland, and they told me, "Right now there's no French police there." They knew that, the Swiss police.

Q: So you literally walked into France.

A: They told me, "Go this way to the next town and there you can take the train to Paris. You are free but don't come back. We don't want you."

Q: But you did have at this point some sort of passport then? What documents did you have?

A: I had my passport, but no visa for France. Only the French were the most human. They accepted every foreigner.

Q: What was happening to your mother during this period?

A: They were still there. My mother didn't leave Germany. My brother -- the younger brother died -- and the older brother left, in 1938, '37, for South America. He couldn't get a visa for another European country. See all Jews who wanted to emigrate had to go to South America. England didn't take any, nobody.

Q: So he left before the infamous Kristallnacht.

A: Yeah. I don't know when that was.

Q: That was, I think, '38 already.

A: He left in '38. So it was maybe shortly before, or shortly after. I don't know. He left. He was married. He was traveling a lot. He went to Israel before and got married there. In '38 he left for Bolivia. Stayed about 10 years there. And then had trouble with the police and went to Argentina where he stayed all the time. My mother never left. She said she wants to stay with the tombs, graves. Where my father was buried and our youngest brother. She stayed. We couldn't find a visa, anyway, for her. She didn't get any.

Q: There was an effort to find one for her.

A: We tried to get her out against her will. She didn't want to go.

Q: When was that effort made? How late do you think that last effort was to get a visa for her?

- A: All the time from '38 'til '42. And in July, '42, she was deported. We got a postcard -- that was all she could write -- that she has to leave, and so she will not see us again. And we never could find out where -- we think the whole train was gassed. The whole train.
- Q: Everybody they took out from Berlin at that point.
- A: We think so. She never landed in any camp. In any of these Polish deportation camps. We tried for months, or years...
- Q: So the postcard was sent by the Red Cross?
- A: Yeah, or to the Red Cross. I suppose everybody got one postcard? But in any case, we heard that. I don't know who.
- Q: And by this time, where were you in 1942?
- A: In '42 I was in France.
- Q: So then you had come into France, you had taken the train already directly to Paris?
- A: I went directly to Paris.
- Q: How did you survive then in Paris? Were there any communities to help you? Or any Jewish agencies?
- A: Yeah. There were committees. I heard right away on the station, the day I came in, when I get out of the train, there is a Jewish man who somehow he "smelled" that I was a foreigner who didn't know what to do. He talked to me. He took a taxi and showed me Paris. And I'm sure he gave me something to eat. And he gave me an address of a committee -- I would have found it anyway -- that was on the main street in Paris, Champs Elysees.
- Q: Do you remember the name at all of the agency? Did it have a name in French or German or...
- A: Yeah. In French. And this committee that was really marvelous, they trained people. Most were German Jews who were intellectuals or students. They had no profession. There they trained them for two things; woodwork or metalwork ,so that we could get a job. I learned metalwork. For one year they sent me, this committee, to the south of France, near Lyon, a little town where they had professional schools like here, like Dunwoody.
- Q: Trade schools, we call them.



- A: Yah, trade schools. I knew a little French from school -- most of the Jews I met there, maybe 10, 15 boys like me -- they didn't speak French.
- Q: How old were you at this time then, when we're getting into France?
- A: I was over 20. And stayed there in this little town for a year, and then the same committee found me a job, and everybody else, at the railroad. That was state-owned, the railroad.
- Q: Working as a metalworker?
- A: I don't know. I got a normal salary, and what I did was repairing engines -- locomotives.
- Q: Now were you still, in Vichy, France at this point in 1942?
- A: No, but at the beginning of the war, I lived in Paris and worked 'til the end, but at the beginning of the war, they didn't keep me. They couldn't have foreigners, and I didn't want to become French.
- Q: So this area in Lyon was free, still Free France?
- A: Yeah. I was in Paris now. School was over. I worked at the railroad near Paris, but at the beginning of the war, all foreigners had to come to the police. And Germans, and Poles, Jewish, and non-Jewish, they put in a camp in a Stadium, a sports arena, outside of Paris. Not covered. Near Colombes. Near Paris. So I talk now about 1938. The war was declared, but no shots were fired for a full year. The French called it the "drole de guerre," that's funny that you know that.
- Q: It's a famous episode.
- A: So I had to go there. We had to come with a blanket, with food for three days. That's what the French said. So I went there too. And from there we were sent, all thousands and thousands -- and we stayed overnight in Grenoble. I remember I took a book of Dostoyevsky -- in French -- with me to have something to read. I forgot the name now of the book. And at the entrance to Colombes, I have to show the food and the blanket. And the French officer saw the book. He took it and turned around and said to another Frenchman, "Ah, look here. Look what I found." He says, 'Bastard!' And put it in his pocket. Doesn't say, "Can I take it? Will you give it to me?" He just stole it from me! I had no rights! So we stayed there a few days in this open camp, and then we're sent to the center of France -- a beautiful part of the country -- two camps. And they were good camps. Not like the German. Plenty to eat. Always wine.
- Q: Do you remember the names of the camps at all?

A: Not right now. But we were known for some reason in the unions. And I had a girlfriend. The women were not arrested like we. Only men, foreigners, had to come. Women could stay for the moment. Later on, they, too. And she knew somebody from the union high up, or worked for them. One day A French officer came from the Army in uniform and took me out. Brought me back in Paris and I was a free man again. But it was a funny situation. You couldn't have any lights shining outside the windows. And I worked again, "Poule de France National" – for the national defense. But we had no orders. There were hundreds of French workers standing in front of machines. We had to make these gears for planes. But we had no orders.

Q: It was that chaotic.

A: Yah. Terrible. So we had to work 10 hours, with a good salary, and I was a free man, but nothing to do. So we played cards. I think I worked nights.

Q: Was this very scary for you at this period? Were you frightened with what was going on?

A: Not really frightened, but you never knew how it will end. German planes, but no bombs, over Paris. War and no war. Nobody had confidence in France anyhow. In any case, when the real war began, when the German armies started moving -- and nothing stopped them -- all foreigners had to come again to another place. This time we were sent down to the south of France. I don't remember the name. Near Bordeaux. Not real south, but southeast. A camp. And guarded -- in the train, full of foreigners, arrested -- was guarded by black men -- giants -- and for them, they would have liked to kill us. They looked at us as enemies!

Q: Were these hired by the French?

A: Yeah, they were part of the French Army from the colonies. But in any case, we came there. When the Germans overran France, they opened the camps -- the French. They told us, "We can't protect you. We know you don't want to meet the Germans." And Petain, to show the world that there is a free, independent France, left a little part near Toulouse, near the Swiss border, that was called Free France. They told us, "Go there. There you are free." And they gave us even, a paper; "He is a friend of France. Help him." Something like that. So I went there, alone. Tried to get hired. I went in the direction of Montauban. And that's where I stayed a year-and-a-half, two years...

Q: Montauban is where?

A: It's near Toulouse. An old town. Not too little.

A: Were there other Jewish people there with you?

- A: There were hundreds and hundreds of foreigners. Because now, at this time, the Germans occupied France. The women were arrested too -- or shortly before. And they were all sent to this Free France -- to Montauban. Somehow the men knew that the women were there, so everybody went in the direction of Montauban.
- Q: Was your girlfriend there at this time? She was Jewish, I presume?
- A: Yeah. She was not any more my girlfriend. I married her in the camp. I didn't want to be all alone in Paris so she came. I got the permission to have the marriage there. The camp commandant married us. Then she went back to Paris. Later she came to me in Montauban. So we stayed there. I was pretty lucky. I had a room in the house of the Mayor. Now he had nothing to do with me. But one day after a year there. One day he sent his maid to tell me, "Tomorrow morning at six, all refugees will be arrested and put in a camp on order of the German authority." There was no German army in Montauban, but there were still some Germans in "civil" -- not in uniform -- who told the French authorities what to do. So I knew next morning there would be a round-up -- that all foreigners will be arrested again, the rest of the foreigners that were still free. So we gave everything away, what we had...
- Q: How did you know these things in advance? I mean were the notices put up in the town?
- A: The Mayor of Montauban sent me a message to tell me next morning at six, all foreigners will be arrested again --or have to come to the police. Something like that. Because I gave his little boys German lessons. So he was kind of interested in me. I never talked to him. I don't remember his name, but he sent me the message, indirectly, I should take care of myself. Nobody else. So we warned a lot of friends we had -- one who is still here before we left, did everything to help me come over to this country. In any case, I left, took the train to Toulouse in the direction of Switzerland.
- Q: About what time are we talking?
- A: 1942. I think September. Still beautiful. I had no coat, but we went to the mountains, direction of Switzerland, just the two of us, over, high up -- the lowest point on the map I found, the 2,000 meter, that's not too hard on us. It was night when we came to the border -- the highest point. I saw a light -- a little lower -- the Swiss guards. And I yelled, "Hey!" I thought the moment I'm in Switzerland, I will be free. But they couldn't find us. So we descended. It was six, already light, then, on the Swiss side. And there in a village I saw a Swiss gendarme, a Swiss man talking to a farmer's wife. So I waved at him. I thought I'm free. He bent down, took his gun and said, "Hey! Wait!" He arrested us.
- Q: How many were there in your party? When you descended?

- A: Just two. My wife and I.
- Q: So this was quite a shock, I imagine, when this guard would suddenly...
- A: Oh yeah. After two days -- we couldn't stay -- he brought us again to the French border and said, "Go to France. I don't care what you do. Don't come back."
- Q: Did he give any reason for his action?
- A: "We don't want you. We keep only old men, old people, and very young children. But not you. This boat is full," he said. "The boat is full," I heard that several times. And so we went down to one of the little French towns near there near the lake. Stayed for two days with groups of hundreds and hundreds of foreigners who whispered! Didn't dare to talk. Nobody knew what to do. And one day a Frenchman, many did that -- tried to bring, for money, people over to Switzerland -- I gave him my wedding ring. So we went over the lake, after two, three weeks, maybe, staying in Evian, one of these little spas, and we came, after, over the lake, Lake Le Man -- I don't know the English name. The biggest lake. We came on the other side.
- Q: You took the boat across, in other words?
- A: Yeah. There were maybe 10 people on the boat, and the baby was crying, and the mother almost killed her baby, because she was so afraid that they will hear us come -- it was very early. But now some miracle happened. When we came on the other side, the Swiss army was there. An officer yelled at us, "Why do you come bothering us! We don't want you! Why aren't you fighting the Russians like the other Germans do?" But they had to keep us. The Swiss churches forced their government to open the border to all refugees, only nobody in France knew it! Nobody knew it! But for two months, the borders were open. They kept everybody who showed up!
- Q: What a terrible irony that nobody knew.
- A: Nobody knew -- or very few! There was no communication between refugees in Switzerland. For two months the borders were opened. They kept everybody. Put us in working camps. Women one side. My wife was expecting, so she came to Geneva in a home in a "kampenhof" and she died there. They made several transfusions, but at the delivery she died.
- Q: How terrible.
- A: I don't know. Maybe these weeks were too much for her. I don't know. The baby, too, died, maybe a week after. I remember only from the camp where I was, one day I got the note, "You come to..."

Q: Do you remember where this was exactly? The name of the place in Switzerland? The camp?

A: The camp. I know where it was, near the lake in the French part. But then after my wife died, I went there to see her, but she was dead already. Then I think I went back. I was half out of my mind. The police were very nice to me. They transferred me to a camp -- now I know the name; Biermanstorff, near Zurich -- on a little hill overlooking Zurich. They said, he's German, so let him be in the German part, I suppose. I didn't really care.

Q: They didn't know or consider you Jewish, you think, at this point?

A: Oh, yeah. They knew. Refugee Jewish. They knew I refused to be considered German. So they called that "Jewish refugee of German origin." That was the official denomination. So I was there in a camp near Zurich.

Q: Was your passport stamped with anything ... any kind of special symbol or anything that would show that you were a Jewish refugee?

A: No. In the beginning, the Germans didn't do that. Later on the passport had the stamp, "Jewish." But I left too early.

Q: I'm thinking more of the Swiss...put anything on the passport.

A: I don't know. I don't think so. And I don't think I used my passport. I used a French identity card.

Q: So you had a new identity when you made the crossing?

A: Yeah, I didn't have a passport. I didn't use a German passport.

Q: So do you recall what French name then you may have used? Was it your own name on this Carte Identite? Or was it a new name?

A: No, no. My own name .

Q: Mr. Loewenson, we were talking about -- on the other side of the tape --your coming to Switzerland, and you remained there as the war was coming to an end, but before that happened, you were telling me that you had moved to Zurich from the camp.

A: From a camp to another camp near Zurich. And there I met the Swiss people who tried to make life for these refugees a little bit easier with the nice music or with speeches. Somehow I got a job offer. I could become an apprentice in a book

bindery in Zurich. And the police authorities gave me the permission to leave the camp, because somebody guaranteed for me.

Q: Now this bindery was from a famous German?

A: Yeah, a bookbinder named Behr, who was very well known. He was a teacher in art schools -- bookbinding teacher -- he was known in all of Europe. He had a bookbinding atelier in Zurich, and he agreed to take me as an apprentice. No salary or very little, I think, just pennies. But I didn't have to stay in the camp and could learn another trade. So I stayed there for a year, maybe, until I wanted to marry again -- a young girl I met there -- but the Swiss authorities didn't give her the permission to marry a foreigner who had no nationality. I refused to be declared a German again after all these things that had happened to me. So we decided we'd go back to France where I liked to be anyhow, and like many Swiss, they are happy if they can leave Switzerland and live in a bigger country. So we went back outside of Paris, a street called Bonliere. A friend of mine who lived in Switzerland, an older man, gave me permission to use his apartment. It was very hard to find apartments in Paris. So we installed ourselves.

Q: Now this was about what time? What year?

A: This was 1944 or '45. The war was over.

Q: That's right, Paris was liberated by September, I guess, of '44.

A: So maybe it was '45. I don't know exactly. But I couldn't have come back when Germany...

Q: That is why I was asking.

A: Yah. So, I found a job in Paris in a factory somewhere. A job.

Q: In all this time, did you ever hear stories about what was going on in Poland? In other words, did any word reach the Jewish people or the Jewish communities of what was going on elsewhere?

A: I don't think that I knew it. I knew that my mother was deported, but I had no idea what happened to her. I don't think, at this time, that we knew. The general public knew. I met a man in Zurich -- a journalist named Savolovitz -- who was one of the first Jews outside Germany to hear about the killing of millions of Jews. He got the first reports. I don't know if you remember the name.

Q: I think I've heard of it, yes.

A: Dr. Savolovitz edited a Jewish paper -- not a daily, maybe. He headed some information office in Zurich -- a Jewish one. His name was mentioned several

times that he was the first who was contacted by a German industrialist who, on the outside was Nazi, but really, he wanted England and all countries to know what happened to the Jews --and he contacted Rabbi Wise. But that is not for me to say, all these things.

Q: But you did meet this man.

A: I knew him because my mother-in-law worked for him. My future wife's mother worked in this agency. I forgot the name. We were in Paris now, after the war.

Q: So, in other words, you heard some information of what was going on.

A: No, not at all. Not in Switzerland, and not in France. I didn't know these things. And I think the majority of people didn't know.

Q: So you found all this out after the war, as everybody else found out about it, in America and elsewhere.

A: Yeah.

Q: So in Paris then, how long did you stay? How long were you in France before you came?

A: I stayed in France 'til the end of 1953.

Q: Were there children now? You were married again?

A: Yeah, we were married. That's why we went back to France. So that we could marry. A boy of mine was born in 1947 in Paris. One day we got a visit from a friend of mine from Minneapolis who came to Europe and visited us -- a friend from the youth movement in Germany. She could leave France shortly before -- it opened after the German invasion -- for the United States. She became a professor of social work here at the University later. She studied first.

Q: Who is this?

A: Gisela Konopka. Very well known here.

Q: Yes, she's very, very well known.

Q: She came visiting us in France -- in Paris -- and for some reason declared, "James, you can't live like this! You have to come to America!" I thought I lived like a king! I had my own apartment -- not every Frenchman had it -- but she thought it would be good if I come here. She found a relative of mine I didn't know, an aunt of mine, who gave us the papers. You needed certain papers.

- Q: Sponsors.
- A: Responsibility. A Mrs. Hirschfield, here in Minneapolis, who agreed to send us the papers. And so, end of 1953, we could come to this country.
- Q: Then you came directly here then, as soon as you arrived in America?
- A: Yeah, we stayed maybe four or five days in New York, in the black part of New York -- we had a friend whom we knew in Paris, a black girl who studied in France -- and then right away we came here, and stayed first at the house of Konopka -- a few weeks, two, three weeks -- and then entered an apartment. I got a job pretty soon.
- Q: Are the children now living in Minneapolis? Or have they grown up and left?
- A: Yeah, we are very lucky. I have two boys, one boy born in France, one boy born here in Minneapolis, and they're both here.
- Q: Now what about their Jewish education? Did you keep your family sort of very secular in orientation when they were growing up? Or did you change?
- A: No, I'm not a believer. For some reason, I didn't want to lie to them. They knew. We talked about it. It was necessary that we are Jewish, and they, the two boys, are Jewish, but I couldn't give them any belief. So both went to religious schools, but that is all. The younger boy, he had some trouble when he was very little. He didn't want to stay in the Sunday school. I had to stand outside the door of the classroom where through a window he could see me, or I had to put my hands up that I'm still there. And he didn't want to go to the real school. So I thought it's more important that he goes to the regular school, and I didn't fight too much for Sunday school. But now he is interested in Jewish things.
- Q: Does he know the story? Did you tell him when he was growing up, or when they were growing up?
- A: He knows very little. And he was bothering me, the younger one -- and the older one, too -- for three, four, five years to write these things I'm telling you. Now for some reason, lethargy or old age or laziness, I...
- Q: No, it's not a pleasant subject to try to deal with.
- A: I have the book where I should write this.
- Q: I'm interested in -- I think anyone who's involved with this project is interested in -- knowing if you have any feelings about the Holocaust itself -- as you learned about it, and your own connection with it.



- A: I can't. I can't read about it.
- Q: You don't read books now about it, or films...
- A: I can't read about it. I don't want to hear about it. I would break down and cry. I remember one day --I belong to a group of senior citizens here -- they are all over, all these groups -- and one day a man who's now at the University here, I don't know if his name is Fisch or Frisch, who was in a camp, who went to a camp in Poland, and he is teaching now, something here. He came to this senior citizens group and talked about how they were. I just had to put down my...
- Q: So you feel, I guess, fairly lucky, I suppose, all things considered.
- A: I am lucky! But I just don't have the strength to hear about these things. I have books about it. I can't read them.
- Q: Do you have any strong feelings about your upbringing -- you were living in a German-speaking culture, and your native language was German -- do you feel anything today about Germany or about any reflections about human nature?
- A: Oh, yeah, but I can't hate the Germans like many German Jews do. I consider them victims of Hitler too, like I was. I don't want to go back. I went back once to France, to Switzerland, to England. I didn't touch German ground again. I don't want to. But I can't say I hate them. I like the German language, I like to speak and read German.
- Q: I see that you're reading now a book of poems by a German-writing, Jewish-born poet, Paul Salon, who you said was Romanian?
- A: He was born in Romania, yeah.
- Q: And are his poems -- now I have not read him -- on what you would call Jewish-related themes?
- A: Yeah, they are all, I think, somehow connected to the extermination camps and the Jewish race.
- Q: And he, himself, is a survivor?
- A: Yah, his parents were arrested, sent to the camps, and killed there.
- Q: You told me before we started this interview that you had met Madame Trocme.
- A: Yeah.

- Q: Whose famous book had been published about her experiences by Philip Hallie. Called, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed. And you know her daughter, as well, in Minneapolis, Mrs. Blackburn.
- A: Yah, yah. She became a friend, both the old lady and the daughter.
- Q: You said you were her chauffeur for awhile.
- A: She called me, "Mon Chauffeur and Very Good Friend." We write to each other. She writes me.
- Q: Well if there's anything you want to add, I think we've covered what we have to cover as far as your stories. I have a letter from Mr. Loewenson that was printed in the Star and Tribune "Neighbors' column on Saturday, November 6, 1982. It combines materials from some other letters that Mr. Loewenson had written to some of his friends, and I'll just read the letter. It's titled "In the midst of terror, there was humaneness," by James Loewenson:

"Forty years ago, I lived in Montauban, the old French town where hundreds of refugees from many European countries found months, even years, of safety from German persecution during World War II.

Many could and, in time, did leave for the United States, more were finally arrested and sent to Germany and Poland, and some escaped. In the summer of 1942, we heard the news that a new raffle was imminent to bring the remainder of the refugees into concentration camps. That night I took off in (the) direction of Switzerland. It was then that I witnessed something exceptional and beautiful.

Forty or 50 kilometers before the Swiss border, I took a bus going in that direction. The bus was filled mostly with Jews from Poland, who had lived in France or Belgium for years and were trying now -- like me -- to escape from the Nazis and their death camps. They didn't speak; they only whispered. And after a while, the bus was stopped, in the middle of nowhere: control by the French police, the "gendarmes." One of them came aboard the bus, saluted, and said what you have heard so often in those days of wartime France: "Vos papiers, s'il vous plait" (Your papers please!) Then he went from one to the other of these terrified people, who didn't look like Frenchmen, who couldn't speak French, who didn't speak at all, who didn't dare breathe. He took their brand-new, forged identification papers, looked at them and gave them back, saying each time, "Merci!" and saluting.

When he was finally finished with the last passenger, he turned around, saluted all of us again, left the bus and waved the driver on. Everybody was crying, even the driver.

This unknown policeman, who had orders to check the bus for Jews and to arrest them, but who let them go free in plain view of his colleagues, who risked not only his job, but his liberty and his life, who rather was human than an ally of Hitler Germany -- he was the greatest hero I have ever known.

Vive la France!

The article ends, "James Loewenson lives in south Minneapolis. Portions of this article were written several years ago as a personal letter to a friend.

Mr. Loewenson, you also mentioned the role of Mr. Nudell when you came to Minneapolis in helping you find some job? Why don't we have that on the record by way of conclusion for the interview.

A: Maybe two, three days after our arrival here in Minneapolis, I had to look for a job. Somebody sent me to the Jewish Family and Children's Service where Mr. Nudell listened to me, tried to find out what I knew, but I couldn't speak English. I didn't see what I could do. But he took the phone after seeing me for ten minutes, and after he was through talking to somebody, he gave me the address where I had to go the next morning. And I had a job. It was Napo Industries in Hopkins. I had a job even without knowing the language, and I was very impressed by this.

Q: I imagine you were! We would all be happy if we could get action that quick! Well, I appreciate it very much for your time that we went over this. And I know it's not easy for you. If there's anything else you wanted to say, you're welcome to add. It's your privilege. No? We're concluded!

A: Yah.

Q: Alright. This concludes Mr. James Loewenson's interview in relation to the Oral History Project of the Jewish Community Relations Council.