

Interview with Leon Wells—1/8/90

Q: Tell me a little about yourself.

A: I was born in Stojanov, Poland. Later on we moved to Lvov. My family was quite religious. After the war I came to Lehigh University to study for a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering, which I received in 1950. Then I taught mathematics at N.Y.U. Graduate School. In the applied math part, at the Courant Institute, I was also a research fellow studying shallow water theory for the Naval Research Office. From 1961-1974, I was President of Panacolor where we did research that was the forerunner to today's VCR. I've written three books and over 19 articles, scientific and general. Now, at 64, I'm sort of retired.

Q: Did you come here on a Hillel scholarship?

A: No. On my own. I had studied undergraduate at a German University after the war. The people at Lehigh were very nice to me.

Q: Do you dream about the war?

A: Yes I do.

Q: How do you think people survived? By luck or by skill?

A: It was a matter of luck mostly but skill also helped.

Q: How did you find the time to write The Janowska Road book?

A: I wrote in the evenings after work.

Q: Tell me a bit about your family.

A: I married in 1955 and I have three children, all of whom have done very well. My oldest daughter is an architect. She married a non-Jew.

Q: In your book, you wrote, and I'm paraphrasing: "God, if you had to kill us, okay. But did we have to die like this, without any dignity?" What could you add to this now?

A: I'll tell you the truth. I don't believe in God, but even so, I belong to a synagogue, a Reform temple. I belong because it's part of a community. This was my background and my culture. It's an emotional thing. But how could there be a God who would allow these things to happen? God said the covenant's symbol is the bris, circumcision. And isn't it ironic that it was the symbol of God's covenant with his people that caused so many Jewish males to perish in the Holocaust because they couldn't hide that they were Jewish.

I'm also bothered by what's going on in today, the way we treat the Arabs. We don't act humane to them and if we don't then we are like all the other nations. And I don't think we were ever different.

Q: What does your second child do?

A: He's a doctor, doing his internship. He's thirty. My third child is a lawyer.

Q: Do your children see religion as you do?

A: No. They're more religiously inclined than I am. They see me as sort of a goy. My daughter, who married a non-Jew, identifies more than I do. My two sons are single.