

RG-50.407.0084

Interview: Leo Lew, August 1996

Summary

Part I.

Leo Lew, born August 11, 1907 in Bialystok, [then] Russia, fifth of six children, describes: Moving east to Kobryn, Russia [now Belarus], his father's birthplace, at the outbreak of the First World War; his family subsequently moving repeatedly among the shifting borders, including a period from 1918 when his father and brother lived in a separate location, and finally being reunited in Bialystok, [then] Poland in 1920; his self-identity shifting from being a "Russian-Jewish boy" to a Polish citizen; his father being a "prominent Zionist"; the entire family being highly educated in a variety of fields; being largely insulated from typical Polish anti-Semitism by the presence of a large Jewish population in Bialystok; obtaining a law degree and beginning work as a lawyer in 1931; meeting his future wife in 1937 and marrying on August 6, 1939; joining the Polish military and being sent east to fight a rear-guard action against the Germans; returning to Bialystok with the Soviets following the German withdrawal from Bialystok pursuant to the German-Soviet division of Poland; his mother, née Sternfeld, a "worldly" woman, and father, Zvi; responding to rumors of an impending German invasion of the Soviet Union by fleeing with his wife on June 18, 1941 to Lithuania—a decision, made against his family's wishes, to which he attributes their survival; deciding to return to Bialystok on a train via Vilnius; in Vilnius, hearing of the German advance, catching the last train out, to Minsk; seeing Russian soldiers fleeing, en masse; barely escaping a German bombardment in Minsk; continuing on to Moscow, Saratov, and Petrovsk, where he was permitted to work as a lawyer; moving on after about two months to Tashkent as Germans advanced toward Stalingrad; moving on to Frunze, where they spent the remainder of the war; hearing about events of the Holocaust relatively late, when the Soviets progressed through Poland.

Part II.

Being repatriated to Poland from Frunze after the war, in approximately May 1946; being resettled in Breslau; being afraid of Poles, who were killing Jews, including 46 killed in a pogrom; growing efforts among Jews to leave Poland; being taken in a group into Czechoslovakia, but the group being robbed by Polish border guards; being taken to an UNRRA camp in Bad Reichenhall, Germany; moving to another place [not specified] near Munich; contacting a surviving brother in Paris and obtaining documents to go to Paris; discovering that he and his brother were the only survivors among his family in Bialystok; remaining in Paris from October 1947 to approximately March 1948; emigrating to Melbourne, Australia; his wife giving birth to son in 1948; building a successful life in Australia.

*Transliteration as heard