

DONOR: LEON SHRAGGE
INTERVIEWER: NADA RUBIN
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approx. running time: 1 hour, 15 mins.

Tape Footage: Background

1-759

Leon was born in the little Polish town of Vecheka on November 25, 1900. He had three brothers and six sisters.

They lived in a house. Leon's father was a whiskey maker.

Leon attended public school in the morning and Jewish school in the afternoon. There were more Gentile than Jewish children at school, but Leon mixed with both. He did not experience anti-semitism while growing up.

Leon's mother was more religious than his father. They kept a kosher home and lit Sabbath candles. The men and boys attended synagogue every Saturday. There were five synagogues in their town.

There were over three thousand Jews in Leon's hometown before the war. Seventeen of them survived.

Once a week Leon attended a movie or went dancing. There was no radio.

He lived in a two bedroom house. He had many close friends. On Saturday he hung out at the park.

They had a very nice life. They didn't know any better. There was one lord who use to drive into town every Saturday and the whole town would come out to look at his car.

The city of Lemberg was 17 miles away.

Most of the Jewish people lived in the same area in town. The Gentiles were farmers and lived on the outside.

Leon completed ninth grade in school. When World War I began he was already working with his father.

Leon had a Bar Mitzvah.

760-1354

In 1916 Leon moved to another town. In 1917 he joined the Austrian Army and stayed with it 10 months until the end of the war.

In 1923 he spent 24 months with the Polish Army, working mainly in an office.

In 1925 Leon returned home and eventually married his wife, who was his first cousin. They were engaged for six years, waiting for Leon's sister to marry.

Leon's wife worked in town. On their dates they went to the park. Leon was 28 when he married. Close friends attended their wedding. They danced outside.

Leon got a job at a flour mill in another town. They lived there in a beautiful suite near the flour mill. Leon earned good wages and was in charge of 41 people.

His daughter Betty was born on January 1, 1931.

Leon and his wife enjoyed a comfortable life. They had a girl working for them. His wife looked after the house and children.

Leon's second daughter Carmela was born on March 23, 1933.

Leon visited his hometown on Sundays by bike. His boss lived there.

Leon's wife kept a kosher home. He walked two kilometers to synagogue every Saturday. She attended on the High Holidays, and lit candles every Shabbat.

1356-2143

Leon heard the war was coming but did not feel anti-semitism. He was well liked. Mainly Ukrainians, some Poles, and one Jew worked for him.

WWII

In 1939 the Russians came. Leon was in the Polish Army reserves but never got called up.

The Russians took over the flour mills and put Leon in charge of a bigger mill on the outskirts of his hometown. He had a beautiful house there too. The Russian manager was not anti-semitic, but Leon was afraid of him.

The German Occupation

The Russians occupied the town until June 1941 when the Germans chased them out and took over. The flour mill was shut down because there was a fuel shortage. Leon was told to choose one man as a watchman.

When the Germans came the Jews had to wear arm bands. They began hunting Jews right away.

Forty-five teenage Jewish girls were taken to work at a saw mill across from the flour mill. On Rosh Hashana the Germans rounded them all up and killed them.

After that Leon knew they could be next.

Leon's 72-year-old uncle was living with him. His parents had died before the war.

In 1941 Leon realized he had to make plans. He used to sneak out at night to search for hiding places. He tried to avoid the watchman, but one day the watchman came to Leon and told him he couldn't stand the way Leon was living and he was willing

to help him by hiding him, asking nothing in return. He told Leon to think about it and let him know.

At one point Leon and his family had hid in a cistern from World War One.

In 1942 the town was empty of Jews.

2145-2853 Leon did not have a better option. There would be no room for his uncle at this man's hiding place. The uncle said he would go to the ghetto, after all he had already lived his life. He went to the ghetto that afternoon, and died that night from natural causes.

The town had been made into a ghetto, with five families living in each house.

After the teenage girls were killed there was an announcement for the men to report to the Germans. Leon wanted to go into town for this, but his wife did not want him to. He decided to do whatever his brother did. His brother was going to report so Leon went with him. Four hundred and eighty-four Jewish men gathered. They were surrounded by seven German soldiers and marched 28 kilos out of town to a dugout that was prepared for them. Leon asked one Ukrainian policeman he knew to look the other way so he could run away, but he refused.

While marching on the highway some of the men said they should either attack the soldiers or try to run away. The soldiers would not be able to kill all of them. But the Rabbi said they mustn't try anything, and nothing would happen to them. Leon was feeling badly for not listening to his wife in the first place. He tried to convince his brother to run with him, but he refused. So Leon and a couple other men ran. The Germans shot after them and the others were killed. Leon got away.

Leon hid under a wagon until a woman gave him an all clear. He jumped over a wall and crawled to the home of a Jewish dentist. He fell in the door and fainted. The dentist helped him. Then Leon asked a German farmer who was on his way home to pass by his house and let his wife know he was alive. He gave the farmer a tobacco leave and told him to show it to his wife as proof that he had really seen Leon.

Leon's wife had gone to her brother-in-law's house and seen that he was gone, so she was worried. Leon returned home through the fields. A German farmer spotted Leon and wanted to turn him in to the Germans, but then decided to let him go.

In Hiding

When Leon arrived home there was much happiness. That is when they decided to go into hiding. They packed essentials, warm clothing and food and left in the middle of the night. The man who hid them was already hiding another Jewish couple. The hiding place was a dugout under the floor, big enough for six people to sit in. Leon prayed a lot for help.

2854-3501 When it was quiet they came out of the hideout into an adjoining room. The

woman hiding with them became pregnant and couldn't fit into the hole. She and her husband found another place to hide.

While in hiding Leon and his family did nothing. At night the woman hiding them covered the windows so they could come out and cook and bake in her kitchen. They had to whisper all the time. It took Leon's youngest daughter six weeks after she was liberated to be able to speak.

They were in hiding for 20 months and nine days.

One afternoon Leon's daughters baby sat the woman's baby. Usually she hung a fabric when she went out, but this time she forgot to. A neighbor girl came in to the house and recognized Betty and Carmela. She ran home to tell her father. Leon's family hid, while the woman hiding them hid all signs of them. When her neighbor came in asking questions, she said those were other girls from the neighborhood his daughter had seen. She offered him to look around the whole house. After the war he told Leon he knew they were hiding there, but didn't wish to do them any harm.

Another neighbor helped Leon with food, arranging for him to buy meat whenever he killed a calf. At night in the summer Leon went out and stole what he could from fields. This friend arranged a spot for Leon to hide and a code for them to use. If he talked about bees Leon knew the situation was safe. If he talked about onions the situation was not safe. Leon met him every week for 20 months.

They also had a signal arranged in the mornings. If the man held a paper between his fingers it meant Leon and his family were about to be discovered and were to get out of their hiding place quickly.

Leon stayed in touch with this man for 40 years.

Liberation

The last few days in hiding Leon heard the Germans moving out and the planes overhead. He prayed that his family would all die together. All of a sudden it got quiet. The neighbor opened Leon's hiding place and told him to come up. Leon thought he was drunk, and didn't believe it was safe. Finally he left the girls behind and came up and saw a Russian soldier.

Leon and his family packed for the city where his wife had relatives. His neighbor wanted him to stay for a while since they had been through so much together. This was in July, 1944. A Russian soldier came in and asked the farmer if he had kept Jews. The farmer did not know how to respond. Then the soldier told them that he was Jewish too.

3502-4029

Once when Leon had arranged to buy meat from his neighbor, his neighbor couldn't meet with him because he had company over. Leon had been dressed in dark clothing because it was raining when he left his home. But as he waited for his neighbor it began to snow. The neighbor gave him his wife's coat and wrapped him in a white bed sheet. As Leon made his way home another neighbor's dog began barking. Leon lay down in the snow. The neighbor was coming closer

with the dog. Leon's other friend had given him a pocket gun to use if he ever needed it. But finally the man and his dog went back inside.

Leon went home in the opposite direction. In the morning this other neighbor came to tell the man hiding Leon that he had scared off a thief.

Once in late November Leon walked nine kilos through muddy fields to find food. He was carrying a big pack and was not used to the fresh air. He sat down to rest about a half mile from the highway. He fell asleep and woke in daylight. His family was worried. There were German tanks on the highway. Leon lay down in the wet potato fields and waited until midnight so he could return home.

Once he walked eight kilos to a farm to get food and no one was there when he arrived. He continued on to another farm where he knew the people and knocked on the window. He thought they would let him into the house, but then he heard such a commotion he thought they were going to come out and kill him. He walked another three miles to a farm, where the farmer had already been invited by his neighbor to go look for Leon. Leon ran out to the fields to hide. This man's mother then hid food in her apron, pretended to be looking for lost chickens, and took it out to Leon.

The Jewish Russian soldier brought Leon two big boxes of food.

Leon and his family went to Lemberg. Leon had very bad eczema on his face. His wife opened a restaurant in their building. Leon bought and sold on the market.

4030-4570 Leon's nephew arrived to see them with a Russian officer and took Leon to a hospital. Leon did not think he would be admitted on his own.

After five months in Lemberg they moved to Cracow and Leon went to hospital there too. A doctor wanted to remove part of his eye. He gave her a Russian gold piece and she agreed to treat it without surgery. They lived in Cracow seven months.

Leon was anxious to get to Israel. They then spent three years in a DP camp in Dengeldorf. Leon worked arranging living quarters for people, and his wife worked in the kitchen. Over 2,00 people lived in the camp. Leon's children went to school where they were well liked and well behaved.

Leon registered to emigrate to Israel. He had a brother in Philadelphia and relatives in Winnipeg.

Winnipeg

Leon had a dream in which his mother told him to write to his uncle Beryl in Winnipeg. Leon wrote a letter to the Jewish Congress explaining who he was and who he was looking for. Beryl's son wrote back, asking how they were related. Leon didn't know but he wrote back listing all his relatives. His cousins checked with a cousin in Detroit who confirmed they were related.

Eight months later Leon and his family left for Canada by boat. The Jewish Congress paid for the trip. In Halifax Leon was given \$60. from the Jewish community.

Leon was met by his cousins in Winnipeg, the Weidmans, Halters and Weingartens. They suggested his daughters take off their brand new hats.

Leon and his family lived with his cousins on Oxford Street for one week. They then moved to Boyd, College and then Aikens. His cousins found him work.

4571-5013 Leon's wife worked at the Sharon Home, and his daughters went to school. After five years Leon went into the cattle business with son-in-law, and worked until 1983.

Betty was married in 1950. They had arrived in Canada in 1948.

The Winnipeg Jewish community was friendly to Leon. There were many here from his hometown.

Leon could not find out exactly what happened to his missing relatives, but he knew they were gone. Two of his sisters and one brother survived.

Leon is a member of B'nay Abraham Synagogue. He keeps kosher. He taught his daughters the zmirot and kiddush, but once they married he didn't keep the Sabbath.

Leon has nine grandchildren and 14 great grandchildren. His grandchildren know they're survivors. Leon's daughters suffered more than he did. At least he got out and got fresh air. The other man who hid with them was very nervous and wouldn't let the girls talk at all.

Leon is happy he is alive. He has a wonderful family. He is retired and looks after his wife now.

They travelled a little, and have been to Israel four times. He has no interest in returning to his hometown.

It is possible the Holocaust could happen again. It is important to teach the Jews to fight. When they were 484 Jews against seven German soldiers the Rabbi said not to do anything because G-d was with them. Four hundred of them died.

Leon still attends synagogue because he grew up with it

Leon wants his grandchildren to know how much their grandparents love them, and for them to be happy. He is happy he is alive and can sit and talk to them.