

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

STEPHEN LERMAN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Harriet Richman
Date: January 9, 1983

© 2018
Holocaust Oral History Archive
Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank

STEPHEN LERMAN [1-1-3]

SL - Stephen Lerman [interviewee]

HR - Harriet Richman [interviewer]

Date: January 9, 1983

Tape one, side one:

HR: Stephen Lerman, This is January 9, 1983 and the interviewer is Harriet Richman. Now, Mr. Lerman, would you just tell us a little bit about where you were born, and something about your family?

SL: I was born in 1927 in Europe, in Poland, was a small town¹. I was the youngest of the family. I have four older sisters and one older brother. Life was pretty miserable in those days, since those were the depression years. My father had a carpentry place, also doing some lathe work, like wooden lathe, or wood anything, rounded. And the farmers used to come to us, anything they wanted to have done and what they couldn't do themselves, like hubs for wheels and others things. And they used to bring like eggs, butter, and other things, to barter, because they didn't have no money in those days. If they did have, was very little offered. Those things I do remember as a kid. But life was very hard in those days.

HR: Were most of these people non-Jewish that came to your father?

SL: I would say 90% of them, yes.

HR: Were non-Jewish.

SL: Yes.

HR: Was your town a very large town?

SL: It was quite a large Jewish population in the town itself.

HR: And did you live in one area? The Jews lived in one area?

SL: Primarily, yes, in center city, and some of the surrounding areas, but as far as on the farms, mile or two miles out, were very few Jews or none at all.

HR: And did you experience any antisemitism from these people? Did your father have any incidents with them?

SL: I would say quite a bit. I remember some of the older kids, there was one high school, and the Gentiles used to throw stones at him crossing that bridge going towards going towards school. And there were plenty other incidents around town. Primarily the Jews took to themselves, and the Gentiles stuck with their own people.

HR: You went to a Jewish school as a child?

SL: As kids I remember primarily in our school were just Jews alone, this is a grammar school, and the Gentile went to...

HR: Was this school run by the Jews, it wasn't a s-...

SL: As far as I can recollect, most of the teachers were Jewish.

¹On page 3, Mr. Lerman discusses that Zambrów was his hometown.

STEPHEN LERMAN [1-1-4]

HR: And did you learn Hebrew and [unclear]...

SL: No, in that particular school was no Hebrew at all.

HR: Did you go to a *cheder*, or...

SL: Very little. After school I went some, but primarily my father was pretty well educated in Hebrew and he taught us how to *daven*.

HR: Did he prepare you for a *bar mitzvah*?

SL: Sorry to say, no, the war broke out before I was 13. I think I was 12 years old when the war broke out.

HR: Then you weren't able.

SL: No.

HR: Did you, were you aware of any Jewish organizations or synagogues before Hitler, before the Nazis came?

SL: Yeah, we had two or three *shuls* in our town, and there were quite a few Jewish organizations because I remember my older sisters they were secretaries, some of the organizations, because they could read and write pretty good. They were pretty much educated in those days, or let's call it self-educated. Seven grades of grammar school. In those days it was quite a bit of education, because a lot of kids didn't go to school at all.

HR: Were you aware of any Zionist organizations?

SL: I would say yes, because I remember in those days they used to train some of the boys in brown shirts. And when the day come, to come, to go to Palestine and help fight for a Jewish state. And there was also *Shomerim* and *Halutzim*. I was a kid. I don't remember too much about it, but whatever I can remember, we did have a lot of Jewish organizations.

HR: As far as you can remember then, your own friends were all Jewish. You didn't have any friends with the Gentiles, with the boys that you played with?

SL: Not too much, because in the inner city was, I would say, 90% Jewish.

HR: So the only, your family in particular didn't experience any antisemitic episodes? No one hurt you as a child, or...

SL: Well, it started, in my days, in the city was a lot of things going around that *Polaks* used to say. They shouldn't buy from Jews, and on the market place they turned over a lot of the stalls they used to erect. And it, it was quite a lot of problems in the late '30s, as I remember.

HR: Did you know of any men in your family that served in the Polish army in the world war?

SL: Yeah, my uncle Ben. He came to America in 1937. He was in the Polish army. But my immediate family, I don't know of. My father was a prisoner of war in the First World War in France, for about nine years. But this is all I can recall of my immediate family.

HR: Well, just tell me a little bit if you can about what it was like for you in this little Polish town as a little boy? Do you remember celebrating the holidays? *Shabbat*? What do you recall?

SL: Well the Jewish life, what I can recall of, was pretty strict. Nobody worked on the Sabbath or a Jewish holiday. So...

HR: As a kid, did you go to *shul* on *Shabbat*? Or...

SL: My father, what I can remember, when he came back from prisoner of war camp, he experienced a lot of difficulty. He was an educated person and very much in Jewish affairs. And from here he experienced what he seen that the strong believers what they did. He came back and he was a non-believer.

HR: How about your mother?

SL: My mother was very strict. She came from a strict Jewish family and she kept on the tradition. But he did not go to *shul* as I remember, in later years.

HR: What would you say, have you any idea how many Jews lived in that, in Zambrów?

SL: Zambrów was a town which was the third or fourth largest military concentration of Polish army. There were barracks erected when the Russians were still there, in the turn of the century. So therefore it was quite a big-- of, the army there. And they, due to the army, the town was a little bit prosperous, compared to other cities in Poland.

HR: And did the-- the Jewish community was very well-organized, would you say? Did they have a *kehillah* in your town? An organization to rule or to...

SL: No, the Jews didn't rule by themselves.

HR: Take care of their own needs and so on.

SL: No, because there was a magistrate like in any other town that he managed. There was police force. No Jews were allowed to be policemen. So, it was pretty strict in those days. But by and large, I mean, it wasn't too many disturbances, but they, they started a lot of rumble against the Jews in the late '30s when I remember.

HR: What kind of schooling were you allowed to have? You were allowed to go to a certain grade, and then no more, or...

SL: I would say that higher education was closed to Jews, as far as I can remember.

HR: And you mean by this, not just college but high school as well? What we would call high school as well.

SL: I would say up to the seventh grade you could go. I don't know how easy, but you could manage to go. But beyond that it was pretty hard I would say. I know very few that went in our town further than seventh grade.

HR: And was there any provision for training, vocational training, and...

SL: No, there's no such a thing. There was a *Schneider* [Ger. tailor], shoe store or whatever...

STEPHEN LERMAN [1-1-6]

HR: And...

SL: Carpenter and...

HR: The father trained his son.

SL: Yeah. But there was no other vocations.

HR: Were your older sisters married then?

SL: My two older sisters were married and they already had children, because before my father went in the army, in the First World War probably-- I cannot remember, but I heard talking about-- there were four sisters born then. And after he came back, after nine years as a prisoner of war in France, there were an older sister and an older brother, and myself born. So we are seven altogether.

HR: Mr. Lerman, think now about the time when the Germans invaded your little town, or the city of Zambrów. What were your first recollections? What do you remember hearing about what was happening to you? And what were your first fears, as far as being Jewish was concerned?

SL: Being a kid, I didn't know too much about it. But I remember going to the main highway and talking to the Germans, to the German soldiers, and asking them what they're gonna do with the Jews.

HR: But you knew that, you felt that something different was going to happen to Jews.

SL: Yes, people were talking about it. So, one soldier pointed with his finger to his neck, like they gonna cut it off. This I remember my first encounter with the Germans. And this was in 1939. And they stood there for a week or two, I can't remember exactly. And they withdrew the armies and the Russians came in.

HR: Because the border was established?

SL: Yes. Right.

HR: How close to you?

SL: I would say 30 kilometers from our town. The nearest town was Ostrów, near the Bug, which was a big river. And the border was established there.

HR: So the Russians came into Zambrów...

SL: Yes.

HR: And stayed how long?

SL: They stayed there until 1941.

HR: And what were those years like with the Russians? For you, what do you recall?

SL: As far as I'm concerned, and what I can recollect, it wasn't too bad. We went to the same school as we went previously under the Polish regime, and they started teaching us Russian, everything in Russian instead of Polish, as far as I remember. Or maybe Polish too, I cannot remember exactly.

HR: You remember learning Russian?

SL: I remember doing, yes, I did learn some Russian.

HR: But by this time you were already 13, 14 years old...

SL: Yes.

HR: And in the middle of, to try to learn a language like that and to study in school must have been very difficult for you.

SL: Well, they didn't give you too big of an education, but it's so many years this happened that I can't remember exactly...

HR: ...right.

SL: ...what was going on.

HR: I can understand that. And, then after the Russians left, this was 1941, the Russians left?

SL: Yeah.

HR: Germany...

SL: Germany invaded Russia at that time, and the war started all over again and they pushed them back as far as Stalingrad, in our part, and it took, it didn't take too long I think, a few months. And they stopped them right there.

HR: But then this time the Germans were back for good and...

SL: Yes. Yes.

HR: And what do you remember of that second...

SL: The ordeal started, and now first they, one time they, one time they wanted everybody to get on the market place, all the Jews.

HR: How did you get this message? Did they come to your house, or did they...

SL: No, they had, through loud speakers or through word of mouth. They went around hollering everybody to get on the market place. And I remember my father and mother, they wanted me to go with them, and I told them, "I'm too fast. They cannot catch me. I'm not going." I was sort of a [unclear] and I did not go with them. So my father, my mother, and my older brother went with them.

HR: This would be David?

SL: Yes...

HR: No?

SL: This would be David.

HR: ...David?

SL: And they never returned.

HR: Your father, your mother...

SL: And my brother.

HR: And David went to the market place.

SL: Right.

HR: Shana Reva?

SL: She, at that time, she wasn't home at that time, because when the war broke out between the Germans and Russia she worked for the telephone company,

STEPHEN LERMAN [1-1-8]

which the Russians manned. And she left town, was a day or two before the Russians came in. But there are...

HR: She go where, do you know where, do you know where?

SL: She probably went deeper into Poland, which toward the Russian border. Whether she made it to Russia...

HR: You never heard from her again?

SL: Or not, I never heard nothing about her. What she got killed on the way or managed to get to Russia, I heard somebody rumors where that somebody met her close to Russia or near Russia during the war, but whether she survived or not, I don't know. I never heard from her since.

HR: Now you say she left town because she had been working for the Russians?

SL: No, she worked for the Russians, right.

HR: Right. And when the Germans were coming in, she had to leave.

SL: They, they the Germ-, Russia knew that the Germans coming closer and they...

HR: And just the fact that she worked for them, she was in danger.

SL: Well, they took her with them, because she was probably good at what she was doing, and they had the truck, all the equipment and everything in the truck, so they meant probably to help communications for the Russians army, so therefore she was, went along with them.

HR: And what did you say the rumor is that she...

SL: That somebody did see her deeper towards Russia or in Russia. So I had rumors from somebody in Israel that they did see her during the war, but I never heard anything whether she survived or not.

HR: And that day that everybody had to gather in the market place, your mother, your father, and your brother David did go to the market place?

SL: Right.

HR: And you refused to go, and you never saw them after that.

SL: Correct.

HR: Because everybody was deported, do you know to where?

SL: No! As far as I remember, they took everybody about 15 miles out of town. They marched them down the highway toward Ostrów. The town was Szumowo, and they shot them all. I don't know how many hundreds of them, or, 500 or a 1,000. I cannot recollect, and nobody came back. They were all shot.

HR: So, not every Jew showed up at the market place, is that...

SL: I would say you're correct.

HR: But would you think that most of the Jews of the town did? Didn't...

SL: Whoever went in that market place, nobody came back.

HR: Came back. After this, though, there were still Jews, when...

SL: After that, whoever didn't go, I don't know how many days or how many weeks lapsed, and they made a ghetto from part of the city.

HR: What did you do immediately after that day? Where were you? Were you staying in your house? Were you hiding?

SL: I don't know, som-- running around, didn't know what to do. Immediately after that they gathered everybody and made a ghetto, whoever remained, as far as I can remember. And at that time there were two married sisters of mine. Looks like they didn't go to the market place either. They were living separate miles, in different part of town, and they wound up in the ghetto together with me.

HR: So you lived with them?

SL: I would say yeah. Two sisters, and they had children of their own at that time.

HR: Now the house that you lived in with your parents, was that a part of the ghetto?

SL: No it was not.

HR: So whatever you had in that house was lost to you.

SL: I would say yeah. We didn't take maybe some soft clothes, maybe. Very little.

HR: Did you, did you go to the ghetto, did the ghetto have a name, or was there...

SL: The Zambrówer Ghetto.

HR: And when you went into this ghetto, did you go there with the idea that you were going to have to work?

SL: There were times they were rounding us up and taking us to clear the roads, or build other different things. A few times yes I was out on work details.

HR: Would you say that this ghetto was made up from, mostly the people of your community?

SL: As far as I can remember, yes.

HR: Did you know a lot of the people?

SL: It wasn't a big town. At that time I was very young.

HR: Were a lot of your friends there in the ghetto with you? Your boyfriends.

SL: Whoever survived, yeah, some of them.

HR: So you did know some people.

SL: Yes.

HR: Were you, so there were times, then, when you were allowed to leave the ghetto and go on these work assignments.

SL: It wasn't too much of it. They kept us pretty much inside the ghetto.

HR: Did you ever meet anyone from any other city in your ghetto? Were other Jews brought into it?

STEPHEN LERMAN [1-1-10]

SL: No, not in our ghetto. In the ghetto itself, no, but I do remember after they, they dispersed the ghetto they made another ghetto in place which it was the barracks where the army, Polish army used to be, which is very big, so they took some of the buildings there and encircled it and gathered the Jews from the surrounding communities and made a big ghetto from quite a few Jews.

HR: They took you out of the ghetto that you were in?

SL: From the home, from the town which the barracks, the army barracks were about two or three miles out of town.

HR: So in other words, they reestablished a new ghetto.

SL: A new ghetto, bigger one.

HR: And then other Jews from other communities came there.

SL: Yes.

HR: Did it, was it still called the same name, this ghetto?

SL: I don't remember exactly, but it still was the town of Zambrów. But from that, from that ghetto in place, from the barracks, they removed everybody to 12 miles away to, where the train station, and they took everybody to Auschwitz from there.

HR: Well, how long were you in both of these ghettos? How long were you in the first ghetto, would you say?

SL: Well, the war started in 1941, in the fall of '41, until the end of '42.

HR: Were you, for just a few months in the first ghetto until they made the larger one, and then...

SL: Yeah, a combination, total.

HR: So you were staying in barracks, then, in that second ghetto.

SL: Yeah, army barracks.

HR: Did you have a Jewish Council that was resp-, running the ghetto?

SL: At those, at that time, maybe there was something like it, but they didn't have much power or nothing whatsoever. The East Side administration I think was run by Jews, yes.

HR: Do you have any recollections of the, the Jewish Council being responsible for choosing people who were going to work, or choosing people who were not capable of working, or any of these, any of these things?

SL: Once we were in those army barracks, the-- from that particular place they didn't take too many people for work. And I can't, as far as I can recollect.

HR: Do you have any recollection of the rabbis of your town? Were they in the ghetto, or were they...

SL: I don't know if anybody...

HR: Survived that...

SL: Of those made it to those barracks. I cannot remember.

HR: In the ghetto, did you have any school? Did the Jews try to make any kind of a school for themselves?

SL: No, none whatsoever.

HR: A synagogue?

SL: No.

HR: You don't recall any kind of...

SL: Nothing whatsoever.

HR: You do-, do you recall seeing any of the men *daven* on their own, or...

SL: On their own everybody, probably did whatever they could...

HR: Never got together.

SL: Nothing was organized. I don't think that they didn't allow nothing like that.

HR: Did you, when you were in this ghetto, did you have any idea what was going on in the outside world? Did you have any kind of communication with the outside?

SL: Probably here and there somebody, news got through but even the Polish community of those days probably didn't have, didn't know much about what's going on in the outside world.

HR: Do you think that in the ghetto in a barracks there was any kind of talking about resistance to the Nazis? At that time, do you think people were thinking of, what do you think was the general feeling within the barracks of what was going to happen? Here, you, at this point you knew, all of you, the possibility that the Germans, not the possibility, you *knew* that the Germans had annihilated at least 1,000 people. So, when you were in the barracks, you didn't have any expectations of being liberated, or being sent someplace to work. You, were you thinking the worst was going to happen to you?

SL: Well, it's hard to say, but in those days there were no outside contacts. And as you know, the Gentiles were on the outside and they didn't collaborate too much with the Jews, and they didn't resist too much against the Germans. So how could just a handful of Jews in a small town do much to resist? There were no weapons, and I myself don't think they could do much. Maybe kill one or two Germans, but as a whole I don't think you could do much to fight.

HR: Did you, what sort of food were you given? How was this meted out to you by the Germans?

SL: It was very little. Maybe a small piece of ration of bread and a little bit cabbage borscht maybe. But...

HR: Did you see people getting sick as you stayed there?

SL: Oh yeah, many people died.

HR: In that ghetto.

SL: Sure.

HR: How did you, did you bury these people within the ghetto, were you, did you have to take care of them? Or don't you recall?

STEPHEN LERMAN [1-1-12]

SL: I don't remember too much about, probably buried them close by, but I don't know. I can't remember too much.

HR: Do you think that the whole Polish people, or were you aware of the Polish people trying to assist the Nazis in persecuting Jews?

SL: By and large, I would say, I would be willing to say that they collaborated with them against Jews, because they didn't help...

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

HR: ...of any incidents where the Polish people helped? Are you aware of any incidents?

SL: Well, I was able to get out of the ghetto on a few occasions, and I knew a guy that primarily was the same type of business as my father was. And I was able when I got to him, I helped him out, helped him work and a little bit, and he fed me. And I stayed there quite, quite a few days and...

HR: Was that terribly dangerous for you?

SL: It was dangerous, but I was able to get out and, but was no place to run there, because the Polish population didn't try to help any Jews.

HR: This man let you hide, actually, in his...

SL: Well I don't remember sleeping there overnight, but when I was able to get out, I helped him with some kind of work and they used to feed me.

HR: Because that would have been dangerous for him at this...

SL: It would have been dangerous for him.

HR: How did you get out of the ghetto? Was...

SL: Sneaked out.

HR: Was there barbed wire around it?

SL: Yes, it was.

HR: But you managed to get through.

SL: And I used to, since I knew all the corners and how to hide out. I was young and fast. I managed to get out once and a while.

HR: And back in.

SL: Yeah.

HR: So you were getting in and out of the ghetto.

SL: Yeah.

HR: You, did m-, a lot of a lot of the kids do this? Or...

SL: I don't think it was too much of it.

HR: If you, when you did this, did you let anyone else know that you were doing it, or did, these things had to be done...

SL: Well, I had two sisters, and they had kids. When I was able to get out I was able to bring some food back with me.

HR: Stephen, you were never a part of a labor unit, though. You never...

SL: Well, I was a kid. On a few occasions they caught me and I went out clearing snow and working odd jobs, but primarily they, they were not too much, that on work details know about it.

HR: And what happened, now, when this, when you were taken from this ghetto? What, where were you deported to, and what happened? Did you have any idea what was happening to you when they did?

SL: Well we knew that they kill now a lot of Jews, since nobody came back. Anything happened nobody came back alive to tell, so people talked about it I think, they are very bad and, you try, have to try to save yourself in every way shape or form you can.

HR: While you were in that barrack ghetto, did the German soldiers, did you see the German soldiers doing anything in the way of hurting Jews or, as long as you didn't do anything to upset them they...

SL: They were primarily, this was not a camp of extinction that they killed out. They just, a ghettoing point and from there they shipped out, they ship them to other places.

HR: So you, did you get some idea that you were gonna be shipped out? Or it happened suddenly, or...

SL: No, because every time we going, it's getting less and less in that camp, so we knew the day will come when you're next, to ship.

HR: You saw people leaving every day then?

SL: Yes.

HR: They took them to a nearby railroad station?

SL: I would say yes. I know it's true, when I was next from the transport they took us with the, four, like, the farmers with their wagons took us to the station, that train station, about 12 miles away from town.

HR: So, the day came in this ghetto when you were called up to leave. And you were, you got onto, into wagons that belonged to the Polish farmers?

SL: Yeah.

HR: And Germans were overseeing this.

SL: Accompanied, yes. Germans were overseeing.

HR: And you were not told where you were going.

SL: No, nobody knew nothing.

HR: But they took you to the nearby railroad station.

SL: Yes.

HR: And what happened there?

SL: Then they loaded us in cattle trains and on the way to Auschwitz.

HR: Were these sealed trains?

SL: Yeah, they were sealed trains.

HR: How long was the journey?

SL: Oh, I don't remember. Could be a week or more. I don't remember it yet. Because it was quite far away from our town. Three days, six days, seven days, I don't remember exactly.

HR: Did many people die on that?

SL: I would say yes since hardly any food.

HR: How crowded were you in these trains?

SL: Very crowded.

HR: Could you lie down?

SL: It was a closed, it was a closed wagon, you know, like a roof and everything else, little windows. No [unclear] or nothing. And this was in the wintertime too. It was in December, I think, of '42. It was quite cold in that part of the country.

HR: So you were jammed into these trains, and there were so many people in each train...

SL: Yes.

HR: That you were not able to, to lie down? You were all standing up all that time?

SL: I would say, would, could be able to sit down, some could lie down. I don't remember exactly, but it was very crowded.

HR: And Mr. Lerman, then, tell us what happened when you arrived at Auschwitz?

SL: This was, could have been the end of December, 1942, was very cold. Because when you got out in the snow, you could hear the crisp snow. Must have been way below zero. And they started sorting out the older people, the kids, and trucks were standing by. And they ordering people, lot of people in the trucks. And some younger people I seen they pick nearby. Due to the fact I remember they used to pick the younger people for work, so I was thinking about getting to those, for the younger men they were picking for work. This was in my mind, but I was picked for the trucks, and I was already on top of the truck. My mind was how to get off the truck and get to the young, to the other side where they picked for work. That's what I imagined. It didn't take me long. I was managed to get under the truck, was big heavy wheels like those contractors use. And in between there was a German soldier walking back and forth, watching it. I remember he turned his back and I went in to the, to the younger crowd. When I get in, everybody backed up and made room for me. Upon arriving into the camp, this was in Birkenau, a subsidiary of Auschwitz. I was one of the youngest there. And everybody kept on asking, how did I get here? Being so small and young I was maybe not even five feet tall, 'cause I was young at that time and very small. And they all offered me some help if I need anything I should come to them. Because they were already, some of them were organizing already and managing better than others. They were quite, quite a few months there already. So, I don't remember what was after that but...

HR: Let me interrupt you just a minute. Was, when you were chosen to go on the truck, do you think it was because you were too young?

SL: I would say yes. I was like a kid. I looked like a kid.

HR: You looked younger even than your age. Even though you were...

SL: That's right. Yeah. I was very small. I was then about 14 years old, and I don't think I was five foot at that time. So, they chose me to go with the children and the older people.

STEPHEN LERMAN [1-2-16]

HR: ...the older people, yeah.

SL: But to my instinct I managed to get away, like the previous time in the ghetto, I didn't want to go with my parents.

HR: This was the second time that fate was with you.

SL: Second time fate was with me.

HR: Yes. Now, when you got to Birkenau, what happened to you?

SL: I finally got into one of the barracks, and they piled us in in those, looked like a drawer, you know, four layers high, and six people to one layer, one on top of the other, like sandwiched in. It was very bad. So instead of laying there after a day or two, I seen a broom there and I was walking around and started sweeping. So one of the guys that managed that barrack...

HR: A Nazi?

SL: No, it was an inmate.

HR: An inmate.

SL: So he started hollering at, needs help, you see, "Here is a little kid trying to clean the place, and you guys, you've been here a long time and you're strong like oxes and you don't try to help keep the place clean." So he called up one of the, his inmates that worked in the barracks for a long time. And asked him if he got some decent clothes for me, because the clothes they gave me, urine, they had louse on, and the ones they got there, they didn't match the at all, and it was hanging down from me. So, he did get me some decent looking clothes that keep me a little better, and he says, "From now on, you help them guys keep the barracks clean." So this was my luck, too. So, this whole winter I stayed working inside the barracks.

HR: So in a way, the people there protected you because of your, there was some protection for you.

SL: Some protection because I was...

HR: So little.

SL: I tried myself a little bit not to stay with the rest of them. I tried on my own, and I think this was part of my luck, too. So I managed to get their ration here and there, and therefore I survived. Because most of them didn't. But there was no food, very little, and each time when anybody was weak, there was-- they chose the weaker one or the sick one, and chose each time and because more and more people came with the trains, so they kept the stronger one and whoever is weak, used to choose to, for the, crematoria.

HR: From Birkenau they...

SL: From Birkenau.

HR: So how long were you in Birkenau?

SL: Quite a while. I think all of '43, the whole year of '43 maybe and a half a year in '44.

HR: And were you doing any work for the Nazis? I mean, were you...

SL: Well, everybody, or most everybody, went out to work. Whatever work was there. I was going out to work with the 30 peop-, a commander of 30 people, and we dynamited all the farms in the surrounding this camp so the inmates wouldn't be able to hide. They flattened everything around it. And there was one German SS officer that was in charge of that commander. He was as far as I can recollect a dynamite expert from Leipzig. And he befriended me and he told me that, he showed me an SS uniform. He says he is no SS. And he hated the Germans as much as I do. I mean the German SS, but he says he couldn't help to do anything. He says, he's not one of them, but they drafted him and gave him SS uniform and he had to do the job. I worked, quite a long time I worked in that outfit, and he used to help me. But he told me keep quiet and not to say nothing. Once...

HR: How did he help you?

SL: One time I was sick with fever and everything else, and I was lying in one of the [pause], in the farm house while everybody was drilling holes to dynamite this room, so when he came to the job, and asked some of the inmates where I am, since I was a little bit in charge, I was sort of like interpreter. So they told him I am down there. And at that time I was laying with fever. And he asked me, "What's wrong?" So I told him, "I'm sick. I have fever." So he told me not to worry about it. He's going to go home, he'll bring me something. And I remember he gave me, he brought me some aspirin or whatever it was, some tablets. And he made me better. The medicine helped.

HR: Do you remember his name?

SL: I don't remember his name, but...

HR: Was he helping other people?

SL: I doubt it. I mean, he hollered a lot, but he himself, I, I-- he did a lot of hollering, but he did not kill anybody as far as I remember, in that outfit that he was with me, that I remember.

HR: And do you know that he helped anyone else other than you? Do you think he probably did help others?

SL: I don't know, because he used to come and investigate the [unclear] and tell us how to make marks, where to drill the hole in the cement, foundation, and he was there to wire everything. And we had a detonator, and that's when he was there. And at one time I also remember they used to pick a lot inside the camp for the crematorium, the weak. And I told him they keep on picking so much that one of these days I won't be here anymore, because they'll pick me too. So he did ask me who was doing the picking, and I told him. He says, "That *verfluchter Hund*?" [Ger. literally: cursed dog] He says, "He's my best friend. We play cards every other night." So I say, "Can you help me?" He says, "Wait. I'm going see him tonight." And the next day he came back to me on that job and told me, "From now on when you walk through the gate, stay in the first line and carry the detonator." Because we used to leave it at the gate. We didn't take it inside the camp, near the barracks, at the gate, the post. And he told me that he told to

this officer that used to pick for the crematorium that he needs me, that I know the job, and I'm the only one that I can assist him on the job. And he probably saved my life, too.

HR: So you carried the detonator so that he would know it was you.

SL: That he would know who I am.

HR: And you had trust in this man?

SL: Well, he did a lot of hollering, but I didn't see him harm anyone. He was a civilian and they gave him a uniform, and that's what he told me, and I probably...

HR: The fact that he...

SL: Will believe him.

HR: Yeah, the fact that he brought you medicine was [unclear].

SL: Well, they needed an expert in dynamiting, so nobody could hide around there.

HR: Yeah.

SL: So they got him and he probably did the job for them.

HR: But I say the fact that he helped you, so as far as to go and to bring you medicine even...

SL: As far as I know, he was...

HR: That was amazing.

SL: He did help.

HR: You don't hear of that too much, did you?

SL: Yes. Yes.

HR: So then, did you go into Auschwitz from Birkenau? Did you ever go in...

SL: ...no, I was never in the main camp. I was always in Birkenau.

HR: Never in the main camp.

SL: Until the time when the Russ-, you know, when the war got closer to...

HR: Excuse me, before you leave Birkenau, is there anything that you, else that you want to tell about Birkenau and the conditions there? Do you want, do you want to say anything about it?

SL: Well, the conditions in Birkenau was very, were very bad. Originally we came to the-- an old camp. I mean, the first camp that we were in, it was pretty small and old. And after a while they built a bigger camp close by. And they also built crematoriums there.

HR: Did you see these crematoriums?

SL: Yes, I did see the crema-, was right near the camp.

HR: Were you aware of when people were being cremated?

SL: Yes, in those days, yeah, because we seen the chimneys and people were working in them. Those same people, some of them they were in the camp, they were working in those crematoriums.

HR: And they came back.

SL: Yeah. At night they came back. They went to work like everybody else. They worked probably three shifts, or two shifts. I don't remember. Night shift, yeah, it was a night shift, and day shift. So probably they worked, as far as I can recollect, probably 12 hours each, because they call it a day shift and night shift. So, this what I remember. Then, as I say, then they were, we were transferred from the old camp to the new one, but then the old camp became a camp for the women. There were a lot of women too, I remember. That's right. It was adjoining the, the new camp was adjoining the old one. I remember that now.

HR: Were your sisters sent to Birkenau?

SL: As far as I know, my two older sisters with their children were sent to Birkenau.

HR: They didn't go on the wagons with you to the station?

SL: I don't know, but, as far as I know, somebody told me that one sister was in the women's camp. Of course the child must have been taken away from her. But I really don't know how long she survived, but she did not live for too long.

HR: And the other sister?

SL: Probably with her child went to the crematorium, but...

HR: You never saw them then after...

SL: ...no, I never saw nothing. I heard rumors that somebody said one of them was in the camp, but...

HR: But you don't remember going to Birkenau with them? You don't...

SL: Yes, we went in the cattle train together. Yeah.

HR: You did go together in the cattle, but when you came to the part where they were selecting, they were taken with the women and that's it.

SL: Yeah, they were taken separate.

HR: So that was the last you saw of them.

SL: Because it was a lot of tumult there, with dogs, with SS officer and hollering, screaming and everybody went their own way probably.

HR: In Birkenau did you see people, was there a lot of sickness?

SL: Of course.

HR: People were dying...

SL: Sure.

HR: Just from starvation?

SL: Now, I remember a few incidents if somebody, there was one short, when they were counting, every day, when they were counting. They were counting the people in the morning, and counting inmates at night. So, if one, couldn't account for one person, probably had to stay half of the night outside. And in the winter time, when you stood so many of those out, 10, 15 percent of the population died from the frost and the cold anyway. So, to stay warm you had to cuddle up. And everybody squeezed everybody. And those who were weak probably dropped, so they couldn't stand on their

STEPHEN LERMAN [1-2-20]

feet. So to stay warm, whoever died you probably had to stand on those person that died to stay, get away from the cold, and the frozen dirt, earth, or frozen dirt.

HR: So what happened then after Birkenau? You were...

SL: Birkenau was disbanded, I would say, because they said the Russians are closing in around. The Germans felt...

HR: This was '42, or...

SL: This was in Poland. This was already '43.

HR: '43.

SL: '43. In middle of '43. I can't remember exactly. And a lot of people, they're evacuating, and they went on transport. Where, what, and when, we didn't know where people are going. Like we didn't know where we, when we came here. So we were-- I don't remember-- one of the last, but, not, it wasn't too many left. I held out as long as I could there, and then we went on transport. And from there we arrived in Oranienburg, near Berlin. In fact we stood the whole night, a day and a night in Berlin, on the train station, because they were bombing-- the American planes or British, whoever they were-- constantly bombs were falling. And...

HR: So you arrived in Oranienburg, and you stayed there several weeks?

SL: We stayed there several weeks, and as far as I know, we were supposed to go to work in the factories where they were building planes. This was the rumor going around. But the possibilities, they were bombing so heavy around there, that maybe those factories were destroyed. So therefore there was no place to send us to work there. This was the rumors. So they put us on a march to Sachsenhausen. It couldn't have been too far away from there, I don't know how many kilometers from there. But we arrived there. It was a small camp; it was clean, and we didn't stay there too long. From there they shipped us on a transport toward Dachau. I don't know how long we traveled, could be days or a week, from Sachsenhausen, and we arrived near a town of Landsberg. And this, the, the name of the camp was 11, and it must have been a subsidiary of Dachau, a smaller camp. And from this camp they built barracks primarily underground. Half of them buried were underground, and half above ground, with straw and then with dirt. And like the farmers used to keep the potatoes in and, and from that place they took us to work. I would say the Germans were building in the forest everything underground so they could hide all their machinery and their equipment or whatever to build factories there. And this was a li-- big roofs, round roofs they used to build, and plant trees on top, to hide everything underground. And that's where we were working, in that camp, every day. They used to take us to work. It was near Landsberg.

HR: And what kind of work were you doing?

SL: Originally, we were loading cement, and it was very treacherous. Those bags of cement, and I was weak, and they used to break, and the dust from those, from the train used to carry the cement, that's all you used to do is cough dust. Was very bad. We happened to be one day, a civilian came up, big tall guy in a leather jacket, and asked

for a carpenter. And everybody was afraid to say who's a carpenter. And I thought to myself, my father was a carpenter, and I had a little idea. So I would say anything would be better than staying, working with cement, due to the dust and weakness. So I told him, that, "*Ich bin* a carpenter." I mean that, "*Ich bin* a *Tischler*," which is a carpenter. And he started laughing. And he said in German, "*Du* [unclear], *du bist* a carpenter?" Which means, "You tiny little putz." So he says, "How do I know you're a carpenter?" I said, "Well, take me to the job, and you'll find out." So he starts hollering, "*Du bist* [unclear] *schlauer Jude!*"

HR: Which is you...

SL: This, that you are a very smart Jew. So I say, "I didn't know that, I didn't see the job so I don't know if I can do it." He says, "You'll need some help." I say, "Still I don't know how many people I will need. I have to look at the job." So he says-- he agreed with me, took me to the job, and showed me what is there to do. And he was, the place that he worked out of is a wooden shack. It was picks, shovels there to fix. So I told him, "I can do it. Nothing to it. I can fix everything."

HR: He wanted you to make...

SL: To fix the...

HR: To fix the...

SL: To say that I will fix, 'cause it was not too far away from, near the place where we were working. So I told him, "I can do it." He says, "How many help you need?" I say, "As I need help I'll tell you about it, and we'll go and get some help." But in the meantime I kept still working there by myself, and he happened to be nice to me, too. When the people left, he told me he was, he did hide some food, from the workers. They were civilian workers. They were not inmates. They were Polish and German civilians working as foremen on those jobs. And he was nice. Every once in a while he used to hide something and say, "Go ahead. I'll keep an eye and nobody will walk in. And grab a bite." And used to come in another engineer with him, from the job, an older, maybe 75 years old, and he took me outside and he showed me a tree, a hole in the tree. He says, "Every morning I...

[Tape one, side two ended.]

STEPHEN LERMAN [2-1-22]

Tape two, side one:

HR: The, the, when you were working as a carpenter for this German civilian, who was guarding you? You were outside of the camp.

SL: Well, the whole place was surrounded far away in a big circle, a diameter, and everybody was working inside. Probably every 100 feet or 200 feet a soldier on the outside, in the outside perimeter and guarding us. Inside there were only civilian and some SS guarding us, and foremen on the job, which were civilian engineers and so forth, that directed most of the work.

HR: What-- do you think that the German civilian who allowed you to do this carpentry work, do you think that he found more work for you so that the work should last, so that you should be protected there for a little while, or...

SL: Well, as I say, I was working by myself, near this hut where his office was, where he's directing all the work from this place, so primarily the civilian, they were only interested to give out a job and keep an eye that things are being done, followed according to instructions.

HR: But you always had plenty of work there to do.

SL: Oh yeah. They were hollering and screaming murder, work fast, and-- but whoever could did more, and whoever was weak did less, until they couldn't do no more.

HR: How long did you stay on this carpentry job?

SL: Could be quite a few months. I don't remember exactly, but must have been at least six months.

HR: And what happened after that?

SL: After this, while the war was closing in on everybody. I mean, this was, must have been already in the beginning of '45. And we heard rumors that the Germans are doing very bad, and the war might come to an end soon. But we didn't know what will happen to us, since we were still in their hands. But we, our commander of this particular small camp, he was, wasn't too bad of a guy, because he was a Czechoslovakian German. And there were two inmates, two brothers, in that particular camp, they went to school with him in Czechoslovakia, as far as I can remember. That's what I heard rumors. And he told them, he'll see what he can do to save us. Not to try to run places, because there's no place to run. It's inside Germany. So, even if you do run, it's no place for you to go. Nobody's gonna hide you. Toward the end of the war, I don't know it was May or could have been April, when we started marching. Where to, I don't know. But we kept on marching further away, probably from there. Because the German army kept on closing in. I mean...

HR: The American.

SL: The American army kept on closing in. And still he told us not to run and he'll see what they can do for us. But in the meantime, at night, every night we'd see one

or two less German soldiers keeping watch on us. One time couple guys tried to run away and they did shoot at him and probably they did wound them some of them. And he put them in the hospitals, and they survived. So, one night we woke up, I mean, while we were in the woods on the march, there was hardly anybody keeping an eye on us anymore because we already heard artillery around. So we dispersed all over in the woods and hiding out.

HR: 'Cause you really didn't see any German soldiers then.

SL: We didn't...

HR: They sort of just...

SL: I mean those...

HR: Stole away.

SL: Those German soldiers kept watching us.

HR: They disappeared.

SL: They disappeared, little by little. We didn't see anybody. But he stood with us, and a few more.

HR: This Czechoslovakian leader.

SL: He, this commander, whatever he, I don't know what kinda rank he was. But, he had some high rank. And I remember personally with another couple guys hiding out in the woods and three soldiers and one high-ranking officer, which could have been a commander, approached us, came across of us. And we got s-, we were scared to death. We figured this is the end. He's gonna shoot us. In the meantime he told us to, "*Du [unclear] Angst haben.*" It means, "Don't be afraid." He says, "We are looking for the American army. We want to surrender." He told us, if we know, we should tell him. So we told him we don't know nothing. We're hearing the shots close by, but we don't know where they're coming from. So he told us to stay and hide out a little bit longer, and he's looking for the American army. He wants to surrender. And the, the next day the war was over. This was in Buchberg [phonetic], near Walkertshausen [phonetic], in Germany.

HR: What, how did you hear that the war was over?

SL: Well, we seen the German cars and trucks on the main highway.

HR: You mean American.

SL: Amer-, American soldiers.

HR: Do you remember seeing the first American trucks?

SL: Yessss.

HR: And soldiers?

SL: We didn't want to believe it that we made it.

HR: And what happened then? What did you do?

SL: Well we were, this was near, close where we were hiding out. It was a civilian camp from all kind nationality, but non-Jews, you know, they were working around the factories close by. So we...

STEPHEN LERMAN [2-1-24]

HR: You mean this camp was set up even during the war?

SL: No, no, for it was civilians to work for the Germans, but there was no Jewish inmates [unclear]. There were civilians. Not as a camp, just a gathering place for them to live. So, we probably established there temporary, a gathering place.

HR: You all got together, whoever...

SL: ...yeah, whoever from the surroundings, quite a few were hiding out in the woods in that time and...

HR: You went into that camp?

SL: Yeah, and it's called, was called Buchberg, near Walkertshausen [phonetic].

HR: Did the American army take over that camp?

SL: Yes. And there was plenty of food that time.

HR: What, did you, did the army come to all of you? I mean, did you have to go to them, register with them?

SL: There were so many, so many soldiers...

HR: What kind of organization, how was it organized? How was it, in those early days, was it all chaos, or...

SL: I don't remember. It was a chaos, happiness, and so forth. But nothing were organized. I mean it took days until some kind of semblance...

HR: But there were people there that at least were giving you food to eat.

SL: Yeah, food was plentiful, because the American army supplied, and there was plenty of food that time.

HR: So how long then did you stay in this camp, or what, what did you do?

SL: Not too long. It was just a gathering place I would say. I don't think I was there more than weeks, maybe a couple months. I don't remember.

HR: And then what did you do? How did you decide what to...

SL: We didn't know what to do, where to go. And from that place I think we managed to get to Munich. And we didn't know where to go. Back home to Poland? After a while we were in Munich...

HR: When you were in Germany, the Germans, do you think they realized, well they knew that you were Jews, the German civilians.

SL: After the war, I mean they...

HR: Were you afraid that they would...

SL: After the war we were not afraid, because it was occupied by the American army.

HR: Yeah, but, and you weren't afraid that some Nazis were still feeling the way they might feel and...

SL: I mean, in those days we weren't concerned with them, because the war was over, it was occupied, American occupation, and...

HR: Nobody wanted to say they were a Nazi then.

SL: At that time, sure. They, if you went in town, they, you were able to get food and so forth. So it wasn't that bad. And of course the UNRRA² started helping, all the inmates, the survivors and so forth.

HR: And you were thinking even of going back maybe to Poland?

SL: We didn't know what to do. That maybe there were some survivors, they, everybody tried to go places and look for relatives, friends, or whatever. At that time I think, I don't remember, we went in Munich. And then we were trying to think about going back home. In fact I did manage to register to go back home, and people came back from Poland and said, "Don't you dare to go back. Hardly any survivors. And nothing there." We were thinking about going to Russia. We didn't know what to do. And of course I had relatives in America, and I tried to-- any soldier that would listen to me, that, some were Jews, I tried to ask them to try to find my relatives. I knew I had uncles in America.

HR: Were there American soldiers that tried to help you?

SL: Oh yeah.

HR: They do, they tried?

SL: Yeah, they were, pretty good, pretty nice. So, some of them, I tried to ask if anybody's from Philadelphia, because I did remember when we got mail that we had relatives in Philadelphia. And I did know their last name and their Jewish first names. My mother had five brothers and a sister here in Philadelphia. So eventually when I was living in Munich, I heard that there was one survivor in my hometown, it is in Pocking near Passau. And I managed to get on a train to that small town in Pocking.

HR: This is where the survivor from...

SL: From my hometown.

HR: Zambrów was in Pocking.

SL: Right. I knew that nobody survived from my immediate family, so I figured at least I'll go, try to look up somebody from my hometown. And in fact I spent quite a few years in that small community in Pocking.

HR: This is near Munich?

SL: It's near Passau. And I stayed there until 1949, from '45 to '49, about three or four years before...

HR: Who did you find there from Zambrów?

SL: A guy by the name Yitzhak Golombek. 'Cause he's also a survivor, and...

HR: And you knew him, did you?

SL: And he...

HR: As a kid?

²UNRRA - United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration was founded in 1943 to provide relief to areas liberated from Axis powers after World War II.

STEPHEN LERMAN [2-1-26]

SL: Yeah. He was much older than me. And in fact, he lives in Jerusalem now. He's a principal of a school, and he's also a very well-known artist.

HR: Mr. Lerman, did you ever have the good fortune to meet any relatives in Germany?

SL: By asking any soldier possible from Philadelphia to try to locate my relatives, one day I received a letter from an uncle of mine that he has-- that his son, he's in the army-- and in this letter was the address where he was stationed, which is, was near Nuremberg. I went there and the soldier at the gate, I told him whom I'm trying to locate, and he told me that during the day they're all busy doing one thing or another, that he couldn't, he wouldn't be able to come out. So I, so he left word that I'm waiting here, for Frank Burstein, for a guy by the name of Bur-, yeah, Frank Burnstein. And when the day was over, he came out, and we met. And he was able to-- he went and got permission from the post commander, which he was Jewish, and he got permission and got me inside the camp, and stood there quite a number of hours. And also the next day we went to American clubs and so forth. But after a few weeks my cousin got permission to go back to America and continue his education, since he was already, he already had one or two years of college. And he wanted to become a doctor. Since then he did become a doctor. His name is Frank Burstein and he has a family, two boys, two girls, and two of his kids are going to medical school already. But I was fortunate enough to keep in touch with all my relatives through my cousin, and I got, I received affidavits from my uncle, and eventually with their help, and through the UNRRA, and other organizations, I was able to come to America in August 27, 1949.

HR: And you were twenty--...

SL: I was 22 at that time. And I worked and they give me in the dental lab, but since I got paid very little, so I switched to something else. I went to work, since my uncle had a small grocery store, and I knew a little bit about meat, I went to work in the meat store, and I learned the business pretty fast. After a year or two I managed the store. For five years I managed one place, and I did quite well. And in 1954 I opened up my own small grocery store and meats. And I stood there from 1954 till 1968. And I raised a family, two boys, two girls. My oldest is 29 now. Next son is 26. I also have a son 22, and a daughter 20. And she is attending Tempe Arizona College. I'm still married...

HR: To the same lady.

SL: To the same woman, and we're very happy. And nice family. My daughter has two girls. One four-and-a-half, one about eleven months old. Beautiful children. My son has two boys, so two are married, and still two to go.

HR: Two to go.

SL: Two single.

HR: Mr. Lerman, thank you very much for this interview.

SL: It's my pleasure. Thank you very much.

STEPHEN LERMAN [2-1-27]

[Tape two, side one ended; interview ended.]