

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Benson, Leon

Date of interview: 7/29 & 8/25/1992

Summary: (Deceased). Leon was born Leon Samuel Szmelcan in Lodz, Poland in 1931. His family immigrated to Paris when Leon was 3 years old, and his father worked as a furrier. After the Germans occupied Paris, Leon, his mother, Yana Benson, older brother, and younger sister were deported to Auschwitz. He was separated from his mother and sister, but remained with his brother for a brief time. Leon was forced to labor in a grenade factory.

Near the end of the war, Leon was sent on a forced march to Buchenwald. He was liberated by the U.S. Army in April of 1945. He recalled planes outlining Buchenwald with vapor prior to liberation so the camp would not be bombed.

After liberation, Leon returned to Paris and lived in a home for child survivors of the Holocaust. He was the only survivor in his immediate family. Leon joined the Zionist movement and planned to immigrate to Israel. However, after being contacted by relatives of his mother, who had settled in the U.S., Leon came to the U.S., staying briefly on the east coast before moving to San Francisco.

In San Francisco, he married Lillian, and the two raised a family. They have two sons and a daughter. In his retirement, Leon enjoyed ushering for the San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Giants.