Interview with BILL LOWENBERG

Holocaust Oral History Project

Date:

Place: Jenson

Interviewer: Lani Silver

Transcriber: Susan Aronovsky

Q: TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FORWARD TO. WHAT DO YOU EXPECT TO COME OUT OF THE CONFERENCE?

A: That's a difficult question because since this has never been done before and we are not a cohesive group, meaning that we are coming from all over the world, with no outlined purpose in mind, but rather to be together once. Which is a dream which may not even be fulfilled because 36 years and longer after having seen someone... I'm not looking for any person in particular because we didn't know each other as names, but rather as numbers. First name maybe, so there's very little that one remembers of people we were with and specifically for me because I was only, I wasn't even 19 when I was liberated. I was 18 years when I was liberated. So there's very little I remember in detail of people, because I was in eight different camps, so you see people, and you don't see them. And they are here today and the next day

they may not be alive.

The most important thing I can say about this conference is it's nice that so many people, specifically Jewish people can now celebrate life together rather than mourn and especially in a city like Jerusalem. But I think it's more important that the world realizes that therre are survivors and the survivors have a testimony to give and that we also, we are doing this so we can leave a legacy to our children and our grandchildren and the rest of the world that the Holocaust really happened.

There are people in this day and age and in recent years who are telling the world that there was no Holocaust, that this is a myth and when it's said often enough... The big lie started with Goebbels. It's said often enough, people start to have doubts and from doubts maybe come beliefs. That we are trying to dispel. And we are trying to show the world that here, people are running around this city, three, four thousand, with numbers on their arms. Who haven't seen each other for many years and some of them, there's very few I know here frankly because I am from Holland. I left Holland, I was arrested in '41, late '41.

Q: DO YOU REMEMBER THE EXACT MOMENT, WHAT HAPPENED?

A: Ah, yea. We were arrested. The whole town, the Jewish people in the town were all arrested and we went to a camp in Holland and we stayed there for a few months and then I ended

up in Birkenau, Auschwitz, we stayed for awhile. Do you want me to go into this? You changed my thought, I'll get back to it maybe.

Let's go over my geographical trips for a moment. I left Holland and I went to Birkenau. And from Birkenau, I went to Auschwitz and I was taken away from my parents and my sister in Holland when I was 15 years old. I went on my own to the camps and my parents, which I found out when I was in Birkenau. I saw them going to the gas chambers a week later. And I never saw them again, either my parents or my sister who was 2 years younger than I, she was 12 years old then.

And from Birkenau, I went to Warsaw. At the tail end of the uprising in Warsaw in 1943 they took 300 men off the street in Birkenau and we didn't know where we were going. We was thrown in cattle cars again. And we ended up in Warsaw, while the ghetto was still burning, while the fighting was still going on. We were taken there by the Germans to dynamite the ghetto and to burn bodies. And we did this from '43 until '44 and in June of '44 when the re broke through we got out of Warsaw, four days before Warsaw was liberated. While we were marching due west from Warsaw, the city was being bombed and liberated and we again were put in cattle cars after about a week and a half of marching. And we ended up in Dachau. And from Dachau I went to several Other Satellite camps off Dachau, and when the Americans

started breaking through, they took us back from the satellite camps into Dachau. On another death march and we ended up again in Dachau and that's where I was liberated in 1945, on April 30th. Which coincided, by the way, this year with our Yom Hashoah, the day of remembrance in San Francisco.

Q; WHAT WAS LIBERATION LIKE? WHAT WAS THAT DAY LIKE?

A: Let me think. It was April 30th, about 7 in the morning.

We knew that there was something happening because they start bombing the camp. The Germans had anti-aircraft around the camp and instead of using them on the planes they used them on the camps and they bombarded the camp terribly. A lot of people were killed during that night. By 7 in the morning, about, just when it became light, we saw American tanks coming over the hill. But the Germans had put all the wires on the camp, the high tension, high voltage, so we had to warn the Americans to stay away. They finally brought in engineers and

The only thing I remember, an American soldier gave me a cigarette and I took a big puff and I fainted. Because I hadn't smoked ever, actually as a child, 13, 14, we snuck a cigarette in. We weren't allowed to smoke. But he gave me a cigarette and I fainted. It didn't last too long. But they were very good to us. And that was the beginning of my life.

they cut the wires and we were liberated.

I went back to Holland till '46 and I went to Switzerland and I lived there for three years. And in '49 I came to the United States.

Q: WHEN YOU WERE IN WARSAW, DID YOU MEET THE RESISTANCE FIGHTERS?

A: Yes and no. The overground fighting had stopped. The city was burning. But there were hundreds of Jewish partisans, resistance fighters, still in the bunkers. And they had bunkered themselves three and four stories deep. We were sent there to clean up and to dynamite the buildings. While we did, they came out of the bunkers, those young people, in their late teens, early 20's. And they were strong, they looked strong. They'd been in the bunkers for several months, fighting and waiting. When they came out the Germans shot them immediately.

Q: YOU SAW THAT?

A: Oh, yeah. We saw that, daily they came out of the bunkers. These young beautiful people. And if the Germans didn't shot them the (Post) would shoot 'em. And then open their mouths and see if they could find gold. But the Germans shot them immediately. They weren't treated as anything but...whatever the Germans thought of them. But we saw I don't know how many, maybe 70, 80 to a hundred, in the year we were there. But not in the tail end, in the first 3, 4 months

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they were coming out of the bunkers. It was sad. We couldn't do anything. There was nothing we could do for them. We couldn't keep them alive, there was nothing. Because we had a guard all the time.

Q: WHEN YOU GOT OUT, WHEN THE WAR WAS OVER, DID YOU HAVE
NIGHTMARES EVERY NIGHT, HOW DID YOU ADJUST? HOW DID YOU
COME BACK TO LIFE?

A: Nightmares I still have. But I've adjusted, I think. I'm told I've adjusted quite well. I feel that I lead a very normal life. I'm married, I have two children, I have a business. But you live with this issue forever. People have asked me, "What were you thinking during the days in the camp, almost four years?" And I can't answer this because I have a feeling that I was at that time under some kind of hypnosis. And that's not the proper word either. It's, I don't know, I can't answer that. But I can say that I can't talk about it for long periods of time. Maybe it's self-defense because I've never tried to talk about it for long period of time and maybe that has made it possible for me to lead a normal life.

I think that I do lead a normal life and I have a good

I'm very grateful. Especially in America. Life's been very good for me. But I've not demanded of the world that they owe me anything. I had to make my life my own and you try to forget. When the thoughts come too heavy, you pick up a book and you read. So when you can't sleep at night, you don't just toss around on the bed, you turn on the light and you read. I think I've done this when the thoughts would come too heavy, when certain memories, certain smells, even certain sights and smells, that I can't stand. away from the smells, like chlorine, or burned hair. very hard. When I smell burned hair I know I smell Auschwitz. I smell the crematorium, Birkenau. When I smell chlorine, I smell the camps so I always make sure when I smell that, that I say something different, that I change my mind. I'll get away from the thought and the area.

Q: HOW DID YOU DECIDE WHAT TO TELL YOUR CHILDREN?

A: Well, the children, I think the children...let me answer you in a different way. The problems the survivors have had since 1945, if they had a problem, but which I for one, have only been able to answer recently, and I know other survivors have asked, and I've asked, is "Why now? Why is everybody

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running after us?" For thirty, thirty-five years, no one was interested. And now, all of a sudden when you see 30 (Kremerkus) here, which if good news, important news, and I'm delighted that the world is interested. But we also have, I have this feeling, and I'm not saying this to be critical, but just as an observation, why is it that for thirty some odd years no one asked us, no one was willing to talk to us. Now when you say that to a lay person, if I may call it that, they will say, "We didn't want to hurt your feelings, we didn't want to remind you, we didn't want to hurt you..."
But that's not an answer. Because it was deeper than that.

I've heard people say that it would have been better, and I'm not saying this for myself, but I've heard people say, who still live under some neurosis, and I don't feel this, I want to be emphatic, I don't feel this, that it would have been better for us had we been able to talk about it in 1945, immediately. And since no one asked us, we are ambivalent at times. I've resisted interviews until this year. Because a few years ago people came and wanted to interview me and I felt that the people who tried to interview me were psychologists, psychoanalysts and I felt I was being used. I resisted that. I'll give a few interviews now, here, while

this is happening, because it's important. And I can do it.

But when you asked me the question, "What do you tell your children?", I remember once, trying to discuss with my children, they weren't interested. Not that they didn't love me, I know they did. And the reason they weren't interested was not that they didn't want to hear about it. They picked up books, I know, behind my back, wherever they could. didn't want me to think about it. They were too protective. So was my wife and still is. And so were my children, and still are. Even though I decided I would like to be here, for this gathering, they would have been just as happy if I had not come. But they would never have said, "Don't go." They just don't want me to be hurt. And they're very protective of me and they are very good to me. We have a great life together. And so you asked me, "What do you tell your children?", when they ask me. I answer. They never asked I tried once to tell them and they wouldn't hear. They didn't want me to talk about it. Because they felt that it was hard for me, and they could find out somewhere else. was good and it was bad. They didn't know enough about it, but they didn't want me to talk about it.

Q: WHERE WAS IT BAD FOR YOU?

It wasn't. They didn't know that. It was bad because, oh, it's not bad. Because if it was bad I could not function today. I can function quite well. It's a typical syndrome, that you don't want to hurt people. You don't want to talk about an illness a person has because if they're cured, it's good. And I think it's the same with this. But now you have a new syndrome in the world and that is... (Pointing out a That is a survivor, a very important passerby, evidently) Mr. (Sultanic) from New York is a great, he's very active in this group. We feel it's just important. We know that not all the survivors are here. There are about three and a half, four thousand here and there are more in the world. A lot of them can't do it. A lot of them won't do it. A lot of them want to forget even more so. Some people even feel, "Enough is enough." And I'm not even sure what the representative group is who is here.

It's a very unusual group. It's not organized. It's not defined. Except by virtue of having said, "I'm a survivor." Now, the ones you see with a number, you know. And it will only be done once. And that's why it's so difficult, to put this all together. They are having a tough time, the organizing committee, which I was one. We are having a tough

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time to make it successful. We don't know yet until next week. I think it well be. Just our presence here will.

Q: IS IT PAINFUL TO FACE THE CONFERENCE?

A: No. Like I said earlier. It's like I have to go hot and cold. I can't continue to think about it on a long range. I have to turn my thoughts away from it every so often. Or very often. How can a person who has some emotion accept the fact that six million people were killed? I left Holland with four thousand people. And only two or three of us survived. I only know of one. There may be another person but I don't know. If I had the courage, which I don't have, I would sit down one day and say, "Now let me figure out why six million people were killed." But I would go insane with it. Does that answer your question?

Q: YEAH.

A: I would have to end up in an institution if I would try to analyze why. Because there's no answer to it.

Q: TO PUT THIS IN PERSPECTIVE-

A: Six million people.

Q: IS IT A THIRD OF JEWS, A HALF OF JEWS?

A: Oh, a half. But aside from that - take in one area, take a city of six million people, That is incomprehensible to any

person. So how can one understand that his happened in modern times, in our lifetimes? And that nothing was gained by it. The world didn't gain. There's still anti-Semites running around the world, doing their propaganda. Standing with the KKK...

Q: DO YOU FEEL THAT THERE'S AN INCREASE IN ANTI-SEMITISM?

A: I don't know. Statistics say there is not, but certainly it's there.

Q: DO YOU FEEL IT, IN YOUR LIFE?

A: I don't feel it in my life to the extent that...I don't feel it because I don't belong to a club they don't want me. How can you say you feel it? I don't move in circles where I would be excluded. I don't attempt to move in those circles. I feel it differently. I feel that the world should have made a better effort to protect Israel. There shouldn't be any ambivalence about the existence of this state. And I feel very strong, very strong, I resent it, I resent it to no end, that the Vatican has not accepted the State of Israel. This to me is a bigger insult than any insult you could give me. That the Vatican, the Catholic Church, refuses to recognize the State of Israel. That, to me, shows that if they don't understand what it's all about since they are

discriminated against, they talk about Ireland. That's a sham, it's a fake, and the Vatican ought to be ashamed of themselves. And I like to say that as often as I can. But for them not to recognize Israel, they were proud of it, in Germany.

Q: MAYBE A RESOLUTION, AT THE CONFERENCE? HAVE YOU DONE ANYTHING LIKE THAT?

A: There will be a resolutions committee meeting and you will hear some more about it. I'm on the committee. I resent the Vatican no end by never recognizing the State of Israel. All it would take is one line. If they think that (inaudible two words) their conscience, then to me they're not human.

Q: DID YOUR WAR EXPERIENCE MAKE YOU A STRONGER JEW? WERE YOU AN ASSIMILATED JEW?

A: No, I was a Jew before the war, I was still a Jew, I never had a problem of not wanting to be a Jew. I always wanted to remain a Jew. I was never a Jew who went to temple everyday, on Saturday. And I keep my holidays, and I lived kosher when I was a child. I don't live kosher now but I don't eat pork. I skirt between the middle about. And on Pesach, I observe Pesach fully. And I've no intention of

leaving my life of a Jewish religion because I've never had any doubts who I was.

Q: ARE THERE WORKSHOPS PLANNED FOR THE CONFERENCE? WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SPECIFIC ISSUES?

A: There is one issue that has to do with anti-Semitism, etc.

It's done by some scholars. I think on Wednesday morning or

Monday, I don't know. There's a program out. Is there

anything else you'd like to discuss?

Q: IN THE YEARS SINCE THE WAR, HAVE YOU DONE ANY POLITICAL WORK AROUND THE HOLOCAUST? SPEAKING OR WRITING?

A: No, I haven't done any writing. I don't want to write yet. I'm not prepared to write it yet because I haven't had the time. I've been asked to do it quite a few times. I'm not prepared yet mentally for it. Like I said earlier, I don't think I could spend that long a period of time and go through the different stages. It will take awhile yet for me, if I can do it ever. I would like to do it only for one reason. So it would be written down for, family-wise. I think there's been enough books written. I couldn't add anything to what the world doesn't know. There have been many books written about the Holocaust. And if I wanted to write it at all, it would be strictly for my children and their

children. But just to write another book - I'm not an author. People who were there the same time have written enough about it and frankly I also feel very strongly that people who really can tell the stories are not here any longer. Having been in Birkenau and Auschwitz where the real mass murders were, where six or seven crematoria were, that's where it all happened. Aside from Treblinka and Majdanek. But these are the people who should write the books and they can't. We only were on the outside of it. We saw the tragedies but there were even deeper stories.

Q: HOW DID YOU FIND OUT THAT THERE WERE THE CREMATORIA?

A: Well we walked around and they were right there. You couldn't help it. You could see the smoke, you could smell it, it was in the air all day and all night. The trains were coming in and they were marching in and thee screaming day and night. People knew by the time they got there, there were no showers.

O: DID YOU GO THROUGH A SELECTION PROCESS?

A: Yeah, Mengele stood in front of me with his big stick.
Oh, sure.

Q: AND WHAT DID HE SAY TO YOU?

A: He asked me how old I was. And I lied. Because I was

only sixteen. And he said, "How old?" And I said, "Eighteen." Why? Don't ask me why I said eighteen but at least by instinct I knew that an older person...Since he asked, I figured to work, otherwise he wouldn't select. So I said, "Eighteen," and he moved me to one side and others went to the other side. And the ones who went to the right went on the trucks and we had to work. And the ones who worked went into the camps and we stayed alive. And the ones who went on the trucks went right to the gas chambers. Some went by truck and some had to walk too. That day they all went by truck.

Q: DO YOU HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR WILL TO SURVIVE, HOW YOU SURVIVED?

A: This was the first transport in about a year which was kept alive, number one. Number two, yes, you have to have luck. Number three, you have to have a good will to survive. And while you're at it, you have to keep yourself very healthy. Hygiene. And just being able to skirt between the edges. You have to stay strong.

Q: YOU WERE SO YOUNG. DID YOU KNOW OTHER PEOPLE YOUR AGE?

A: There were some, but I was young even then, in relationship to others, yes.

Q: WAS THERE ANY MUSIC, OR DID PEOPLE WRITE POETRY?

No, the only music in Birkenau was the band. You know, the bank when you march in and out. You saw the movie. When there was in the women's camp. Well, the men's had also a So the band played in the morning and we marched out band. and in the evening when we marched in again. No poetry, music, no entertainment. There was no such thing. There was only a matter of life and death. You were alive today, you could be dead tomorrow. You went to sleep at night and you didn't know if the guy next to you would be alive the next morning. And some mornings you woke up and he died of malnutrition or illness or killed himself, or whatever. never knew who was alive, who was dead, you looked for yourself if you're still alive some mornings. Because it was, it can't be explained. You were living in an inferno where everything was either life or death, there was nothing in between. It wasn't a matter of saying, "Well, I'll do this tonight or this tomorrow." You didn't think what you would You were told what to do and you only knew that once there was some food being distributed, you'd better stand up to be there. Because if you couldn't stand up they didn't want to give you your food even, because they didn't want to

waste it on a dying person.

Q: DID YOU EVER SEE ANY MOMENTS OF KINDNESS BY THE GERMANS?

A: Hardly, no. There was no such thing. There were guards,
there were SS and they were bastards and they remained
bastards.

Q: WERE THERE JEWS THAT WERE BASTARDS?

A: Yeah, but that's minor. No. Human beings are human.

Q: I WAS JUST CURIOUS...

A: Human beings are human beings. Sure, you could find a person who would try to steal your food sometimes. But then, you have to think, look, the guy's dying for hunger.

O: HOW MUCH FOOD DID YOU GET?

A: It depends on where we were. In Birkenau, was bad, very bad. In Warsaw was a little better. In Dachau was very bad. Depending on the time, if they had it, but also what they give you. But, of course, the worst parts were the marches and the trains. But then there were constant beatings. And there was searches and sometimes there was food and sometimes there wasn't food. They didn't worry about you. I was in the United States Army, then you know there was three meals a day. Somebody had to worry about that this was done, or you would be reprimanded.

For the Germans, the purpose was to kill Jews, not to keep them alive. The only reason they kept a few of us alive was not because they liked us but because we had to do something that was benefitting them. Meaning some work where they didn't have others to do. Like, one of my friends, he is the Spelling? schairman of this event, he was in (Bunah), in the rubber works, in (Bunah), outside of Auschwitz. The only reason that you see Jews alive today was not because they were smart. They had luck, they had some intelligence, but it was because the Germans kept them alive for their own purpose. For the German purpose, not the Jewish purpose.

O: WHAT WORK DID YOU DO?

I worked in railroad yards and laundry, in A: You name it. digging bunkers, demolishing buildings, polishing anything that you can imagine. Burning bodies, you name it.

(INAUDIBLE QUESTION)

A: No, there wasn't. In Birkenau, it was different. camps you had to dispose of the bodies. In Warsaw. why we were sent to Warsaw, to dispose of all those thousands of bodies you found in the streets in the ghetto.

SO THAT'S ONE OF YOUR WORST NIGHTMARES? 0:

A: Yes, some of them. Those, and Birkenau was the worst.

Especially in retrospect because we found out afterwards how many people were killed in Birkenau. In Warsaw too. But in Warsaw at least we worked, and there was more food to be found. We found food in the buildings we destroyed. All these thousands of buildings. We went into buildings where the food was still on the stoves, when we got there in '43. After the uprising.

Q: DID YOU SEE ANY SIGNS OF RESISTANCE IN THE CAMPS?

A: In the camps, no. I never saw any resistance in the camps. First, we didn't have the strength. And what did we have? There were no weapons. We had a striped suit and we were barefoot or had some (kaloshes), they called them. A piece of wood with a strap of rag over. You didn't have spoons or knives. There was no such thing. You had nothing. You were stripped and you were shaved and that was for openers. You couldn't have anything. It was against the rules. And if they found out that you had anything, they shot you. It was a matter of staying alive. You didn't need a knife to cut meat, there was no such thing.

Q: DID ANYONE HAVE ANY ENERGY TO LOVE ANYONE ELSE?

A: No. First of all there was only men. I hadn't seen a woman for three years. So there was first of all, you were

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thin. People were dying of hunger. There was no strength, there was no drive. You had to drag yourself morning to night, you had no energy. Maybe you had the energy to live but no physical energy. There was total malnutrition.

Q: DO YOU EAT NOW OBSESSIVELY OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT? DO YOU WORRY WHEN FOOD IS TAKEN AWAY?

A: No. The first years after the war I couldn't leave food. I had to finish everything what I had. Even to the extent that if there was food left on the table it was better to eat it because you didn't know if you had it tomorrow. But not obsessively. I think you have to live normal. You have to have some sense of value and sense of health.

Now I have to watch my diet like everybody else! I swim everyday, it helps a little, not a hell of a lot! But no, I like food, but so do other people. I'm no different than anyone else. You can't have an obsession with food because there's enough here. You've got to realize that times have changed. You have to live normally. Yes, after the war you probably ate a little, but not to that extent. You have to survive even now.

Q: DID YOU SEE MENGELE AGAIN?

A: No. I wish I would. They're still looking for him.

I wish I would see him once more.

Q: HAVE YOU TALKED TO ANY PEOPLE HERE THAT ARE STILL HUNTING NAZIS?

A: Well, Simon Wiesenthal, I understand is going to be here tomorrow, who does this full time. He has done a magnificent job. So far he hasn't traced Mengele. He's the one who found Eichmann, you know. Among others. Mengele's the one they want, we want. There are many others still. But he's still the number one on the list.

Q: YOU'VE NEVER RUN INTO, IN THESE YEARS, A NAZI?

A: After the war, in Dachau, we killed as many as we could find. The Americans helped us, they were very helpful. The American soldiers. They saw tremendous tragedy when they liberated those camps. And those boys, they had no compulsion of killing them off. If they didn't do it, we would have.

You must realize that thirty-six years later, how do you recognize a person? If Mengele would walk in, I wouldn't know him. Someone may, I know Simon Wiesenthal would because that's his lifetime job he's made of it. But I wouldn't recognize him. I only saw the man once in my life for, what, a minute? Thirty seconds? When he told me what side to go to.

O: WAS HE HORRIBLE LOOKING?

A: He looked like a German officer. You know how they look, you saw the movie, the television series. He looked like a German officer. They all looked like that. What does an evil looking man look like? You asked me about the man who killed all those girls on Mount Tamalpais. He's a very handsome looking guy! He killed how many women? How does a murderer look like?

Q: DO YOU FEEL (INAUDIBLE) TOWARDS GERMANS?

A: There are two kinds of Germans for me. I don't like to go there. I don't have to go there. There are Germans who are older than I am, they were proud of it. And there are Germans younger than I am who are not proud of it. Because I am about the youngest survivor you'll ever see. So the young Germans, no. You can't go through life and hate. Because that's self-destructive for your own being. So the young Germans, I think they've tried. They've tried to be realistic and they've tried to understand what did they do wrong.

The ones I have my doubts about when I see Germans, older Germans. I ask the question, "I wonder where they were from 1940 to '45." That's the question I ask. But it's a

good question. I had to make the decision after the war to either go and become a hating human being and hating But I wouldn't have stopped hating those everything. Germans. I'm not saying I hate or dislike them, I want to forget them. It's much better that way. But I also had to think of my own life. And my own motto was that if you want to stay alive, you have to jump on this carousel if you like it or not. If you don't jump on, you ain't gonna get there. And I wanted to live. I had big dreams. And I've accomplished a hell of a lot of them. I've a wonderful family and I've been quite successful in business. And I do what I like to do. As you know, I'm quite active in the Jewish community. And I love every minute of it. I could only do it if I had a normal mind, whatever that means, normal. But I can't go through life hating. If you hate that much, I couldn't even raise a family. So I made that decision and it worked better for me.

Q: WHAT IS YOUR ADDRESS?

A: You want my card? My business address is 44 Montgomery st.

Q: THAT WAS THE SAME BUILDING M

Y FATHER...

A: No, your father was at 130, or 140. I know, I've been in his office. He was next to the Equitable Building. Equitable was 120 and your father was 130 or 140. My home is 125 Santa Ana. And the zip code is 94104 for the office and 94127 for my home.

Q: WILLIAM J. LOWENBERG.