

**Translation/Analysis of Oral History Interview with Leon Lendzion**  
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Leon Lendzion was born in Gdańsk on May 20, 1918.

**The interviewer asks Leon to describe his life prior to the outbreak of WWII and his contact with Jews.**

In 1920 all residents of Gdańsk were automatically offered the status of citizens of the Free City of Gdańsk. Part of the population accepted that citizenship, while part kept its Polish citizenship. Jews who were in Gdańsk in 1920 took the citizenship of the Free City, while those who arrived afterwards, kept their Polish citizenship. Very few Jews sought citizenship in the German Reich. Many German citizens, however, did.

Leon's first contact with a Jew was with a Jewish woman, a certain Lina Les, who worked for Leon's family as a nanny and helped to care for him, his older brother and later, his younger sister. She did not speak Polish and was a Gdańsk resident.

Later on, Leon lost contact with Lina, although his relatives stayed in touch with her.

Leon then attended a kindergarten that was maintained by the Dominican nuns. There were no Jewish children there, obviously. Then he attended an elementary school that was taught in Polish. There he met a friend, a Jewish boy, Harry Szmant, born in Kalisz. The two became good friends primarily because they shared the same route to and from elementary school. Leon then lived in Dolne Miasto (Lower Town) on Planken Gasse, while the Szmant family lived on Milkghannen? Gasse. As a child, Leon he used to visit Harry in his apartment. After elementary school (3<sup>rd</sup> grade), they both went on to middle school—the only one in Gdańsk that was taught in Polish. After school, Harry Szmant attended Hebrew school. Leon even learned the Hebrew alphabet from Harry. Harry's father was a tire sales agent. Leon's father was a union activist.

The two boys were quite close throughout this period.

Since after World War I, Gdańsk was a contested city between Poland and Germany and the German population outnumbered all other nationalities. With Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933, both the Poles and Jews were increasingly persecuted by the Germans in Gdańsk.

**Interviewer asks Leon to provide some examples of this discrimination.**

Windows of shops belonging to Jews were frequently broken. Posters discouraging the patronizing of Jewish commercial establishments were openly displayed. As students, both Leon and Harry wore school hats that identified them with their Polish school. This was the basis of being attacked by German students from other schools. Whether one was Jewish and the other one was Polish was not the basis for harassment that they experienced.

All of this acting out was meant to encourage both Jews and Poles to leave Gdańsk.

There were 13 students in his middle school class intent on earning a diploma—4 were Jews, one Evangelical and the rest were Catholic. Jews in general did not attend German-speaking

schools in Gdańsk. They weren't welcome. Also, some Jews began to leave the area for Palestine.

After completing the middle school, Leon enrolled at the Gdańsk Polytechnic. Harry proved to be more fortunate, since his parents ended up sending him in 1934 to the U.S. And in general, after 1937, once the life of Jews in Gdańsk became severely restricted, their departure from Gdańsk increased considerably.

At this point, Leon tries to account for all the Jewish students who attended his middle school before war broke out and who among them survived the war. After the war, Leon became the leader of a club that tried to keep track of all former students of his gymnasium and organized a few reunions that brought them together.

[Stop on Tape 1: of 4: 26:48.]

**For the remaining 10 minutes or so, Leon is asked by the Interviewer to provide some information about his life during the last year before the war and whether he had any contact with Jews then.**

It turns out that during that year, Leon lost contact with all the Jews he knew through middle school. He was in Bydgoszcz when the war broke out, since as of the end of February 1939, the German students at the Gdańsk Polytechnic, where Leon was studying, expelled all non-German students. Leon moved to Bydgoszcz to become an apprentice for the Polish National Railroads, in training as a signalman.

On September 1, 1939, the railroad in Bydgoszcz was subjected to heavy bombing. Leon sought safety in the basement of the railroad station. His roommate Alfons probably died during that day's bombing.

[End of Tape 1 of 4]

**At the start of the next tape, the interviewer asks Leon to return to events that took place in Bydgoszcz on September 3, 1939.**

Leon indicated that he was witness to some chaos and the disintegration of Polish resistance to the German invasion. Specifically, he witnessed how the Polish Army was strafed by Germans from windows on Gdańska Street and then he couldn't find anyone in authority to point out where and how he and his friend might be of help to the Polish cause.

During the night of September 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>, Leon's landlord and his son decided to leave Bydgoszcz and to head to Żłotniki Kujawskie, where his landlord had a well to do uncle. Leon joined them. That night they walked 28 km. They all stayed there a few days before the entire family decided to flee south, where they hoped they wouldn't encounter any Germans. They reached the vicinity of Łódź and learned that there was no point of going further. The Germans were all around them. Leon decided to return to Bydgoszcz to get his things and then to head back to Gdańsk.

At the checkpoint entering Gdańsk, Leon was stopped and since he didn't have any legitimate documents, he was instructed to report to the police. There, he was arrested and kept in the local prison, under awful hygienic conditions for some 3 weeks. From there he was transferred

to Stutthof Concentration Camp, which then a work in progress. Initially it consisted of 2-3 barracks in the Old Port. It housed then around 2,000 prisoners. The timeframe for his initial detention there was the last 3 months of 1939. It was there that Leon ran into his father. By January 1940, Leon was living in a partially, newly built barrack in Stutthof.

[End of Tape 2 of 4.]

**The interviewer asks Leon to comment on his first impressions following his arrival in Stutthof.**

At first, the majority of the population there consisted of Poles from Gdańsk. There were transports from Gdynia and other Pomeranian surroundings. There were about 3,000 people. Leon did not encounter any Gdańsk Jews during that time frame. He was imprisoned in Stutthof until April 19, 1940. On Palm Sunday he learned of his father's execution.

Leon was in the first transport to be moved from Stutthof to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. He was placed in Barrack 38. At that time there were no Jews there either. Prisoners from Stutthof were known to have been transported to Mauthausen. Leon's brother was in one such transport in early April, 1940.

Leon spent 3 to 4 years in Sachsenhausen in Barrack 50. He proceeds to describe the various labor details on which he worked. One of Leon's jobs in Sachsenhausen involved sorting and polishing metals. The purpose of this work eluded him.

He discusses his work on a team that provisioned the SS officers that were assigned guard duty in Sachsenhausen. This allowed him to indulge in theft which helped him regain strength, some weight and some health. This part of his narrative allowed Leon to provide some insights into the rampant theft that was perpetrated by everyone involved in provisioning. It seemed to have been almost expected and quasi-condoned. There was even a virtual rivalry in this regard between the two different branches of the SS staffing the concentration camp.

In 1943, conditions improved significantly, because prisoners were allowed to receive food packages from home. At that point, Leon decided to find a job in the construction department of Sachsenhausen. This choice made sense for him since before the war he was studying to be a construction engineer. And openings in that department came into existence, because even the German communists imprisoned at the camp were being called up for service in the German army.

At minute 00:35:35 into this recording, Leon starts to describe an odd protest that was staged by some young Jewish prisoners at the *appellplatz* (roll call square of the camp). It seems that they wanted to die where they were (in Sachsenhausen) instead of boarding transports that were being readied for them, which were going to take them to their extermination in Majdanek. This incident continues to be described by Leon at the start of the fourth recording of his oral history.

[End of Tape 3 of 4.]

The camp commandant, Albert Sauer himself, defused this confrontation without a shot being fired, by assuring these young Jews that they represented considerable value to the Reich and that they wouldn't be liquidated in Majdanek, given that they offered considerable energy that

the Reich could exploit. According to Leon, these Jews did board the transport and in fact a number of them did survive their ordeal in Majdanek. Leon was able to find evidence of that after the war.

Interviewer: **What did you know about Auschwitz when you were in Sachsenhausen?**

Leon claimed that he knew a lot, since Auschwitz was modeled on Sachsenhausen. The first SS-men and first Kapos in Auschwitz came from Sachsenhausen. However, Leon's actual knowledge was limited and at the time he did not know what was going on there or on what scale. There was a rumor that a gas chamber was designed and built in Sachsehausen, but Leon himself never found evidence of it.

Interviewer: **What sorts of projects were being planned by the construction department?**

Leon: Mainly, whatever was needed by the camp. Leon's assignments in this department had to do with water supply, sewers, sanitation system, and road construction.

Interviewer: **What do you remember of your liberation from camp?**

Leon: That they would be dispatched from Sachsenhausen in groups of 500 prisoners. He remembers that they could see signs of the groups that preceded them, by seeing the corpses in the ditches along the way of those who weren't able to keep up the pace of the march. Leon's group had a very sadistic guide who dramatically changed after being in charge of a detail with prisoners near Berlin on assignment to exhume and disarm unexploded bombs. In the process he was seriously wounded. After that incident, he seemed to calm down.

For Leon, the march lasted 8 days. It would have lasted longer, but he and some 5 other prisoners had decided to escape. On the ninth night, he joined the second group of 3 to escape from the unit. They tried to return to Poland as quickly as possible.

Leon claims that on their way back they did not encounter any returning Jews. He did not meet any previous Jewish residents once he returned to Gdańsk. In fact, he did not establish contact with any of his schoolmates until 1987, when they started organizing reunions, having discovered that some of them resumed corresponding with one another. Leon reached out to Yad Vashem to find out who else might have survived the war. This oral history is concluded with a few examples of those emotional reunions that were held in Gdańsk after 1987.