

Herman Leefsma was born on July 11th, 1924 in Leeuwarden Netherlands; a country town of 3,000. Herman was born into a close-knit family where his mother was a teacher and father was a retailer. He had two brothers and one sister, which by the end of the war, none survived. Herman was 16 when the Nazis seized power over Holland in May 1940. They began mandatory curfews, stealing property, and enforcing other anti-Jewish laws. Herman's family had thoughts of moving to England or America but decided against it because they figured things would die down after the war. Between 1940 to mid-1942, the town of Holwadyke Netherlands was relatively normal. Herman said he had no encounter with discrimination in the town, and that his family received help from the neighbors by bringing foods and other goods to them. However, in Aug 17, 1942, his father's business was taken away by the Dutch authorities and by the next day, August 18, 1942, Herman and his brother were arrested by Dutch policeman. They were taken to the Dutch slave labor camp in Westbroek, Netherlands. A month later he was deported with a transport of 1500 people where only two survived. His brother stayed in Westbroek until January 1943. His father was arrested November 1942 and sent to a concentration camp as well. Later in January of 1943, Herman was transported from Westbroek to Annaberg Camp. He was tasked to work on the roads by rolling and crafting stones weighing 80lbs for 12 hours a day for 6 weeks. Faced with selection, they brought him to another slave labor camp called Neukirch. Then he was transferred to Okmuut on the border of Poland working on the construction of roads. In that camp for about 14 months he met his father. He heard that his mom was brought to the hospital and brother was sent to an orphanage. He and his father stayed in Okmuut camp until January 1944, and then went to a camp called Auschwitz- Blechhammer until the 21st of January 1945. The Nazis knew they had lost the war, therefore they started taking the remaining Jews on death transports. Herman was transported for 16 days living on snow with his father alongside him. Unfortunately on day 6th his father was executed because he could no longer keep up with the grueling day to night transport. On the sixteenth day, they arrived at Gross-Rosen, and he saw the most heinous crimes committed on human beings. The Nazis bonded people together, made chains of people, and took them outside so they would freeze to death. He was there for 3 weeks, where he faced the final selection process. Herman was placed in wagon carts, sharing space with the dead and living for 3 days. Then he arrived to Buchenwald. He saw the biggest mass grave ever with bodies stacked from 10,000-80,000 people in mass graves. He collapsed and was unable to work; as punishment they tortured him and pulled 10 nails from his toes. April 11th, 1945 they were liberated by the Army of General George Patton. He could not remember the specifics of being liberated because he was so sick and fragile. He had pneumonia, kidney problems, and tuberculosis. He was unconscious for a month and stayed in an American based hospital. The Americans took care of him and brought him to an emergency hospital in Holland. He already knew his siblings died, but he was unsure about his mother. His mother heard from the radio a list of prisoner of war and heard his name. She was able to visit him and see him for the first time in 3 years. They discharged him, and was brought him back to his hometown with his family home. 1946, then started over his father's business again where he built the business up, stayed there for 4 years, and ultimately sold it. He invested the money for his mother, and married in 1948. He immigrated to California in 1974 with his wife, daughter, and stayed and worked there. His disappointment after 50 years was that the world did not learn anything from this catastrophe. He leaves us with this statement "We are still uncivilized and we do not know how to handle freedom".