

Questions to Consider When Viewing Video

1. What restrictions were placed on the Jews once the Nazis took over Poland?
2. How and why was Leo able to defy these restrictions?
3. Leo says that he did not fear the Nazis when he defied these restrictions. What other group did he fear, and why?
4. Where was Leo sent? How did he realize that he would be assigned a very dangerous job?
5. How was Leo able to avoid this dangerous job?
6. Where in Germany was Leo sent? What were some of the experiences that he had there?
7. Why was Leo attacked by a Nazi guard?
8. To where were the remaining prisoners sent as the Americans approached Buchenwald? Soldiers from what country liberated Leo and his fellow prisoners?
9. Why didn't Leo want to register as a Displaced Person (DP) with the Russians?
10. How was Leo prevented from being able to get to Palestine? Where did he land?
11. What skills did Leo learn in the DP camp?
12. Where in the United States did Leo settle first?
13. What caused him to move to Cleveland in 1951?

Holocaust Survivor

Leo Silberman

Filmed on March 22, 2007



*"Even though I have an unimaginable past,
I thank God for a good life."*

- Leo Silberman

Face to Face
A Holocaust Education Program at
Congregation Shaarey Tikvah
Beachwood, Ohio

Leo Silberman was born in Poland in 1925, one of seven children. His father sold sewing machines, bicycles and small farming equipment.

When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, Leo was 14 years old. For the next two years, Jews were forced to do physical labor. There were many restrictions. When food became scarce, Leo took off his armband with the Yellow Star and rode his bicycle to a nearby farm. The farmers sold him bread and potatoes, but he was afraid that one of his Polish neighbors would turn him in to the Nazis.

In 1941 Leo and his brother were sent to Plaszow, a concentration camp, where they were forced to use Jewish tombstones to pave the camp streets.

In 1943 Leo was transferred to an ammunition factory in Skarzysko, Poland. When Leo arrived, he noticed that something was wrong with the prisoners. Their skin had turned green from toxic exposure to gunpowder. Knowing this job would mean certain death, Leo volunteered to be a mechanic.

As the Russians started advancing, Leo was taken to Buchenwald. Buchenwald prisoners were marched to Weimar, Germany, where they cleared rubble left by Allied bombings. One day, while the prisoners were clearing rubble, an air raid siren went off. The guards ran away to bomb shelters, leaving the prisoners on the street. Leo ran into a nearby house and took a pot roast from the table to share with his fellow prisoners.

In 1945, as the Americans were nearing Buchenwald, all the Jewish men were marched to the railroad station to be killed. Attempting to escape, Leo started to slowly fall behind. A guard caught Leo and hit him in the mouth, knocking out four teeth. To his surprise Leo was left behind on the ground. After the rest of the group was gone, he ran back to the barracks and put on a Polish armband to blend in with the non-Jewish prisoners. The next day, the rest of the prisoners were packed into cattle cars and taken to Theresienstadt.

Theresienstadt was liberated by Russians on May 10, 1945. By that time, Germany had surrendered, but the Gestapo and the SS were still putting up a fight. They were planning to bomb the camp to get rid of the prisoners and all evidence of what the Nazis had done.

After liberation, Leo decided not to register with the Russian authorities and be sent back to Poland. He said he had “no desire to go back to a country soaked in Jewish blood.”

Instead, he joined a group being smuggled into Palestine by the Jewish Brigade. The group was caught by American soldiers and taken to a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Germany. There Leo attended a trade school, learned to drive, and met his future wife, Paula. Leo moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1949. In 1951 he settled in Cleveland, Ohio, and married Paula.