

Leon – part A

R: Fast forward from the beginning.

What do you mean, the beginning?

R: Born in Lithuania.

Llithuania.

R: I don't even know where it is.

Ah. You know, one of the things, for example, that I feel has prepared me for the way I've decided to participate here is that I have seen a number of worlds that were pretty well constructed worlds and that's how it was, suddenly fall apart or torn apart, and the world's a different world, it's not what--. What I'm telling you is, I grew up in Lithuania in a very orthodox Jewish family. They were comfortable people, they had worked hard and took care of business and made the business work. They had a factory, a couple of houses, one * was working in a bank, and they were pretty well together people. But life was always with God's will in mind, you know, that was their main prerogative, always. I mean, Grandpa was most most that way. He had a beard and he was going to synagogue three times a day and the house was full of his Talmudic books or these cows in the pasture would always, because they *** for the nation I guess is the people who could give the ** and were willing and so this was a house like this and that's where I grew up. There was just no question in my mind that God was described by the Jewish people and we were the favorite sons and daughters, on down to Abraham and the land of milk and honey and ** these were the kinds of things. We were exiled from that but come back and -- I was a little kid, I mean maybe 10 or 11 years old, and I would go with my Grandpa to the services. My second home was the synagogue, you know, as a little kid.

And it was understood that all these people around us who don't have much and who will, they don't (destroy me), it's because they are lazy and they drink too much. If they were like us, stay sober and work hard and don't get drunk, they'd have something too. And I thoroughly believed it. They were the nicest people I could think of, you know, like *** dirty workers about, working in the factories with them. They cared about them. They were like family in so many ways. Sick or something, they'd come knocking on your door in the house and they were treated as -- The family liked to think they were treating them as family. But I didn't think of it then. But then the Russians came in. And I was by that time going to Yeshiva, I was going to study and the Talmudic ** I was doing that but then at that time ****. Money was not an issue ever for them, but when they sent me to Delsht(?) and Yeshiva as a kid, I had to eat what they called (Teg Days?) in different tunnels in the town. And this is where they set it up. It was Yeshiva, it was kids, they were studying all day and the different days there were different people in the community who ***** It's a matter of opinion, because I had to go there too. I'll tell you, **** like you're working ** some of these people didn't have that much food themselves, but they were some kind of (Israel) family or something. This was their charity, their thing. Anyway, so I went through all that. That impressed me, because they just trained ** what it was about, it was how everybody lived and I just did that because **** Another thing that impressed me about them is that Friday night, it used to be like -- we have homeless people here -- they weren't homeless but transients kind of, and they were either Shul Friday evening for the Sabbath etc., and some of the people who could afford it, or whatever, would take them home for the Sabbath meal. Every Friday they had a couple of people who were somewhat -- they looked like, they seemed like, they might have been the homeless transients. They'd go at the table with everyone just as if they were part of the family. They were treated with total respect and it wasn't something to eat * in

the back door or anything. That has always impressed me. I just knew that they were just good people. They really do what they can and they're capable and they work hard. They didn't have a lot but they also want to help others, and * others, and I knew that to do the right thing in God you're going through this thing here, you're going to school and you're going to graduate and you're going to ***** Okay, so they set you up this way. And so naturally I believed -- I mean, not totally totally. I remember I just wasn't sure of the -- they had the long whatever, the ***** really that much worry, but God disapproving of singing and prayers that were a little bit (proud?) -- but you know, it was something in mind, though, you know.

Anyhow -- and after all that, the Russians came. And suddenly this whole world is no longer functioning. That's when I stopped going to the Yeshiva **** There was Jews they were ***** I said Hey why is it ** one kid warrant, gets everything, another kid is warrant and doesn't have a chance at nothing. **** they don't want you to think. ** They were just exploiting little people, you know ***** the people maybe cared for and helped if they needed a doctor or something, but they weren't making a good living working. ** Suddenly that world was no longer the only real world that these, the way it really is ** say Well, everybody should be taken care of. Everybody believed that -- They had this slogan, "From everybody according to their ability and to everybody according to their needs." And yeah, I think it still looks to me like not so wrong in approach, we are just living in a world that doesn't allow that way. It's not because it's not a healthy way. It may actually be that people would be a lot happier if ** -- and so that started to raise some big questions about -- and then I saw that world fall apart.

That was interesting. I don't know if I fast forward, but the things that have impressed me most, there were two things, and I have written stories about that

already, in my biographical stories. Once we had a Russian officer stationed in our house because in really nice homes they requisitioned rooms for their officers and staff. It was a young Russian, handsome guy, always smiling and friendly and always, you know, he had an expression, "Nacht **" means "We have everything." *** He was a hero from the Finnish war. The Finnish war was just shortly before that, and he got medals from the Finnish war. So he was just a young man, this medaled officer in the army. He was a man of our times, an elite, whatever. Then ** came out of his room one night and his gown, his whatever, was on fire. He was drinking, I guess, I didn't understand it all that much, but he had left a burning cigarette or something and it caught fire, and he woke up and it's on fire. My family awoke, they were scared immediately, and since it was a Russian officer, he's the occupying army officer, they struggled whatever on -- wanted to call the army doctor, so he went to his knees and his face was burning with fire and he was ** pleading with them *** "Don't call the doctor. Please don't call the doctor. Do you have a doctor that you know of? Don't go, don't tell them, no, please" ***** It was actually a brave act to do that, because--. But anyway, they didn't tell, and so all of a sudden everything changed. *** He's a hero from the war, but he has his act completely right, he's (30 years older?). He is watched all the time. He has a big smile and a good *** for the system, but they don't respect him either too much. If he does any misdeed or something, like not showing the proper ** to the population, he's anti propaganda you might say, that would be ***** and it turned out that he lives in fear all the time, ** he makes sure that he's just doing everything **** That was interesting. That was very interesting. So that's one thing that started to --.

But the other thing that was even more * was * took the Russians, they * to Lithuania with an agreement with the Nazis, the Germans. They wanted to attack Poland and they were afraid that the Russians might interfere,

so they made a deal with them. You go in the Baltic and we to into Poland. We give you -- and they gave them a bone (or bonus?) for a while. And that's how they got to Lithuania. And so they stepped up their army post and they were, like their officers and stations, they were propagandizing. They were propagandizing a lot. You know, "Your worries are over, never a rainy day, you'll always be taken care of ...". And then, they started to complain because the old anti-communist officials, especially in the police department, were not friendly to them and they didn't feel safe with them and so they wanted more people they can trust better, and so that was their first move, because they replaced a lot of the old police with their police ***

Then, one day it turned out the delegation from Lithuania, and at the same time from Latvia and Estonia, somehow these three countries where they had their *** decided at the same time to send delegates to Moscow to say, "Please take us into the union. We want to join the Soviet Union," and the Soviet Union graciously accepted this offer and now we are going to have elections to elect two people to go the Soviet, Moscow ** to represent Lithuania. There were elections. I was a young kid in school and I remember we used to gather together and all fly little flags and sing and all this and we have these political rallies. I was in one of those, I remember those days * we'd sing the songs and clap and do all these things for the *** The two people that they had selected to be elected were two people who were heroes because they were communists when communism was outlawed in Lithuania before the Russians came. For years. And they were dedicated for the people and all these other things *** Halfway through the election, they discovered that both of these were not -- they were FBI spies from Lithuania **** They were both elected ** all these wonderful great stories about them **** now it turns out they were secret spies. So they shot them and there were now two new people to be elected to be representatives because they weren't elected -- it was during this

election campaign that all that happened. And so that was an eye opener. Hey, I always thought, you know, Grandpa ****now it's time to light a candle or say his ***** and all this and now this new order. And it's not **** So that was an eye opener by that time. In a certain way I think *** wait a minute, ***** used to tell me and I had a lot of questions about the secret army and ***** there's couple worlds away come and gone and so this one may too, so nothing's permanent.

And then there were ** and ** came and that world was startling. So this is part of my training, it's part of the way I look at the world and see. Naturally I saw, for example, my Grandpa and the uncles and -- they worked too hard. They really worked very hard. They were totally committed to what they were doing. They were manufacturing and improving and ** the operation. This was their life, working hard, working like * they found something to exploit, *** cash cow. But yet when the Russians came they started to say it's all okay, ** exploit the parasites and *** not the way it was ***

I came away from it mostly with a thing that people, you get to know them a little bit as people, you deal with them as people, and it's one way, one thing happens in life and then you have a *** about those people and people get so hung up in that, they use the extractions and protections *** in fact it comes * naturally to dehumanize those people who don't fit in and demonize ** -- all of this I take with a grain of salt.

Danny went to Israel. I was in the camps. Right next to me was, where they left me to die in the concentration camps, his name was Darka Shiantri. Darka Shiantri was from my town and he was a couple years older than I, not much. And I still have a picture in mind *** Get down *! Get down *! Get down *! *** fired. He said *** You'll be redeemed with fire and blood. ***** It's like as if he got infected. This guy is only good for the next world, ** they actually believed that, you know,

and so they were going to prevail, but -- and so that turned me off from that direction. I said, Well, I see another movement, and just accept the past, the ** that you have experienced in the past is what is real and you got to bring all that back and just, the total picture was totally right or glorious, it was one real way for me to come back to it and you feel guilty if you don't.

R: And this is the change where you left home and arrived in the camp?

Change?

R: Yeah, suddenly we're in the camp, so --

I was in the camp with my uncle. One uncle and I were together to the very end.

R: So how did you get into the camp? What's the sequence?

The sequence? First, a moonlit night, it was a night not too long after the Germans took over and kicked the Russians out. Came in, nobody was sure it wasn't going to happen that way, we had to deal with it. In fact at the time they were still looking for a, maybe a German officer we want to requisition ** be a little more protected and ** The other thing was, the factory, there wasn't anybody who knew how to run the factory, and when the Russians were there, I decided this is maybe (why we weren't sent to?) Siberia. Because they had to have somebody to run the factory. And also the workers institutions and well, this way doesn't make sense but they said ***** whatever, but the real reason was they wanted to maintain the factory and keep working and they didn't have people *** And under Communism they had already appointed one of their people that my uncles were supposed to train him to take over the management and until then they would let (us stay) to run the factories.

R: Other people had disappeared to Siberia.

Yes. They came off the -- they called it, I forget, then actually they had a big freight train at the station and they already collected up all the wealthy people and the ** other people, *** and it took them three days to haul the people off into this freight train and they then shipped them off to Siberia. And now some of those survived there in that kind of area, by that time. But our family wasn't touched because they were needed to run the factory **** And then when the Germans came, the Germans did it too. My uncle was still working the factory, so there was always hoping that maybe there would be a little more safety in this corner, you know, they need people. But then one night they came in and they rounded up all the men, and many of the kids too, boys, and took us down in the street and put us in jail. I was in jail there with one of my uncles. My sister ** younger, always skips along ** whatever, and she went to the, whatever, German office that they had the delegations to run the community or whatever, and she got me released from there. But it was too late for my uncle. He was already taken out and -- when they pulled ** we were together and they ** "What do you do? What do you do?" ***** "You go on that side." **** which was the right thing, but I tried to go back to my uncle who was in that group and they kept chasing me away, so. But *** they were just taken out and shot. ***

So this was done ** for a while, there were ashes, there was a ghetto. They organized a ghetto, fixed us up a ghetto and whoever was left was made to work in different places. They assigned us at nine in the morning. But we had little apartment to get in and this land around it and it was kind of a whole neighborhood that was fenced off. This was the ghetto. And inside was a little community life. They opened up the floorboards in the floor and down the hall we needed to hide possible ***** all kinds of food(?) like that

because we were all locked in there and the guards were all standing outside.

And then one day, I mean they came different times, with different actions, just collecting us. Everybody was lined up and say, "You go here, you go here, you go here, you go there." You didn't know where you were going, but I guess there were people that were taken out for extermination, and there were people who were taken out to different places to go to work or to the * When they came for us that last time I was *** We were put on a freight train and taken away to Germany. At Stuthof was this concentration camp that the train landed in, and that was a very interesting, I mean it was a very -- this was **** We were loaded up in this freight train, and a very interesting thing. On the freight train you're going, you don't know exactly where you are going but it's a prison train, that you can -- you're watched and you gotta stay inside, you can't go out. And there's a lot of people and it's crowded. Everybody was maneuvering to find a more comfortable place to sit/be. So the whole attention was to see if people were *** by their friends and they were moving in the straw so they had some place, a little cushion. And it was an interesting scene that way. But anyhow, we landed at Stuthof and suddenly it was night and all the doors opened up and ****

[tape side B]

So they got us all off of the train and we had to drop all our clothes in one pile and shoes in another pile and go to the shower. When we came out of the shower they had uniforms for us, we couldn't even go near the clothes. But the shoes, we were to use the same shoes that we'd left there except it was hard to find your own. My uncle and I went through the pile of shoes, and he found his boots, and see those boots, he had in the heel some * gold coins, something. I couldn't find my shoes but I kept on trying different shoes and this one shoe I was trying there was no ** there. So I reached

in and there were gold coins and a gold ring that somebody had left inside the shoe. So we both got it out with riches you might say in that situation.

There were little (garages?) *** you sleep in, laying one next to one next to each other on flats. And in the morning there's a bell, and everybody gets up and get outside and you stand there and they count you and they point you to where you're going to go for the next *

There was this Polish convict and he had a green thing, it was a triangle on his uniform, who was some kind of charge of us. He'd ** get us out and make us all stand and check everything out and when the German officers would come through he would have it all ready for them. He wielded a lot of power. He's passing us by and he looks everybody in the eye and he comes to me and looks me in the eye and he reaches in my pocket and gets the ring out. How? I was a kid. What I showed I don't know, but that was the -- and he gave me a slap in the face and walked on because he didn't want to make anyone wait. But that was only the one ring. I had coins in my other pocket.

From there comes two *. We were taken to Dachau. This is where we were separated, we really were * separated *** The only two people from my town that were together was my uncle and I. We were taken to Germany * Bavaria and Dachau. From there we were taken to what they called *** They were working and building underground factories and they had some plan in mind. It was the forest and they were *** they were and setting up roads ** we were working on setting up the roads, pouring the sand for the lanes * the railroad tracks, stuff like that.

I have used the coins that I had to (smuggle out) food from the * of the kitchen people, and I was sharing it with my uncle and a couple old friends, we all ate what I had until it was gone. Now I waited for my uncle to open up his heel. He wouldn't do it. "Ah naw, we don't

need it. We'll need it more later. We'll need it more, we'll need it more." Well, the end came, we were liberated, that was the end and he still had the coins. Interestingly enough, they were stolen from him in Tel Aviv. But I always ***** I used to go up and then he wouldn't **** So ** I was looking another way * Israel. Where he made so much money, I don't know. But the family had sent him to Israel as a young guy starting off at 19 or 20 * and -- that's right, he just died a couple years ago and he was 91, so it was about 20 years ***** I did want to go back to ***** at that time, I was thinking, "Well these people live here." And we come -- I have already, I'm ** brainwashed that I had when I grew up. We had the same fantasies that I hear Israelies today, you know -- our land, and we were exiled from it and it's a waste and nobody does anything with it, it's waiting for us to come and bring it back to life. That was clearly God's will, whatever. So Arabs live there, so -- but I thought they were buying it. Turns out there was this *** soil, this was a perpetual pump for Israel and we were little kids in most of these camps and then they were all making us ** just to reclaim our homeland. And I grew up with that. But this was before the Russians came and everything and I said well I used to feel that ** but you know there's these other people there, and their land Israel **. So I didn't go in that direction. There were other things too, of course. My father was here in this country. He was a rabbi.

R: How did he get to this country?

How he got to this country is before all this happened. He got to this country -- he left before I was born, when my mother was pregnant with me. Or maybe some months later. She contracted Asian flu. ***** but it was a very severe illness, because they didn't have any cure for it, and actually she became semi-paralyzed, and that was when she was pregnant with me. And what kind of **** I have no idea, I don't know otherwise, but she knew that he was gone. He went to Israel first

and then from Israel to America, and he became a rabbi here. He was the head of a Jewish agency in Jerusalem for a while. Well I didn't want to have anything to do with that. He also had a new family, he had a wife and kids, and he had gotten a divorce *** just what I had ** with my family but not very above board, you know. They have something in the Jewish laws about that. My mother was there, she was ***** Anyhow, so he got a new family and I never was interested in going back to my father, you know, but I did want to go in his direction. I mean this was a * country that had -- looking for a future, you know, accepting everybody from the old countries and something about it ****

R: So after your liberation you came directly to the United States?

I went to Sweden and the United States, because we got out early, quickly, because he was a rabbi, an influential guy, whatever, and he arranged for us to be taken by Red Cross *** from there we came ***

I'll never forget, one of the things he said early, "Thank God you didn't become a Communist. If you'd become a communist I would have to disown you." What? I heard that ** at the start. Quickly after we got there I started to look for other relatives and whatever just to get away from them, and that was that.

R: So when you went to Baltimore you were then what, 18 or 20 years old or something?

When I came here I was 21, 20 years old. I can remember 46, and I was born in 1925. I came in the first part of 46, March, and my birthday is in October, so I would have been 21 because I was 20 when I got here.

I remember so many things. I think ** fast forward and that's enough about my story here -- I'm going to have to cut down because of --

R: That's good. You can make bigger or smaller later, but then you left Baltimore, you went to some college or school somewhere?

I went to school, yes. I went to Brooklyn, New York where I had these aunts, my mother's aunts, and relatives there. And we got a job in a * factory, so I was working as a laborer in the day and went to school at night. And in New York was called the Rose Preparatory School, it was a good school, too, with *** and when I graduated, ** the year I started college. And then we moved to get away from that area all together. We got jobs in **

R: Who's we?

My sister and I. My sister, they both -- my brother-in-law, he *** Germany **here and they got married and the three of us left for Milwaukee. We were already together. We all had jobs and stayed together ** and went through **

R: Stop there? Enough for today?