

Leon - 10/30/02

R: Where are we in our story?

I don't remember.

R: How did you get to the United States from Europe?

Okay, I was in Europe, in Munich. And actually, I have fond memories of my period after liberation in Munich until I moved, traveled from there to Sweden. And there was a period of time when I found a -- They had a camp for us Americans after we were liberated from the Nazi camps.

R: Which camp you were liberated?

Dachau. The last days in Dachau were -- they collected us all, everybody in Dachau, they gave us our provisions, some we had never seen in those years -- complete loaves of bread to be divided because they were handing out all their supplies, they were leaving. And so they started to march us. We'd march all night, walk, walk, walk. It turned out later we were walking in circles kind of. But in the night -- in the daytime you'd be waiting in the woods, hiding in the woods, and that was sleep time, in daytime. We were walking, there was loaves of bread, and there were several people who were the owners of this particular **. I saw skeletons, literally skeletons, trying to rob somebody, another skeleton from the loaf of bread, and they were not separate. They were just -- it was like surreal (fiction) picture of starving people when they were getting a taste of bread, and what they did to each other, and some people were killed that day, I think.

R: This was before leaving Dachau?

After leaving Dachau.

R: Walking to, in circles.

We got supplies, it was handed out and you were told there will be no more and not **

R: So maybe you were a skeleton yourself.

Yeah. Exactly. I was pretty -- my feet were getting sore and I think I was already one of these people who would have dropped on maybe in another day or two. You know, I just -- could be an exaggeration, but I was getting tired. And they had, you know, dogs and the people would fall by the wayside it's * time for the dogs. And in the daytime we'd be hiding in the woods, but we could hear there were a lot more airplanes flying missions, you know, bombing missions.

R: You mean the American army liberated the camp, gave you the bread --

No, no, no, Americans weren't here yet. They left -- they took us out of the camp and started to march --

R: Ah, the famous death march.

I don't know what they called it, I just --

R: It was the Germans with the dogs following along, going in circles.

We were not yet liberated. Before we left the ** they were buzzing the camp, American airplanes, so they'd come real close and near and they started to be more frequent that we could feel and see that the end is coming, and then they gathered everybody together from the outlying camps and brought everybody back in the central camp and there we were, sleeping by the day and they'd line us all up in a big open area and that's when they told us there would be no more supplies, they're giving out all the supplies so you better hang on to it ** because there would be no more. And we marched for several days. We were hiding, kind of. What

it turned out is, the number of guards was thinning, and so a lot of them were running away. They didn't know what to do with us. Later we heard that there were orders from Himmler to annihilate everybody, but it was too late, they couldn't carry out the order or were chicken or whatever, and they pulled us out and we were just dragged around through, in the area, and we were liberated and ** big deaths * at one of the main * I do recall from various ** attacking, grabbing some. There were apparently -- there were Hungarians, there were Lithuanians, there were Greeks, and different -- and it was like international countries who were fighting each other. They were very dangerous because they were bandits grabbing from the others, from the Poles or from whoever they were. The national were all together. We were all together. Lithuanians we all stuck together in one group. And so if you were a big group you kind of were a little safer, but you had to watch out because you could see what stragglers were getting attacked and destroyed for their bread by other victims just like themselves.

R: Dog eat dog.

I saw that among my own people, and so that's one thing that remains in my memory.

One morning we arrived into a little town called Aachen. It was near ***** Officer Training School. And on the outskirts of town there was a big barn and the German guards were already gone. The people who were guarding us were Hungarian, older, old Hungarians, and they were Nazi sympathizers, volunteers, and they used them here now, but those were the last guards remaining. Anyhow, they were -- I think about 150 or something of us were put in the big barn and the door was closed and we didn't know what happened to the others and so forth. And it turned out that there were other barns like this in which they got put. And we were in the barn for a few hours and it started rumbling and *should see what's going on out there and

people were fearful and they -- "They're waiting outside the door with machine guns so they can say that we were running away, they had to kill us." That was plausible, one of the more plausible hypotheses we kicked at for a while. But guess what? I was a young kid still and compared to ** or whatever, I guess I was a little more impatient than the others and after I heard for hours the same argument back and forth etc., I just kicked the door open. Guess what? There was nobody outside. So we started to walk out and now we were outside the barn and free, clearly free, there was no guard. And I was elected to get closer to the barn --

R: And split.

*** a dead horse there not too far away, shot. People started to attack them. We were milling around, we tried looking in the town. I don't remember exact distances, but it was not far from us. Down below and seemed quiet, nothing going on there, nobody was out in the streets or anything. And after a couple of hours American tanks arrived. And that was the moment of liberation. We were in uniform, stripes etc., and they were so wild, they were throwing at us food, wine, rations and so people were standing, eating all these things. And so suddenly we had all these -- And a little later, and there were people who killed each other. But suddenly, the rich food that they couldn't handle and they couldn't **

R: Ate themselves to death.

Mm-hmm. You know, maybe not at that moment, but... Well, after a couple of hours -- but they were a group, they were hanging together. My uncle was with me and we were kind of rationally looking at this thing and there was a little support to say well *** be careful. A little bit later they stopped ** the captain stopped and they had officially, whatever, found us and they were going to do something to take care of us, and they

transported us to the ** (batures?)***** train * I saw -- and it was of course abandoned, there was nobody there. There wasn't a soul there, barrels of wine. And people got to these barrels, uncorked them, and wine was spilling on the floor and people were ** the wine from the barrel, and then they died too. And there were people there especially who couldn't handle whatever was happening, it was their last --

R: Wow.

Yeah. Another scene I remember from that -- In our camp where we were, because a lot of strangers were camped outside of Dauchau ** they wanted to build some underground factories or facilities or -- and they got as far as laying the road tracks, railroad tracks, and we were doing that work, and a couple was a guy who was the leader appointed by the guards, the warden, whoever, who was like, they have what, a prison foreman or something who was in charge **. Well, that captain was a young guy, I mean as you see here many people who said, well ** he was a Jewish guy, *** he was from Poland I think, or Hungary, I don't even remember. He was a young guy. When they were ready to thin the ranks they told him to go and get 20 people. He'd just go through and collect them and send them out and we never saw those people again. And so there was a lot of ** And he was there with the rest of us, in Baturas** and people got ahold of him and they said **** They surrounded him with pots and pans and they were going to beat him to death. They were hitting him with pots and pans, whatever they found. Until the American captain saw it and separated them and saved him, but I saw that (several times?) *** I heard that he later emigrated to the United States, he was somewhere in the South, but I don't know what happened to him but he did make it to the United States. But he almost got killed.

From there, this was just a very temporary station, * you're in county jail waiting for your long-term to be -- They had a camp for us *** what they called the ***

and the Strombergers. It was a beautiful place, right on a lake, and nice barracks **** and they were taking care of us, you know, *** medical help and there was a committee or whatever ** getting a little organized and all these things. And there were sexual activities that were hidden from (kids?). The next room, it was a birthing place. But, so now you were like in a minimum security camp, from the adjustment center or something. It was very very nice, but still it was under the regime, you know. There are the bosses who are taking care of you. For instance, *** we were in a strange country among previous oppressors or whatever, and you won't stay there. And that's where I parted company with my uncle. I said, "Naw, it's not for me. I've been in camps long enough." I went out of there and hitchhiked. There was American amphibian ** both in the water and on the road, that's who picked me up. They were going to Munich. I said, "Great! I'll go to Munich." They said, "Well, what are you going to do down in Munich?" I said, "Well, the first thing I have to do is get some food and then get a place to stay," but, you know, I was young ***** whatever, and "Hey, you liberated us, right? This is enemy country and so we are now free," you know, and I think they were definitely interested in taking care of us and so forth. So that got me a little * What I did was I went to city hall directly. And I came there and I said, "Hey, I'm coming" -- I showed the uniform -- "I'm coming from the concentration camp and you guys liberated us and I don't want to be in a concentration camp anymore, you know. I've been there long enough and now I want ****"

R: Speaking English at this point or what?

German, yeah. These were Germans. This is not the Americans. It was German city hall. But this is after they lost the war and they were ruled by the occupiers, but the civil government was functioning. They were giving out ration cards to everyone, and so I wanted a ration card. And so they gave me a ration

card. I said, "Well, I have ten others who couldn't make it to walk * They gave me ten ration cards. Next I need a place to stay. They gave me a list, you know, what's available, what they had, where there were leases they had. I left there with a couple addresses to check out for a place to live and I had ten ration cards which I know I have now to take care of any rent *** or whatever.

I needed money. I stood on the steps at city hall *** and I held up everyone *** I had money. And I checked out the addresses that they gave me. One of them was in (Zemlinger Toclat) and that was a house where an old professor lived. He was a physics professor. Hagenmur, Karl Hagenmur. I really liked the guy. We became very good friends. I don't know, I mean now, was he -- I thought he was around 80 maybe at that time, so I guess it was, to me he was much older than I am right now. But he was, you know, * strong, with a German face, straight up and walking a lot. He had -- his wife was much shorter than he was *** And I said, "Hey, this is where I want to stay," I thought, you know. He's an old professor, a regular guy, seemed very friendly and **** too. They had a roomer *** it was an older lady, she was a widow, and -- he had a mistress in another part of town and pretty soon he invited me to dinner at his mistress's house. ** That was a kind of a setup, I guess, the old aristocratic ways that they had. And I was very interested at the time. When it came time to go to the United States, he advised me not to go there. "Don't go to the United States," he says. "Stay here where the mensch ***" Where the person, human, is closer to another person. And I thought difference than what? This is where people are close to each other? Thank you. Years later and I can see what he meant and it is true. In this country where the urbanization took place and people became more urban, they are a little further from the roots that they come from and not this close to another *** more ** it's just we don't see much anymore, but we hear about them. They grew up together and then they (built) their lives together and

everybody knew each other. They weren't running around all over the world, just strangers passing through. They were people who knew each other. Parents, grandparents, friends and neighbors, so they were sort of more ingrown together. And ** rented apartments, affordable or not, you're still far removed from any of your neighbors. So that took me years, but I always kept it in mind. That's one thing ***

Ah. Anyhow. In the meantime, he also set me up with a Professor Meyer, who a sociologist, he was going to educate me because I missed my high school education and so forth and I was still there. He was really very nice. Both of them were very nice people ** friendly, and that helped me a lot because it cleared out my head about racial -- where we come from and where we are going is not the same place and we're all coming from different backgrounds but we still have a lot. Everybody is not just like those fanatics who was trying to erase all the others from the ** So that was (quickly) a good experience for me and ***I enjoyed it a lot. *** I had a girlfriend there. Then my cousin came which was of course another thing, * one day.

R: How did he find you?

One day I come home to where we are living in this house and the landlady *** "An American soldier was here looking for you" and she's scared to death because Americans were the occupiers force and looking now for one of the tenants, and so * it was a little weird, you know. "But he's going to be back here" all this stuff. Sure enough at two o'clock he was back. He was a big dude. I have this picture on my page. It's an American soldier ** that's the guy. And he was maybe a couple years older than I, maybe one or two years. Anyway, he shows up at the door and he says, **** "I'm your cousin!" That was a strange experience, you know, because (it was) not expected. I don't think you know anybody, I've heard there might be a few people but I have my personal emissary, you know, my cousin from the

liberating forces who were there and stationed right there and he's going to be interested in whatever, and we became very close buddies at the time.

R: How did he find you?

The Red Cross had made lists of all the survivors that they found. My father, who was a Rabbi in Baltimore at the time, found this list and he found that I was in Munich where he was and he sent a telegram or a letter or something to Danny, "Make sure you find my son! My son! He's alive! Can you maybe find him?" or whatever. And so that's how he found out I was there.

His daughter, I just met his daughter. Well I met her once when she was a very little girl, and she lives in the valley now. I remember when he was in Munich, we were close buddies. I had my girlfriend was living right there and he'd come over and we'd all go to a nightclub together. And he had written a little, for the family, it's a notebook, and they ** there was only one chapter that "This is for someone now * a legend." That one chapter that names the name: "How I Met Leon." My name is -- I said "Wow, I really must have meant a lot to you ****" I did. But he used to say, "When I get back to the United States I'm going to make a lot of money" (and he did?) Nobody learned from anybody else's experience, but I learned from mine, you know. I knew my parents, and grandparents, and their whole life was working hard and taking care of the business and ** the business and it became a yoke around their necks and they would kill themselves because they said well, ** all the money *** the money and that's why we are giving, I guess that was the most explanation they could have is that they were all jealous of us because we were not like them, we didn't mingle with them, they were Orthodox Jewish, they were wearing like a nice -- I saw my buddy in Jerusalem, who called me the other day by the way too, he's got an operation ***** "You're not my brother. Maybe we are brothers, but we are certainly ** opposite direction, you know, not --

although we are friends and I can, you know, but I can't understand is people who live in a place, I mean people who *** stay away from everybody ** they just have these strange habits and they go on in their own ways. They think I'm very odd because I'm not really quite right or whatever, and I understand though that, I thought, well --

R: So you had this cool setup in Munich with the girlfriend and Danny is there and the place to live, and at some point you decided to go to the United States.

Okay, my father found us, correct? And so now Danny found us. Okay, ahh, thank God you find the children, because God, their life was -- they could have been taken back to Russia or something. He has big fears, whatever, *** young. And he went to Sweden and connected, of course, he wrote * for us and whatever, and we were going to be -- One day the captain of the whatever, he was ** We were displaced persons *** and so persons who chartered this * or whatever, I got a couple of them got visas to go to the United States, our father was kind of an important figure there or whatever and they'll let us go immediately to Sweden.

R: So who's we? Who went with you?

My sister.

R: So she was in Munich, she got to Munich.

She got to Munich after a while. And that's a whole other story, because I had no idea where she was and my present brother-in-law, they had met in the ghetto before we were moved to the Germany, the concentration camps, and they were sort of hanging out together. He went to some camp near mine, and it was where they kept -- he was getting pretty weak or something. They had a place for people who were just on their way out kind of, whatever. But he found me in Munich. That was all

in the same area. He was in another camp but not too far away. He came and showed up. So we are buddies because he's the guy that my sister was going out with before and all that. He's an interesting story himself, because he's one of the very few people I know --

[tape side B]

R: Okay, your sister's boyfriend.

Okay, so he was now in Munich, nearby. He wasn't living in the same place I did but this * little place and (we were) seeing a lot of each other and so forth. One day somebody came who was in East Germany, another Jewish person more close to our age, I guess, I remember * we didn't know who it was exactly, but he had a witness, an eye-witness report. My sister was shot to death. She was trying to run away from a camp and she was running and they were starting to shoot and they shot her and she fell and also a cow that was nearby got shot and fell over her and that was the last of her. We got that report, and for a while -- it was an eye-witness report, so we were in mourning. Then one day my sister shows up at the door. Knock knock. In the same place, in the same room, in the same house, another knock on the door and there's my sister. "Yes," she comes in the door, she was trying to run away, and they were shooting, but she fell and that cow fell over her. She didn't get shot, the cow got shot. So she was there hiding for a while until it was gone over and she continued running away. So she had run away. She was liberated by the Russian army. So my sister was back. And of course in the meantime my father was working, getting the papers and so forth, and we were going to transport with some other people to Sweden.

R: So you and your sister and your sister's boyfriend.

No. He -- after we got to this country -- it took us a while, but we got him papers.

R: Separate project.

Yeah. That was a project to bring him over.

R: So you and your sister got to Sweden and your father was still there?

No, he wasn't. In the meantime he had gone to look for us in Germany and he spent too much time so he had to go back to the United States. So we didn't meet there, but he had already arranged with the consulate and so forth, we were gearing up ** and when we got to the country he met us. Ah, I have a couple of pictures in my mind that stayed from all those experiences from this time, and one of them is, when our transport came into Sweden from Germany, they first put us in what they call an intern camp. It was a very nice place, it was like an * in the woods and very nice, you know, but it was where we were kept for a little while, isolated, because you had to be checked out medically and all the other things. And they were entertaining us and I remember it was near Christmas time because I remember the song they were singing, you know, Santa Lucia and so forth.

From there, we got tickets to go to Stockholm to the address of this Rabbi that we were going to. And our train was leaving far away from town, so they took us in the bus to downtown, and we got there a little early, you know, from when the train was going to leave, and I had needed a haircut by that time, ** and here there was nothing to do. I said, "I'll get a good haircut while we are waiting." So I went to a barbershop and they didn't understand German and I couldn't speak ** Ah! So! He dipped my head in these *** washed my hands. Anyhow, they did all kinds of things, and by the time they were done, I remember it was ** they gave us the money for on the road and it was gone. I didn't have any money for the train ticket. So we had to come back again because -- So somehow * this is the story that I remember. But we made another

turn and got back there.

From there, we got the papers and all that and there was a train that took us from Stockholm from Malza(?), Malza is the port, and the boat that we were going on was a Liberty Ship. Liberty Ship was a freighter, it was designed in the war ** they were now part of the Merchant Marine but they were (supply ships) **** and so forth. There were ten passengers aboard that freighter, and our first stop was in Denmark, Copenhagen. And sailors were going out to town to Copenhagen, and of course, we were kind of new, whatever. My sister wouldn't go, of course, but I did, you know. Hey! We're ***Sure. *** Copenhagen. The guy helped pay for a couple hotel rooms on half a floor or whatever and the ** ran to get the women there, before they brought the women, and ** one of them be mine and they're willing to do other things and *** well I don't have to go into all the details, but turned out that these two women were not prostitutes or anything. They were working in the telephone company. This was their excitement and adventure, the Americans. Partying, yeah. Party time. So I remember this very well. Actually I have very vivid memories of this (party).

And we came back the next day to the boat and there also *** it wasn't the telephone operators that I knew but there was another woman and she might have been a prostitute or not, I really don't know, but -- well, she must have been, because she came along for the ride to New York. She wanted to get away from -- because she was going to be a stowaway and they were going to have their companion. And there was one room especially that the bursar had that -- the Liberty Ship was loaded up, the cargo was Schnapps, Danish Schnapps. And in his cabin, a couple of boys pried open and was loading up their share. And this room was the perpetual permanent open bar. There were a couple guys that were playing music, etc., and I couldn't understand anything. There was one Polish guy, a sailor, an American sailor, who was born in Poland, but he spoke a little German, so he

was my translator or whatever, and I was hanging out with them there and we were drinking all the time. In the meantime, another part of the story, a different place -- the dining room where the ten passengers ate, one of the passengers was a Swedish war bride. She was going to the United States to join her husband, American officer that she married. On the third day she disappeared from the dining room, nobody saw her. What happened? She ended up in the captain's cabin and nobody saw her. She was in the captain's cabin. I go back to the bursar's place, where we were all drinking all day, the captain discovered the stowaway and locked her up. And he was like *** drinking buddy and I got the translation from this *** Plans were hatched for vengeance on the captain, and we spent a lot of time composing different *** drunken sailors making up a letter to the husband of the war bride who was in the captain's cabin, but he took their woman and locked her up from everybody. That was one of the mysteries that intrigued me from the beginning. I thought maybe she worked with the captain ***** Of course when we got off the boat *** we didn't see anybody, you know. *** They would have done it. They were going to *** telling the officer about what happened with the captain and his bride that was coming to see him. That nobody saw for the remainder of the trip. *** Did he get the telegram? What happened ***? I've probably wondered about that story more than anything *** what happened to her and the captain. No idea. Nothing ever *** But those are the ** memories of our trip.

And then our father came to pick us up --

R: It landed in New York?

It landed in New York, and we didn't stay there because he lived in Baltimore, remember and after ** we took a train. I remember the train. And we went to Baltimore. And we stayed in Father's house, who was remarried and he had a family and several kids, and we (didn't?) feel comfortable there at all. I mean, first of all, "Ah!"

*** "Thank God you didn't become Communist or I'd have to disown you..."

** Do I really have to? **** Well, my mother had relatives in Brooklyn. My grandpa, my baby sister and others were there already, so, * find a way to get a way to get in touch with them, I'm going to get out of this ** number one. Well I certainly didn't -- I had to act ** in public as if, you know, I'm just totally going along with his religious ideas. I mean I didn't become a communist to *** but I certainly had lost any faith in the religious ideas.

R: Let me ask you about the **. The liberation was I suppose in August 1945.

May.

R: May 1945, and you were in Munich in the fall of 1945 and then the Christmas Carols in Stockholm is still 1945?

I arrived in the United States in March 1946.

R: And how long in Baltimore before going to Brooklyn?

You know, I don't remember the exact time, but maybe a year, maybe not quite that. Yeah, I stayed there and he asked me to go ** with him ***

R: 1947 then you moved to Brooklyn with your sister?

Yeah, I haven't thought about the numbers of the years. I never remember my birthday, you know. I did remember it was ***** October 6, well it was not 1925, I didn't -- it wasn't brought up much, when I was a kid and grew up it was during the circus and that was my birthday, but October 6th you never knew. So it took ** getting used to, getting down on applications and whatever kind of thing, was my birthday. So the dates, I mean I can figure it out if I have to because I remember *** but

approximately

R: So maybe we should stop here and next time we'll start with Brooklyn?

Okay.