

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

DR. LEON FRIEDMAN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Josey G. Fisher

Date: April 7, 1981

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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LF - Dr. Leon Friedman [interviewee]

MF - Mrs. Friedman [wife of interviewee]

JF - Josey G. Fisher [interviewer]

Date: April 7, 1981

Tape one, side one:

JF: Could you tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your family?

LF: I was born and raised in Warsaw, Poland, in the beginning of this century, and I was educated also in Warsaw. After finishing the so-called *Gymnasium*, which is equal, let's say, to part of our college in United States, I attended the History Department of Warsaw University, studying history, Polish history and world history, especially around the time of the Renaissance in 16th Century. And, in 1928, I received my official diploma as a teacher.

JF: Can you tell me about your growing-up experiences in Warsaw?

LF: Well, all the time we were facing antisemitism in many forms, like, let's say the religious Jews were forced to cut off their beards, and sometimes their beards were cut off on the street by soldiers or so-called hooligans. In addition to this, we had special restrictions for Jews living in Poland: higher taxation, and certain professional--professions were closed or at least, called "*numerus clausus*" [closed or restricted number] it means to say that only a certain part of the Jewish population could attend, let's say, a medical school, or the dental school, or even the law school. In many cases, like, for instance, my younger brother failed twice to pass the examination to the law school, and the second time, when he called the professor's attention that he would not be able to face the examination a third time, because this is the regulation of the university, so the professor said that this is exactly our purpose. "You shouldn't be a lawyer; we have enough lawyers, we don't need Jewish lawyers." I'm just giving some examples. There was a time when Jews who were not able to pay high taxation were facing confiscation of their belongings. At that time, the Minister of Treasury was Grabski and they called this the "Car of Grabski" is coming to pick up the belongings of those who couldn't pay the taxation, their taxes.

JF: On what basis were the taxes?

LF: Well, actually, in addition to new taxation from profit, they also put a special taxation from volume of business, in addition to profit. So, regardless, if you did not even make profit, you had to pay according to the volume of the business, two percent from all the business during the year.

JF: And how were the taxes on the Jews higher? In what way?

LF: Actually, it was not passed against Jews, but practically they knew who was a Jew and who was not a Jew, and then this was left to the free action of the workers,

the officials that worked with the Treasury Department. They knew who to press and who not to press. Now, we had cases in the university where the Polish students demanded that we, as Jews, should occupy the last benches in the class, and, in some cases, they just threw from the windows, if there were too many Jews in the classroom.

JF: They threw the Jews...

LF: Yes. Through the windows. As a matter of fact, my professor, this professor, Haletski, Oskar Haletski, was well known in conservative circles of the Polish society, and he regretfully accepted my dissertation, motioning [mentioning] that my style is not the clear Polish style and bears some other influences; it means to say Yiddish influences. At that time I didn't know Yiddish at all. My parents belonged to the very--to circles of high assimilated people. They were afraid even to use among themselves the Jewish language. And, maybe, the children will be affected by using the Yiddish language, and their Polish would not be as clear, and Polish it should be. In my case, of course, I didn't know Yiddish at all. I learned Yiddish after the war in one of the DP camps in Germany, in Bergen Belsen. And I considered myself as a good Polish patriot. We had, of course, our representatives in the Congress, in so-called *Sejm*¹. We had a few congressmen and senators, and, just because they discriminated against the Jews, I became a Jew, and I started to study in the university. Up to this time, I was not considering myself as a Jew.

JF: You had no Jewish training as a child?

LF: Not at all. Yes, I did have, in the very youngest years, when I was five years of age. My grandfather, who was a religious Jew, insisted I should learn in a *cheder*, which I did, for about two or three years, I don't recall. If course, this was on a very, very low level. At that time, I knew Hebrew before I knew Yiddish because I learned in the *cheder*. And, during the two or three years attending the *cheder*, I believe that we reached even--we went through all Bible, the whole Bible, and we started even the *Gemara* [Talmud]. But this was the end of it. As soon as I entered the school, the so-called *Gymnasium*, which started from zero class through the 8th grade, the 8th grade was the last grade, and, getting a diploma from the 8th grade, each student had the right to enter university of poly-technical without any entrance examination.

JF: Either university or poly-technical?

LF: Poly-technical--without any examination because of the high level of the education. For instance, in the 7th and 8th grades, we used to have about 14 subjects, which proves that very few of us could get this kind of diploma. And we were lucky that on basis of this diploma we could enter university or poly-technical; however, not all the departments. As I mentioned before, not, let's say the medical school, the law school, the pharmaceutic school, I guess.

¹Sejm, one-house parliament

Well, in 1930, I received my Ph.D. diploma, in spite of the resistance of my professor--promoter. But the dean of this department, Professor Haletski, Handelsmann, Professor Handelsmann, who probably had some Jews in his ancestors, he probably had more sympathy towards the Jews--he was a brilliant fellow--and he insisted that I should go through the examination. In Poland, in order to get the Ph.D., in addition to the work which you have to defend before the professors, they are going to [unclear] two *Rigarosums*, the bigger *Rigarosum*² which is from the subject of history, all world history, and especially my period, which means the Renaissance, two hours in front of three professors. And then the little *Rigarosum*, one hour, which takes care of psychology, logic, and history of philosophy. Two professors. By getting this diploma, I was receiving 20 percent more in my wages than a normal teacher. And it could be that, at that time, I was the youngest in this field.

This was the time when I started to feel that I am a Jew, and I joined one of the Jewish organizations, the very liberal wing of the Zionist organization, the *Hashomer Hatzair*. *Hashomer Hatzair* at that time was not as, I would say, left wing as today; it was more in the center of all the Jewish organizations. If you know, at that time in Poland, the Zionists had many organizations, which is difficult for a Jew who is thinking very deeply and, in many cases, he would not agree with himself. So we had, let's say, policy on right wing and policy on left wing, we had *Mizrachi* and *Agudas* and we had *Hashomer Hatzair*, and we had Communists and all kinds of political parties. Before entering the university, after finishing the--by the way, I was attending a Polish school, a Polish school created by the Polish merchants. It was called [unclear] which means to say, The Association of Merchants of the City of Warsaw.

JF: At what point was this?

LF: This was, let's say, up to 1918, from 1910 to 1918.

JF: This was before...

LF: Before the Second War, but in between was the First War. The First was 1914 to 1918. As a matter of fact, the Warsaw University was created during the German occupation in the First War, in 1915.

JF: Which was the Polish school that you attended?

LF: The Polish school was, as I said, was called The Association of Polish Merchants in Warsaw.

JF: Was this the *Gymnasium*?

LF: *Gymnasium*, yes. And we was on a very high level. As a matter of fact, most of our teachers went to the University of Warsaw in 1915 with such subjects which are unknown here in general science, like, for instance, commercial geography, in addition to physical and political geography. We had, for instance, bookkeeping. We had

²Oral examination for the doctor's degree.

two compulsory foreign languages. In my case it was German and Russian, in such manner that we had to know not only perfect language but also the literature.

JF: What was your experience in this school as far as the Poles who were there?

LF: Well, again the same story. Very few Poles were liberal enough to accept us as human beings. Most of the students in school considered us as standing on a barbaric level; that we don't know how to behave; that maybe we are smarter than they are. As a matter of fact, the first class student was a Jew, [unclear], but at the same time they wouldn't let us participate in any social activities. For instance, this school had three lunches. Each class was going downstairs to the dining room, so they tried to push the Jews to the last rows. And we used to have once a week even showers in school, special shower rooms; again, the same story. They had the priority to enter the shower room, not the Jews. Very few of them were liberal and accepted us as human beings, and those who did, later I found then in Socialist parties, Polish Socialist parties, like, for instance, P.P.S. *Polska Parti Socialistishna*, [Polish Party, Socialist Party], but there were very, very few.

JF: Were you living in a Jewish community?

LF: No, I was living in the Polish section of the city, not among Jews.

JF: And what was your experience there? And your parents' interaction with non-Jews?

LF: My parents had a little store in the Polish section of Warsaw, and their relations with the customers was, I would say, more than good, because my mother *olev asholem* [Hebrew: may she rest in peace], was a very brilliant person, and she was treating the customers like friends, and many times they were coming for advice. It was a very good relationship. Of course, this didn't stop, let's say newcomers to break the windows.

JF: What kind of shop was it?

LF: It was a grocery store. Like a corner store, a family store. They worked very hard, but they didn't face any discrimination. They were accepted by the surrounding society, mostly consisting of workers.

JF: You said that they were liberal, that they were not particularly religious.

LF: Not at all. My parents were not--although my father has a special place in the Great Synagogue in Warsaw, with his plate and his name, but he observed only the really High Holiday and *Yom Kippur* [Hebrew: Day of Atonement]. He was not religious at all. It was rather to stay, to tolerate the Jewishness. They believed in Brotherhood. They believed that lack of education is the main cause of wars and exploitation. They were very liberal people.

JF: Were they involved, in any way in the Jewish governing group...

LF: No. Not at all.

JF: Did you have any experience with the *Kehilla* or the Jewish...

LF: No, not until I entered the university. In the first years of my entering the university and facing antisemitism, I finally realized that for us, there is only one place to live in--it was Palestine. And, at that time, instead of going to serve in the Polish army, I organized a group of about 17 young boys and girls, and I convinced them to serve two years in Palestine instead of the military service in the Polish army. We went to Palestine...

JF: Was there any objection on the part of the Polish government that you did this?

LF: No, not at all. It was free to leave Poland. They didn't ask any questions.

JF: And this was what year?

LF: 1922. From 1924 we were in Palestine and we joined the *Kibbutz Bet Hashomer Hatzair*. At that time *Kibbutz Bet* was living in tents. They didn't have any place assigned for the time being, so we used to work in the most dangerous places. Like, for instance, around Nahalal, the mud was causing a lot of malaria, and we found out that the mosquitoes can fly only two miles, so the whole problem was to remove all the water from the mud, from this place, about three miles away, and this solved the problem. But, when we came in--the Arabs called this the Valley of Death--because each and every one of us had malaria, all kinds, *tertiqua*, *quartana*, *tropica*, and taking quinine in the beginning before using breakfast was normal. Then we worked in, on the roads. We would build the roads from Haifa to top of Carmel, which now is Neve Sh'anana. So this road was done by us, and when my two years expired, I went back to Poland to finish my studies, which took me another four or five years, six years, I would say, six years till 1930, till I got my diploma.

Since then, for 14 years, I was working in so-called *Gymnasium*, actually in three *Gymnasiums*, because I was only teaching the last two grades, 7th and 8th, preparing for the *Matura*, which means to say for the diploma, which is finishing up the study in the *Gymnasium*. During this time I had very little contact with the Jewish society, again, because I came back a little bit disappointed from my experience in Palestine.

JF: In what way?

LF: Well, we came there to build a new society, and I soon found out that the leaders of each group is, first of all, trying to secure himself instead of securing the group. There were very few exceptions of ideal people like, let's say Meir or Chazan, in the *Hashomer Hatzair* Group or other people in the *Poale Zion* Group, but the majority was trying to get as much financial benefit as possible. In addition to this, at that time, we faced tremendous resentment from the old colonists who preferred to hire Arabs than the Jews. There were maybe also some personal matters which I don't want to mention. But, in any case, in coming back to Poland and working in Poland until the beginning of the war, I was, rather, preparing material for a book in general history, not in Jewish history. Now, when the war started in 1930, the Polish government gave an order that all men up to age 45 should go to East, and the government would try to create a new army. I went

with my two brothers to Bialystok, which at that time belonged, of course, to Poland. We didn't know that Hitler and Stalin had signed a treaty to divide Poland, and on the 17th of September of 1939 the Red Army crossed the border and suddenly we were already in the Soviet Union.

They, of course, opened all the institutions normal for a Soviet town like Bialystok. Among others, they opened also a bank, Gosbank, and because of my knowledge of European languages, I got a job in this bank in the foreign department. And I worked there for about eight or nine months. Each day the director of the bank was coming to me, insisting that I should take a passport, a Russian passport, a Soviet passport. We had a few hundred thousand refugees from Poland at that time in Bialystok, and we had many discussions, sometimes deep in the night, trying to find out what to do, to answer the simple question--should we accept the passport or not. Some of us accepted the passport, and the majority, I would say, refused. I belonged to the majority and, one night, I believe this was the 20th of June, 1940, 250,000 former Polish citizens who refused to accept the Soviet passport were sent to the northern part of Siberia, this part which calls Komi RSSR.

JF: How do you spell that?

LF: K-O-M-I. This is one of the independent, I would say, like state. Actually, the population is not Russian. They are Finnish and their language has nothing to do with the Russian language. Although the official language was Russian, but the natives were not using Russian, and we had to learn their language.

JF: Before we move on, were your parents still in Warsaw?

LF: Yes.

JF: And were you able to leave Warsaw then before the actual invasion of Poland?

LF: Yes, illegally. Now, we were walking from Warsaw to Bialystok. The German army was traveling in tanks and cars; of course, they were always ahead of us. We were traveling usually at night and resting during the day. When we reached Bialystok we didn't know that Bialystok would belong to the Soviet Union at that time.

JF: These were all Jews who were leaving?

LF: Yes. My group.

JF: Your group. And these people were told by the Polish government that they would be able to establish another army.

LF: Right. This was the actual reason why we left Warsaw. As a matter of fact, I left Warsaw before my wife left Warsaw. My wife was still in Warsaw when I was already in Bialystok, but still the communication--the border was very loose between the Germans and the Russian. People were running from east to west and from west to east, and on the border they were crying to each other. "Crazy, where are you running?" Nobody knew where he is running. And, of course, my wife decided to join me, and she

has to pay special money to farmers to cross the border illegally. And then she joined with our daughters in Bialystok.

JF: How old was your daughter at this time?

LF: That time she was six years of age, and in one night, as I said, we were put in cars for horses or cows and were travelling... [Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

JF: This is tape one, side two, of an interview with Leon Friedman on April 7, 1981. Before you move on to the Siberian part of the story, can you tell me what your knowledge was of what was going on in Germany, and whether you thought that it was going to reach Poland when it did?

LF: Well it was general confusion. As a matter of fact, many of us went back to Warsaw because we remembered the Germans from the First War. We didn't know what we may expect this time. We didn't believe that the *Mein Kampf*³ is really going to be implemented in reality, but we felt it is only propaganda.

JF: You went back to Warsaw...

LF: Not we, many of us, I would say, not I myself. But many of us went back to Warsaw, and, of course, they were killed. However, either they went through the period of the Warsaw Ghetto and some of them, very few, survived, and most of them were killed. Those who accepted the Russian passport got jobs, right away, as Soviet citizens. And when the German army attacked a year later, June 22, 1941, most of them didn't have time even to run away. And they were killed. So, actually, we survived thanks to our, maybe, stupidity, that we refused to accept the Soviet passport. Of course, when they brought us to the little place which calls Mandacz, M-A-N-D-A-C-Z, but you can put C-H, I guess [unclear], we didn't have any guards. It was 400 square miles of forest.

JF: This was the village where you were taken? In northern Siberia?

LF: Yes.

JF: And at this time, your wife and daughter were with you?

LF: Yes, together. We didn't have any guards, and some of us tried to run away, and a few days later we found the skeletons in the forest. The normal temperature is 40 below zero. The winter starts in the end of August, beginning of September, and lasts through almost the middle of June. But during the summer time, the sun runs 24 hours and the vegetables are growing so fast that it is enough to save the vegetables for the entire year.

JF: How long did it take you to get there?

LF: I said the traveling was about four weeks.

JF: And what were the conditions on the train?

LF: They were terrible. About 50 to 60 people in a car, and the distribution of food was very limited. But we suffered mostly from the lack of enough water, and we were traveling--the train was stopped most of the time in open fields, never in a town. We should not face the Russian people.

JF: What was the treatment by the Russian people that you experienced?

³Hitler's book, in which he expresses his hatred and fear of Jews.

LF: When we reached the destination, the Russians told us that we have start a new life, to build here a new town. "You are from Warsaw, build here Warsaw. You are from Lodz, build here Lodz, and so far and so on." I said that I never had an ax or saw in my hand, so they asked me, "Where is your culture? This is the highest culture to know how to cut the trees." And when I went to a special tech-minimum [speaker's expression] course to know how to cut the trees, which part will go, let's say, for railroad, which part will go for telephone poles, which part will go for furniture. I organized a small group of five people, a brigade, and we started to work. We were amazed that in a short time the local newspaper was writing about our group as Stakhanovites, Stakhanovite is a person who is overfilling the government plan. We didn't know that we were doing more than the plan allowed us to do. We were there in Mandacz about two and a half years.

JF: Were there Soviet citizens who were also living there?

LF: No. not with us, only Polish citizens. In this group, only Polish citizens.

JF: There were Polish Jews?

LF: Polish Jews. All of them, Polish Jews from different parts of Poland. Even we had a lawyer from Krakow, from the southern part of Poland.

JF: Had there been a village there before? Were there homes that had been vacated?

LF: Yes. Most of those inhabitants in addition to the natives, very few natives, most of them were Russian. For instance, those so-called *kulaks*, landlords from the time of the czar, or clergymen or, let's say, those who in any way criticized the government. Now this was the best place for additional education. I would say that the Soviet government had succeeded because if somebody left a place like this and applied for a job, he was admitted right away because the boss knew he would never criticize the government here; he has already the schooling, additional schooling, and was very important. And, of course, many of us died during the two and a half years, but there are many cemeteries in this part of Russian, all over, Pitchora Wichidine [phonetic], and so forth and so on. Finally, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, Mr. Stalin reminded himself that there is a Polish government-in-exile, in London. And he signed a special agreement⁴. On the basis of this agreement we were released from the labor camp, permitted to remain as Polish citizens, as Polish citizens, and to work according to our professions. However, yes, in addition to this, it was permitted to even create a Polish army, the Anders Army⁵. It was the first Polish army; we should not mix it with the second Polish army created much later by Rhomda Bashaneivska. It was a Communist group. At that time, many Jews who entered the Polish army had an opportunity to leave the Soviet Union. The majority, especially those with families, remained in the Soviet Union until the end of the war. But at that time I got a job as a bookkeeper.

⁴The official agreement was signed in London on July 30, 1941, re-establishing diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Poland.

⁵Under General Wladyslaw Anders.

JF: Was this still in the village of Mandacz?

LF: Yes, from Mandacz we still were in Komi RSSR, and the main town, I would say, the capitol town of Komi RSSR is Syktyvkar, put it down the way you want it, S-I-K-A-I-V-K-A-R [Brit. Atlas: Syktyvkar]; this would be the closest pronunciation of Syktyvkar. And this is one river which passing this town is most of the time frozen, from September to almost the end of May, and to get out from Komi RSSR we tried to reach, in any way, to leave this part of the Soviet Union and to reach any other part. The nearest town with a railroad was the town of Kotlas, K-O-T-L-A-S. What we were trying to reach was this Kotlas town.

JF: Were you guarded?

MF: I want to remind you [unclear] when you were a Stakhanovite and they didn't let you go to a doctor.

LF: As I mentioned before, in the forest, I was with my group, with my brigade called Stakhnaovites, which means a person who did more than the government plan describes, but when I got sick and my *nachal'nik* [boss, supervisor] wanted to help me, the NKVD, which is now the KGB, was against me, because they knew I got my education in a capitalistic Polish country. So they wouldn't let me even to get a doctor. Somehow we survived. Now, we didn't have any legal papers to leave Komi RSSR. We had to leave illegally. Now, if you want to know the details, I can tell you. Now, the details were like this. One of our friends who had a passport and had a job with traveling papers--that he had the right to travel from one stat to the other--took my wife as his wife officially to the ship. The ship was standing out in the river, and we know this is the last one, because later on the river will be frozen and this is the end of it. I with my daughter tried to reach the boat. First of all, and there was a lot of us trying to enter the boat, and the police was standing around not letting in anyone but sure enough with a lot of commotion, I jumped on top of the highest level of the boat and I called my daughter, and I picked her up trying to reach up, and suddenly one of the crew tried to push my daughter down, and I called her in Polish, "Hit him, hit him." And she did. And this is how we got in the boat. But the police--and many of us entered the boat illegally without tickets, without papers, without anything--so the police decided to make a search of the entire boat. My wife, I did not know at that time, but my wife didn't have the papers to prove that she is the wife of the salesman, so she went downstairs, the lower level, under the deck, in the warehouse and she was hidden. She is a very small person. And she was hidden in all the big packages and when the police came asking the manager of the warehouse, "Do you have somebody hidden here?" they said, "No, there is nobody."

MF: They didn't see me.

LF: The manager didn't see her. She answered correctly; nobody was there. I, with my daughter, went to the men's room. The men's room on this boat was opened in the bottom and open in the top so only the middle section was closed. We were standing on the top of the seat, closing the door, when we heard when the police is coming from

one part and the other part, and I said only to my daughter, "Please keep quiet, don't answer, don't even breathe." They came up, they knocked at the door and one said to the other, "It's probably out of order. You see, it's locked." And they went by. We heard crying people, and I was sure that my wife was caught. She was sure that we were caught. When the boat moved--it was already at night, and I was trying to reach the salesman, my friend, to find out where is my wife--and here I see they are sitting together and I am, I ask him, "Where's my wife?" He said, "Your wife is sitting on the top of the deck resting." And when he said that we are still alive, she didn't believe us. Now in Syktyvkar we gave a loaf of bread to get the address of a certain Jew in Kotlas, who will try to help us. And really when we came to Kotlas, we paid for the ticket on the boat, and then without any obstacles, we reached Kotlas. When we came to the address of this place, this was an office, when I entered the office I saw a fellow who probably was the person who was supposed to help me, but at the same time I saw a woman in uniform of NKVD officer. This was his wife and I didn't know it. He was just standing behind her chair, showing, "Don't talk." I mentioned a certain name of a certain office and he said, "No, this is not the office," and we went out. We were waiting a few hours, and later, he came out and he said to us that he would try to help us. This is his wife. He is also one of the prisoners, but now released from the labor camp. He is allowed to work but only in the [unclear], and he gave me a job as a expeditor to expedite 60 bags of watermelons to a spirit factory, alcohol factory. However, he didn't trust me too much, so he said, "Your wife will remain here until you give us the information and the proof that all the watermelons are delivered to the factory." I went with my daughter in a caboose, almost partly open, and the snow already started to fall, it was September; and traveling during the night, and I had also, one Polish fellow, a Polish Jew, to whom I gave a job as a helper. This way I try to help him to get out from this part of the Soviet Union. In the morning when we finally arrived at the factory, they started to count--there was only 59 bags. Probably one was stolen during the night. My fellow Jew, who was, I believe, from Lodz, said, "Don't worry, I will fix it." It was about five o'clock in the morning, he went over to the factory asking for the right person who will accept the watermelons. And in a very friendly way, they started to drink a little bit, spirit and alcohol. When he brought him over to the station, the fellow was half-drunk and he started to count and said, "There is only 59." So my fellow said, "You're drunk and I will report you to the government." So he signed the document that we had 60. At that time I sent a telegram to Kotlas: "The watermelons delivered. Send me back my wife." Of course, this fellow that gave me the job was not the *nachal'nik* [boss, supervisor], he was only the right hand of the *nachal'nik*. A *nachal'nik* was a member of the party, a Russian fellow, and he started to shout at this fellow, "What are you doing here in my office? I'll bring him back with the NKVD, who will send him back into forest." He said, "No, I promised," and my wife got paid a ticket, an official ticket, a railroad ticket and we met in Kirov. Kirov is...

JF: How do you spell that?

LF: K-I-R-O-V.

JF: This town is far outside where you were supposed to...

LF: Kirov is on the way from Moscow to Kotlas, on the north railroad way. In Kirov we met--my wife came back and we were united again. I got a job as a chief accountant, [unclear], this chief accountant of a little town called Murashi. M-U-R-A-S-H-I. We were sent from Kirov to Murashi, in order to take over my job as the chief accountant, for this little town of Murashi, is on the way from Kirov to Kotlas; and it was about 5,000 people.

JF: It was legal that you were in this town.

LF: Yes, but still as a Polish citizen.

JF: Now, how did the people in this town react to you coming in?

LF: Friendly. Very friendly. As a matter of fact, the bookkeeping department had nine people, mostly women, because the men were in the army. And I wouldn't get the job like this without being a member of the party. But because of most of the men were in the army they had to take anyone who could replace them.

JF: Were there Russian Jews in this town?

LF: No.

JF: Were there any other Polish Jews?

LF: Yes. Not too many.

JF: But they were accepted by the Russian citizens without any qualms?

LF: Yes. They worked according to their professions. For instance, one fellow was a shoemaker. One was a tailor. We had a few. Not too many. Then, because the war was progressing and it was--the situation of food was becoming very serious. I decided to go to the southern part of Russia where there is more vegetables, fruit, and this way maybe we would survive better. And I sent a memorandum to the Russian government that we Polish Jews in this Kirov's territory would like to be transferred to the southern part of Russia.

JF: How many Jews are you talking about?

LF: There was about 3,000. And I was amazed that they agreed to prepare special echelons, and we were traveling from this part of Russia to the southern part at the Black Sea.

JF: How did you travel?

LF: By train. We got enough food, supplied by the Russian government, because at that time it was a very serious situation for the Russians. They could lose the war without the help of the Allies and without the help of the, among others, the Polish government in London. So they treated us very well.

MF: We had American food.

LF: And actually they were the Soviet and American food. I had an American uniform, as an American soldier.

MF: This helped the Russian that help us recognized that this is probably refugee.

LF: We were coming to this part of the Soviet Union divided into small groups. The biggest group of 80 families went to a little town, Gelendzhik, G-E-L-E-N-D-Z-H-I-K, at the Black Sea near Sochi. Sochi is a well-known place to relax near the Black Sea.

JF: How do you spell that?

LF: S-O-C-H-I.

JF: And this group of 80 families included your family.

LF: And here we remained until the end of the war.

JF: And what were living conditions like in that town?

LF: First of all the majority were Greeks. We stopped in this place because it was on Sunday morning--actually we were assigned to a second *sovkhos* [Soviet farm] and when I saw and they looked to me Jewish. And all of them in white dressed, white clothing, beautifully dresses, so I said, "We'll remain here." And they agreed, so we remained in this little town, and I went to the city hall asking if they wanted to have some professional people, some trades people, and they said, "Of course, we would like to have you here." And they accommodated us without actually having the official approval from the central government. But the local government accepted us immediately. But all our documents were going with us through NKVD channels, so they knew, for instance, that I worked in a bank so they offered me here also to work in a bank. I refused to get this job because I was only interested in a job where is close to food. I became a bookkeeper in a food supply of this little town.

JF: Now only 80 families stayed in this town. What happened to the others?

LF: Spread out all over the country, also around the Black Sea, but also in this part of Russia, southern part of Russia. This I would say, yes, around the Black Sea.

JF: Could you have contact with them?

LF: We could but we didn't. We were too much occupied here, and we were afraid to talk to each other; we were afraid to meet each other. The first meeting was organized by the Communist Party. They called all the 80 families together and they said, "Now that you live here together, and you will have your representatives." We required--they said to me that we recommend you to be the representative for the group. They said, "How do you know that I will be elected?" They said, "We would propose--who would reject our proposal?" and this is how this happened. I was trying right away to try to get some food; for instance, I sent a few trucks to the nearby farms *kolkhoz* [Soviet collective farm] to get some food for the 80 families. Everything was rationed by coupons. You couldn't buy more than so much bread or so much meat and so much sugar, so thanks to my experience, previous experience, we survived, and I don't think that anyone died that time. I don't think so.

JF: How long were you in this town?

LF: In Gelendzhik, to the end of the war. I would say that must be about a year and a half.

JF: Did you have any knowledge of what was happening back in Poland?

LF: We were getting some letters from Warsaw till the beginning of the war between the Soviet Union and Russia [he means Germany]. But the letters which I received from my mother were rather to be read between the lines. For instance, mother would write...

MF: I am reading now Dante...

LF: "I am reading Dante's *Hell*." Dante is an Italian writer so we knew what was going on. We didn't know all the details, of course, we didn't know the details. And, then we came back to Poland after the end of the war, officially. They permitted us to come back to Poland. We came to Warsaw, everything was bombed out. Our apartment was burned out, and there was no use of staying in Warsaw, so we went to Lodz. In Lodz, all who survived met together. Usually we used to put on the walls names of those who survived: "I am here and trying to find--" and this way we found her brother with his wife and daughter, my brother and his wife and a daughter and we met together in Lodz. In Lodz we were trying to go to Palestine...

JF: Excuse me for one minute. When the war was over, the Russians said you were free to go. There was no trouble leaving?

LF: We didn't have official papers, we had the right to go to Poland, but not farther. Now here starts a game, a new story. In order to reach the nearest town, Berlin, which was already in the Russian zone of Germany, now, please remember that at that Germany was divided into four zones. [Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

JF: ...with Mr. Leon Friedman, done by Josey Fisher on April 7, 1981. This is tape two, side one. Before we get into the post-war period, did you know, when you were in Russia, about the death camps? Did you have any knowledge of what was happening?

LF: No.

JF: There were no stories filtering back?

LF: No.

JF: Did you have any knowledge of efforts on the part of Jews in Russia trying to get out of Russia during that time? Back into Europe during the war?

LF: Not to my knowledge. Impossible, impossible.

JF: Did you have any knowledge or experience with any kind of religious life during those years in Russia?

LF: No.

JF: Did anyone try to have any kind of religious life?

LF: We had...

MF: We have few very religious men and they were forced to work in...

LF: During the holidays...

MF: During the holidays, our main holidays, like *Yom Kippur*.

LF: But there were not too many. Not in our group. But we heard that there were a few cases.

MF: No, there was a few in our group.

LF: Maybe, I don't recall, maybe, but very few. In order to observe the Jewish religion was almost impossible.

JF: You had a young daughter at this time. Were there other children around?

LF: No. In this group, yes. We did have some children.

JF: Was there any teaching of the children privately at home?

LF: Yes. No, not at home, but in public schools. This was compulsory in the Soviet Union. It starts from age of seven, I believe, I'm not so sure. She was attending the public school.

JF: Was there any religious training of the children?

LF: No. not at all.

JF: Now, you have left Poland, you have tried...

LF: We smuggled from Poland to Berlin with a convoy, a military convoy, a Russian military convoy, paying, I don't remember how much per person. In this way we reached Berlin.

JF: How many people was this?

LF: Our family, altogether with 12 people.

JF: Now you had two brothers you said, who went to Russia with you.

LF: Yes, the two brothers, three brothers actually, two brothers left Russia with the Anders army. One brother with his wife and daughter was living in the Soviet Union till the end of the war, as I did, and we met, after the war, in Lodz in Poland.

JF: What about the two brothers who were in the Anders army?

LF: They went with the Anders army; one is now in Italy, in Rome and one is in Australia. None of them wanted to join us in the United States.

JF: Did they tell you of their experiences?

LF: They did. They faced great antisemitism in the Anders army, although one of my brothers was a captain of the army.

JF: In what way.

LF: Well, my brother cut off his family name, the "man", so he remained Fried. As a Fried, maybe he was accepted as a Pole, I don't know. But his brother was still Friedman. And they were in the same army.

JF: What kind of antisemitism did they face?

LF: I know that, for instance, that my youngest brother was a chemical engineer, so they gave him a job loading the ammunition instead of working in the laboratory, something like this. And as a rule, in the Polish army, somebody with higher education has to be an officer; he cannot be a private. This is beside the point. Now let's go to Berlin. Berlin. UNRRA, U-N-R-A, stopped, that time, stopped to take care of refugees who were trying to reach the English, American, or French zone of Germany. New refugees were coming from the Soviet Union and Poland and Hungary and Romania, and all of them were in the Russian zone of Berlin. When the amount reached 9,000, and we got information that the Russians are preparing echelons to take us back to the Soviet Union, we tried to get, some way, transportation to the French, or English and American zone of Germany. We created a committee of nine people, I remember, including my older brother, who knew French very well, and English; and we had an appointment with the French general, Beauchamps, with the American general, Baker, and with the English general, I forgot his name. I don't want to mention how we were treated as the delegation of the 9,000 people, but I would say that all of them gave us shelter in their zones in Berlin. They couldn't get us transportation beyond Berlin, but they gave us shelter in Berlin in their particular zones. For instance, we got permission for 3,000 people in the American zone of Berlin, 3,000 people in the French zone of Berlin, and 3,000 people in the English zone of Berlin. But we were still in Berlin.

JF: How did you organize? How were these 9,000 people...

LF: I'll tell you how. When we got the permission from the generals, we came back and we had a meeting conducted in Yiddish, that we were afraid that maybe we have spies, and we said, "This night, all of you should go, according to," we had made a list, "You will go to this place, this place, this place, using the U-bahn, the subway." And, exactly the next day, the Russians came to this hotel to pick up us, back to the echelons. They found about 12 or 13 old sick people who couldn't make it, and in all the

German newspaper were articles--“Where did they disappear, the 9,000 people in one night?”

JF: The Russians knew that you had been granted permission to go to the other zones.

LF: No, they didn't know. It was done in 24 hours.

JF: How were you able to get this audience with the leaders of the other countries?

LF: They were all together in one huge hotel, rather a place for a military. We were 9,000 people, and we were conducting everything in Yiddish, not in Polish, not in Russian, in Yiddish. And, of course, everyone wanted to get out as far away as possible. The only obstacle was that, at this particular time, UNRRA did not secure the transportation with legal papers, and we were afraid that sitting still in the *Rosshaar kaserne* in the Russian zone of Berlin, we will be forced to go back to Russia. At least we were in French part of Berlin, and others were in the English or the American part of Berlin. But then again, there was discussion about what to do next. How long can we stay in Berlin? It was still Berlin, we were still surrounded by the Russians.

JF: What point was this? What month?

LF: It was about 1946, in September.

JF: It took you over a year between...

LF: I worked in Lodz for about seven, eight months as a chief accountant in the transportation, Polish transportation. It was a sad story, also.

JF: In what way?

LF: To tell you how I got the job: it was announced in the Polish newspaper that the government transportation was looking for a chief bookkeeper. I went there and I saw that the captain of the Polish tanks, in uniform, Polish tanks, sitting in his office. And he said to me, “You came too late because an hour ago I hired Meyer Zygieski and he will be the chief accountant.” And I was still dressed in the American uniform which I had from Russia. On the way back to the door, he asked me, “Where you come from?” I said I come up from Gelendzhik, from the Soviet Union. So he gave an order that I would be the chief accountant and Meyer Zygieski would be my right hand. And we went straight to a bar and he gave me a 1,000 *zlotys* under the table and said to me in the office--“I call you Dr. Friedman, you call me Captain Mischlitzky, but remember we are surrounded by Polish enemies, so watch out. We will work together.” And we started to work together and he would never let me out from Poland but, thank God, for me, he was killed by the--by another Jew, a communist, who was an officer in the so-called [unclear]. Which is like the KGB in Russia. We had some Jews working with the Russian government, especially old communists who still believed that this is the only way to make a living. In any case, I don't want to go into details. When he was killed, I was ready to move out from Lodz, from Poland. Now being in the French zone of Germany, we had two choices, either to wait patiently, hoping the UNRRA will open their activities

or, like my missus, which is a very impatient person, to try to steal the border again. Following her advice, a certain night, a dark night, a rainy night, we went with a group trying to cross the border from the Russian zone of Germany to the English zone of Germany. We were walking from eleven o'clock at night till four o'clock in the morning--on the way we lost our daughter because she was walking faster than we--and then we found her and, finally when we reached the English zone of Germany, Bergen-Belsen DP camp, yes, it was a DP camp for displaced person.

JF: Bergen-Belsen was the...

LF: Bergen-Belsen was in the English zone of Germany. In Bergen-Belsen we had about, at that time about 7,000 or 8,000 people. We were getting the best supplies from all over the world. As a matter of fact, many of them were killed due to the rich food. When a person was not used to, so many of them who couldn't control themselves, and they ate too much rich food, and many of them died. In Bergen-Belsen we were on the list to go to Palestine, *Aliya Bet*.⁶ But, unfortunately, at that time my wife had her first heart attack. This changed our plans. In the meantime, here in Philadelphia lived my cousin, who left Poland when I was two years of age, and I didn't know him at all, but he was raised by my mother, and when he found out that we are still alive, he started to send us letters. He found out where we are, and he started to send us letters that he wants us to live here in Philadelphia. He made out all the necessary papers, he paid for transportation for all three of us. And, as a matter of fact, we lived in his place for about 10 or 12 weeks before I got first job here in Philadelphia, and this is the reason why we are here. Otherwise we would be there.

JF: How long were you then in Bergen-Belsen?

LF: In Bergen-Belsen we were there only about a few months.

MF: I was sent to a spec...

LF: She was sent to a special place, Bad Nauheim, a special place for heart, cardiac patients, and she was treated by German doctors. Yes.

JF: What kind of care, then, did you have in this home?

MF: Very good.

JF: And what was your treatment like by German doctors as a Jew?

MF: They didn't know.

LF: They were afraid of the Occupation armies and they were following state orders.

MF: They didn't talk any politics, and I just came as a patient. That's all.

JF: And the care you received there?

MF: Yes, yes. I had even an operation there in--I had a tumor, yes, and they cut out. My husband was panicky, he thought that they were maybe did--that they will do something to me, but no, I didn't...

⁶"Illegal" immigration, entry into Palestine during the British Mandate by other than the official way.

LF: Well, the Germans, after the war, were so afraid and they are used to follow orders. Once the doctor has an order, he got the patient, he has to care of the patient. This is it, regardless of his feelings.

JF: Did you have any physical repercussions from the war? Or your daughter?

LF: No. As a matter of fact, yes, in Bergen-Belsen we faced the problem with orphans. Hundreds of orphans speaking in all imaginable European languages, and we are trying to prepare the youngsters to go to Palestine, and we organized the first school in Bergen-Belsen, and we had a problem. Of course, we should teach them in Hebrew, but we didn't have enough teachers knowing Hebrew, so we chose Yiddish, and this is the time when I learned Yiddish well. I knew Hebrew, but I didn't know Yiddish. And most of the youngsters went to Palestine, and most of the inhabitants of the DP camps went to Palestine with *Aliya Bet*, again illegally, Exodus and all the other ships and so on.

JF: But Hebrew was not taught.

LF: No.

JF: Because of the lack of knowledge of Hebrew.

LF: Right. Although the children, we started to teach Hebrew as a foreign language, but, I believe, except me, there was only one more person in Bergen-Belsen who knew Hebrew well enough to teach Hebrew. Of course, the Jewish committee was organized in each of those DP camps, as you know, conducted by Jews, by refugees, and we created schools, and we had hospitals, and we got a lot of support from all the Allies governments and, of course, America was playing the first hero. The most food and the most clothing, we got from the United States, of course.

JF: Were there any religious services in the DP camps?

LF: Yes. But the majority was rather on the left wing of the spectrum. We had, let's say, in Bergen-Belsen, it was, I would say, a society of Jews from East European countries, from different backgrounds, education, and behavior, and we needed, over there, right there, as many political parties as you have right now in Israel, I believe 12 or something of this kind. I was apolitical, I was only interested in educating the kids; and then, when we went to the American zone of Germany, Stuttgart, I created a, I organized a folks university for adults in Stuttgart. We lived in Stuttgart for a while. Teenagers, they didn't have any education whatsoever. I believe the language used was Yiddish.

JF: How long were you in Stuttgart?

LF: In Stuttgart, how long were we?

MF: Not too long.

LF: About a few months, till we got the papers and the visa and all the other things. But the university existed after I left. It had enough professional people who could conduct the lecturing of all kinds of subjects, not only history.

JF: What was the name of the school in Stuttgart?

LF: I don't recall that we had a name or not. We called it folks university. We got the help from the leaders of the Jewish community, all refugees, all were survivors of

the Holocaust. Because we lived together, in one section of Stuttgart, was actually occupied by refugees exclusively.

JF: How were these two schools funded? Were there...

LF: No money. No money was involved. Everything was free. We were trying to get, let's say, pencils or paper, we were getting them. Any request we made, we got them right away, no problem, either through the military government, the English military government in Bergen-Belsen or through the American military government in Stuttgart. It was not a problem. The doors were open; we were getting more than we deserved, maybe. I don't know.

JF: No, not so.

LF: In any case, when I arrived in Philadelphia, in March the 3, of 1947, with a sick wife and a sick daughter, and myself not feeling well, we did have \$15, I believe, in my pocket to start a new life and English did not belong to the five European languages in which I am fluent, so, of course my knowledge in history was of no value whatsoever because I could not convey my knowledge. I believe my first job was a photography job, because my parents had a villa in Warsaw before the war, and they left me one little apartment, one room under the roof, and I was playing with photography at that time, bringing books from Germany trying to make color pictures, enlarging pictures, which was something new in photography at that time, so when I came here to Philadelphia, so probably I'm a photographer, and my cousin tried to get me a job in photo-finishing shop. But when I saw the equipment, let's say a machine which makes 25,000 copies in one day, I was scared. But knowing the basics in photography, I was working in this photography shop 10 months and during the 10 months, I got three times a raise without asking. And, using, of course, Yiddish with the owners, four brothers, and attending evening courses, English courses, and after the 10 months when my English improved a little bit--yes, I had a special, a private teacher in addition to courses to speed up my knowledge--and, of course, I went with French or German pronunciation. My pronunciation is today *gehakte tsorris* [very bad]. Forget it!

Then I got a job as an executive director of the Uptown Home for the Aged which was created, was organized with, established on Franklin and Gerard and now is on Bustleton Avenue, and I was with this outfit for five years. And during the five years, we built a third floor from Seventh Street side. We threw out all the old equipment and we increased the capacity from 135 to 180. When I started, we had in our treasury about \$23,000 for a rainy day; and when I left, it was \$225,000 in the treasury. This is, I believe, is the end of my story.

JF: Is there anything else you would like to add?

LF: I guess you have plenty of material. I would like to make some remarks. First of all, my first remark is: all those Holocaust survivors who arrived in this country in '47, '48, and '49 did not accept and did not expect any help from anyone. I organized, the first time in 1947, with the help of one American Jew, all the newcomers from the

Holocaust survivors. We had the first meeting on Broad and Pine Street conducted in Yiddish. I remember my remarks at that time. Of course, after all the experiences during the war, when each and every one of us survived by thousands of miracles, we deserve to have a quiet peaceful life for the rest of our lives. But we cannot expect this kind of life, we are, we would find our greatest help on the end of our right arm. We shall help each other as much as we can, remembering the *Landsmannschaften*⁷ created in the beginning of this century, of those immigrants who came to this country, not having any help from no one. And we started out just the same way. I am proud to say that the New Americans,⁸ which is this organization, is in existence as of today. They are collecting from \$40,000 to \$50,000 every year for Israel. They are very active. I would say that the first monument for the six million Jews was erected in Philadelphia, thanks to this organization. Of course, the Federation helped financially, but the initiative and a lot of the money and kinetic energy came from this group--the New Americans. Each year when we are having the memorial meeting, is really thanks to the New Americans. Of course, now all the other groups are participating. Now this is my first remark. Comparing with those who are coming from the Soviet Union recently, they are facing an entirely different element of people. First of all, due to the fact that they were born and raised and educated in an entirely different environment, they are creating multiple problems wherever they go--Israel or United States or Canada or West Germany--they are creating so many problems that our local agencies, like, for instance, the Jewish Family Service, or Jewish Employment Vocational Bureau, our Day Care, will not be able to solve these problems without the help of the entire Jewish community. And this is what I am trying to bring out in the Federation, in the JCRC; but I am a single voice which is maybe not accepted so with great sympathy, because I try to criticize what is coming. I am not against greeting the newcomers from the Soviet Union with open arms, but I am against treating them like newborn babies and creating programs trying to give them more than they can absorb. And without asking their responsibilities and their participation, I say that, unwillingly, we are creating, in certain cases, professional beggars who are looking only for help regardless of which way they get it, without any responsibility on their part. This is my first remark. The second remark is that the Holocaust survivors, in spite of the experience during the war, started to work very hard. Many of them were declassified, they couldn't work according to their profession, but... [Tape two, side one ended.]

⁷Immigrant benevolent organizations formed and named after the members' birthplace or East European residence.

⁸Association of Jewish New Americans of Philadelphia

Tape two, side two:

JF: This is tape two, side two, of an interview with Dr. Leon Friedman, on April 7, 1981.

LF: As I said before, I believe that the American Jews, by creating too many forms of assistance to the newcomers from the Soviet Union, are doing a very poor job, because it is counter-productive. Instead of creating jobs in which they should participate, and having separate responsibilities, we are trying to give them everything on a silver plate, and I believe that this is wrong. For instance, if I am making a *Seder* [Hebrew: special service and dinner on Passover] for 100 Russian newcomers, most of whom never had the opportunity to have a *Seder*, I still ask to pay \$1. Of course, the four-course meal will cost me, let's say, \$5 or \$6, I don't care. But let them have some responsibility. Or, if I have, this coming Sunday, four buses with Russian immigrants to participate in the Memorial meeting, I will insist that they should pay \$1 per person, realizing that for them \$1 is like for myself \$10, and, maybe if somebody will ask me to spend \$10 to attend the Memorial meeting, I might hesitate, but I still believe that they should participate, they should have some responsibilities.

JF: Dr. Friedman what job, eventually, did you have in the United States, after all of your experience, all of your education?

LF: Executive Director of the Old Age home, that's all. And then my missus had a business of her own, and I help her, and this is it.

JF: And what do you think kept you going during the years that you spent, during the war, in Europe and in Russia? What kept you going?

LF: I discovered that the human being can suffer more than he thinks. For instance, in Syktyvkar when food supply was so meager that people were falling on the street, and then we found them on the street, dead. Actually, hunger is not a desire to have food, hunger is a whole symphony. It starts--the first period is when the person is looking for food, then he has nightmares, tables with food, rich food, and he has the desire to have the food. But gradually, not having the food, he became more apathetic and he is not dreaming about nothing--he is just trying to survive as much as he can using less and less energy. And, of course, it comes to a point when he cannot take this any more, so he dreams and falls asleep and makes sleep for 18 hours per--in 24 hours--he has no desire to go nowhere, do anything--just to survive, knowing that the less energy he will spend, the longer he will live.

JF: What purpose do you think the dreams had, then?

LF: The great desire to survive, despite all the obstacles.

MF: We dreamed like the men brought a sack of flour and I didn't take it. I refused because I wanted just to survive. Because it was illegal, he couldn't...

LF: At a certain time when I was the chief accountant in the little town in Russia, at night, somebody knocked at the door. Who is it? The baker. And he brought a

bag of flour. I said, "Go back, I don't need you. I want to survive. I don't want to go back to the forest. I don't want to go back to jail. I want only to survive." Most of us tried to do this--we didn't talk about politics because sometimes coming back, let's say, from the office, I would think--"What did I say during the day?" Maybe I said something, one word, which would take me back to the forest. Who knows? By stealing, you can get five to six months, but by saying a word, 10 years.

JF: The difference between the people that died from hunger and the people who were able to survive...

LF: Thin margin.

JF: You were talking about the apathy? How does this fit in to what you were saying?

LF: In the great symphony of hunger, when the person is not getting any food any more, and the person is not getting the food, he is trying, at the risk of his brains, but he is thinking how to survive, and he realizes that in order to survive, not having food, he has to save energy, and it is to save energy the best time is to just lie down and try to sleep. So in many cases, those who survived, slept, as I said before, 18-19 hours. This maybe, this is, of course subconsciousness, because nobody was telling us what to do. The person was filled with apathy to everything, he didn't want to do anything, just to lie down to sleep, maybe tomorrow it would be the end of the war. Maybe tomorrow it would be the end of the war. And this is the only way to survive.

JF: It there anything else you would like to add?

LF: No.

JF: Thank you very, very much. [Tape two, side two ended. Interview ended.]