

# Leo Zelman Testimony Transcript

I been born in a little town in Poland – Wloclawek. My father was a tailor. When the war started I had four brothers, two sisters, a father and mother and a grandmother lived with us when war started. All of a sudden we start splitting. My eldest brother went to camp. I went to camp. My little brother went to camp. And my youngest brother, two sisters been home.

Interviewer: What was it like when the war started? When did you first see the Germans?

There was early morning. Two days before, we had to close the windows – patch up the windows. No lights – no nothing. Was a curfew – can't go out after 7:00 o'clock. And next morning, we heard shooting. They went out of sight. There was a lake and a bridge there was other side they start shooting over to town. And we know that's the end of it. The Germans come over to town. The first day they come over, the same night, they went out and took out all men. Men – about 500 of them, to clean up the city, that there was bombed. Everything was destroyed in this town. Been working - put up to jail in the night. In the morning we got out working again – clean up the town. That was going for a week. We never went home. We stayed in jail. We get a meal and that was. About two weeks later, there was a sign 500 people on our town, go to Posen – Oberschlesien – to work. To a camp. So they picked up about five – not me, not my parents – the picked up 500 of 'em and send 'em away to work to Posen. To work – all kind work – publish [public] work – work, work, any kind work. A month later, the city was evacuated, like make a ghetto. Like people used to live in town they used to put 'em up like they close up 12th Street to 18th Street. A ghetto was fenced and they were put in all in the ghetto there – six in a – six families in two rooms. So, just squeeze 'em in. There was no difference. Just got 'em into the ghetto – all fenced around. And then we started shipping out – shipment was going out – thousand.

Interviewer: What kind of shipment?

To work.

Interviewer: To work?

Yeah. To work to Posen, Kreisroder - and I went there too. I went to Kolmar. There was a town in Poland – Kolmar. I was there for two years from 1941 to 1943. My mother and father, one youngest brother and two sisters still left in the ghetto. So my sister got shot by the fence. She was working. She had a Gentile girlfriend in the city and she brought her a sack potatoes and bread and throw it over the fence. She went pick it up and a guard was up there and saw it and shot her.

Interviewer: How old was she?

She was 18. So she was one. There was just left one sister, and my youngest brother and father and mother. They been shipped away when they closed up the ghetto. They shipped ‘em away to Treblinka. They were [unclear] left – one brother, one sister, father and mother. They went to Treblinka. That was the end.

Interviewer: How old were you when you were sent to your first camp? You went to...

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Interviewer: Which camp was that?

To Posen. We work publish (public) work – that was all publish (public) work on [unclear] street like make streets. Was not like the machines here when you want break a concrete highway. Was no machines. Have to have a hammer. And now think you work and a foreman were behind you and ask you. Do you don’t want do it, or you can’t do it, or you don’t want to do it? That was the question. And we just scared. We live in a barracks. It was not too bad. We got three meals a day. We got in the morning coffee, slice of bread. We got a soup for lunch and come back in the night we had another soup. Posen – it was not too bad. From there from Posen we went to Auschwitz.

Interviewer: And how did they take you there from Posen to Auschwitz?

We just close up the camp and they put you in trains and come back. I never forget that. Come up to Birken – Birkenau. Never forget that. We got off the train the SS man say with a flashlight in your hand, “Left, right. *Gesund, crank, gesund*. Healthy, sick, healthy, sick.” Sick on one side, healthy...some guys complain they say the get sick, they go to a hospital or something. But they don’t know when they say sick, they going straight to the chimney. So we got off that train and put out to Birkenau. And when they got in there to Birkenau, they lined it up put it in fenced place. Next morning we have to stay in the line and everybody got a number No food, no water, no nothing. And soon you got a number. They tell you what block you got to go to – Block 3. We lined up in Block 3 – in the barrack, laying on the floor. No covers, no blankets, no straw, no nothing – just laying there. That’s all to it. When I walked out next morning from the barrack, I walked out, people been laying in the bundles dead. And they been picking ‘em up. There was a special group for picking ‘em up and throwing to the crematorium. They been laying dead just like nothing. Like nothing. Then I was realizing what this is. At that time I didn’t care. I know. I know it happen the same thing with everybody when they stay longer so about three days later – no about six weeks later, they moved us over to Buchenwald. I went over to Buchenwald and was about two months in Buchenwald.

Interviewer: How did they move you over there?

Trains.

Interviewer: Trains?

Trains. Yeah.

[Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit about that move too?](#)

Well, we just call out names. They call off your name. They went to the barrack and call off name. Heck, in the barrack was maybe 2,000 people so there comes around the foreman and they call your names off. And they call you the name, you have to get lined up and they circle you around already. Next morning they put you in trains. You don't know where you was going – just put you in trains and you got out to Buchenwald.

[Interviewer: How long, how long was the trip?](#)

Oh, about three, four days.

[Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit about the trip?](#)

It was nothing – just trains, locked up trains. And in there they give you piece of bread and for the road was about a pound spread for three, four days, what was on the train laying there. Was no go out – no pee, no nothing. Everything was in the train. And you got up – there was half people was laying dead on that train over there. And so who was live was live, who was dead was dead. That's all to it. And we went to Buchenwald. And Buchenwald was not bad. They put you in a barrack – there was... You could lay in the barrack and there was a blanket in Buchenwald. And I stayed about two months. They call you off again. I went to Essen to work. We don't know what was going- was going to Essen and there was Krupps *Werk* - ammunition factory.

[Interviewer: Can you tell us about the work that they made you do at Krupp and what that was like?](#)

Yeah, I was working in a fraise machine. I was working the fraise machine and I was... There was a machine what I was cutting out holes in it to the eighth of an inch. And I was good on it. I worked there for a year and a half. I was good on it – on the machine. Just cut out a fraise machine - I don't know you know what a fraise machine – that's a big machine what you cut out what goes in in that tank – a big chunk and you have to cut out little round holes. You just move it and just circle around with the... And I worked there for a year and a half till the liberation. We lived in, in barracks. We come home, in the morning, we got a piece of bread in the morning. And there was no lunch. In the night you come home, you got the soup. And you live in the – there was barracks. You live in the *pritches* and they had the blanket. And you come get up in the morning come home and lay down there. That's all what it was. There was four men from Czechoslovakia – they was not prisoners – they was just working over to work. They gave you some piece of bread or – I was good on it and I worked there.

[Interviewer: Did you lose much weight while you were there?](#)

Well, I lost weight. I was liberated – I was about 89 pounds. I'll never forget the liberation. We been in trains, fenced with wires. And we was in the train for days, and days, and days, and days. And I know I would last, I wouldn't last another day in that train. People been falling like flies in that train where I was. Would I – no, I wouldn't last another day either.

Interviewer: You got on that train where? And you were going to where?

We got in in Essen. There in the Krupps *Werk* and there was no way to go already – the America was already surrounded. And was the train they would try to go out – I think like they been planning to go out to Tyrol. I didn't know what was over there. And the trains was already blocked. I was in the trains and we sit in the trains and all of a sudden we hear – [makes noise]. And it was all kind people – Russian, French. And all of a sudden we hear, I was sitting in the car one night and just... I never forget like that and all of a sudden they broke the wires and everybody ran out from the train. We broke the... And everybody went out so I went out too, look around. I don't know where. And all of a sudden you could see American jeeps coming on already – Red Cross American jeeps. And there was the liberation. They give you three – about a hour later everybody got a package, care package from Red Cross. There was a package margarine, can roast beef, package Philip Morris cigarettes, package Cadbury chocolate. And I took that package – and I had a can behind me where I was liberated and there was a lake and I sit down by the lake and eat that can of beef and the package margarine just like a wild man. That was already the liberation – April the 28<sup>th</sup>.

Interviewer: What happened, what happened then?

So they brought us to Landsberg am Lech.

Interviewer: How did you get...?

The Americans brought us in trucks to, there was a camp in Landsberg. They brought us to Landsberg. And I stayed there about 1946. I think by 1946 there was a... Going to Israel un-legal. There was still occupied by the English people before Truman signed the free states. So we was going - young kids, like 18, 19 - was going to Israel un-legal from Paris – *Aliyah Bet*. I don't know you know what that mean. There was the - we going to Israel from Paris with a ship – torpedo.

Interviewer: A submarine?

That's right. [sic] Was trying to go in to Israel. We got to Tel Aviv and we couldn't get in. We sit three day onto the water. We couldn't get into Israel. So we turned back to Paris. And Paris went... And we went to Paris and the ship went back to Germany where I come from. And I went back to Landsberg and sit in Landsberg until I saw a sign I can get registered go to America. I register and about – oh, take about three months you got through the...

Interviewer: When you went, after liberation, did you try and find people you knew or family?

Yes, I went – May the 1<sup>st</sup> I went to Poland. May the 3<sup>rd</sup> I been in Poland already. There was a shipment from Germany going to Poland. I went to Poland and I was about three days in town where I was. I find nobody. I just had - he just told me about all my family what's happened. I find some friend what were with my brothers in camp how they die. Like my one brother – the older brothers die on typhus. My younger brother died for hunger. I [unclear] some Gentile people what was in town. They told me what happened to my sister and... One sister, one brother, my father, my mother... And grandmother died in the ghetto. I don't know how she die. She die. They went to Treblinka. And I was about three, four days in Poland and I went back to Germany. I went to Germany. I went to 1950. I was in Germany and then I saw the sign, "Go to America." I register and about two months later I went through the medical procedure. Come to America. I got to New Orleans and like the Jewish Federation had a contract for me with Wolf Brothers – like a tailor. You know, they always have to have somebody sign for you. He was mine. I got here. I got the job over there. Worked about three months – about, oh, about a month for Wolf Brothers and they had a strike – the tailors shop had a strike over there. So I say, "What I going to work around?" I went, had a job on Rothchild's. I work five years in Rothchild's. I learned the language pretty fast. And I was the foreman, then I was a fit on the floor. And I just said, well, I look around and I find a little place on Kansas City on Brookside. And I opened that place over there in 1955 and I'm still there.

Interviewer: What was your first impression? You were, obviously, a young man coming to the United States. What were your feelings, your impression when you got here? Were you scared?

Well, I just been here and I was thinking – well, I see what's happened. I was glad. Really, I was glad. I'm know I'm a free man. I start my life.

Source: Leo Zelman video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/zelmanleo/>