Leo Bretholz (2007)
Interview 2

Interviewers: Tova Tennenbaum, Amber Kepple-Jones, Jennie Reich
Also present: Flo Bretholz

[Beginning of Interview 2]

Amber Kepple-Jones: So we’re supposed to introduce ourselves. My name is Amber from Goucher College.

Leo Bretholz: Nice to meet you, again.

AKJ: Nice to meet you, again.

LB: Jennie.

Jennie Reich: I'm Jennie.

AKJ: And Tova. And this is Leo Bretholz.

LB: Yes.

AKJ: So this interview is going to be about the war.

LB: During.

AKJ: During.

LB: During the period after I left. After my young years and after I left Austria. So during that period from—

AKJ: Okay. So last time you talked about getting on the train to Luxembourg. So I was just wondering what were your thoughts going through your head as you were leaving Austria?

LB: As a kid I always was thinking be nice to travel to distances, and to me this was a trip, to run away into safety mainly because my mother had insisted. And going through Luxembourg, I knew I was going to meet someone who was going to pick me up in the town of Tria, which is a town near the Luxembourg border, a very interesting town of Roman vestiges, very historic town, in fact a cathedral city. And the thoughts were that when I was in that train leaving Vienna
in the railroad station. My uncle and aunt had accompanied me. I waved and I saw them disappear in the distance as the train left the station and never saw them again. So my thoughts were to hope for I'll be able to get into Luxembourg without [inaudible] I knew I was going to meet a guy. They call him a smuggler. This happened, and my aunt and uncle had gone to Luxembourg. They fled to Luxembourg a few months earlier. They had arranged all this with a committee in Luxembourg for me to be picked up by this man, swam the river. The river was not normally a placid mountain stream about the width of this room, but there was a torrent because if had rained for 45 days before I crossed. And it carried all this debris from the mountain, rushing waters. Interesting enough, I spent five nights, five days, in a monastery in Tria. Did I mention that before? Franciscan friars. Franciscans and they sheltered me. I felt very comfortable and safe and secure, crossed into Luxembourg and stayed a couple of nights with my aunt and uncle, and two days later I was arrested in a coffee shop [inaudible] The first floor of the building where my aunt and uncle lived, and they gave me a choice, go back to Germany, go to prison in Luxembourg because I was there illegally, or go to any country that I would choose that they want to take me to the border of that country. Luxembourg borders Germany, France and Belgium. So I opted for, spent one night a prisoner, actually a nice place. They asked me the next morning if I have any complaints, and I said to them, "No, I can recommend this place highly. It's a very nice place. I had a clean cot and I had a good breakfast." Sort of joked around with them. You know, I was 17. To me this was all getting away to safety temporarily because I was going to be back as we hoped to, get back to my family.

AKJ: What had you brought with you on the train?

LB: Well, I had a little--my mother packed me a little handbag, like an attaché, like a brief case, and a little suitcase. And I brought that with me. Then when they took me to the--after that night in prison, they took me to the French border, and I crossed the border, and they told me that at the other end there is a--as you cross the border, you'll see a farm building. There's a group of Jewish young people who are preparing to go to Palestine, agricultural preparation, and they will probably shelter you. And I crossed into France after the gendarmes deposited me in the border. I went to that farmhouse. They were friendly and everything. I describe that in my book. They were friendly, but they were not ready to let me stay there because I was illegal and they themselves, they were just there by the grace and the goodwill of the French government because they were also foreigners. And they told me outright that if they were sheltering me, they were, they would endanger their privilege to be there by the grace of the French government. So being that they couldn't shelter me, I went back to the Luxembourg border and waited in the dark--it was already getting dusk you know.

AKJ: How did you get back?

LB: I just walked back to the border. It was just maybe like a half a mile or a mile. And waited.
People cross and that train that had taken us to the border like a commuter near a restaurant and the gendarmes went in there to probably have a glass of beer, a glass of wine, waiting to return to the city of Luxembourg. Well, I peeked across and when I didn't see them anymore--I knew they were in the restaurant--I crossed and hid behind some bushes, and there were one of those, you know, structures of like--electrical, maybe--see some of these bunker things that look like, and I hid and then was waiting there for the train to leave because I knew they were taking the train back to the city. And as the train passed by, and I saw it because the path that I was walking was right next to the railroad track, I looked in the window and I saw these two gendarmes with their heads sitting there and I said, "Now, I know they're gone," and I just made my way back to Luxembourg. Later on, I was taken north to Belgium, you know. I was hiding with a family. My aunt and uncle could not shelter me because I was arrested in that same building that they lived and I wasn’t going to endanger them, but they recommended, the committee recommended that family that I was staying with them there, about, at least a half a dozen or more people, others that were waiting there to be picked up to be transported here or there, and a special Luxembourg Jewish family.

**AKJ:** How did you get to Belgium from Luxembourg?

**LB:** The same, the same man that transported me into Luxembourg, who helped me get to the river, took me and five other people to Belgium, north, nine days later, and that was during the night of November the 10th, 9th to the 10th, when the night of broken glass took place in Germany, in Austria and Germany. So I was taken north to Belgium again by Mr. Becker. I don't know his first name, but his last name was Becker. He was actually, a very congenial, a very friendly man. He always made light of things and made jokes even when--he wanted to make it easier, make it sound easy, but he was sort of a fellow who fit every situation and took me north to Belgium during that night and I stayed in Belgium for 18 months.

**AKJ:** What did you do in Belgium?

**LB:** In Belgium was for 18 months rather peaceful. I was a refugee there, and the Belgian government allowed us to stay there with a 18-month residential permit, and young people, you know, I was 17 and 1/2 so I committed to mischief, and the Belgian government wanted to avoid that. They gave us a choice--you either can go to a camp. They had interned people in a camp to be away from the streets. Well, you're hungry or you do this. You do that. You have an opportunity. You start doing stealing or whatever, getting into trouble. You have a choice—you either go into a camp or we can enroll you in a school, and I chose the school. It's a public school for, trade school, for electricians because in Austria I had been working for an electrician for a half a year after I had to leave school because they said Jews couldn't go to school anymore in Austria, so I worked for an electrician, but always, always with an eye on going to Palestine and it's good to have a trade when you go to Palestine, you know, agriculture or some sort of a trade,
plumber, electrician, whatever. So I enrolled in that school with the help of the committee and passed the test and learned Flemish—in Belgium they speak two languages, French and Flemish. Flemish is a derivative of Dutch, same thing except the dialect is different. And I'm very unusual in Antwerp. I lived in Antwerp for 18 months. They have a very large Jewish population. About ten percent of the population were Jewish. The city hall, the public places, the public baths, the anything, public places, had the two languages, French and Flemish, and also Yiddish. It's interesting. As an accommodation to the Jewish population, and I remember writing to my mother that I see Yiddish here and I see Hebrew lettering and everything, and it feels a little bit like Jerusalem I wrote to her. She must have liked that. To know me in safety, that's what she wanted.

**AKJ:** Did you write to your mother a lot?

**LB:** I wrote to my mother regularly and for Passover I sent them packages with matzo and I was there 18 months, from November 1938 to May 1940. Rather placid and peaceful. As I said, I went to school, I learned the language and I passed my test with A in the Flemish language and my distant family that I found there, they were very impressed with that. I was always pretty good with languages. And then on May the 10th, because the war broke out in the East on the 1st of September, 1939 and it didn't start in the West until 1940 when the Germans attacked Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France after they had conquered Poland. And I was in Antwerp on that day when the Germans attacked. It was being bombed very heavily. It's a port city, very important strategically, important location. But the night before the attack—the attack was May the 10th on a Friday—the night before, the 9th of May, I entered the hospital in Antwerp to have surgery. I developed a hernia and the doctor that whom I had seen, naturally, told me it’d be good for you not to get it done—“Why would you have to run around with a hernia young man” activities. And I went into the hospital that Thursday night and I was supposed to be operated on the next morning and the operation never took place, because at 6:00 the bombs flew in Antwerp and a couple of bombs even fell into the hospital grounds, knocking out windows. Civil Defense was there instructing us.

**AKJ:** What were they instructing you to do?

**LB:** Well, instructing us to how to get out—all those who are ambulatory, who can walk under your own power. You haven't been operated on. You are not buried. Come to get dressed. Come to the office. We will give you your documents. And we will tell you, instruct you how to get home under the bombardment. They gave us instructions, walk near the boards on all sides, duck, whatever, and I left the hospital. My hernia untouched. And the same day I was arrested in Belgium as an enemy alien. The Germans had attacked. I came from Austria which was now Germany, therefore I came from a country that had just attacked so I'm an enemy alien. I was arrested.
Interviewers: Wait, so you were arrested by the Belgians?

LB: Belgian police, yes. So many of them, a few hundred others, about 600 of us were arrested, all males. Not the women and children.

AKJ: So, how was your prison stay? It probably wasn’t as nice as the other one, right?

LB: Well, I wasn't in prison. They sent me and the other 600 down to southern France, a long trip. We protested. We said we're not enemies because they were our enemies before they just became yours, so we're in the same, on the same page on that, but that didn't--in national protocol, that doesn't go. [inaudible] You know, I could be coming from there but I could also be a spy. That was the rationale. They took us down to France to a camp near the Spanish border, so it took about five days and five nights before we got down there under the bombardment, under the war. There was war zone and there were battles in the skies as we crossed into France and drove through the French roads, through the French countryside, often not knowing are these the enemy or not. We looked up and we saw planes in formation in battling. A couple of them were shot down. That was all while we traveled to southern France. And then we went to southern France which was away from the war zone, of course, into a camp near the Spanish border. The camp was called San Cyprien, C-Y-P-R-I-E-N. San Cyprien. C-Y-P-R-I-E-N. That's for your benefit?

AKJ: And what was it like there?

LB: Well, it was filthy, dirty. I remember it was sort of a rat hole. The camp was used in previous years from '36 to '39 for the refugees from the Spanish Civil War, and when they left that camp, they left it in utter disarray. There was all kinds of schmutz, as we say, and there was very few hygienic facilities, washing, cold water, and then the faucet. There was no bath, no bathing. It was near the beach so the barbed wire strung across the beach, the shore. There were latrines in the sand on the beach. Latrines. You stepped up on the latrines, wooden steps, and when the tides came in, those steps were covered with water, so you had to walk through the water, and then dysentery set in, dysentery and typhus. With no hygiene, this became a very great threat. In the couple of months that I was there, maybe about a hundred people died. And the guards relaxed their watch on us because these were all guards from the First World War, French guards, mainly African colonials, and they knew we were not criminals or dangerous. We were simply internees, but with the typhus, being, going around and people being ill, and fevers, these guards were not too eager to come close to the barbers, they stood at a distance.

AKJ: How many people were in the camp?
LB: Several hundred, at least six, seven-hundred. And one day I get a message from the command post sent to my barracks, I have a visitor. One of my friends whom I had met in Belgium during the period that I there, my age, Leon, found out that I was in this camp. But he came to France fleeing the war zone on his own because he was a Belgian citizen. He wasn't arrested. He lived in Toulouse. He went down to Toulouse and then the Red Cross officers, there were lists of people that had fled [inaudible] and he found out that the people who were taken from Antwerp, and from Belgium, all over, not just Antwerp down to the south wound up in San Cyprien. Well, took a chance and went there, and he found out in the command post, yes, there is a Leo Bretholz in San Cyprien. Could he visit him? They gave him a pass, and that pass was handed to me by an officer who came to the barracks. So he visited waiting out there by the barbed wire.

AKJ: What were your thoughts?

LB: My thought was that I--what is he doing here? What does he want?

AKJ: Did the pass say who it was that came to see you or?

LB: No, it did not say, just you have a visitor. And when I saw him, Leon. And he said, "You know you can get away from here." Maybe the pass said--I didn't inspect that pass. It could have had his name all wrong. It might be remiss in saying for sure, but he never showed me the pass, but I'm sure, it must, have had his name. There's no doubt about it because when you get to a camp, they want to know who you are. But Leon said to me, "You know, you can get away from here."

I said, "How can I do this?"

He says, "You're not being seen by these guards. They don't watch. They just walk around. They, they couldn't care less."

"So I get out."

He says, "Well, you see this barbed wire here? You're standing near the barbed wire." The barbed wire and the [inaudible] on the sand because this was a beach. He said, "All you have to do is dig deeper into the sand and crawl through and I'll pull you up."

I said, "I can't be able to do that."

He says, "I'm sure you can. The thing is I spent almost an hour now walking around watching." I went back to my barrack. My Uncle David, my cousin Kurt and another uncle were in the same
barrack with me and I told them my Uncle David, "Leon Ostreicher is here. He wants, he tells me I can get out of here."

"Don't be foolish! What do you mean?" My uncle was always trying to be in command. When you read my book, you'll find out my Uncle David. Maybe--have you read the book? In that case [inaudible] said you wanted to read the book. My Uncle David wanted to be in command. He was also a little bit of a tyrant. So I could have taken his son. He was younger than I. He would have probably wanted it. So I grabbed a couple of my belongings, my rucksack, put on my shoes for the first time in two months because I never needed shoes on that sand. The soles of my feet was as hard like leather walking on the sand for two months. Put on my shoes, took my rucksack, a few belongings, went to join Leon again at the barbed wire, and just like he said. I squeezed in the sand deeper. He pulled me out, dusted me off, and says, "Now, you know what? We are walking away from here normally. Don't run. Don't show any special concerns. Just walk casually because these guys, they don't even wonder. They'll just think we're visitors and we're both walking away." And would you believe it? We walked away quietly. We passed near the entrance to the camp and through that gate, and on the way out we sort of did this to the guys, and they waved back. Leon was right. They couldn't care less. So easy. Actually. Walking. Like many things in life, surely I was very lucky. I ran because I was scared. Fear is a motivator. There was also hope because I always hoped to be reunited with my mother and sisters. [inaudible] survived. But there was a great deal of luck. And we walked away and then he told me about my friends, my distant relatives, for [inaudible] Flo, is the light on out there? I'm sorry. Is the light on on the porch or not?

Flo Bretholz: I'll check.

LB: Maybe the bulb is out. It should have gone on by, by now. Absolutely. That goes on by 7:00, even a quarter to seven.

FB: Something may have happened, but it's [inaudible] door wide open when we sleep.

LB: Do you know we woke up this morning?

FB: The door was wide open [laughs]

LB: The door was ajar. We did not lock the door. On the left is a bulb there.

FB: Now it's on. You fix it later. It's on now.

LB: Does this move? Okay, find out a bit later. Don't worry.
FB: Are we being recorded?

LB: I don’t want to deviate from this, so--

AKJ: So, did you find--

LB: We joined those friends and distant relatives and I lived in southern France 'cause Germans conquered France very quickly. On the 21st of June there was an armistice signed between the French and the Germans. French capitulated. And Marshal Petain—have you heard his name? Philippe Petain. He became president of new France and southern France and the town of Vichy was the seat of government—have you heard of the expression Vichy, France. French signed an agreement with the Germans. France was divided into two parts—the north above the Loire River occupied by the Germans including also the whole west coast of France which is strategic. See, there was this west coast and this is France occupied and the southern part ruled by Marshal Petain and the government was collaborating with the Jews. And they instituted anti-Jewish laws that were just as evil, if not worse, than the ones in Germany. And I lived in Vichy, France under the Vichy Regime.

AKJ: You lived there with your distant relatives and friends from--what kind of living situation was it? Was it an apartment?

LB: Well, I lived with all these friends together. We had rented a, first a farmhouse, then a little villa. We spent time together. Then came rationing. We had bread, butter, meat, eggs, fat, sugar, salt, clothing, soap. That was all rationed. So we lived under this, these conditions, restricted naturally, but manageable. Soon the anti-Jewish laws got into effect and many of us were sent, I included with these relatives and family, to what they called an assigned residence, French “residence assigné”--assigned residence. We called it forced residence because we were forced to go there, unreasonable places near the Pyrenees border, near the Spanish border in the Pyrenees. They were designed to hold us where we had to stay. We had no right to leave and were confined. So this was already with a design for the future that they will know where we were as Jews. Later when deportations would begin, they would just know how to collect us because we were in these assigned places, sort of in the vernacular between a rock and a hard place. We couldn't go anywhere. You had to register with the police [inaudible] they were still there, in order to collect the ration coupon. And [inaudible] little towns near the Spanish border.

AKJ: Were the rations a lot less than what you--

LB: Huh?

AKJ: Were the rations a lot less than what you had gotten before?
LB: No. It was the same. There was, the rations were the same and we got the same rations as the French populace. The difference was that we could not leave and the deportations of Jews from France to Auschwitz began in the spring of 1942 in the north in the occupied zone. And then the same thing began in August of ’42 in the non-occupied or Vichy zone or they called it free zone. That was a euphemism. It was never really free. They were always under the control of the Germans, but the deportations began in August of ’42.

AKJ: So how long were you in that assigned place in southern France?

LB: In south place, in southern place, in Cotraine. We were there for, from ’41 to ’42, like over a year.

AKJ: More than a year.

LB: Yes. That was August. Of course there were--end of ’41, a year, from the end of ’41 til August, make something like eight to ten months. And on August 26 the deportations began in the south of France in that little town where we lived. They had a very--I call him a righteous Christian mayor. A day or two before the raids began in southern France, he sent out a messenger to the city to let us know. He knew it would be passed on word of mouth. All he had to do is tell it to two or three people and it would be passed on among us. We were a thousand Jews in that town. The town only had 1,200 inhabitants, a small village, and all of a sudden they got a thousand Jews there sharing their space and everything with them. They'd never seen a Jew before, but this mayor sent out a messenger. There will be a raid in a day or two. Do as you see fit. And a few of us took to the mountains. We were hiding out.

AKJ: What were--

LB: Pyrenees.

AKJ: What were the relations between the other 200 people that were already there in the--

LB: Twelve hundred.

AKJ: Twelve hundred.

LB: Yes, 1,200 people and 1,000 Jews almost doubling the population. We were friendly. We had good neighbors. Friendly relations in the stores, in the restaurants. When we walked the streets, normal. They hated the Germans to begin with, but the government is not a thing that people want, government and [inaudible] other thing. Then he notified us and we went to the mountains, were hiding. The next day when we came down, half of the Jews that had been
confined there, over 500, had been arrested and deported. And my name was on the list because, you see, I knew it because I came from Germany. The ones that were not touched yet were those who were French Jews, Belgian Jews, Luxembourg Jews. They still wanted to give a semblance of fairness, you know. They were deported later. So when I came back into town to join with my friends and distant family, they said, "Leo, you can no longer stay here because--you can't go to the police and register." We had to register periodically. So I couldn't say, "Here I am," because I wasn't supposed to be here. I was supposed to not happen, taken away. Ration coupons, I had to leave. And I left this town at nightfall, made my way on foot back to a town that I had lived before, before we came to Cotraine, where I had a friend and I joined up with him and his family, the Spira family, S-P-I-R-A. They had two teenage daughters, and Spira told me, "Don't go out, you know. Don't go in the streets." Anyway, I sat with the family in the house, didn't leave the house, and Spira had a connection in that town with some of the underground, and they forged some papers for me and for another fellow.

AKJ: What kind of papers?

LB: French. I.D. That was my first. I had three false I.D. cards in France. That was the first one. And became a Frenchman, wore my beret.

AKJ: [laughs]

LB: [inaudible]

AKJ: Literally or metaphorically?

LB: No.

AKJ: That you wore a beret?

LB: Literally. I wore all these berets.

AKJ: Can you--

LB: [inaudible] later on for me.

AKJ: Do you have it?

LB: Yeah, yeah. Flo, hand me the beret, please.

FB: Here it is.
LB: They want to give, the want to give it, they want to have the real thing in it. There, please.

AKJ: [laughs]

FB: I know where it is.

LB: You know where it is, hanging on the doorknob, never found it.

FB: Here's some cookies right--

AKJ: Oh, thanks.

FB: Here are some other things. You like cherry soda? I won't give you that peach stuff that he didn't think would have been sweet enough.

LB: False papers with an instruction to meet somebody near the Swiss border who will guide us into Switzerland to escape to neutral Switzerland, right into safety.

AKJ: Who was your friend?

LB: My friend was also one of the family circle, Albert Heshkowitz, and Albert and I, with the help of a guide, crossed into Switzerland, crossed the mountains, which took over forty hours in October of 1942 with the France-Swiss hospitality.

AKJ: Did you make a convincing Frenchman? [laughs]

LB: I did not make a convincing Frenchman simply because I had a French I.D. card, but I had crossed into Switzerland illegally and we showed them immediately our Belgian I.D. We wanted to be truthful with the policeman, we were arrested in Switzerland. The policeman said, "Yeah, we know all of this. You're going back to France." He sent us back to France, my friend and I. We could feel freedom. We had it in arm's reach. Swiss sent back, how many people? Flo, how many did the Swiss send back?

FB: Ah, we found it on a website. We found a website that named every person who was sent back, every Jew, and Leo's name was among the names.

AKJ: From the Swiss board?

LB: Yeah.
Flo: From the Swiss board. They turned away--most of them would up in Auschwitz and--

AKJ: So you were literally at the border?

LB: In Switzerland.

AKJ: In Switzerland.

LB: We had already crossed into Switzerland and were arrested in the mountains by mountain police, took us into the valley to the police station and that sergeant, he was like a tyrant. He was like a sadist.

AKJ: Did he arrest you because you didn't look--

LB: No, we got arrested because we were illegal in Switzerland.

AKJ: How did they know that you were illegal in Switzerland?

LB: Because I had crossed through the mountains. I was not a Swiss citizen.

AKJ: Did they see you.

LB: What?

AKJ: Did they see you cross or--

LB: Well, we had crossed and were 20 minutes on the path down into the valley when a policeman appeared and said, "Halt! Where are you going?"

We said, "We are going--"

"Where are you coming from? Papers!"

We showed them the papers and that was it. So we couldn't just cross into another country like a, like a, like a tourist.

AKJ: Not like in The Sound of Music?

LB: Well, that's--The Sound of Music was a little bit contrived.
AKJ: Well, they did the same thing. They walked through the mountains into Switzerland, right?

LB: Yes.

AKJ: [laughs]

LB: The Trapp family.

FB: Do you remember what Peter's father did when he got into Switzerland, he told them--

LB: He told him he was a teacher.

FB: Yes, he was a teacher and a bunch of students going into buy across the border, so he had prepared this briefcase with a book and a pencil and he, among these people, he just walked in, walked to Switzerland.

LB: A friend, father of a friend of mine.

FB: And pretended he was a teacher. That's how he got, escaped.

LB: So he, we were sent back to France into another camp and that camp was just about maybe 20, 30 miles or so away from the original camp, San Cyprien, and this camp was called Ribesaltes, R-I-B-E-S-A-L-T-E-S, and I was there for two weeks, and from that camp 107 of us were sent north to Drancy, that's a suburb of Paris. And Drancy was a transit camp from where over 70,000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz. And I was sent to that camp in Drancy, D-R-A-N-C-Y.

AKJ: What were the--

LB: A hundred seven of us were sent from the south of France to Drancy. Albert was among them, the one with whom I escaped to Switzerland. And on the 6th of November, I was deported from Drancy in a train going to Auschwitz. Albert was in that train, too.

AKJ: And you were only in that train for--I mean in Drancy for two weeks?

LB: From the, like from the 22nd of October to the 6th of November.

AKJ: You were on the train to Auschwitz.
LB: And on the way of Auschwitz, and on the 6th of November at nightfall, a friend and I, a man, not Albert, another young man whom I had met in Drancy, was also born in Vienna. He was two years younger than I. I was then 21. He was 19. Manfred Silbdiwasser. Manfred Silbdiwasser: S-I-L-B-D-I-W-A-double S-E-R, Manfred Silbdiwasser.

AKJ: I'm sorry. What year was this?

LB: That was '42.

AKJ: Silbdiwasser.

LB: Silbdiwasser.

AKJ: Silver water.

LB: That's right. Silver water. You know what is like, silver water, it's creek. It's mercury. Mercury is called silver water.

AKJ: He was your friend on the train. You met him--

LB: I met him in Drancy, this young man.

AKJ: Oh, you met him in Drancy.

LB: And he and I escaped from the train.

AKJ: How did you collaborate with him, or how did this come to be?

LB: Well, that was--the escape is today, when I think of it, that was the key to my being here today because of the thousand people on that train--it was 20 cars, cattle cars, 50 in each car, a thousand. Of those thousand, only five men survived and ran for their lives, we were among them. In fact, in the book that was published, I'm not listed as a survivor by mistake. Flo?

FB: Yes.

LB: Is it possible for you to bring me the Klasfelt book here? Bring me the whole bag, please. It’s there in the den.

AKJ: How did you and Manfred, like, start talking about this?
LB: We already talked in the camp. In the camp, what we saw in the camp, realized that if there is a way, we've got to get away from here whenever, between now and wherever they're going to take us, whatever it's going wind up going to be.

AKJ: Did you know where you were going?

LB: No, we did not. We [inaudible] the rules.

AKJ: I just have to blow my nose really quickly-- Can you explain the train ride, what--

LB: I will tell that in a minute, yes.

AKJ: Okay, sorry. I'm eager.

LB: That is the, that is the centerpiece of, because, as I said, I would not be sitting here today if I hadn't--

AKJ: Can I just ask you a quick question before we get to that?

LB: Go 'head.

AKJ: So, obviously you're very knowledgeable about everything that was going on right now, but how aware were you of all these different things going on as you were going--

LB: Well, I wasn't. Now I'm knowledgeable, but then I didn't know. There were only rumors, but in the spring of '42 they already had heard on the radio that, and that was illegal to listen to the radio. If they caught, caught you listening to Radio London. The free French speak to the French and all the nations, whatever, fled to England. They call themselves the free Czech, the free Poles, the free French, the free Belgian, the free Dutch, and Anthony Eagle, the foreign secretary, had declared at that time in the spring, we now know that the rumors that have been coming through to us from the east, from Poland, from eastern Europe, they've now been proven true. People are being put to death. So and that, when we heard this, and then I hadn't heard from my mother in months, we had communicated with my mother, through a cousin in Switzerland, who had forwarded the letter to France, because there was nothing like mail between two warring nations. So Switzerland being neutral, I had a cousin in a camp in Switzerland. My mother's sister sent him letters and he forward it to me. Those letters had stopped between February and November '42. So I put two and two together. If I hadn't heard in nine months from my mother and sister where before I had heard every four or five weeks, I had put two and two together where they're taking us, I don't want to go. We don't want to go. My friend and I decided already in Drancy in the camp before we went into the train, let's do something if
Bretholz Leo, Interview 2

possible, if the occasion, the opportunity, presents itself. And in the train we decided, yes, we have to get out of here. Well, that wasn’t easy. When I think today that that happened, it's almost like, it's like, like a dream. This is the book that tells you about the deportation of Jews from France. All the names are in here. Over 70,000 names. Over 70 transports, a thousand each transport. I was in transport number 42 on the 6th of November 1942, Leo Bretholz's here. Out of the thousands, according to these records by the Germans themselves, out of the thousand in that train, 773 were gassed on arrival. People were taken to work and in the final analysis, only five men survived of those 1,000 in that train. Of the 70,000, 70-odd-thousand, that were deported, only 2,000 survived. So how did I escape? Did you want to know that?

AKJ: Apparently.

LB: In each cattle car, there are two small windows, diagonally across. Have you been to the Holocaust Museum?

AKJ: Which one?

LB: Here.

AKJ: In DC?

LB: In Washington, DC.

AKJ: No, I haven't been there.

LB: So you haven't seen that cattle train that's there. That cattle car, that freight car, is so that I would not have been able to escape from that car. That car was brought here from Poland in '93. That car had the bars of those windows bolted to the outside, see. The bars in these-- The window was about this size, a little smaller than this, with two bars here and here.

AKJ: Diagonal bars?

LB: But the bars were here and here. Now these bars were in the freight, not bolted to the outside, and rusty a little bit. As they were, we had to look at this and say, this is the only way for us to escape if we can make it, if we can manage. Well, that also meant prying the bars apart.

AKJ: How high were they from the ground?

LB: Well, you know cattle cars, like arm's reach. I'll see if I [inaudible] museum you can see the cattle car. You know [inaudible] upper end, diagonally across. You've seen them on some of the
railroad tracks perhaps, but this is the only way out, and as we are debating this, and some people trying to talk us out of it. "Don't be foolish. If you get caught. If you get caught, they'll take it out on us. They'll kill us."

And my answer was, "I'm afraid that's going to happen anyway."

"How do you know that that's--"

"I know that I haven't heard from my mother and sisters. They must be dead. So the rumors are true."

"Oh, you know, [inaudible]" And then there's a voice in back of the car, dark. It was close to nightfall, November, northeast France, and there was a war zone because the war was still going on. There's a woman who raises her voice. She was on crutches, one leg amputated at the knee, and she moves, lifts the crutch, and points this crutch into my direction and my friend's. She said, "Don't let anyone talk you out of it. Do it." She says, "If you succeed, you'll be able to tell the story." And then she says in French, "Dieu veill du garde, May God watch over you." This old woman. I say old woman. I was 21. If she was 60, to me she was on old woman. I'll never forget her eyes, just like I'll never forget the eyes of my sister when I said goodbye to her. This woman was adamant. She emboldened us where others tried to discourage us. You must--she was [inaudible] and we tried to pry the bars apart like moving them didn't help. Pushing didn't help. We tried belts. They were slipping. We tried some rope from some packages that people had or from luggage. Ropes were slipping, and somebody had the bright idea in the car. I think it may have been even Manfred. The only way we can do it if we have a wet cloth, something, a garment that's wet and twist it around. You know, I'll give you an example.

**AKJ:** To provide friction like friction so it wouldn't slip?

**LB:** Exactly. You have a jar that you want to open up, a jar of preserves, and you can't open it. You take a cloth and make it wet, twist it. When you have a towel that's dry, you cannot wring it, twist it. But a wet towel, you can wring and wringing, and there's a last drop is out like a corkscrew. Alright. A cloth, when it's wet, becomes more tensile in strength. You know [inaudible] There was human waste on the ground, on the floor. In the middle of that cattle car, there was one bucket for 50 people. I leave it to your imagination how long this bucket really served its purpose. It overflowed in no time with 50 people. There was no--modesty went out the window. If a woman had to relieve herself, other women stood in front of her as if it helped because we were dehumanization. That begun an illness. This was a microcosm of humanity all but abandoned by the world going to certain death as we find out now. All these-- We dipped--I don't know whether it was my towel or my sweater. I believe it was my sweater--into that human waste covering the floor. We were sitting and walking and squatting in human waste. I've done
some things, as I say in my book, that the most disgusting thing in my life, dipping this garment into human waste, but that was the way to freedom. Sleeves rolled up and we twisted these garments around the bars, twist, twist, twist. We took turns and then we untwisted the cloth because it was wet so it was more tensile as we realized. Then we went back and did it all over again, dipping again and doing it again. And all of a sudden, it was like a light in the, cliché, at the end of the tunnel. [inaudible] sleeves, unrolled sleeves. We saw fine rust particles that had come out of the frame of the bars, rust that had dropped down and that's the proof was that the bars must have been getting loose, and as we continued this, we twisted and twisted the bars ever so slightly went inward and we went back with our hands and pulled them apart. That made a little more movement and you know, back and forth, back and forth, loosens it more. And we worked feverishly for a few hours until I could finally—that final result was that the bars, instead of being straight—this is the size of the window—straight, all of a sudden they were bent because we had, and I wasn’t 160 pounds then. I was 190. And my friend was even thinner, so we saw our way squeezing out there, and Albert, my friend with whom I went to Switzerland, was also there. I said, "Albert, you coming with us?"

He says—he was in his ‘40s. He had a paunch. He says, "You know I'll never squeeze through the window." And he had also become resigned. He was a tenor, an opera singer. He sang opera and was resigned. He was phlegmatic a little bit. And he was in that cattle car singing an Italian folk song, leaning back and singing, and I mention it to- [sings a little bit in Italian] -Albert sang. I said, "Come."

He says, "I can't." And he helped me climbing up on some luggage. As I say in the book, this climb of this luggage was, seemed higher than the climb through the Swiss Alps going into Switzerland because in the metaphor it was a difficult thing. And at first I reached up and tried to squeeze myself through it and it didn’t work exactly. Albert pushed me and Manfred pushed me, and I squeezed out head first holding onto the edge of the roof, pulling myself up and getting myself out. I put my beret in the pocket of my jacket because I didn't want it to fly off my head. I had a shaved head. They shaved our heads in Courson before they deported us, prisoners, and I squeezed through, reached between the, to the back of the car, between that car and the next car, stood on the coupling waiting for my friend to come out and join me. And there we're standing, the wind blowing against me, refreshing me. It was the most exhilarating moment in all these years because there I was outside. All I needed is the jump, and I waited for Manfred to come to come out, do the same thing. He had handed me my rucksack through the window which I pulled with my left hand and put it over and put it on my shoulder. Then he climbed out, joined me. I moved over to the next coupling, and he stood on this one. That was the north side. We were going east, and we had to jump on the side where there was the ravine you know, the bushes, not on the right side where there was the parallel track because the parallel track, when you jump on it, you can really get hurt badly or can get, some people were supposed, we heard that tried to escape and didn't make it. But we had to also wait for the train to get into a curve because in the
curve what happens to a train? It slows down, right? And we wanted to take the least chances, and as we got into the curve, the first car of that convoy was a person, a passenger car, and so was the last one. That's where the guards were in. But when a car, when the train came into a curve, they had these powerful flashlights. When a car, when a train is in the curve, you can see the whole length of the train because it's the concave side. You know, when you look up, you see the top of the train and the end of the train. So they were shining the flashlights up and down to see that everything is alright. Well, we had to wait for these flashlights coursing from the first and the last train to get past us so that they don't see us jump and we had to time it. So the time came and the coast was clear, we thought we made it, and as I say, my friend jumped first and I jumped next, and that's the end of that chapter, chapter ten. That's the end of this chapter where it says, "And I leaped into the great darkness below." That's where they took the title, the people who did the book and this was the—how do you call it—people who work on it, the publicity. They used that.

**AKJ:** It's a good title.

**LB:** Everybody thought it was a good title because leap is an action word and darkness is a metaphor for danger and uncertainty, and leap, and I wrote in the book, "And I leaped into the great darkness below following my friend," so that's where they took the title. And we made it out of the train, and the first night we spend in a priest's sacristy in a little village in northeast France. So we escaped from that train and that is the most exhilarating moment in all my years of running. There were tender moments, dangerous moments, hardships, exhilaration. This was the one. [inaudible] some other dangerous moments, but I'm here to tell the story. There's more to the story because I also was imprisoned later, you know. You may have more questions. I talk too much.

**AKJ:** No. You're supposed to talk a lot.

**Leo Bretholz:** And these kids are standing in with a propeller and nobody notices. [laughter]
You understand? It’s, it’s interesting. It was a culture shock. It was—the culture’s different. What was normal was the propeller and was abnormal was a beret, a stylish, chic beret. I was looked at like a, like, where did he come from? [laughs]

**Jennie Reich:** Also, it’s been exactly 60 years you’ve been in America, right?

**LB:** In January of 1947, yes. It will be 61 next January. It’s a lifetime, right? Maybe, probably. What you mean the train—the train was, it was a devastating experience. It was stressful. As I said, humanity abandoned in our cattle car, in our car. It was not only that woman on crutches, but there was also an infant in the car with us, I think 2 or 3 weeks old, without the mother. The mother may have been in another train or maybe left, whatever. Dehumanization that started in
earnest. Next to that infant was a man sitting like this. He must have been in his 60s or 70s. This man would have been entitled to have a decent end to his life. I was 21. To me this was, get away. I felt threatened. I wanted to live. Simple. The rumors were flying and they said, “No, those are rumors.”

I said, “You know what?” I said to one fellow. There was a fellow there with his girlfriend. She was sick. He kissed her on her eyelids, on her forehead, and he had a leg that was bandaged, probably gangrene, and smelled to high heaven. Putrid. Pu. That’s the way it was in that cattle car. And I said, I said, “Oh, if they find out you’re right, we’ll all be killed. It will happen anyway. And if I find out after the war that my fear was unfounded, no, I didn’t, I was wrong. I’ll be glad to say I was wrong. But, at least I’ll be here to say it.” That was my answer to them. If we found out stronger, so we’ll make history. We’re wrong. The whole emotion, the whole gamut of emotions, if you want to know the mood in that cattle train, arguing, physical pushing and fighting for space, women consoling the children, a child crying, a man praying, front of the train facing east. He was a religious man. He was praying, and somebody in the train said, “What is he praying for? Who will listen to him?” But this, you know, skepticism and complaint—and somebody else said, “Let him pray. Let him do it if it helps him. It might even help you. Maybe he’s even praying for you.” All these arguments going on this, and these attitudes, the whole, as I said, the whole gamut of emotion. Emotions.

We didn’t know where we were going to go, where we’re going to wind up, but all we knew, my friend and I, that we have to get out of this train before it gets into Germany proper. That we could rationalize. Once we are in Germany, we would be taken over by Germans and then in Germany itself, it would be almost impossible to escape. Now, if I may bother you for a moment, every train, every convoy, was accompanied by a letter, and that letter went from the camp commander in Drancy to Eichmann. Eichmann.

JR: Mhmm. I know who he is.

LB: In Berlin. Adolf Eichmann. “Transport of Jews from the lake—from the camp in Drancy.” This is in German, but I’m translating it to you to use. “Jews from the internment camp in Drancy near Paris to the concentration camp Auschwitz. In the Jew camp of Drancy, Jew camp of Drancy, we have at this time 2,600 Jews who qualify for the conditions of transportation.”

JR: To be healthy enough to be transported?

LB: No, Jewish.

JR: Oh.
LB: There were sick people, too, and there were infants. There was some man with, got ties there. They’re still Frenchmen. They still wanted to show who I am, and I get there’s probably a mistake. I shouldn’t even be in this train, you know, because he had the Legion of Honor. He fought with the French, you know [phone rings], First World War. Old man. “2,600 who qualify for the conditions of transportation. This amount will be raised in the next week to 3,000 [Flo Bretholz answers phone; background noise disrupts] so that we can, that we intend to set in motion 3 trains each of a thousand Jews to Auschwitz and the departure days are—we are considering the departure days as being Wednesday, the 4th of November, Friday, the 6th of November—that was mine—and Monday, the 9th of November. The transport material is at our disposal. Departure from the train station L’Auberge Drancy as usual at 8:55 in the morning. Arrival in Nurdwork”—that is already at the border—“at 20:20.” That’s 20 minutes after 8. That’s military time, in the evening, you know, 20 military time. In Europe, people go by military time.

JR: Yeah, 8:00 p.m.

LB: “8:20 and arriving in minutes. We ask you for instructions, we ask you for instructions so whether these trains should be set into motion and, and please notify the security police in Germany of our arrival.” This—every—this how bureaucratically, how businesslike this was conducted like, like they were transporting sacks of potatoes or bales of hay, but these were people. We were people. [turns to FB] Yes?

Flo Bretholz: [indistinct]

LB: Huh?

FB: [indistinct] for dinner on Thursday?

LB: David is the neighbor across the street from Charles.

FB: And I might work a few hours.

LB: No, you will not work.

FB: I might. I might have to.

LB: No, I won't let you.

FB: I might have to. Yeah.
LB: [laughs] Who are we going to?

FB: We’re short help in the office.

LB: That’s where we’re going, [Broussant?]

FB: You said David Mutnick?

AKJ: Mitnick.

FB: Oh, I have a cousin named David Mutnick. That's so strange.

LB: Flo, where are we going [indistinct]?

FB: [returns to phone] David? I'm sorry, but I don't [indistinct].

LB: This is. This is. See how bureaucratic this was done? This was not just shipping people. This was like a trans, like merchandise, and it was executed with precision. I never knew that we left that, that station at 7:00, whatever this is in the morning.

AKJ Kepple-Jones: 8:55.

LB: 8:55 in the morning. When I read the book, I realized—I knew it was in the morning, but I never knew it was 8:55. But every train left punctually. Can you imagine how this was organized, the murder of people organized in a bureaucratic fashion? The 20th century. I have to add the land of poets and thinkers, Germany. And helped by the French naturally, Voltaire, [indistinct], Emile Zola, the Declaration of Human Rights. That’s all French. Where did, where did that history go at that moment? Off by the wayside. And today, I’m telling it only. It’s never easy to talk about. I’m telling it only so that you can take that into the future. Maybe it will never happen again, but who knows what’s going on this year, today. We have a mad man that just spoke at the United Nations. That was my escape and the priest accepted us that night after we got out of that train. He took—he tore off our star. Did I show you how—my star last time?

AKJ: Hmmhm.

LB: My 3 star. Did I? No?

JR: Hmmhm.
LB: Oh. This was given to us at Drancy. In Vichy, France, they did not wear the Jewish star, but in the [indistinct].

JR: Because of the Nuremberg Laws, right? You had to wear the star?

LB: The star, yeah. This is the original. This is, this is now—it was 1942. This is now 65 years old.

Tova Tennenbaum: What made you save all this? I’m just curious.

LB: I saved it because I wanted to have it as a souvenir. Don’t you save photos?

TT: Mhmm.

LB: That’s what it is. You go to an event. You to an outing, a party, you make, take photos. Why? Sometimes you never look at them. What made me save it? I think it’s more important than—

TT: What does it—what does it say on it?

LB: Juif.

TT: Jew.

LB: Jew for French. Every country had its own. In Holland, it was Jood. In Germany, it was Jude. You know, in Poland, it was Jyd. They all start with J anyway.

JR: Yes.

LB: This is the star.

JR: What’s it made out of? Is that felt or—

LB: Cloth.

JR: Cloth.

LB: And you know, it might raise a question. These stars were produced. They were manufactured. People were working on this in factories, in workshops. When they were doing this, printing them, cutting them, manufacturing them, did any of these people who got paid to do
this have any thoughts what we they doing here? Why are they doing this? Why should we be doing this? Should I really take money for this? Am I doing the right thing or the wrong thing? Am I helping the evil to, to be perpetrated? Never a thought. Never a protest. Einstein said the world is an evil place not because of those who do evil, but because of those who stand by and do nothing. This has to come to your mind. That wasn’t done in a vacuum. It was done by people, not by robots. But here it is. We tore off those stars after we had jumped off the train that was given to us in Drancy. We tore it off. I remember we walked on the streets and we approached a bake shop, and it was nighttime already. The bake shop was closed, and this was war zone, and you know in a war zone, you have the civil defense. Civil defense, the windows are blackened—darkened for civil defense, and this bake shop had a darkened door.

JR: [sneezes]

LB: Gesundheit.

JR: Thank you.

LB: Allergy? Hay fever?

JR: Yeah.

LB: I had it, too, and then I got out of it. I had shots and everything. We rapped the door of the bake shop and a young man and his wife take us up, came to the door, and said, “Fellows,” he says. “No bread yet, not until the morning,” because bread was rationed anyway. And I said to him, “I don’t want bread,” in French because he must have recognized the accent. Spoke French very fluently, a Nice accent, but I speak French fluently. And he says, “No bread.” I said, “We don’t want bread. I’d like for you to tell us where the priest of the village can be reached, where he lives.” He says, “Un moment. Give me a minute, a moment.” Put on his jacket. It was a raw November night. “Une minute,” he says. Come right back with his jacket on. He says, “I’ll take you there.” We walked about 5 or 6 or 7 minutes, came to the sacristy near a small church. We rapped on the door. The priest came to the door and the baker’s apprentice had disappeared. He didn’t want to have anything to do with that situation. You know, there are 2 fellows at night asking for a priest. They’re speaking with an accent. Something isn’t kosher, right? Something about it isn’t kosher. He didn’t want to have to be involved.

JR: The priest’s assistant fellows?

LB: No, no, the baker’s.

JR: Oh, the baker. The baker ran away.
**LB:** He ran away. He ran away because he didn’t want to be involved in that. That was too strange for him.

**JR:** So after he showed you?

**LB:** Then he left and the priest asked, “What are you here for? What can I do for you? What is it that brings you here?” And we said, “We just escaped from a train nearby,” and his answer was, “Oh, yes. They come by here 3 times a week.” You know that. “So what can I do for you?” He let us in and we smelled to high heaven. You can imagine coming out of that putrid cattle car with the human waste on our arms from the twisted thing. We couldn’t, I couldn’t stand my own odor, my condition. I had to do it. That was—meant freedom. And he looked at us and he could smell us. There was no doubt about that. We were, we were obvious, and the priest says, “Fellows,” he says, “before we talk, why don’t you go to the bathroom, a small bathroom in the back there, and use some soap and water. Clean up a little bit.” A nice human gesture. In the camp, they didn’t have soap and water. Then we came out of the bathroom. There was another point of light. Humanity. Humaneness. On his small stove in the kitchen, there was a pot of milk boiling for us, I remember. We didn’t have water, let alone milk, and on his table, he put on a platter with some fruit and cheese and bread. And then he sat down and says, “Let’s talk. You escaped from that train?” “Oh, yes. I know, we did this. Would we be able to spend the night here? We want to run in the, to the country—to the countryside as prisoners.” Our heads were shaved. Of course, we wore berets, but still.

He says, “I can let you stay here for the night, but between 5 and 6, you’ve got to leave here because the patrols come by here regularly every day to check us out. Ostensibly, they just want to walk in and have a cup of coffee, a glass of wine or have a chat, but they’re checking. Their eyes are all over the place.” These are the Germans. “You’ve got to be out of here by that time. If not, you’re in danger.” What he really meant to say and I’m in danger, too, because sheltering you puts me into the same category. He put us into a bed. Girls, I’ve never slept such a nice night. You can hardly imagine the total metamorphosis from that cattle train to that bed. Crisp white sheets. A down comforter. A wide, large bed. And for the night, fell asleep immediately. And then this priest in the morning came to our bed and whispered, “It’s time to get up. Time to get up.” We didn’t feel like getting out of that bed. It was cloud nine. You can just visualize that. And then he had breakfast for us and had an envelope with a letter of recommendation to another priest some miles away, maybe some 20, 30 kilometers away.

And we arrived at that priest’s sacristy early afternoon the next day, and on the same day after that we woke up the next day from the day before. And he read this letter from his colleague, another priest, who says, “Yes, I can let you stay here.” He didn’t have a bed for us, but he had a little stable next to his little church farm. He had a stable. In that stable were 2 cows, and he took
fresh straw and put it between the 2 cows. There was about a distance about [indistinct] and Manfred and I stretched out on that straw and we slept between two cows. I often say, “Who would look for two fellows running away between two cows in a stable—Jewish boys running?” We felt safe and secure and sheltered, yes, and I like to say the manure didn’t bother us, either. It was like perfume more or less when I think of it today, you know, because it brings back good, warm memories. The psyche works. You know, there was once a book written. It was a bestseller and I was in the book business so I know that. You Are What You Eat.

JR: Oh, my friend’s reading that right now.

LB: Is that so?

JR: I was just reading some of that last night.

LB: And there was two other books printed at the same time. One was called Sugar Blues and the other one was called Killer Salt. Killer Salt, Sugar Blues and You Are What You Eat. And when I’m telling you this, our emotional, psychological makeup is a sum total of what we experience. Isn’t that true? So when I’m telling this story, the olfactory senses come right back, and I can still smell that manure although at that time, it was more like perfume. It was a good feeling that it is connected with that situation.

So, we spent the night with that fellow. The next day, he had an envelope with us with two train tickets to Paris. Would you imagine that? We didn’t ask questions and questions didn’t matter. We did not exchange names or ask questions. The deed spoke louder than any names, and names were not exchanged for a simple reason. The less you know, the better you are. If you get arrested and get tortured for whatever reason, you are liable to blurt out with a name. If you don’t know it, we can’t blurt out or we could give a false name. The less you know in a situation like this about somebody else you’ve helped, the better you’re off, but the help was important. If we would have asked him, “Where did these tickets come from?”, it must have been some networking, right? I’m sure he would not have given us the answer. That was a useless question and you learned questions do not—do not ask questions because you will not get the answer and it endangers you. We arrived in Paris. We stayed a couple of weeks in Paris, got some—we got a new set of false papers. My aunt who lived in Paris in hiding, she said, “Stay in Paris.” I didn’t want to stay in Paris because of—in northern France, we would have had to wear the star. In going back to Vichy, France, we didn’t need to wear the star. Also, I had left a girlfriend in the area there, some papers and documents and some clothing with my friends before I left for Switzerland. And after Switzerland was October. This is already—has already gone into November and December now.

JR: This is 1942?
LB: ‘42. A new set of false papers. We crossed into the southern zone and I was arrested in Vichy, France, and sent to prison, and I was sentenced to a year in prison for abandoning my assigned residence. Abandoning my assigned residence. This is the document, my prison document. When we were back in France in 1999, we visited the prison where I was and the director of the prison asked one of his guards to give me a copy of my record. And I was arrested and sent to prison and sentenced for abandoning my assigned residence. Remember the mayor had notified us--

AKJ: Yeah.

LB: And I ran away from that residence and fled to Switzerland. Well, I was not allowed to run away. Abandoning assigned residence, I was sentenced to 1 year in prison, and when you get 1 year in prison, you get a quarter of that year—meaning 3 months—off automatically for good behavior.

JR: Did you get those 3 months?

LB: Plus two days because after my trial, I escaped from the police and two days later I was back in prison. They had caught me again.

TT: [laughs]

LB: That was another escape. I had 7 escapes all total.

AKJ: What were the prisons like?

LB: The prison was I was sentenced to, and I served nine months and two days because I was absent that one full month in solitary confinement, be punished for having escaped. I was on dry bread and, and tea for just a small week. I did some drawings there, passed my time. Prison was, like my escape was, as I say, a term I used, it was exhilarating. Prison was stressful for one reason. The main reason why is—prison is, you sit and have nothing to do while you—they gave me paper and say I could do some things, and I would doodle. However, I was assigned—a lawyer was assigned to my case and he told me, “You’ll be better off in prison than on the street. On the street as a Jew, you can get arrested, sent away, deported again. However, in prison, you are off the street.” And my answer to him was, “Yes, barrister, that is true. But if one of the Germans”—Flo, somebody at the door. Flo.

I said, “But, if a German officer of the garrison”—they had garrisons in these French towns—“or one of the militia, the French police, gets killed by a resistance fighter.” You know what they
did? They went to jail. I think about 50 hostages, too. They shoot them in reprisal. I said to my lawyer, “What if they kill somebody in this town of Tarbes?” —where I was. Tarbes, that’s where the prison was, the jail. T-A-R-B-E-S.

JR: Mhmm.

LB: In southern France also, near the Pyrenees. I’ll be a sitting duck here if something that happens in town and they come to jail and pick out 50 people, it’s the Jews, the Communists, the resistance, the Socialists, whoever. But, fortunately, that’s why it was stressful for those 9 months. Then the final month came and I was released in September. When August came, I made myself a grill—a grid on the wall and counted the days, and every day—it was a game to know that the day had passed and nothing happened in town where they would come to prison and pick out hostages. That was stressful. Those nine months were really stressful. And two days. After prison, I wasn’t free. I was taken to a forced labor camp and I was in that forced labor camp called Septfonds, S-E-P-T-F-O-N-D-S.

JR: So that’s still France because—

LB: Septfonds. I was there for 1 month and then October of 1943, we were notified that 14 of us will be taken—that’s what they told us ostensibly—to a work detail on the west coast of France to build fortifications. I was there from September to October, 1 month in that camp of Septfonds. My friend, Manford, came to visit me at Septfonds. He found out where I was because I had written to him from jail and I had let him know where I was. He came there and I committed his address to memory because we couldn’t write down anything. And he says, “If you ever manage to escape, let me know. I can help you out with a lot of things.” He had already—Manford had come back from, he had escaped with me, as you know, from the train. Then we went to Paris. Paris, we cross to the south. He left me to rejoin his brother who he had left in town before he was deported.

JR: And then, and then you got arrested?

LB: What?

JR: And then you got arrested?

LB: And I got arrested, but he was free, so he found out where I was, came to visit me in Septfonds. I committed his address to memory. He says, “If you ever escape again, let me know and I can help you,” and that was it. I was taken with 13 others, 14 of us, by train to the train station of Toulouse. They had told us we were go to build fortifications. Now, girls, I’m not one to build fortifications, am I? Do I look to you like I can build fortifications? I also had a hernia
that was never repaired, 4 years running with a hernia. I had fashioned a truss for myself. I took an old sock and put other socks into it and tied knots around it and then I tied it around my groin so that when the bulge, the hernia came up, it should be pressed and painful, very painful, but it helped. I was taken on that train to Toulouse, and in Toulouse, we were going to change trains or get further down to Baldonia, the coastal area, and in Toulouse, there was a standing train this time. I escaped from that train.

**JR:** Huh.

**LB:** A standing train. Now—

**JR:** So before it left from the Toulouse station?

**LB:** Toulouse station, yes. It was standing there waiting to either board another train or wait for the track to become free for traffic. I escaped. Now this, to me, was the most unusual, the funniest moment, because if I had been a guard there—we were 14 of us and we had 4 guards. One guard was named Kaufmann. He was from Alsace Lorraine, spoke French with a very heavy German accent, and he also knew German. From time to time, I spoke to him in German. Then we had developed a Stockholm syndrome. When you’re in camp, you become acquainted with your guard. That labor camp was not—we were not being tortured. We were just worked to death, but, you know, and small talk. He gave us the news about the war, how the war’s progressing, and Kaufmann, when we were in that, in that train before we got to Toulouse, from Septfonds to Toulouse, we were sitting there and he said to me, “Hey, you’re not escaping this time,” because my story was already known. They must have followed me. My escapes had been part of my record. I said, “Mr. Kaufmann,” jokingly—that was the Stockholm syndrome—“you know, whether I escape or not does not depend on you. That depends on me.”

**AKJ:** [laughs]

**LB:** Jokingly, “And besides, would you, can you blame me to want to be free?” And you know what he said to me? “No, I can’t. I really can’t, but go because,” but he knew he had a gun so he might as well play along with me. I didn’t even know whether that gun was loaded. Some of the French guards, I think the Germans even allowed them to have loaded guns in case they shoot, revolted against them or whatever, but whatever it is. “No,” I said, “It depends on me,” and why was it a funny situation? [looks at watch] I’m running over time, so now [indistinct]. Why was it funny? Do you know the old European trains where you walk into a compartment, each has a separate compartment?

**JR:** Well, you can’t walk through them.
LB: You can’t. There’s a corridor, yes, but the compartments are separate. There’s a corridor in front of them, but you walk into the train. The train may have 8 different doors to walk into, the old trains, they had—and each led into a compartment. Now there were 4 guards, right? We were 14 of us. Wouldn’t it seem logical for one of the guards to come into the train to see what’s going on in the train? Logical, right?

JR: I think so.

LB: I would think so. All 4 guards stood in front of the train so that no one would walk out. I had a friend there who I had met in the camp at Septfonds. His name was Werner and he had his family living nearby. He told me that. He was arrested, sent to camp. The family, wife and children nearby. I said, “Werner, I can get out of this train. You coming with me?” He says, “No.” I said, “Why not?” He says, “Well, if they catch me, I finally get taken out. My family.” You know, when you have a family connection with you, it’s very hard to make decisions. If I had been with my family in that cattle train, I would not have escaped because you don’t abandon family. But he had that situation.

I said, “Werner, you coming with me?” He says, “No.” “Fine,” I said. “If you go—you can’t come with me, you know what you do for me? You stand by this window and look outside. If one of these guards decides to come in, give me a sign, just let me know. In the meantime, this is what I’m going to do.” I walked to the other side of the train and let that window down, took my beret, actually I wore it and as I got out of the window, it fell off and I picked it up and put it on again. And I was familiar with the Toulouse train station. I had been there before. So I said to him, “I will go out the back window. After I drop down, go back and close that window again,” and he did. I went down. On the parallel track—this was a passenger train that we were in—on the parallel track there was a freight train standing. I got under that freight train, crawled underneath to the next platform, went my way downstairs to the luggage department because I was familiar with it, and in the luggage department I made out like I had—oh yeah. I had asked my friend Werner before we got on the train because his wife came there to say goodbye to him in Septfonds. I said, “If she’s in the train station, why don’t you go ask her”—I gave him the money. I had some cash. I said, “Ask her to go and buy a train ticket.” He says, “You don’t need a train ticket. You’re going free.” I say, “No, I want to have that train ticket because if I run away, I need a train ticket,” because in the French train stations when you exit the train station, you have to show that you have a passenger ticket. If not, you have traveled for free. You could have been traveling for free, and I knew that.

So I had that train ticket with me. I went into the luggage department. I made out like I’m looking for luggage. I say, “I’m looking for my luggage,” and he said to me something in French, “All the luggage is not here yet from the last train. You may have to wait a while.” So I said, “Okay, I’ll wait a while,” and there was a door leading to the outside. I walked out and I
was in Toulouse. And a few weeks later, I was hiding out with a Jewish family. They were hiding, too. I contacted my friend Manfred. He sent me a set of false papers including a birth—

**AKJ:** Birth certificate.

**LB:** A birth certificate. And my birth certificate was, here it was, really looked so—I don’t think I have it here—looked so original that I could have been a Frenchman today if I wanted to, and that’s the way I survived. This was my third… the…Dumond, Boucher, and the last one was Lefevre. My last papers were Lefevre, and I joined up with a parallel military French group and I looked like a Frenchman. And I—they were like the Boy Scouts. That was the Vichy young man group. They went to Germany for work and they collaborated, but I just wore the uniform as a cover. With that uniform I could walk into a train, into a bus, and travel freely. I could walk, I could go into a movie and not have to pay. Like here, the Boy Scouts. And I was assigned, I joined with the French underground, joined up with the French underground through the intermediary of my friend Manfred. His brother knew somebody and he sent me to that person and I joined. You had to have a recommendation. You had to have a reference. Joined with the French underground and I was assigned to the city of Limoges in south central France, L-I-M-O-G-E-S, and on the 8th of May, 1944, almost exactly a day, exactly to the day that I went into the hospital in effort to have my hernia repaired. That was on the 9th of May, 1940. This was on the 8th of May, 1944. I collapsed in the streets of Limoges with a ruptured hernia, all the stresses and the running and everything. That never gets better. I collapsed in the streets. I started vomiting very heavily. I lay on a park bench. I had nothing left but bile. I lay on a park bench violently ill when a woman walked by, another woman. There was—my mother sent me away and there was that woman in the train who encouraged me. There’s a woman who walks by and says, “Young man, you had too much to drink. Too much, wine—that’s why you’re puking now.”

I said, “No. I have a hernia and I cannot push it back. I managed, but I can’t. I’m in pain.” “If you have a hernia,” she says, “you need a hospital. I’m going to call an ambulance.” I said, “No, I don’t want to go to the hospital. I can’t go to the hospital.”

**AKJ:** Because they would have known.

**LB:** I’m Jewish. I had false papers. I can be discovered to be a Jew on the operating table. I don’t have to clarify that. That goes without saying. In France, they do not circumcise little boys. But here it is. I was taken to the hospital. This woman had called the ambulance and the surgeon the next day told me—I was operated on—“If that woman hadn’t called the ambulance, you wouldn’t be here.” A hernia, a ruptured hernia, develops into gangrene and that is fatal. That is when the membrane that holds the intestine ruptures and goes into your groin and gets caught.
The blood cannot flow, and the blood doesn’t flow, it’s poison. He says, “She saved your life.” Never knew her name.

And the next morning, the 9th of May, 1944, I was 23, I woke in my hospital bed after my operation. I cannot even remember being—I was put into an ambulance and they immediately anesthetized in the ambulance with ether. I cannot remember anything, being undressed, repaired, anything like that. The next morning, I woke in the hospital bed and a voice whispers into my ear. That was the most startling moment in a situation where I also was the most vulnerable in a hospital bed under the control of others, being Jewish with false papers. I’m trapped here. I can’t go anywhere. And this voice tells me, “As long as I’m in this room, in this ward”—there were some maybe 20 other patients in that ward—“As long as I’m in this ward,” the voice tells me, “you have nothing to fear. I am your nurse and my name is Jeanne d’Arc.”

Joan of Arc, a nun. Hospitals in France are 90 percent Catholic hospitals, and the staff are nuns who are nurses. “You have nothing to fear.” Can you imagine what that meant to me at that moment? She adjusted my hot water bottle, a hot water bottle at my feet. “Are you comfortable?” and she came back and she consoled me. “You have nothing to fear.”

And then in ’98 when I wrote my memoir, wrote my narrative, and I wrote about this, I get all choked up. I said, “Flo,” I said to my wife, “Why do I need this? Why do I need this? I’m torturing myself. Who needs this? Why do I have to relive the whole thing?” She said, “Leo, you’re not giving up, are you? You know what you do now? You write to that hospital and find out if they know whatever happened to Sister Jeanne d’Arc.” I said, “Flo, that’s 54 years.” “What do you got to lose? A stamp?”

I wrote to the hospital and I got an answer after 54 years. Yes, Sister Jeanne d'Arc. They gave me her last name which I had never known before. “Sister Jeanne d'Arc Sardin”—S-A-R-D-I-N—“was with us till 1965. The last address known to us is Maison St. Joseph”—the house of St. Joseph in the city of Castre in southern France not far from Toulouse—“She’s there in a retreat for aging nuns”—she was already in her 90s then—“Write to her. Here’s the address. Good luck.” And I wrote and got an answer from Sister Jeanne d’Arc. In 1999, when Flo and I decided to go to France, I wanted to show her the places where I had been hiding, the jail where I was in prison, the jail where I was confined, they let us go in and take pictures and made me that document as you saw, and we went to visit Sister Jeanne d’Arc in that retreat.

That was some get together. That was really something. Sister Jeanne d’Arc and I became good friends. We corresponded. She says, “Nothing will separate us. No big pond, the Atlantic Ocean, will ever separate us now that we know each other.” She was in a wheelchair. She wrote to me. I said, “I remember you when you looked at me with your kind, dark eyes and told me I had nothing to fear.” And she had such a great sense of humor, she had—she answered me, “You know, the way you describe me with my dark eyes, please don't romanticize me because I’m
now an old nun.” [laughs] That’s what she wrote to me. It’s beautiful. We corresponded. She put me in touch with her family. Her family sent me pictures of her when she was a younger nun at the age when I met her, and then one picture of her when she was a child, 11 years old. I got, that’s what they sent me, the family.

**TT:** Can you hold that up? One more time?

**LB:** And she told amazing stories, how she helped children being hidden and they were arrested by the Germans finally, and I wrote about that in the paper after we came back, and a teacher at the [Phillip?] School where she taught French at that time, Linda Pastel. She—she wanted me to come to her class and do a talk for about 20 minutes to her students in French, which I did, and then she took a class picture of those 19 students and sent it to Sister Jeanne d’Arc, and every student wrote a letter to her. Every student. She had told me, the nun, that she was once trying to save children. The Germans came and arrested her. She could never overcome that stigma that she couldn’t save these children. They were entrusted to her and other nuns in another hospital. As I told that story… in 2000, in January of 2000, I received a letter from her. “Dear Leo, my dear Leo, in this new millennium”—the year 2000—“in this new millennium, after so many years, a modern miracle has happened,” she writes to me. “I have been adopted by 19 smiling Jewish Hebrew School students. I have been adopted.” The 19 letters she got. So beautiful.

Last year when we were in Vienna—my book has been translated and I went there because, you know, my book has been translated into German—I received an email from one of her nieces that the good sister had had a stroke and passed away. Something interesting—the day that she whispered those words into my ear, “You have nothing to fear when I’m here,” was the 9th of May, 1944. Jeanne d’Arc was buried on the 9th of May, 2006. Isn’t that a strange coincidence? Her nephew who lives in Paris wrote me a letter and he took a line out of my book and he said, “Those dark eyes that looked at you with kindness in the hospital in Limoges have now been closed for eternity. And we planted a couple of trees in her name in Israel.” Then when he got the certificate, her nephew, that it was planted, he made many copies to give that to other nieces and nephews, and he wrote to me, “My aunt, Jeanne d’Arc, would have loved nothing better than to reclaim the desert by planting trees there.”

There’s another person that was my mother, was my sister, was the woman on the train, was the woman who called the ambulance, then Sister Jeanne d’Arc. Don’t let anybody ever tell you that the women are the weak sex. They’re the strong sex. It’s memories and it has to be told just the way it was, and that’s what I’m doing, basically, is telling it as it was and hoping that you and others who that follow you will be able to make an impact of the story in the future. I hope so. It certainly is one of the stories. I’m just, as I say, a thread in the tapestry of the Holocaust. I’m just a footnote. Every story counts. Spielberg did 58,000 interviews for his Shoal project and when he was finished, he said, “We don’t have them all. The mosaic is not filled yet.” It’s not completed.
But, we will never have it. Some people can’t remember. Some people don’t want to remember. Some people are just not here any longer. But it has to be told the way it was and the way it happened.

And with that, I think, I’m not going to bother you much longer because you have other fish to fry. You probably have some more questions maybe as I, as I—why not tell this whole thing? Do you need any names, any spellings, anything specifically? Well, you can always call me before November to, to, you know, to…

**AKJ:** Let me think. Do you gus—

**LB:** Amber, got any more questions? I know you’ve got them all up there, but you just can’t quite think of them.

**JR:** What happened that day, May 9th, 1944? After she consoled you, you felt better?

**LB:** Well, I was in the hospital for, in fact for 17 days from the 8th to the 25th, and I went out. When I went, left the hospital, I was released from the hospital, I came back for dressings to be changed, which, of course, Jeanne d’Arc did also. She was in charge. She was the head nurse. She did most everything. The dressings were changed. She helped me with that, and that was May already, and on the 6th of June, the landing took place in Normandy. 2 weeks later, the 6th of June, 1944, the Allies landed in Normandy, and all, that was—what do you call it? Elevating, but the deportations didn’t stop yet. They still took place and the war wasn’t finished yet. The war didn’t finish till ‘45.

**AKJ:** What went through your mind when you found out that the Allies had landed?

**LB:** That what? That the Allies had landed? Well, it was excitement. Joy. It was mixed with feelings that I had never known what happened to my mother and sisters. Yes, the Allies had landing. That might be the beginning of the end. The beast will be taken down, you know, the Nazis, but it was mixed with the exuberance. It was mixed with feelings of, “Where is the family?” Now, this has ended, but where and when do I see my family? That was still a puzzle. That is probably something for the next session because that will deal with what happened afterwards. And then I came to America and did not find out, to just give you that one sentence. I came to America in ‘47, but I did not find out the truth, the true for the reality, the reality, the truth that my mother and sisters had been taken to a camp [indistinct] until 1962. 15 years had gone by before I really found out what had happened to my mother and sisters. Up to that moment, there was still uncertainty, and I didn’t start speaking about all this until that time when I had found out what happened to my mother and sisters. I couldn't get myself to relate to it too much because it was unfinished business.
TT: How long—can you—I was curious the year from your first escape to your last escape, how many years?

LB: The first escape—of course, the first escape was through the river into Luxembourg, but the first escape from the train was in November of 1942, and the last escape from the police was, was in, in September of ‘43, and then came one from the train in October of ‘43, so it was over a year.

TT: 2 years?

LB: No, about a year. 11 months.

JR: Your last, your last escape was in Toulouse when you walked off that, that, train?

LB: That’s right. That was in October of 1943 which was 11 months after my, after my first escape from the train.

JR: Did you ever find out—oh, that’s right, of course.

LB: My friend?

JR: I was wondering if you found out what happened to the 13 others on the train.

LB: No. I met Werner, the fellow that I asked to escape with me, later in Limoges and he was taken to a camp and they did some work, but he doesn’t, didn’t elaborate. And he and his family survived.

JR: What do you credit to your ability to escape?

LB: Fear.

JR: Fear?

LB: Yeah.

JR: I mean, like the odds. You said you—5 people escaped from this car with thousands. Is that what you said?

LB: Not escaped. Survived.
JR: Survived.

LB: In the final analysis.

JR: The only 2 who escaped were you and your friend?

LB: And my friend.

JR: Manfred?

LB: Manfred.

JR: So, I mean, I’m sure everyone was scared, you know. Everyone feared. So what, what made you and Manfred special of 2 out of the thousand?

LB: We wanted to—we wanted to try it. We believed the rumors that we heard. Others were resigned. Others went—what was their resignation? They resigned to, “We are getting where they’re taking us and what can they do to us? After all, they’re taking infants. What are they going to do?” They rationalized. If they want to kill us, they could do it right here. And nobody could in the vast imagination figure that they’re going to take us there to be murdered. People wouldn’t want to believe it, but we just—Professor Mark Gilbert who endorsed my book, he told me there was just about 12 reported escape attempts in all these deportations from Alsace.

JR: The 3,000?

LB: Oh, no.

JR: Deportations?

LB: Oh, no. Over 70,000.

JR: Oh, 70,000.

LB: The book has over 70,000, a thousand in each train, 3,000 in one week, but of—there were only about 12 reports of attempted escapes. In fact, I met him and he was here as a scholar-in-residence talking here, and I said to him, “Professor Gilbert, I have your Atlas of the Holocaust. Can you sign it for me?” He says, “Yes.” I said, “In your atlas, you describe 3 escapes, 3 specific transports from Drancy to, to Auschwitz, one on the 4th of November, one on the 6th of November, the other one on the 9th of November.” He says, “Why are you so particularly
interested in these transports?” I said, “Professor Gilbert, I was in the one of the 9th of November—on the 6th of November.” You know what he said to me?

**JR:** He said you were what?

**LB:** He said, “If you were in that transport, how come you’re standing here talking to me?” He says, “There were only about 4 survivors.” I said, “Make me the fifth. I’m not listed as a survivor.” The ones that have survived have a star next to their—asterisk next to their name. My name has no asterisk by mistake. Here, Amber.

**JR:** What a shock that must have been to him.

**LB:** Yes. See, do you see any asterisk here? Can you see any here? They’re far in between because only 2,000 of 76 survived. Right here. You will see some of them. Little dots. There. See one?

**AKJ:** Mhmm.

**LB:** See another one here? You can have a look at this too later. There’s one. See my transport, number 42.

**JR:** 42 out of 70?

**LB:** On this transport number 42, yeah, out of 70.

**JR:** Out of 70.

**LB:** Out of 76. Actually, there were a total of, total—I’ll tell you how many were exactly. [turning pages] 79. 79 transports. 79 transports.

**JR:** So that’s 79,000?

**LB:** Yeah. Whatever, approximately. Some transports had 950, whatever. So whatever that is. But there it is, listed. Look. Transport 773, 1942, 6th of November, 773 gassed on arrival. Another thing, look how bureaucratically that was all marked down here. Look here. The oldest person in all those transports was born in 1849. She was 94 years old. The youngest were children born on the same day they were thrown into a cattle car, often without the mother. 20th century. It’s all marked here by the Germans themselves, and this guy Ahmadinejad said it didn’t happen. It means the Germans invented all these things, right? Now, here’s my name.
**JR:** They invented thousands and thousands of—

**LB:** Yes, they invented. Here’s my name. See this? I’ll show it you. Here’s my name, Leo Bretholz. Leo Bretholz, born in Vienna, 6th of March ‘21. I have no asterisk next to my name. Do you see an asterisk next to my name?

**AKJ:** No.

**LB:** By mistake they forgot, but my friend Manfred, you see here. He has an asterisk.

**JR:** Is that M-A-N-F-R-E-D?

**LB:** M-A-N-F-R-E-D. He has an asterisk. Why? When he, when this book done, he lived in Paris. I was in America. So they must have, before they published this book, sent out messages, “If any of you happen to be a survivor or you know of someone or whatever information you can give us, please come forward.” So he must have let them know, yes, I was in a train and I escaped, so they marked him as a survivor. But I was in America. I am not marked. So they make a mistake, too. Even the Germans can make mistakes.

**AKJ:** Ugh.

**LB:** Well.

**AKJ:** Yeah like, putting bolts on the inside of a train instead of the outside of a train.

**LB:** Well, that, the outside is the Polish. In the east, the Polish trains have it. If you go to the museum ever, you will see, when you see that cattle train, you will refer—you will keep thinking of my story. You see, it was in one of those trains, but look at them. They are bolted on the outside. If that would have been the case, we would not have dislodged these bars, naturally not. But this was—and when we got out of that train, I said to Manfred, next day when we were walking away—we were in that train to Paris. I said to Manfred, “You know what? 30 years from now, if we’re going to talk about this, it will be like a dream.” He said, “Are you crazy?” I said, “What do you mean?” He says, “You’re crazy. How can you think of 30 years from now when we don’t even know what’s happening 3 days from now?” We had no papers. We were walking around with shaved heads.

But I said, “You know what, why I say that? Getting out of that train tells me that nothing like this can ever happen again, and whatever happens, I will probably be able to overcome it because I overcame this situation.” This was the key. This was the… what do you call it?
TT: The crux?

LB: The, the—

TT: That sounds like that was like, the moment.

LB: That was the—you said, that was the crucible.

JR: The crux.

LB: The crux, same as crucible. The crux. This was it, but—Flo?

FB: [indistinct]

LB: Sweetie.

AKJ: We were too enraptured by the stories.

LB: They’re all enraptured.

[End of Interview 2]