National Council of Jewish Women

Sarasota-Manatee Section

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

John Lampel

Supplementary Material

December 17, 1987

Sarasota, Florida

MN: This is Muriel Nathanson, National Council of Jewish Women. I am interviewing Mr. John Lampel as part of the Holocaust taping. Uh. The interview is taking place in his home on December 17, 1987.

John, I want to thank you very much for taking part in the taping, and with your permission, now we will go into...

JL: I will be happy to give you the necessary information.

MN: Tell me a little bit about yourself and your family background. Where were you born?

JL: I was born in Moedling. That’s about six miles from Vienna. That was our summer home.

MN: How do you spell that?

JL: That’s Vienna, Austria. Moedling.

MN: Um. Hum.

JL: And, as soon as I was born, they moved back to Vienna...after a couple of weeks.

MN: And when was that?

JL: I was born in 1920, April...to be exact, April 17, 1920.

MN: Um, hum.

JL: My family had been in the clothing business for fifteen generations back, and we owned two apartment houses and three stores.

MN: In other words, you were a fairly prominent family.

JL: A very prominent family. And, my Dad was also Director in Jewish Affairs in Vienna, and also, he had to do a lot with the Chevra Kaddisha. He made sure that Jews would be...would go on a

MN: The Chevra Kaddisha.

JL: Yes, and he spent a lot of money for those. It was one of his hobbies. And, also, in his neighborhood, he was very...very well recognized for his philanthropic givings to the community, because we did not live in a Jewish district at all.

MN: Oh.

JL: The Jews in Vienna lived in the second district. And we lived in the tenth district, which was mostly...99% now Christian. Plus others...nationalities.

MN: But, you said that your father was very deeply involved in Jewish affairs. What was your connection with them?

JL: Well, I had to go to Temple every Friday night and, I had to go...when I was three years old, I went to the Hebrew kindergarten in Vienna, and I spoke Hebrew fairly well in my younger years. Of course, when I was 13, I became Bar Mitzvah.

MN: This is the ceremony that took place...

JL: ...took place all over. My Dad also was Vice-President in a Temple.

MN: So, the family was very involved in Jewish activities.

JL: We were very involved. Right. I had to go to Temple every Friday night and I had to go to the Temple every Saturday morning. Even so we had to keep our business open because Saturday was the main business day. And, it was a necessity for survival in our store.

MN: Do you have brothers and sisters?

JL: I have one sister.

MN: And, are you older or younger, or...?

JL: No, my sister is three years younger than I am. As a matter of fact, she was just here this week.

MN: Oh.

JL: From New York, visiting us for a couple of weeks.

MN: As you look back on your growing up, how do you feel your experiences were as, say, compared to other children in the neighborhood, because you did not live in a Jewish neighborhood?

JL: That’s correct. Well, I had two Jewish friends. Most of the others, mostly asked me all questions. Austria is famous for being very anti-Semitic over the years. We felt anti-Semitism even when there weren’t...I became ten years old..when I was ten years old, a decision had been made if I am eligible to go to the Real Schule gymnasium. Is it familiar?

MN: Yes.

JL: Or to the regular trade school to become a carpenter, or whatever. And, I was always an A-1 student, so I took the test for high education, and, at the first take, I flunked out completely.

MN: Oh, my.

JL: Nothing. My mother was a very good friend of the Director from high education, and she said, “That’s impossible.” So, I took the test over again in the Fall, and I passed 100%. This test.

MN: Um, hum.

JL: At this time, only two Jewish students could go to class at one time a semester. That’s all there was to it. Only two.

MN: Only two.

JL: Only two could go.

MN: Out of a class of how many?

JL: Out of 35. And this was the limit. And, if you didn’t...you know...you just were pushed aside. And, even in school you could feel the anti-Semitism all the time along. The teachers were very mean. The teachers were very nasty. And, I found out, as soon as Hitler came in, in 1938, they all were...they belonged to the S.S. ...and they all belonged to the Brown Shirts. In fact, I’ll never forget, as long as I live, and I was just about 12 years old, we had a chemical experience in class, and we used some sulfur, you know.

MN: Uh, huh.

JL: ...And the professor and one of the students said, “Huh, look at those Jews. They stink up the whole class.”

MN: Huh.

JL: The teacher did not say, “Boo.” Nothing.

MN: And that was long before the Anschluss.

JL: That was...this was in 1932, long before the Anschluss. And, the following year, my friend in class, the other Jewish student, the teacher asked him a couple of questions. He got so upset, that he threw the book...the notebook at him...at the teacher, who was a converted Jew. You know. And, that was the end of him. I was the only Jew in the whole class.

MN: You were the only one at this point.

JL: You had to study. And, you had to study like an idiot. They always give you the final test, when you were Jewish, the last day, so they could see how good or how bad you were, and you really had... And it was tough. But, I survived.

MN: So, you really grew up in an atmosphere of...

JL: ...In an atmosphere you could feel it all. No matter when it is. But, there again, when I was 14 years old, I left the Real Schule Gymnasium, and because my Dad was the Vice-President, in the clothing industry, and he wanted me to take over his business one day, I had to learn design, tailoring, quality control to run his business one day. Because he was a master tailor.

MN: Um, hum.

JL: They called him that. He was a master designer. We had a very successful business operation, and he wanted me to take over. He wanted me to be a man one day. Anyhow, so I had to go to the school of design, tailoring and business in Vienna for two years. After two years, I got my degree as an apprentice, and then I finished my apprenticeship, and, this was in 1936. Then, I had to go to somebody else to learn, for one year, to get my master tailoring - whatever you call it - O>K>

MN: Um, hum.

JL: Then, in the meantime, at night, I went to the Matura School, which is gymnasium at night, because I want to get the Matura just the same, my graduation.

So, in 1938, just before I was able to get my degree, Hitler came on March 13, 1938, and that is the last I was able to go to school, because no Jew was allowed to go to school after this.

MN: After that, after March.

JL: After March. Right. He kicked us out immediately. Immediately, the following day, when you walked in the street, they spat on you, because people I know for many years, they just...you know...they didn’t care who you were. They just pushed you around. And, we went...even people we used to go to the grocery store with there for so many years...with these people. Now they all liked us very much before Hitler came, but they were afraid to deal with Jews...with Jews because they were afraid they were going to lose their business. They were going to now get blackmailed. So, they sold us bread and milk being we had to go in the back door, you know, sneak in, before we got our food rations, finally. My Dad went to the barber every single day, for thirty years the same barber. Next day, when Hitler came, he went to get his shave, he said to him, “He doesn’t shave Jews.” I remember this, and, after two days, when Hitler marched in to our store came one of those business managers, and he took over our store. He said to my Dad, he says “As of today you get the same salary what you paid your highest paid employee.” So, the following day, I came to the store early in the morning, as I usually did, and he said, and the business manager said, “You come in the store one more time, and I will blow your head off.” And he put the gun on me. I will never forget that. So...

MN: Did they allow your father to continue though? He continued to work, but you were no longer allowed.

JL: No. My mother couldn’t go in the store either and she worked constantly in the store, because my Dad did all the buying. Um, hum. Well, anyhow, things got pretty bad in Vienna, so one day I decided I shall go to the American Embassy and apply for visa, because we had some distant relatives in New York - Lampels, which emigrated many, many years ago. And, I wrote to...and I took the phone book from New York, and I wrote to fifteen Lampels, and one answered me.

MN: And he was a relative?

JL: And, he was a distant relative, second cousin of some kind, and he said he would not be able to help at the present time because in 1929 depression, he lost all his money. But his cousin, Mr. Straus, is also a fifth cousin of mine. He is an attorney in New York and he made over 8 million dollars in the Depression and he will be able to help you and the family to get out eventually. O.K. Anyhow, things in Vienna got worse by the day. They picked me up at 2 o’clock in the morning to do some work for them.

MN: “They,” who is “they?”

JL: The Nazis. Yeah, they came and picked me up at 2 o’clock in the morning. They picked up my Dad and another time they picked my Dad up and myself to the police station, about 4 o’clock in the morning and they only wanted to sign that my Dad should give them the house and the business - write it over to them. Dad just refused to do it. They always threatened...the police always threatened they were going to beat the heck out of him. it was fortunate that they didn’t touch him.

MN: These were the Austrian police?

JL: They were the Austrian police.

MN: Working in cooperation with the Nazis.

JL: You see, my Dad did so many things for those people, so they didn’t want to hurt him too much...too badly. They tried...but, with the S.S. over there, the Brown Shirts, I guess they had to follow through their orders. Anyhow, in August, it got so bad that my Dad got a phone call from one of the Nazis, I don’t know...from his friendly Nazis...that I have to leave within half an hour, or else they are going to pick me up to a concentration camp.

MN: Now, this was August, 1939.

JL: This was August...no August 1938. And they also...my cousin, who was an attorney then in Vienna. His name was Dr. Hahn, and he was 38 years old then. He was a very close friend of my family and my Dad called him up and told him about it, and we both packed and left immediately.

MN: You and your cousin?

JL: Ya. We left immediately, and we caught the late train to Germany. Of course, we had Austrian passports, which were not good at this particular time, but they were valid - put it this way. So, the following day, we arrived in Germany, and we tried to cross the border into Germany, but before we did so, my cousin, being an attorney, went to the judge in Frankfurt, Germany, to see if we could get German passports, because if you had German passports, you could cross into France or Switzerland very easily. Um, hum. Well, he told him, he said he wouldn’t give any passports to lousy jews, but he says, “Go to Gestapo headquarters and tell them that they should advise you how you can cross the border.”

MN: To Gestapo headquarters?

JL: Well, what have you got to lose? So, we went to Gestapo headquarters, and the guy told us, “We give you half an hour. Get our or get shot.”

MN: Why were you trying to go through Germany, rather than go directly to France or Switzerland?

JL: Well, we tried to, but, you know, Austria has not border. Only borders on Switzerland. We were told it is better to go into France or Switzerland easily, you know. It was very difficult. It was easier to cross over there because all the Austrian border was closed altogether.

MN: I see.

JL: There was no way you could get in there. Well, anyhow, the guy told us he is going to shoot us in half and then we don’t get out, but at the same time, he told us another agent, so and so, to see him, and he told us to take a train from Germany into Switzerland. The train goes back to Germany again, and there is a certain station, the train slows down. Not a station exactly, it was a junction, but they have to crisscross over somehow. I can’t remember the name any more, and when the train is going to stop over there, more or less, you just jump off.

MN: In Switzerland?

JL: Yah, in Switzerland, and just pray to God that the guy is a German, not a Swiss, so he is going to let you board the next train. But, what he forgot to tell us, we had both valises we had our underwear and all our possessions in that one big valise. He forgot to tell us that the valise gets locked in.

MN: Oh, you can’t get your baggage!

JL: We couldn’t get our baggage. So, we came to the c rossing and Swiss was over there. he felt sorry, I guess, for my cousin and myself, and he let us go in the train which went to Zurich.

MN: Um, hum.

JL: But now we had absolutely nothing.

MN: No passport, no...

JL: No, we had our passports.

MN: No clothes.

JL: No clothes. Nothing. We just had what we carried ourselves. It is a good thing it was summer. So, we finally got into Zurich. It was great. We looked at the phone book, looked for the address of the Jewish Federation in Zurich, and we just were about to enter - to pick up the door handle of the Jewish Federation, when we got picked up by the Swiss police - my cousin and myself. he says, “Where are your papers.” I showed him my passport. And...well...we didn’t have a visa, so they send us back.

MN: To Germany?

JL: Yah. See. So, when we got to Germany, so the Germans...you know...they stamped us “Refused Entry.” So a German goes ahead and whips out our passport. O.K.? So, anyhow, we get into Switzerland somehow...somehow we managed to get back into Switzerland again.

MN: How was that...How did you manage?

JL: Well, you know we were so close to the border. We crossed the border again.

MN: You crossed the border.

JL: And, of course, we got arrested. And, the police picked us up, and, we were put in ... for 24 hours, in ... (how do you call this?) confinement.

MN: Confinement. Solitary confinement?

JL: Solitary confinement, yes. And interrogated, and then I ripped the passport up. I destroyed the passport and was not supposed to do it. And, they are going to treat us as spies, and so on and so forth. O.K. After 24 hours, they let us...they put us in another jail with other prisoners for one other week, and, what are you going to do?

MN: Were these political prisoners like yourselves, or were they, uh...

JL: No, they were all different prisoners. Some were refugees, some were not, I have no idea, but most of them were murderers, gangsters, all kinds of criminals. I was only 18 years old. Anyhow, after about 3 days, someone of the Jewish community heard that my cousin and I are in prison. So, this guy owned a stocking factory in Zurich, very well-to-do man, and he says, “Well, he could help me to stay in Switzerland if I become Yeshiva butcher.”

MN: In other words, if you go to...

JL: ...a Yeshiva in Zurich...

MN: In other words, a religious school in Zurich.

JL: ...they would pick me up. My cousin said, “No way. We came here together. He is responsible for me. This is what he promised my parents, and I am going to stay here.” So, after 8 days in the Swiss prison system, the Swiss dropped us off at the French border, at the Maginot Line. O.K. Well, my cousin spoke French fairly fluently. I also studied French. I had a tutor in Vienna, I studied French in the Vienna school, in the gymnasium. So, anyhow, we managed to go into France about 8 kilometers. Mind you, we had no...

MN: You had nothing.

JL: We had nothing. And, we evaded on police. But the second police, we just couldn’t. We didn’t have any money. That was the whole problem. Uh, huh. They finally picked us up. And, the French said, “Um, um.” They sent us back to Switzerland again. So we spent another night in one of the prisons. And, then they told us, “Now, look, if you come back one more time, we are going to put you in the Tzuchthouse,” which means in English, in the crazyhouse.

MN: Oh.

JL: So, what are you going to do? It was interesting. Anyhow, the following day they dropped us off somewhere else in the Maginot Line, in a different area, in a different spot.

MN: I didn’t realize that the Maginot Line came all the way down to the Swiss border. We only knew of...

JL: See, they dropped us...the Swiss took us somewhere... We went by motorcycle, after that point, I forget how many miles, and by train...maybe I should have mentioned to you that they took us to the French border by motorcycle and by train before we got there. Anyhow, they dropped us off a second time behind the Maginot Line, somewhere, so we managed to enter about 10-15 kilometers again, and we got picked up again. Anyhow, after we got arrested, the French took us to jail in Mulhouse...Mulhouse, France, and we were there will all different types of prisoners - murderers, gangsters. And, they had a trial. We were vagabonds, because we entered France illegally, without any money. O.K. And, so we get a sentence of four weeks. After two weeks, we...

MN: Where were you sentenced for four weeks? To jail?

JL: In Mulhouse, France. Yeah, to jail, because we were illegal immigrants, illegal. We entered France illegally, and we had no money. So, we were a bunch of vagabonds. So, being transferred to a different prison, the mayor of Mulhouse happened to be Jewish. My cousin and I didn’t realize. When he saw us, he felt sorry for us when he saw us passing by, in chains...you know...there was machine guns all over us...and guns and all.

MN: Chains?

JL: Oh, yes, we were chained to everybody else, you know. And, he felt sorry for us. After our jail term was over, after four weeks, somehow he sent us to Besancon, that is about...I don’t know exactly how many miles it was from the border, and there he recommended us to a Jewish family, who somehow took care of us. The name was Ulman...the Ulman family...and they were in the watch manufacturing business. Just about 12 miles from the Swiss border, but way inland, you know. And, Mrs. Ulman happened to be a cousin to Leon Blum, the Premier of France at this particular time, and they were a very, very wealthy family and they were very nice to us. They put us up in a cold-water flat. A big apartment building, which, if you don’t where you were you would get absolutely lost. You know, it was like a...

MN: Um, hum.

JL: And they supplied us with three meals a day, breakfast, lunch and dinner. But, we didn’t have a penny in our pocket. My parents didn’t know for six months if I was alive or dead. There was no communication whatsoever. After the end...Finally I got a job in one of the stores as a...to arrange the window arrangements in a clothing store, and also to do some tailoring and some design work. We got special permission, but, every week we were living in France, the police...the French police came to our house and said they are going to send us back to Germany. We are here illegal, and we have to call our friend, the Ulmans, even at one o’clock in the morning, and the police prefect gave us always an extension. We had a special booklet which called...the French called it “recipe book” which had about a hundred pages, and each time they gave us another week permission to stay in France.

MN: And they wrote it in that book.

JL: They wrote it in that book. We got an extension all the time and we...they always threatened to send us back.

MN: Those were the only papers you had.

JL: They were the only papers we had. And our passports, which was damaged by the Germans. Well, anyhow, in the meantime, things got very bad in Austria and Germany, especially in September, when in the Fall, they shot the German ambassador. Remember? When they had the Kristallnacht in Vienna. And, I understand my parents were, you know, got frightened. They were in bad shape. I understand my Dad had a nervous breakdown which he was never sick in his life. And, I spoke to the Ulmans. I had to go help them. And Mrs. Ulman got a visa for my parents to come to France, and my sister.

MN: Now, this was November of 1938.

JL: 1939. It was ‘39 now. I was almost a year in France. O.K. And, my parents were able to leave Austria. In the meantime, they shipped all their belongings to France, which were confiscated by the...somewhere...they...the stuff never arrived. In the meantime, my parents left Austria sometimes in November 1939 via Italy. They had to climb the mountains, but they finally somehow got to France and we were reunited. O.K. Sometimes in 1939, things got bad in France, because there was the threat of war, you know with France and Germany, and all male inhabitants that were of German, Austrian or not-French origin were interned. So, I was...my Dad and I were sent to an internment camp in Lengers in France. This camp was a miserable place. It was a converted barn...for horse...horse barn... It was stables. There was no hot water. There was just a fountain, like a ... you know. If you want to wash yourself, fine. And, the food - minimal. Minimum, you know, you get bread and water, and unfortunately, many people, including my cousin, died in this camp. He was only about 39 years old then. Because a lot of people picked up pneumonia. Only the tough ones survived. I happened to be very fortunate because I had my designer-tailoring background, and I fixed the uniforms for those soldiers who took charge of the camp and for the Commandant. So, I got some extra butter, which I split with my Dad. Um, hum. So, I was able to survive. So, finally, in 1940, my visa came through to come to the United States - or my affidavit - for my mother, for my sister and myself. But, unfortunately, my Dad actually was born in Czechoslovakia, in a small town, in Brusnov. And, this quota was not open to come to the United States. Remember, everybody thought President Roosevelt was a fantastic genius, but because of him 500,000 Jews went down the drain because he couldn’t lift the quota for them. Because they happened to be jewish. I am sure you know that, don’t you? My Dad, unfortunately, was one of those guys. Anyhow, through a miracle I got out from this camp. Even so, I had my papers. They wouldn’t let me go for six or seven weeks, and the fellow that was in charge of this camp had a very good...his former boss was interned in this camp, too. Believe it or not. And he spoke to him to let me go. And, he finally let me go.

MN: Through the intervention of the former boss.

JL: Yah. I was finally able to get out from this camp and I had to go to Bordeaux. Boy, I tell you, what papers I had to get out from there...I had to travel. The train was just unbelievable. So, I finally got to Bordeaux. And, every train from the German border to the coastline was checked. And, police all over the train. I tell you, it was unbelievable. I thought they never would let me go to Bordeaux. But, they finally let me go. As soon as I got to Bordeaux, they put me in another camp. I have to wait until... There was an Army barracks, and I had to wait until my boat would be ready. And, I got interviewed every single day. Every single day they interviewed me. They said, “Is your boat ready? When are you going to leave?” So, finally, the day arrived when - I didn’t have any money any more...

MN: Uh, huh.

JL: So the HIAS finally furnished me with a ticket to come to the United States. That’s a Jewish agency.

MN: HIAS, that’s the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

JL: Fortunately, my mother and sister were able to smuggle out 100 pounds. My mother had it hidden in her petticoat, and so on.

MN: British pounds?

JL: Yah. All she had was 100 pounds, and she was able to get a ticket for herself and my sister. Mine was paid. And, the same day Hitler invaded France, it was on May 10, 1940, I was able to leave from St. Nazaire on the S.S. Champlain to the United States. We were very fortunate...very lucky.

MN: And so, you came to this country. Your mother and your sister...Were your mother and your sister with you on the same boat?

JL: Yah, we were together.

MN: You were together?

JL: Because my Dad was still in the camp. Remember, he was left behind. We tried very had to get him out later on, and, in fact, we spoke to my cousin in New York. his name was Strassler. To see if he could help my Dad.

MN: Strassler was his name?

JL: Strassler was his name, yes. And he was a rich...very well-to-do attorney. And, he dilly-dallied. It was a touchy situation. Unfortunately, when he finally agreed to give me an additional affidavit, my Dad was already killed in a concentration camp. he missed to come to the United States by three days. That’s one of those things.

MN: That’s how close it was.

JL: That’s how close it was. That’s about all I can tell you.

MN: Did you ever have any contact with any of the other people who were in the camp with you?

JL: No, I had none whatsoever. So many disappeared and so many got killed.

MN: But, you are here now and your mother was here, and your sister is still here.

JL: Right. Uh, huh.

MN: Well, I want to thank you very much, John, because that certainly gives us a picture of what it was like for the Jews who were caught.

JL: I have just given you basic...basic...you know, I tried to narrow it down as much as possible to give you just the highlights.

MN: It must have been very difficult in Austria to have everyone turn over night.

JL: This was the biggest problem. It was just unbelievable. Like my friend across the street...they also were in business, pretty large business. He had a car. They took his car the first day. See, we did not have a car because my Dad, in World War I, he fought for the Austrians. He was an officer and he host his hearing in an explosion from a gun, or whatever, so he could never drive.

MN: Even though he was an Austrian officer.

JL: It made no difference. No difference whatsoever.

JL: Have you ever gone back to Vienna?

JL: Yah, I was back. This happened to me, because a clothing designer, I had an international conference in 1968 in Stockholm, Sweden. It also was our 25th wedding anniversary. Esther and the children wanted to see where I was born, and how I left. I didn’t want to go for a long time, but they insisted.

MN: All right. Many people have had a hard time.

JL: Yah, and so we went back. Unfortunately, we only could spend one day in Vienna, because we just got a long distance call that Esther’s father died suddenly. He was sick before, but not...

MN: How did you feel when you came out...when you got to Vienna?

JL: Back to Vienna? Well, what are you going to do? I saw a bunch of Nazis, a bunch of anti-Semites - didn’t change any. And even my brother-in-law and my sister were in Vienna two years ago and said “Things changed quite a bit. They still have anti-Semitism. But, you wouldn’t believe it. Those Jews in business, they are very well to do. They make a lot of money.” Another thing he says, “Vienna used to have 180,000 Jews. Now we only have about 7,000. And half of the 7,000 are Russian Jews, who came to Vienna and they are all in business, and do extremely well, even so they don’t speak German. They just speak Russian. They undersell everybody. It is just unbelievable.” You shut off that thing, no...?

MN: I will now. Well, I want to thank you. This gives us another dimension on what it was like for Jews who were caught in the Holocaust, and I thank you very much.

JL: You are welcome.