

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Leonard Vis
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Leonard Vis, conducted by Ina Navazelskis on November 9, 2008 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Alexandria, VA and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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LEONARD VIS

November 9, 2008

Question: This is a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Leonard Vis**, conducted by **Ina Navazelskis**, on November 9th, 2008, in **Alexandria, Virginia**. Mr. **Vis**, thank you for agreeing to speak with us today, about what happened to you before – what kind of life you had before the Holocaust, during and after. And as we do in all of our interviews, we want to start at the beginning. Could you tell us a little bit about where you were born, your family, your circumstances, how many siblings you had, and so on.

Answer: I can tell you a lot about that, because after all, I'm alive to tell you. I was born on the 16th of September, 1930 in **Amsterdam, Holland**. My family tree goes back to before the French revolution. It's important to mention that, because we as Jews generally are somewhat of an errant nation. But we were very well settled there, we were utterly accultured, and I can truthfully say that Yiddish was fairly unknown to us. I have a brother who was born in 1934, and a sister in 1935. My parents, **Maurice(ph)** and **Francisca**, my father was born in 1895. And then – he still belonged to the 19th century, was rather interesting. And my mother was born in 1901, both in **Amsterdam**.

Q: How did he belong to the 19th century?

A: Because he was born in 1895.

Q: Ah, I see. I thought you meant by the way his world view was, his outlook, his – his –

A: Well, my father wore starched collars, and needed a little hook for the collar to hook into the – into the collar button. So, he wore high boots, with shoes – with the – with shoelaces. Yeah, he was – he – well, he was a product of his time. And he belonged to a very unknown Jewish family. When my mother got engaged to him, people said oh, what a shame that **Francisca** is marrying a non-Jew. But that was mainly because he was not – the family was very small. My mother comes from a very large family. Her maiden name is **Depaauw, d-e-p-double a-u-w**. And they were affiliated with the **Ushers**, which was a very important patrician family in **Amsterdam**. So – and then there was the family of **Souget, s-o-u-g-e-t**, of which there is an extensive family tree in **Jerusalem** at the genealogical institute of the University of **Jerusalem**.

Q: What was the – what was the – what was the world like there? It was – was – were people connected also by professions? That is, did they – did they family's you mentioned also have business interests together?

A: The **Ushers** were in the diamond business. **Souget** was medicine insurance. **Vis** was textile.

Q: Oh, textile.

A: So that was – yeah, that was sort of the – but they were not connected professionally. It was really at – from what I recall, it was really a family affair. I

inherited the wedding banquet photograph of my parents, 1929, November. I lost touch with these people when I was about nine, and yet I could mention – I could name, of the 45 people who were invited, roughly 23 – 43, sorry. Which, for a kid that age – so it was th-th-the – the family impressions that sort of stayed.

Q: What kind of – what kind of childhood do you remember?

A: I had a terrific childhood. I was a st – a single child for three and a half years. I was well liked. I was rather shy, funny enough. But my mother spent a lot of time with me. My mother was sort of a frustrated tomboy, I think. We went swimming together. She compiled lists of auto makes for me. We clipped out **Rupert**, the – the comic strip, **Rupert** the Bear, from the newspaper and made picture books out of it. I was allowed to read the newspaper. The newspaper used to come in in the evening, fall on the mat behind the front door, and I was allowed to read it as long as I was – took – treated it neatly. And of course, I couldn't read at three and a half, but I could make out the pictures that were in there. So I consider that a very good sort of start of I – a sense of literacy. I've always loved reading, I could always be find with a book – be found with a book, and then I went to school at age five. That was a very strange thing. I'm born in September, as I said, and I would not be allowed into the first grade, because I became six on the 16th of September. But as I said, I had a very scrappy mother, who didn't take this lying down, and who interpreted the – the law that you couldn't go into the first grade with age five, as saying that you could enter grade two at age six. There were more mothers like that, and I went to a preparatory

first grade, which was quite wonderful. It must have been expensive, there were all kinds of kids of –

Q: It's a private school.

A: Private school. Kids of reasonably wealthy, middle class families. And it was about that time in 1935 that my mother gave birth to my sister. And I said at that point to my father that I didn't think it was a good idea that I would go on vacation with mother any longer – I was very politically oriented – because she would need all her attention for my little brother, and her newborn baby. And my father said, what do you have in mind? And I said, well, I heard in school there is something like a **kinder pensionne**, a youth hostel for young children. [cough] Excuse me. And I would be very interested in going to a place like that. The kids in school think it's terrific. And my father asked around, colleagues of his in the train, mostly Jewish, and he found a place for me to go to with a colleague of his who needed some extra money, who had a bigger house than he could really afford, and the house was full of kids, and they would have a space for me. So, come the Christmas holidays, my father took me to a town called **Amersfoort**, east of **Amsterdam**. The train was very cold, we did gymnastics, I remember that as of yesterday, in order to stay warm. And –

Q: It must have looked funny having your father do gymnastics.

A: Oh yeah, we were hanging from the luggage racks, and things like that, yeah. And – and it was fun to be together with my father, nobody else on the train. It was a d –

sort of a seminal experience. And I – so we came there, to this wonderful home, which was full of German kids, émigré kids

Q: German Jewish kids.

A: German Jewish kids. Was kosher, the whole place. We had a kosher home. We had – let me go back a bit to the home for a moment, we had the maid, a nanny, a lady for rough work, and a seamstress who came every Tuesday afternoon, because we were not beyond having a patch in our pants. She did the necessary stuff. So that was sort of the household personnel. My mother always did the cooking. She didn't leave that to anybody.

Q: I'm jealous.

A: Well, if you have a kosher home, you don't want to delegate that, necessarily.

Q: That's right.

A: And anyway, they loved to have me there, I – I remember that they gave me my own bed. It was a harmonica bed.

Q: What's a harmonica bed?

A: It's a camp cot that collapses, but it was called a harmonica bed, which I had to make every night. Make my bed, and take off my bedding in the morning, fold it up nicely. I was only five, yeah. And so I – or was I six? No, I think I was five. And I had to place this bed between two sliding doors. Much later I realized that these people didn't have any space for me, that the harmonica bed was sort of an expediency. That the place between two sliding doors sort of

happened to be, and they could use the money. But that didn't detract from the fun of the situation, had a wonderful two weeks there.

Q: So ye – wa – did they have this sort – **kinder pensionne** in – in this pla – had they already organized it and it had been fully booked, and that's why there had been no place, and you came in kind of late, as a registration?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Yeah, okay.

A: Well, it wasn't really a registration, the place was packed with these refugee children, and when my father talked to Uncle **Jacques**, whatever his name is, wife was **Judith**, he said, yeah, we c – we can handle that. You know, this kind of thing. And there was nothing terribly formal about it, but they took me in. And they were wonderful, they loved kids. And there was an old grandmother who was also very good with kids, and of course there was a whole stratum of kids; I was the youngest. The next oldest was seven, which is a yet – humungous difference.

Q: And did you talk to these kids who were refugee kids much, about where they had come from, and did the adult world in any way –

A: Nobody spoke about these things, the kids – kids are kids, they're – they're interested in – in the here and now, not in the hereafter, and in the world to come, or what have you.

Q: So, there was no talk about we had to leave **Germany** and had something like that –

–

A: No, no, everybody tried to speak Dutch as well as they could, and they – we had Shabbas services, and you know, made kiddush at night, for a Friday night. I don't remember going to shul, but that didn't –

Q: How long did you stay there?

A: Two weeks.

Q: Just two weeks?

A: Yeah, my Christmas vacation.

Q: Okay.

A: And –

Q: Why does that stay in your memory, this two weeks, out of – out of –

A: I became **Monopoly** champion at five.

Q: Oh my.

A: Yeah. I don't know how I did it, but I was pretty good at it. And – oh yeah, and I remember – no, that was in a – in a autumn vacation later on, we learned to gather mushrooms, which was important, I liked mushrooms. Chanterelle especially. And so that was the Christmas vacation, went back to school, and in the f – summer of – I was that – I turned – no, I turned six in the meantime, yeah, so I was six when I went there. And then I went to second grade, private school. Same grade, same school that **Marion Pritchard** went to. We had the same head of the – head of the school. We had the same lady who taught us carpentry and stuff.

Q: Amazing.

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your father, what kind of business was he in?

A: He was the representative for a textile firm in the eastern part of **Holland**.

Q: Okay.

A: And his area of operations was essentially the western provinces.

Q: A Dutch textile firm, or –

A: Dutch textile firm, yeah, yeah.

Q: Dutch textile firm, okay. So he was a salesman?

A: His father had that agency already, and my father was very proud, and he said, you know, **Vis** and Sons, since 1888.

Q: Wow.

A: So it had been in the family for quite some time. I have a telephone book of **Amsterdam** in 1915, and both my grandfathers had telephone, which in those years was rather unusual.

Q: Very unusual.

A: Yeah. My grandfather on my mother's side was in the diamond business.

Q: Did you have any contact with non-Jewish Dutch families in any significant way?

A: Oh yeah, I went – I went to a mixed school, you know –

Q: I see.

A: – the school was du – it was a – it was a private school, but it was open to everybody, there was no –

Q: So, it wasn't a Jewish school, it wasn't a Jewish –

A: No, absolutely not.

Q: Yeah, okay.

A: No. But I was always off on Saturday morning. In those years schools were working – were operating on Saturday morning, so I never went to school. I did have – and – and the only thing that they graded you on that was done on Saturday morning was singing. So, every quarter I had to sing very privately, but in public, a song on which I was being graded. And I remember having the street smarts to sing a patriotic song, so that nobody could accuse me of either being too Jewish, or too whatever. I –

Q: Or not Dutch enough.

A: Or not – yeah. I – I sang a song that was sort of the exhilaration of Dutch passion.

Q: Did you like the song?

A: Yeah, I made sure that I liked the song, but I also made sure that the song –

Q: Was appropriate.

A: – was for the purpose that I intended it to be.

Q: That's a lot of thinking for somebody who is a little boy.

A: Yeah, yeah, but I think that is also genetically induced. There's something about survival, even in civilized circumstances that sort of prepares you for these kind of things. It – I don't think I'm supersensitive on that, but I – I do feel that – well, you're never totally part of the social fabric because the people let you feel that

you're a little bit different. So, on your own, you try to minimize that difference as much as possible.

Q: Do you have any memories of how that was – how you felt that, when you were – before the war, as a child?

A: Specific instances, I – I really don't remember, no, no. You know, for one thing, **Holland** was a – a tolerant society in the sense that in 1848 everybody got civil rights, yo – everybody became a citizen. So you – you – you had voting rights. And the Jews – the Catholics actually were the last ones to – to get their civil rights, but – so no, there was no particular sense of apprehension. But you know, you knew sort of intuitively that if you were to – called upon to sing, you didn't sing the **Hatikva** even if it was a song that you knew best. You sang something that was typically Dutch, and extolled the virtue of the nation. So that was – I stayed in that school until the Germans invaded **Holland**, that was in 1940. So for us the war started in 1940.

Q: What was the date, do you remember?

A: Yeah, it was the 10th of May.

Q: Do you remember the day?

A: I remember it very vividly. It was just before the **Whitsun** fa – vacation, Pentecost is **Whitsun**.

Q: That's right.

A: And I heard planes coming over, and I went to see my parents in their bedroom, and they said that the Germans had invaded **Holland**, that was on the radio. And I

had a stamp collection of German inflationary stamps from post World War I, and I asked my father if we couldn't buy these guys off with all these mo – millions of marks that I had of these little stamps. That I remember very clearly. My f – in – and this is also important, this is actually very important; in – during the **Whitsun** vacation in 1939, so that is roughly May - June, my mother and my father left for **England** on a short vacation, and my mother went to **Australia** house to get visas for us for **Australia**.

Q: You anticipated my next question, which was, by the time of that invasion, had there been discussions in your family about –

A: Absolutely.

Q: – how to leave?

A: Yeah. And they got visas for our family. My mother got visas for her two sisters and their families. Must have been easy to get that, I suppose. But my oldest uncle said, we can't leave, we cannot leave my father-in-law to his own devices. We can't leave him alone.

Q: That would have been your grandfather?

A: My grandfather. And my father said, Mother, in times of need, the captain does not leave the ship. That the ship intended to kick the captain off the bridge was something that nobody was thinking of. So we didn't use the visas.

Q: Oh my.

A: Yeah.

Q: Oh my.

A: I want to say that that was never – it was never a point of dispute between my parents, my mother was incredibly loyal. I do not understand why they didn't see the danger, because it was being spelled out in capital letters. If I may refresh your memory, because you're stu – you're st – quite a bit younger than I am; it started off with **Austria**, with **Czechoslovakia**, then it went all the way to **Denmark**, to **Norway**, who were declare – who had declared themselves neutral, and the Dutch government said nothing will happen here. So this kind of lulling the troops to sleep was something that everybody wanted to believe in. Just like Islam is a religion of peace, which it isn't. But we like to believe it, because it creates a comfort zone for us. [indecipherable] I was in **Germany** in 1991. I worked there.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: When the war went up.

Q: You worked there in 1961 when the war –

A: 1961.

Q: – when the war went up.

A: Right, in **Berlin**. And I got a telephone call from my mother, and she says, **Leonard**, what are we going to do? I said, well, my car is filled up. I have two cans – two jerrycans full of gas in there, two tires mounted on rims, and if anything happens, I'm on my way south to **Portugal**. And my mother said, how about us? And I said, Mother, I've never heard anybody fleeing from **Frankfurt Main** via **Amsterdam** to

Portugal. Geographically not healthy. What do you advise us to do? I said, that's very simple. Take some money out of the bank, and get yourself a vacation in

Ireland and see how it shakes out. You think they went?

Q: They stayed in **Frankfurt**?

A: They stayed in **Amsterdam**.

Q: They stayed in **Amsterdam**, excuse me, cause of **Frankfurt** I didn't understand –

A: Yeah, I lived in **Frankfurt**.

Q: You lived in **Frankfurt am Main**?

A: Yeah.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And my mother said, what about us?

Q: Yeah. And they stayed in **Amsterdam**.

A: And they stayed in **Amsterdam**, they didn't go on an Irish vacation.

Q: In 1961?

A: In 1961. And we didn't know which way this cookie would crumble. So what I'm trying to point out is that either you are a survivor, or you are not.

Q: But some people are survivors even when they are lulled.

A: Then they have more luck than brain.

Q: Mm.

A: So that was the situation in 1939, my mother saw it very clearly, my mother is a survivor, my father definitely not. Lovely man, loved him dearly, but he – a product

of another century. Yeah, he'd like to go with my mother to **England**, and he was pleased that she was successful in getting the visas, but to make use of it is different kettle of fish.

Q: So what happened?

A: On the 14th of May, my father felt that maybe the time would have come to drive to the coast and see if we could get on a ship to **England**. Of course, that was totally impossible, there was – there was a tremendous to-do on the coast and nobody could get to the harbor of [indecipherable]. And the people who did get – get out, got out earlier. But it – it was hopeless, and we turned the car around, and we went to a seaside resort, where we saw the Germans enter the country. Very disciplined, very – very well disciplined, well oiled ma-machine. And I remember that on the – was the 15th of May, we were waiting to see how the situation would turn out, and my father and I went to a barber to get a haircut. Not exactly a deed of resistance, but under the circumstances, why not get a haircut? Then we went to **Holland** – to – to when we – we went back home to **Amsterdam**. We resumed our life. The first measure that the Germans enacted was – and we never speak about Nazis, by the way.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Nazis is something that the Dutch do not know.

Q: Tell me why is that?

A: Because, here in **North America** there are a lot of loyal Germans. So we wish to exclude them from the bad Germans, so we call the bad Germans Nazis. And I

explained that to the schoolchildren when I speak at schools, and I give the **Hitler** salute. And I said, do you know what percentage of the Germans were card carrying party members? Five percent. And they couldn't have done it by themselves. And most of them were too high up in the party administration to really bother with Jews. So th-they understand that, so I never sp – it – it's not part of my vocabulary.

Q: To talk about Nazis?

A: Yeah, yeah, no, we call them **deutsches**(ph), **mofa**(ph), krauts, if you will. But never talked about Nazis. In fact, we – we – the only Nazis that we knew were **NSBers**, they were Dutch Nazis.

Q: Did you know any personally?

A: Yeah, they used to come to school in their Dutch Nazi uniform. Kids, yeah. I mean, they were a bit stupid, you know, they – we didn't think too much of them, I don't think they were excluded, but by virtue of coming in to – in their uniform to school, they excluded themselves, really. Anyway, I finished school, and for the summer vacation my mother came up with a plan and said, we're leaving – we're go – I wou – Father has rented a house in **Bussum**, which is out in the country. We're going there for our vacation. And while we were there, my mother and my father decided to move to **Bussum**. At that time you didn't need a permit to move.

Q: How far from **Amsterdam** was it?

A: 25 kilometers.

Q: Okay.

A: And we lived in that house. In the meantime my father emptied the house in **Amsterdam**, which was rented.

Q: That is, he had rented it from somebody else?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Okay, it wasn't oi – his ownership, okay.

A: No, it wasn't his own house. He had an own house, but that was where his office was. But the living house was rented from a man who couldn't pay his bills in 1930 or 1929, that's when they started the – it was a very nice house. So I never saw my bedroom again. I never said goodbye to anybody in **Amsterdam** because we were gone temporarily, and that temporarily turned out permanently. Our nanny came along, but she couldn't stay too long because Dutch Jews were not allowed to have Gentile personnel. And in – a young cousin of my mother's came and helped us. I mean, after all, she had three kids. Since my mother pulled this off, her two sisters also moved to **Bussum**.

Q: So this was your – really your mother's initiative?

A: Yeah, and she was the youngest. But she had the better part of what we commonly know – call **chutzpah**, of which the vernacular translation is brass balls. Anyway, I went to school there, private school, nice school, upper middle class school. All these things were organized. I mean, it was very smooth. I really didn't feel that – well, a kid looks at these things as adventure. I – I – I hope that you get that sense from other interviewees. You know, thinking about yesterday, what's hap – tomorrow, you

know. So many nights of sleep before your birthday, you never say so many nights after your last birthday, you always go forward.

Q: Oh I – I have a 13 year old daughter, that's exactly still –

A: Yeah.

Q: – you know, my birthday is going to – is in octo – her birthday is in October, she just had it and all of a sudden she's unhappy again because it's such a long time until the next birthday.

A: Yeah. And the moment she is 13 and a half, she'll let you know. I'm very close to my childhood, very close.

Q: How do you explain that?

A: I don't know. I think I am still very inquisitive, optimistic, fast, impatient, can't wait for things to be fixed, I'd rather fix it myself.

Q: But it also sounds like you've had a happy childhood.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: You know, that's – that's –

A: I'm still hap – I'm still a very happy person, yeah.

Q: How did your brother and sister – I mean, they were so much younger than you were, how did they absorb this?

A: I do not really know my brother and sister. It's as – yeah, this is a very – it's a bit of a tender subject, in a way. My brother is very different from me. We were in

hiding a little bit, a little time together, he and I. But we operate on a totally different wavelength. And I love my brother, but I don't like him.

Q: Yeah. That happens in families.

A: I guess so. But I will not bring the situation to a head, I am very cordial with him, with his wife, but I will – I do not wish to have a closer relationship than we currently have.

Q: And, I don't want to pry in – in that in – in – in any way, simply, was it your natures that made you this way, were there events that made this –

A: There were events, there were issues, and I would want to discuss those issues, but it would be very detrimental to him. I've invented something, I talked about it yesterday at one of the sessions, that is called the lock tight syndrome. Lock tight is a **schmear** that you put between a nut and a bolt.

Q: Okay.

A: You tighten it, it creates a gasket, and nothing rattles. And now we're going to talk about something, and the lock tight is being removed, and then I leave –

Q: And it happens –

A: – and there's no more lock tight.

Q: So you're – you're concerned –

A: I would – I would undo a s – a sense of security that I could not reintroduce. I'm very sensitive to that.

Q: And is – and is that – is that related to what the Holocaust did, or is it related to other types of things with you and him?

A: It's related to other things, too, oh yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: No, it – actually, it's not related to the Holocaust at all.

Q: Okay.

A: It is something that – that started to happen, oh I'd say about 15 - 20 years after the Holocaust.

Q: Okay.

A: No, no, it – it's definitely an adult discrepancy that occurred and I – and I wish to leave it like that, because – I explained it to his wife. I don't want to provide him with the feeling that everything is hunky dory, but I also don't want to give him the feeling that we're sworn enemies. He just had a vacation in the **United States** with his wife, they had a camper.

Q: Do they li – do they live in the **Netherlands**, or do they live in **Israel**?

A: They're living in – in **Holland**.

Q: In **Holland**, mm-hm.

A: Yeah.

Q: And he sent me a card for my birthday, yet, he didn't call. He went to see **Niagara Falls, Toronto** is not too far away, we offered to meet him in **Niagara Falls**, but that

also implied that we really didn't want him – to receive him in our home. So I think he read the signal right.

Q: That's sad.

A: It's very sad, yeah.

Q: It's sad.

A: Very sad.

Q: Did you share anything of a childhood together though, that was different than this?

A: I loved him, I mean, he was really, he was the little brother I always wanted. I had an imaginary brother until he came. In my fantasy I spoke with him, and I knew where he lived. And I forgot about him the moment my little brother ra – arrived physically.

Q: What's his name?

A: **Arthur.**

Q: **Arthur.**

A: Yeah.

Q: And your sister?

A: **Anita.**

Q: **Anita.**

A: Yeah.

Q: Is **Anita** still alive?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: She lives in **Israel** and she has 16 grandchildren.

Q: Oh my.

A: Well, she has three boys, and the boys are fertile – nubile [**indecipherable**]. They are wonderful guys, I'm very good with them. I'm – actually, my salvation does not rest with my contemporaries, it rests with the people who come after my contemporaries. My brother's kids, my sister's kids, my cousin's kids. They're terrific. They – they love me.

Q: How nice.

A: Yeah. And my wife is included, of course.

Q: Yeah. Do you have kids?

A: No.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: No. As my wife said, it never happened. But I was not very happy with the world, I think, all along, and I really don't mind that I don't have any kids. Having kids is also something of a curiosity, you would like to see what are they – what it looks like. My mother, whose favorite child I've always been, said to me – and who would have, of course, **kvelled** herself to death about a grandchild from **Dorothy** and from me, said to me towards the end of her life that she really respected the fact that I didn't have any children.

Q: She understood.

A: Yeah.

Q: She understood.

A: Yeah.

Q: Let's go back to when you were at the summer house with your – your family, and then your aunts.

A: And – well, all of a sudden, the immediate family of my mother relocated outside of **Amsterdam** and we had a good time, and we saw each other regularly. In June – i-in September of 1941, we had to go to Jewish schools, so my coo – my oldest cousin went to a Jewish high school. And my younger cousin also, and I went with my brother and my sister to the Jewish public school, or Jewish grade school. That was a very deceptive thing really, because the kids from my public school really didn't keep in touch with me. The general attitude in those years was that, let's see how this thing shakes out. Typical Dutch saying is let us not burn out hands in cold water. That means, take absolutely no risks. And the kids heard this from their parents, and goodbye **Leonard**.

Q: So – so that meant that when you left **Amsterdam**, there was no one who ever called or said, how are you doing, where are you going?

A: No. And when I went this one year to the school in **Bussum**, where we lived then, nobody kept in touch with me after I was removed from school.

Q: Tell me about that.

A: Well, one day my father came home and he said, I got a letter from the counselor for science and education, and he says that you're no longer supposed to go to your proper school, you have to go to a Jewish school. And well, as kids go, tha – here's another page of – of interesting something or other.

Q: Did you feel at the time hurt that nobody followed up, or is this something upon reflection later?

A: No, that is upon reflection later on, yeah, because you don't have time to be hurt, you have to sort of find out what's going on and – so that – that – I went there for a year, my brother and my sister, too. And – and actually my sister went to a – sort of a – I don't know what it was, a kindergarten of sorts, I think. And then we were told – no, then, in the fall of '41, my father could no longer work, because he could not use public transportation, and he decided to spend a bit more time with my brother and me. And on Saturday morning we used to go to synagogue. And one morning in the fall of '41, we came back from shul, and a man stepped out of his house, crossed his garden path and positioned himself in front of my father and said, I'd like to ask you a question. And that was a dicey thing because you didn't know who the hell the guy was and he could denounce you. And he said – and my father said, okay, ask the question. And he said, are you Jewish? And my father said yes. He said, I thought so. I see you come by there every Saturday morning with your two sons, nice thing to see. I know a bit about Jews because I used to live in **Amsterdam**, blah, blah, blah. He said, but that's not really – that's not really why I wanted to ask you that question.

I would like to know what are you going to do about the resettlement of the Dutch Jews in the east? There had been discussions that the Dutch Jews were going to be evacuated. That was an emigration department of the Jewish council, and the resettlement would take place in the east, where that was, we didn't know.

Q: Do you mean east **Holland**, or east **Europe**?

A: East **Europe**, yeah. And it could have been **Germany**, which was not really eastern **Europe**, but it certainly was east of the Dutch border. And my father said, I don't know. I – my Gentile friends are not talking to me. They want to see how this thing evolves, and my Jewish friends in the same boat as I am. And my brother and I were standing there, you know, seeing how this thing evolved. And this man said something that is quite incredible when you think about it, he said, may I help you?

Q: Oh my.

A: And this man knew about discrimination, he was a hunchback. And he felt that his time had come. There's certain people who rise to the occasion at the appropriate and almost pre-ordained time. And this man, who had been discriminated against all his life, married to a very nice woman, felt that this was his opportunity to shine. To be in charge of something, despite his handicap.

Q: Did your father accept?

A: Not right away. He said that I don't want you to endanger yourself. I mean, he didn't know which way this whole thing was going.

Q: He didn't know who he was talking to.

A: That's exactly. And the man said, may I come to your house and discuss this with you? So my father said, sure. And that's how we went into hiding. I wasn't privy to the discussions, I wasn't privy to anything that happened, except that one day in June of 1942, after we had been resettled in **Amsterdam**, **Amsterdam** was going to become a big ghetto –

Q: So you were back from **Bussum**?

A: From – back from **Bussum** to **Amsterdam**. In my father's office, he had two floors there. And above the two floors there were three more floors, which had tenants. And I think my father made a deal with the tenants somehow to keep the place in good repair until he came back from hiding, because that was the idea behind our [**indecipherable**] discussion with this man whom I shall – shall call Uncle **Bill**. He got the medal from **Yad Vashem** by the way, he survived it all. And so in June of 1942, a lady came to the house and said, I've come from Uncle **Bill**, and come to pick up the kids. And it's – it just was absolutely unbelievable, the Jews stand accused of not having been in the resistance against the Germans. You know, we were supposed to – supposed to have been led to the slaughter like sheep.

Q: Well, there are – there – there is that kind of talk. I mean –

A: Yeah.

Q: – one hears and reads things like that, but – but there's more than enough to disprove it.

A: Yeah. It happens – I have to watch my time here, ooh.

Q: Sure.

A: Yeah, I said at three o'clock I will meet somebody at the movies. But we can always continue later on.

Q: We can always continue, yes.

A: Yeah.

Q: So let's talk until you have to go.

A: So, we'll – we'll talk up to in going into hiding. So the lady came and she – she asked for the kids, and only much later in life have I realized that first my parents resisted the Germans physically and mentally. Secondly, that they divested themselves of their children, without any hope whatsoever. Or maybe with only hope that they would be treated right, that people would like them, that they would be fed properly, in the hope that they would see them again. I don't wish that on any parent. It is the most abhorrent thing.

Q: Do you remember the day?

A: In June, no, I remember when I went into hiding.

Q: That's what I mean, that day.

A: Okay, that was in August, it was the 12th of August. I know that because the 10th of August was the birthday of my cousin, and I went to his birthday party. And I went the 12th of August. After my brother and sister left, my father broke down and cried, and asked me if I would look after the kids in the event that he came to grief – after the kids and my mother. So there you stand, 11 years old, you know, what do

you say? Yes, Pa. And so I was taken to – by the same lady, to a shack in the woods. The summer of '42 was gorgeous. And I had to look after my own breakfast and my own lunch, and in the main house, the people who owned the shack, they got my dinner. My brother spent a brief time with me there, he was in between two addresses and it was nice to see him. And at that time, there was something going on in **Holland**. I can't –

Q: Were they in **Amsterdam**, was this place in **Amsterdam**, outside the ci –

A: No, they were out in the country.

Q: Okay.

A: South of **Amsterdam**. That was a very interesting thing that I've only later diagnosed or **evalued**. And that is that there was a saying the war will be over by Christmas. And there is corollary to that, that if the war is not over by this Christmas, then it surely will be over next Christmas. It meant that every Jew in hiding had a window of opportunity of 365 days, with an automatic renewal, because if anybody had asked will you take **Leonard Vis** in, from August '42 til May '45, you would have had a resounding no. So this crazy Christian notion, because wars have to be end around Christmas with peace on earth and all this kind of stuff, was very beneficial to us. Of course it's a crazy Christian notion, but to we – it was to our advantage. And that's –

Q: Wait, did you stay in the same place?

A: No, because the place with the – the shack wasn't winterized. So in November of '42, I was taken to a very nice family with a big house. And we can talk about that in the st –

Q: Subsequent.

A: – second part of our interview.

Q: Okay. We will do that.

A: Okay.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

End of File One

Beginning File Two

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. **Leonard Vis**, on November 9th, 2008 in **Alexandria, Virginia**.

So, Mr. **Vis**, where did we leave off?

A: I left off when winter came, and the shack that I was living in was not winterized, and my handlers decided – these were friends of Uncle **Bill** – my handlers decided that I had to be moved to a more clement environment.

Q: Were they kind? Were the people that you came into contact with now, were they kind, or were they indifferent, or how were they?

A: They were very casual about the whole thing. To them I was just a kid who needed a place to stay. The Jewishness sort of didn't figure in too much. I think it was important to them that I could lead my own life, they were very intellectual people; he was a journalist and she was a screenwriter. And they had a young son, and they lived their life in the main house, and I lived my life in the wooden shack, and you know, like everybody else, they also thought that the war would be over by Christmas, and that the **Tommys** would be coming. We hadn't really thought about the Americans, but the **Tommys** were close by, and the **Tommys** could do everything. And the interesting thing was that they really – you know, they lulled themselves to sleep. They thought you could rid of the Germans just like that, and that the persecution of the Jews, I suppose was – was one of those things that are part of the war, and you have to take that in stride. I don't think that after I left they were

engaged in any other illegal activity, but at the time they did what they felt, and they felt good about it, so –

Q: I mean, but were they indifferent to you? I mean, sounds like pretty much – it's a certainly – not an – not even a two class system, but here is the upper house, and here way down low –

A: Yeah, it was –

Q: – you're there with –

A: – it was a fairly segregated existence, which I didn't mind, quite frankly.

Q: But it's the first time you're really s-separated from your family's fa – i-it's new –

A: Well, I've been – I had been to the children's **pensionne**, and this was, to me, an extension of that.

Q: So in a way it was an adventure?

A: Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

Q: How did you keep yourself occupied in that shack?

A: Reading, crossword puzzles. My mother taught me years ago, long before I went into hiding, that crossword puzzles are a good thing, it's part of my literacy situation. I still do them. And reading. And of course I was out in the open, so there was a bit of investigation of nature. I knew a little bit about mushrooms that I'd learned in the children's **pensionne**, so it –

Q: Did anybody come talk to you?

A: Yes. A young man joined me there in, I guess, October. Very nice young man, he – for the longest – I knew that his first name was **Joe**. For the longest time I really didn't remember his last name, his omer – his honest last name. Everybody had sort of an alias. But thanks to a wonderful database that has just become public in **Holland**, I found out who he was, and pretty well what happened to him. He was caught and deported, but he didn't die in **Auschwitz** for some reason or other, he died somewhere else, in a work camp. And the only reason that I found him was that I remember the street on which he lived in **Amsterdam**.

Q: He had told you about it?

A: And 60 years later I look on the database – was some 70 years later, I look on the database, I type in the name, and there I fi – the name of the street, and there I find him.

Q: Oh my.

A: Yeah. It was –

Q: How much older than you was he?

A: How old was he?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: He was – I think he had just turned 20.

Q: So he was young.

A: Yeah.

Q: Right.

A: So that was a – sa – I had some a – that was to – actually very nice. And my brother came in sept – not in oct – and my brother came in October, I think, just briefly. He was in between places, and we both were – we both had s-sores on our skin, which had to do with the richness of the food that we used to get at home. They called them gall pimples, they – they came from your – excessive gall bladder movement or whatever. They – it all cleared up as the diet became more sparse, these pimples went away, so – but I remember when he came to me, and it was nice to see him. It was also good to see him leave. I have always felt that I'm better to be alone, because it doesn't cramp my style. Not that I'm a – that I'm a loner, I'm very gregarious, but I find it difficult to be in a strange environment and – and having to look after my st – after somebody else in addition to myself. Anyway, I left the shack and we were taken to a large home in **Huizen**, which was nearby. The shack was in **Blarikum**. It's all happens in – in an area of **Holland** called the **Troy(ph)**, which is southeast of **Amsterdam**, a commuting area. And there was a father, a mother and four children. Big house. The father was Jewish, and he did something that no proper Dutch **burgher** would ever do. When he was asked if he had four Jewish grandparents, he lied. He said no. He was married to a non-Jewish woman. He lived in **Huizen** as I said before. His name was **Isaac**, and he got away with it because he said no, he didn't have a **J** in his identity card, he didn't wear a star, no nothing.

Q: And nobody did any kind of investigation to prove him wrong.

A: Nothing at all, no. In fact, we should have taken more risks in those days, but we didn't, because we were very law abiding. You didn't do that. If the government asked you for something, you responded. He – but in the summer of '42 – oh yeah, th – let me tell you what he did. He was into magnetism. He was sort – some kind of a mature [indecipherable] **lett**re. He felt that he had precious magnetic powers –

Q: Magnetic fields.

A: Yeah, and if you had a headache, then he could sort of – as you can imagine, it was not a well paid position. And he was not unhappy when his sister called and said, I got my papers to report for resettlement in the east, can I sit this thing out with you? And he took her in with her husband. It was his oldest sister, **Rochelle**. And shortly thereafter his brother **Sam** called with his wife, and said they got their papers and could they come to him, and he said okay. And then two younger sisters of his called, each with a son, and he said okay. And then I came and – well, of course, his – he was – all of a sudden he was the proprietor of a **B** and **B** and **L** and **D**, bed and breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Q: Oh yeah.

A: And –

Q: And the pe – guests weren't paying.

A: No, the ge – well, the guests were paying a little bit towards the upkeep. I mean it – we didn't pay him for the danger, we paid him for the groce – it was grocery money that we contributed. I don't know how I – wh-who paid for me, but that went

through Uncle **Bill**, he had these arrangements. I – I didn't know anything about that. At any rate, he – he liked it, the house was buzzing, and at the cert – and, oh yeah, and I have to tell you that what is very important, you have to have reliable suppliers, because if the family of six persons buys six rolls of toilet paper every other week, and all of a sudden the lady of the house comes in and needs 24 rolls of toilet, people start to talk. More Jews lost their lives through loose lips than through all the Germans, collaborators and what have you. The Jews in hiding, that is. So he had very good suppliers for milk, for vegetables, for groceries, for medications. The suppliers were beyond reproach, they were good, as we used to call them. You're either good or you're wrong. So –

Q: And there you were on an equal level. You weren't re-relegated to a shack, were you?

A: No, I had a proper bed and – and there were – there was a younger boy, a nephew of his at the same age as I was. And then people came in with two daughters, and we had some more youthful – a more youthful element in there. I learned to sing g – French **chansons**. I learned to appreciate Dixieland music, Swing. This was still the era of Swing. I was 12 and I was really being formed in a very adult environment, I – I was still a kid, but my interests became rather advanced. **Isaac** – **Isaac's** cash flow improved. It was a funny thing with a man's eyes, when the cash flow improves, his eyes start to wander. And he got himself a girlfriend. And his wife condoned that, she says, you know, the pressure on him is hard enough. And **Isaac** brought the girl in, it

was a nice lady, and you know, she wa – became sort of a friend of the family, I don't know how amorous the interest was, but of course it must have been at one point. And **Isaac** felt yeah, maybe this was not the right thing to do. By that time there were about 28 people in the house, and **Isaac** said to the girl that, you know, we really should sever the relationship because – apparently she loved him a lot, maybe he was good in bed, I don't know. But she said, if you want to get rid of me, I'm going to get rid of you.

Q: Oh dear.

A: And she walked to the nearest police station and denounced him and said, he has 28 Jews in the house. That was a very lucrative denoun – **dénouement**, denouncement, because for every Jew that you denounced, you got the equivalent of five bucks in Dutch money, seven and a half guilders. That's all we were worth. So, 28 times five. Anyway, she lost out; we were warned that there was going to be a raid on the house. The Dutch police came with two guys from the **Sicherheitsdienst**, and they found the hiding place that we had. But before they came in they had notified us – notified **Isaac** that they were coming.

Q: So some of the Dutch police, or one of the Dutch police –

A: One of the Dutch police gave us warning, and one guy left, **Eddie**. **Eddie** was engaged to a Dutch girl who was not Jewish. So he knew that when he showed up at her home and rang the bell, that the door would open. None of us had that privilege. So we waited. And I'm beginning to underst – I began to understand now what they

mean by mesmerized. You just can't move. It's a – it's a frightening thing, it has happened to me one time later in life, that you are absolutely frozen. Anyway, they came in and they found us, they didn't even have to threaten to shoot into that hiding place, you know, they knew where the door was, the girl had told them everything. And there we were, 27 Jews, and they didn't know what to do with us. This was the weekend – this was a Thursday, Thursday the 30th of September, 1943. Rosh Hashanah. This year als – this year by mere chance, Rosh Hashanah is also on Thursday on the 30th of September. Calendars seem to repeat themselves. And so they took us in a moving van to a prison in **Haarlem**, and only on the Saturday did they move us to the Jewish theater in **Amsterdam**, that was a collection point.

Q: You had been with **Isaac** for how long?

A: From December '43 til se – to say – til September – no, sorry, from December '42, til December – til September '43.

Q: So almost nine or 10 months, something like that.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q: And had you had any contact with your parents at all?

A: Occasionally.

Q: So they knew where you were?

A: They did not know where I was, no.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: They didn't know where I was. I got a parcel from them on my 12th birthday, and – with all kinds of good stuff in there. That's where my street smarts – did I tell you that before the interview? I don't think so. Let me go back to the 16th of September, 1942. I got a parcel from my parents for my birthday, had all kinds of good stuff in it. And I'm allowed to send a thank you note. And my thank you note ran, dear Father and Mother, thank you so much for the lovely parcel with, colon; I enumerated what I had received, so that they could check it off against what they had put in. Because I figured in my primitive mind, that when you take a parcel for somebody, you want to know what's in it.

Q: And maybe a few things disappeared.

A: And maybe the person who opens it up says, what does a 12 year old need to do with dried apricots? Anyway, nothing had been removed. They were extremely proud of me, they kept the note against all proper judgment, and I have it to this very day.

Q: Oh my.

A: They kept it throughout their hiding period, yeah. They thought it was absolutely brilliant.

Q: Well, it was.

A: They didn't tell me, but that's what they told me afterwards. So that is when street smarts sort of started to surface. I mean, it – it was developed in the children

pensionne, it was honed further in looking after myself and using my brain a little

bit. Anyway, that's how long I was with **Isaac**, from December '42 til, say, October one, '43.

Q: So you got the parcel only a few weeks before –

A: No, because I turned 13 in September '43. They had a Bar Mitzvah party for me.

Q: Okay, so you got the parcel –

A: Just after I started being in hiding.

Q: Oh, I see, it wasn't at **Isaac's** house that you got –

A: No, no, no, no, still in the shack.

Q: Okay, you're still in the shack.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: And on the 29th of September, 1943, there was a – the largest roundup of Jews in **Amsterdam** took place. Everybody who was somebody, including the Jewish council, were rounded up and taken to the Jewish theater. So they couldn't have another 27 people move in, and that is why we were sent to the prison in **Haarlem**, where they kept us for two days and then Saturday morning the moving van went to **Amsterdam** because the Jewish theater had been pretty well emptied on Friday night. They always did things on Jewish occasions, the Germans. They were very good, very respectful. They kicked us out of the **sowber**(ph), out of the Jewish theater every Friday night. They loved it when there was a Jewish holiday that they could impose some sanctions. For this they were – they were very –

Q: So this –

A: – in tune with making life as miserable as they possibly could. I – I sometimes say to people, and not even quite in jest, that an awful lot of Jews have contributed to the survival to an awful lot of Germans.

Q: In what way?

A: If you were busy with the Jews, you didn't have to go to the front. Anyway, I – we arrived at the Jewish theater, had a huge electric door. I don't know why that stays in my mind, it was – it was sort of – it was sort of a finality of things, the – a chapter was being closed, and the door was electrically operated, and you couldn't get at the button, so you were in there. Adults to the right, adults register their children, children to the left. On the left was a – sort of a barracks room for kids. There were children – cots and beds there.

Q: Aside from the 27 people who you were there with, when you got to that big theater, were there any others that you recognized, that you knew from before?

A: Well, I come to that. I'm still in – I'm still in the lobby.

Q: You're in the lobby, okay.

A: And I'm going to the children's barracks room. I put my satchel down, I had some, you know, some travel gear in there, toiletry stuff, a pair of socks, maybe even a pair of shoes, but not much else. Underwear, I remember. And I go into the main auditorium, the seats have been removed. The balcony has been closed off completely, because people were jumping to their death from there because they

didn't want to leave **Amsterdam**. And there I see my Uncle **Henry** and my Aunt **Betsy**. They were not really an aunt and uncle, but they were friends of my parents. And they – yeah, they were such good friends that you called these people aunt and uncle. They were very surprised to see me. They asked me how things were going with the family and I hush-hush told them that I guess everybody – everyone is all right, but I have been caught. So, Uncle **Henry** says, well, let me find out what your status is here; if I am a punishment case, or if I am a regular arrival, or how did they –

Q: Did anything happen to **Isaac**, by the way, for having harbored so many people?

A: **Isaac** was interrogated by the **Sicherheitsdienst**, and to the best of my knowledge, he agreed to become a **fowman**(ph), that is, a – a confidence man for the **Sicherheitsdienst**. In other words, he would betray other people. But I've never heard that he actually engaged in anything. He was not deported either, to the best of my knowledge. But I did not seek any contact with him after the war.

Q: Okay.

A: I really didn't even know how to do that, how to position myself. And so Uncle **Henry** came back from the administration of the Jewish theater, and said, they've never heard fr-from you, about you or of you.

Q: So you weren't on any pieces of paper.

A: I was on no piece of paper. I was a victim of German administrative rigor. If you have children, they must have parents with them. I had no parents, and thank God

nobody volunteered to register me. So I was there totally illegally, I had no business being there. And Uncle **Henry** said, we have to get you out of here post-haste, because if we don't, then we are in trouble. You are in trouble. If your – they empty the place on Friday night, if they find you here on Saturday morning, they say hey, who are you? **Leonard Vis**. Never heard from. Oh, we must have overlooked you, they put you on the list and your turn is next Friday. How to get out? Uncle **Henry** had a plan. He said, find yourself a young boy your age, become friendly with him. And when these people are being called out on the Friday night, midnight, the Germans want to get this over with really quickly, they don't count the members of the family. As long as the family moves, that's fine with them. **Schnell, schnell und schnell**. Aunt **Betsy** and Uncle **Henry** had a visa for **Cuba**. Of course, no boat in his right mind was going to **Cuba** in those days, but it helped, because **Germany** was not at war with **Cuba** and **Cuba** was not at war with **Germany**. They also had a special privilege in that their maid could bring a pot of hot food every day to the theater. Not only that, both Uncle **Henry** and Aunt **Betsy** got a hardboiled egg each. And Aunt **Betsy** put a note in the dirty pan and asked the maid to put in three hardboiled eggs from now on, because one was for me. I do not like hardboiled eggs. I really am not a great egg fan. I don't like the smell of eggs. I mean, if an egg is scrambled, it's fine, but a hardboiled egg, I'm definitely not a friend of. However, I found a nice kid. I asked him where his parents were, he had two brothers and a sister. And I said, do you like an egg? Oh, he would love an egg. So, every morning

thereafter, you know, we found each other and I gave him my egg, which made for a very good friendship. So, on the Friday night, was **Kol Nidrei**, the eve of Yom Kippur. We were preparing to be moved from – those who were eligible for expulsion, let me put it that way. Not Uncle **Henry** and Aunt **Betsy**. But we who were eligible for expulsion made ourself ready to be taken by streetcar to a railroad emplacement, and from there, in a nice, third class carriage train to **Westerbork**, which is on the Dutch-German border, which had a transit camp for further processing. So, midnight, I'm hanging around the place where my young friend is as well. They call out the name of the family, the family storms out of that room.

Q: Do you remember the name?

A: No. Don't remember his name. Very strange. Been – been trying to, but I don't know. I could fake it, but I honestly don't remember his name. It was all too intense, I think, you know, you had to – to process in your little brain in – whatever information you could. Anyway, outside a streetcar is waiting. It's midnight. There's a curfew in **Holland** from 10 in the evening til six in the morning, so there are no people watching. The streetcars take us to the railroad emplacement. There's a train waiting and I go – I lost my friend and his family in that process, because everything has to run and **schnell** and soldiers there, police there, and I end up in a compartment and I tell the people once we're all seated, that when the train leaves the station, I will jump from the train. And the reason that I could do that, I explained to them, was that I'm not on anybody's list. The roll call will not be impaired, nobody will miss

me, nobody doesn't even know that I'm here, but this is the only way for me to escape.

Q: So you're in the **Netherlands**?

A: Yeah.

Q: This is all still in the **Netherlands**.

A: Still in **Amsterdam**. I had an address in **Amsterdam** of people who I had – a woman who I'd met at **Isaac's**, who said, if there's ever any problem, you can come see us. I had her address. That address I remember, because that was critical information. So the train starts off, it's about three o'clock in the morning, it's pitch dark, Yom Kippur. And it's a choo-choo train, doesn't start up that quickly. So, a little bit outside of **Amsterdam**, I decide to make my getaway, I land fortuitously. I land on a – on a – on a – on the railroad bed at – on the side of the bed, and I roll down. I wasn't a big deal. But I'm stay put, I check my limbs, I have a pee, because I'm nervous as hell. That much I remember. And then I have to wait until it starts to dawn, because I need daylight. I have my trusted Swiss army knife with me, they existed in those days. Not stainless steel, but regular steel. And I'm not looking in the Swiss army knife for the knife, but I'm looking for the scissors to take off my star from my coat, from my jacket, from my sweater –

Q: Oh my gosh.

A: – even had the star – star – I had to sew it on myself, th – so I made sure that it wasn't all too tight, but it was – it would pass a cursory inspection. I had money in

my pocket, and I decided to wait – I also had a watch, and I decided to wear **Omega** watch. One of the big, round jobs. Grandfather's watch, sort of. And I decided to wait til around nine o'clock, because before that time, what would a young kid walk around there for? So I walked back and there was a – the end point of a streetcar, and ma – you know, I've lived in **Amsterdam**, so I knew where to go. And I arrived at number 12 [**indecipherable**] at the family **Bon, b-o-n**. They were happy to see me, and they said th – you're just in time because we are going to a soccer match this afternoon and we have a spare ticket. And as a child in hiding, you are compliant. You don't make waves, you don't say anything nasty, you don't refuse anything, if they –

Q: You don't say, I don't feel like going to a soccer match.

A: No, no, no. You always feel like doing whatever they want you to do. They also called me **Theo**, that was my hiding name. My name is **Leonard, Leo** in Dutch, and they felt that **Leo** was too Jewish. Who am I to dispute that? So I was **Theo**. My brother's name is **Arthur**. I always thought it was a rather Gentile name, but they thought it was too Jewish, they called him **John**. So I was **Theo**. And years later you wake up, and you find out that there have been 13 Popes called **Leo**. Much too Jewish, you know, much too Jewish. I'm telling you that – it's an illustration of a certain depersonalization. They know everything, I am nowhere. I am living a known life. I am living a known existence. They have all the knowledge about life, I have nothing.

Q: You feel that then?

A: Oh yeah, absolutely. If they say that **Leo** is a Jewish name, then **Leo** is a Jewish name. There's nothing I can do about it. I'm totally dependent on them. I mean, it was a nice soccer match, and nobody caught me, but it was, of course, the stupidest thing to do. I've done other stupid things in order to please my caregivers, but I won't go into that, it's not that important. I survived it at any rate. I stayed there for about a week, and they send out word to my handlers that I needed a place to go into hiding.

Q: Were they kind to you, or were they –

A: Very, very nice. Wonderful people, absolu – and no money changed hands, they were first-rate. The father worked for – the father of the lady worked for a chocolate milk factory, so every day I got my ration of chocolate milk. I don't know how he did it, but – and I – and the neighbors were very nice, they – they lived, I think the second story of a house. And there was a balcony that went along the second story to the house next door second story. So, if there was any kind of a round-up, you could move via the balcony, by a coal bin from one apartment to the next. That I remember.

Q: Did they point out – that out to you, or did you figure that out?

A: No, they told me.

Q: Okay. The reason – you know, one of the reasons I ask this is that when you're talking about how they wanted you to – to call you **Theo**, it's with a certain, you know, tone of – I wouldn't – don't know what the right word is, but it's not a positive word. And maybe, in their minds, they were very sincere. That –

A: Oh yeah.

Q: – that they thought there would be greater danger. Whether it's true or not, maybe they sincerely believed that.

A: Yeah. I understood it to be a de-Judai-Judaization of my name.

Q: Yes.

A: Not for any – not to change my identity, but to un-Jew my identity. In other words, **Theo** sounds Gentile, whereas **Leo** sounds Jewish.

Q: In any other time, in any other circumstance, that could be offensive. But in that circumstance, where they don't want you to be caught, then anything that could save you from being caught –

A: I agree. I mean, I'm not against it, but the funny thing is that **Leo** is a very Catholic name. So what do you –

Q: Yes, I know, the –

A: Yeah.

Q: – the irony, and the silliness, perhaps –

A: They could have called me **Derek** or something –

Q: Yeah.

A: – you know, but –

Q: Yeah.

A: – yeah.

Q: Or – or not. I mean –

A: Or not, yeah.

Q: Or not, because if it's that kind –

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: I-I-It's ju – that's why I asked, were in other ways they kind? It – because there would be some people who might have just not liked Jews –

A: No.

Q: – and wanted to –

A: I just finished watching the movie about **Walter Süskind**.

Q: Yeah.

A: And the – the rescue of the children from the crèche. When I came into the – into the theater, the crèche was already closed. And there was a comment about the rescuers, all young people, young students, that there was a sense of cowboys and Indians among them. And I think that sort of permeated the – this sense of renaming me. Could be, I don't know.

Q: Yeah.

A: So the call went out for people to take me in, and the greengrocer stepped forward. He was 25, she was 23, they had a four year old boy, and she was pregnant with her second child.

Q: My.

A: And he said – he didn't even consult with his wife – they knew me from where I had been caught, and he came home at night and said, **Theo** is coming to stay with

us. She didn't even know that I had made it back, he explained to her that I was available for adoption. And she said, when is he coming, she says, tomorrow? He said no, not tomorrow. He said, why? He says, tomorrow's my birthday and I want to have an unencumbered birthday. I don't want to have a kid here that I have to hide. Why was that? The house that they lived in was – the rent was two dollars a week. The house was one of five houses in a little – round a little courtyard. And I asked the school kids, is there anybody here who knows or can guess what you would not get for two dollars a week in a little house like that? And eventually someone says, a bathroom, Mr. **Vis**. I said, you got it. And what do we have instead of a bathroom? In Canadian parlance, an outhouse. And an outhouse can wreak havoc on the **kishkas** – on the innards of a kid in hiding. But they found something for that, because I could piggyback on the four year old's potty for my little business. But as far as my big business was concerned, my innards could not become active until well after sundown. Because in order to use an outhouse, you have to go out, and I was not allowed to go out unless it was dark. Under the cover of darkness, with a little hand dynamo so I could – hand dynamo so I could see where I – where I was going. And so I tell the kids that, I said, you have a freedom that you're not aware of, a very important freedom. And that's taking a shit when you bloody well want to. And that cracks up the lot. And –

Q: But –

A: – and I said, you'll think of me tonight.

Q: But you know, that's tough f-for anybody and especially tough for a young boy.

A: Yeah, exactly –

Q: It's very tough.

A: – because you want it all now. So I've learned – you also learned patience in that respect, you know, regulate yourself somewhat. Wonderful people, absolutely first

rate. He was 25, she was 23. She is exactly 10 years and one month older than I am.

So, I arrived there on the 17th of October, 1943, and I had been exactly 17 days out of circulation. Or, 17 days in the open before I went back into hiding.

Q: And what happened to the people who were in the theater? To your uncle –

A: My group?

Q: – to your uncle and aunt who were family friends –

A: Uncle **Henry** and Aunt **Betsy** ended up in **Belsen**, and where they perished.

Perishing is the right word, they were not necessarily murdered, although you can call it murder, because food was withheld. The people that I was caught with were all murdered in **Auschwitz** on the 23rd of October, 1943.

Q: Oh my.

A: I'm the only survivor.

Q: Oh my, from that house?

A: Yeah.

Q: Do you know the name of the woman who was the girlfriend?

A: No.

Q: So she has that many souls on her head.

A: Yeah.

Q: Maybe more.

A: You know something? Revenge was the furthest of any Jews mind after the war.

There were some people who went out to kill some people, but they had a extremely valid reason. Who was I? Lucky to be alive and keep moving. At any rate, I had a very wonderful time with these people, they were very good to me. I shared a bed with a young boy, four years old, who could not tell anybody that he had a 13 year old pseudo brother parachuted into his bed. Played with his cousins in the street, in the courtyard. Saw his grandparents, who lived around the corner, regularly, his aunts and uncles. This is little fishing village, you know, in **Holland**, where everybody knows each other. And he had his nervous breakdown at age 55.

Q: Oh my.

A: Yeah.

Q: And you think there's a connection between that and that?

A: It proves, you know, that there is no free lunch. That's all it proves. He was offered some psychiatric help, but he knew how it came about, and he knew what he had to conquer and he did it his way, and he is fine now.

Q: Did he make those connections? Did – is he the one who said it's because I had to keep quiet when I was a – when I was a young boy?

A: We think that that was – he doesn't really talk about it, he n – he knows what it is, and I know what it is, yeah. Yeah. No free lunch, not even for a four year old kid.

Q: But that a four year old kid could manage that.

A: That was the miracle. Kid was a miracle, absolutely.

Q: And so even grandparents didn't know?

A: Nobody knew. Only his mother's oldest sister knew, who was into underground work herself, and her youngest brother knew. Nobody else. Who also had people in hiding.

Q: But that's i – it's an amazing feat. Because if you had – given the – the geographic – how you describe it –

A: The geography was – was a killer in a sense, yeah.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Yeah. And he went to school, and he – and his mother had instructed him, and she had said that if they find out that **Theo** is here, the Dutchers will co – the Germans will come and get him.

Q: And he protected you?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did your parents know where you were?

A: My father was in terrible shape in the f – around Christmas '43. He was underfed, he was depressed, and he really needed a change of décor, change of environm –

Q: Were they still back in the – in his own office building? You know, when you – when you had left –

A: No, no, we – no, they went into hiding a week after I went into hiding.

Q: Okay. Together with your brother and sister?

A: No, they went first, they went in June.

Q: Okay. Oh, that's right, they went in June.

A: I went in August, and my parents, I think, went in September, or beginning of September. And my parents stayed together, my sister went to her – on her own, and my brother went on his own. Anyway, my father was very depressed, and his – and I call them handlers, it's sort of the easier way to describe them – came to my war father and said, listen, **Leonard**, or **Theo's** father is really in bad shape. Can you put him up for a couple of weeks? And there came my father, who was so undernourished that he was almost paranoiac about things. And they got him good food, there was always plenty to eat there, because the man was a vegetable –

Q: Grocer?

A: – grow – not – vegetable merchant. Potatoes. And they gave him some booze, which he never drank, my father, but that sort of cheered him up a little bit, and we had a wonderful Christmas and New Years. And I enjoyed being with him, or he enjoyed being with me, and he deferred to me. Whenever he wanted something, he used to come to me first, and said, do you think this is okay, can I do this?

Q: That's a big burden for a young child –

A: Because I was the landlord, in a sense, you know, I –

Q: You were stronger than him.

A: Oh yeah, yeah, absolutely. Well, that came about, because when he broke down after my brother and sister left, which I referred to in this interview, he asked me if I wanted to – if I could look after Mother and the children if he perished. And of course I said yes, what else can you say? But it changed my relationship with him very profoundly, in that I became more of a daughter to him, when I can define care between a woman and a man, a man cares differently. A man is sort of hey guy, how are you, with a knock to the shoulder, whereas a daughter is more kind, softer. And my relationship with my father absolutely became that of a father and a daughter. I – I looked after him. I've traveled with him, I've washed his shirts. It was a most unusual relationship. With my mother I've always been a buddy. My mother and I operate on the same plane. We're tough, we're street smart. My father is totally different.

Q: Yes.

A: Yeah.

Q: But you had a lot of growing up.

A: Oh yeah, pretty fast. Anyway, I – he left be – middle of January, fortified, cheered up, and that was well, the main thing. And then I was sent out of the house in May because my war mother gave birth to a little girl. And I came back after three weeks with a very intellectual family, which I relished. There was music, there was

intelligent conversation, which I didn't have with my war family, which they sensed. And my war mother said to me, in the beginning that I was there, that of course I came from a different milieu, and they would try and find another place for me. And she told me that story, I have completely – completely wiped that out of my mind, and I must have said I'm very happy here. You don't have to do anything. But the offer was made – they were sensitive to the fact that I did, indeed come from a different intellectual milieu. My father was not a greengrocer.

Q: Yeah.

A: I must have been very shocked by that offer, so I – and I declined, I said it's absolutely not necessary, I'm very happy here. That's what she told me. Not that it was so easy to move a child, especially a dark haired Jewish boy. Circumcision played a big role, because regular kids were not circumcised. So I came back and my war mother said, well, here she is. And I learned how to look after a baby, and except for breastfeeding, I did everything else.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: The kid grew up to be a magnificent girl. She's now grandmother of six kids or something, has four children of her own. And we're very close. She's very proud, I'm her older brother, not the – not her oldie – her oldest brother, I am. And she's very proud of the fact that I looked after her.

Q: And how long did you stay with them?

A: Til May '45.

Q: So actually, from the ti – from October 17th, 1943, correct?

A: Yup.

Q: For another year and a half, you were with them until liberation.

A: That's right.

Q: My goodness.

A: Yeah.

Q: My goodness. And –

A: They were very good to me. They – towards the end of the war, well, in – in the winter of '44, my parents and my sister came to stay – my father came to stay with me again, and they found a place for my mother and my sister to sleep, but living was all in that little two dollar house.

Q: At what time had the place been – the – the countryside been liberated already by the – the allies?

A: Well, there was a partial liberation from beneath the big rivers, and that was in September '44.

Q: And you were above those rivers?

A: We were above the rivers, yeah. We were not really liberated, we were surrendered.

Q: Ah. Ah. Okay, so you still had danger until May '45.

A: My father, may he rest in peace, said on the day of liberation, nobody leaves the house. Because a stray bullet can undo whatever we have been trying to preserve.

Q: I think that's very smart.

A: My friend who is here, his father got caught up in some kind of a wild melee of joyful, festival celebrants, and was pushed under a streetcar, lost his leg. So my father was very, very wise at that moment, he – actually, he did a fantastic job in – in reestablishing the family, I'm beginning to see that now.

Q: What happened then, after the war?

A: Well, the general feeling was that – and I speak about that, every returning Jew presented an economical miscalculation. Oh, are you still around? We were not welcomed. It was a very cold and chilly wind.

Q: How awful.

A: Yeah. The queen had said that to her every Dutchman was the same except, of course, there were certain Dutch people who had suffered more and differently than other Dutch people. That was not taken into consideration. I've just finished a talk to an Anglican church, where I was asked to speak about my happenings during the war, and I find that among adult audiences, the Holocaust has been beaten to death a little bit. So I decided, after consultation with a friendly minister in the United Church of **Canada**, and director of the Anglican church, that I would rather speak about the holocaust after the Holocaust. And the heading of my talk was, I have been liberated, but am I free? Because the war against the Jews continues.

Q: Tell me about those experiences, though. Did your father have difficulty in reestablishing his business?

A: My father had to face an unfriendly bureaucracy, to get a house, to get bedding, to get furniture, to get stuff in order to put his family under a roof. Instead of three children, he all of a sudden had four children, because we took in a cousin whose parents had been killed in **Auschwitz**. He had to put four children in school by September one. And last but not least, he had to restart his own business.

Q: That – the place where his business was, did he get that property back?

A: He got – that property was kept by the tenants, yes. But, you have to have merchandise in order to do **[indecipherable]**

Q: That's right, that's right, that's right.

A: You know, that didn't – an-and you couldn't travel. He didn't – he didn't have a car **[interruption]**

Q: Okay, he didn't have a car.

A: So he – my father had a hell of a task. He is not a strong man, he is a very civilized, almost meek individual. And I never thought all that much of what he had to go through until a friend of mine, **Isaac Lipschits** wrote a book in Dutch called, “**The Little Shoah**,” in which he really details, as a professional political scientist and historian, what happened to the remnant, and how did the remnant cope. There were people didn't want to have anything to do with **Holland**, hightailed it off to **Palestine** and that was it, if they had the permit to do so. So my father reestablished us. I don't think we ever gave him the credit for it. I'm sure I gave him the love, but it wasn't based on what he had done, it was really based on our relationship. But this

interview comes to a very nice note, because in 1951 my war parents had another son. They had two go – daughters in between – no, they had one daughter in between – two daughters in between, yeah, they – then they got a son. They named him **Leonard**.

Q: Rather than **Theo**.

A: Rather than **Theo**, yeah **Theo** was – went overboard very rapidly, yeah. So, there is – yeah, and **Leo Hoyer**(ph), that's his last name, has a son who is called **Michael Leonard**.

Q: That's very nice. You maintained contact with them after the war?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah, absolutely.

Q: And your parents, did they –

A: Well, no, there was a time when I was not in contact with them, and they didn't mind. They fi – these people were actually, for the – the social status that they had, uncommonly bright. They were not on my case. If they heard from me it was wonderful, and if they didn't hear from me, they would ask my parents what's wrong.

Q: How is he doing, yeah.

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: So they were very good to me in that respect.

Q: And your parents, were they – did they have good relations with them?

A: Oh yeah, excellent. Yeah, he was – he went into the army after the war. He was three years in **Indonesia**.

Q: Oh my.

A: And he could do that because he knew that my father would look after his wife.

Q: When the war ended, you were then how old?

A: I was 14 and a half.

Q: 14 and a half.

A: Yeah.

Q: So you were in the middle of your teenage years?

A: Yeah.

Q: Do you remember what you felt in those pors – postwar years? Di – when you went to school, did you feel that kind of coldness at school? Did you feel from neighbors and from – did you know – meet people you had known before –

A: No. I – what happened with school, my mother, ambitious as she was, said well, because of the – the winter, you w – everybody got a year free, and she managed to get me into the second year of high school, which was not right, in retrospect. She didn't want me to lose too much time. But it didn't work out that way, I was a very fidgety chi – fidgety child. I had trouble concentrating, I had – I was very fearful of –

[interruption] So –

Q: You were fidgety.

A: Hm?

Q: You were fidgety.

A: I was fidgety, I did not finish high school.

Q: Were you unhappy during those times, those – when you were saying you were fidgety, was it the – after all of that sort of like close brushes with death – you know, there's this phenomenon, when people finally are in safety, everything that held them together during the times of crisis –

A: Yeah.

Q: – kind of – you – then you allow yourself to –

A: Well, I – no, there were some good times. I became a member of the sea scouts, which I enjoyed hugely. Since I had not had physical pleasures, being a scout was wonderful, travel was wonderful, doing things was wonderful. Cerebral stuff was not part of that.

Q: And you were growing up, actually, in postwar **Europe**, which is unusual.

A: Yeah.

Q: Not many people stayed around.

A: Right.

Q: And I sense that you don't have great warmth for **Holland**.

A: No, I have – I can truly say that I have a culinary homesickness, but that's about it. I worked in **Holland** after I got married. My wife married me on my decent face and good character, whatever was visible. But I – I was rather fearful of that and – that she'd know where I came from. So, we went to **Holland**, I spent seven years in

Holland, in the advertising business, which was at that time my – my business. And those were not – those were happy days when I was allowed to run my own agency. They were not happy days when I was part of the personnel. Because their style – you see, th-the – the problem with **Holland** was that the Dutch did not go through a renewal. They wanted restoration. And there, that is the crucial difference. Renewal is opening the windows and letting in a fresh breeze. Restoration is, let's go back to the status quo ante. And that is what happened.

Q: And some things, you can't go back to.

A: Well, they tried.

Q: When did you leave **Holland**?

A: In '54. I finished my military service, and I wrote – while I was in the military, I wrote – and I loved the military. I was a damn good soldier. I – I was good. I c – physical again, you know, I could improvise, I could st – use my street smarts. And I wrote to an uncle of my cousin in **Australia**, and to a cousin of my father's in the **United States**, if you – they would sponsor me, and the cousin in the **States** came through first. So that's why I went to the **United States**.

Q: Where did you settle?

A: In **Westchester, New York**.

Q: And how long did you live there?

A: Until I went into the army.

Q: **U.S.** Army, then?

A: Yeah.

Q: So you went – you’ve been in the Dutch army and the **U.S.** Army?

A: Yeah.

Q: What was – what was your – what was your – what military branch did you go into?

A: Well, I ended up in the military police.

Q: Oh my.

A: Because I’m literate and my German was good, I was stationed in **Austria** and in **Germany**.

Q: And what years?

A: ’55 - ’56.

Q: Oh, those are very interesting times in **Germany**.

A: Yeah, right.

Q: And very – still very **[indecipherable]**

A: Hungarian – Hungarian revolution, yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah. So –

Q: And, can you tell me a little bit about how – I mean, this is not that much long after the war. What – what kind of impression did you have of this **Germany** of the 1950s?

A: Well, of course – course, no German had ever been a Nazi, and – and that is, of course, true, because only five percent of the Germans were card carrying Nazis. I did come away with a bit of an appreciation for **wie haben es nicht gewusst**. We didn't know anything about it. But there is also very ti – because you cannot really sense that two blocks down the road they have a roundup of people, they – they – it's too f – too far removed. [interruption]

Q: – or towards, you know, in the first –

A: Yeah, I had no problem being in **Germany** or in **Austria**. I had been with the Dutch army on maneuvers in **Germany**. I don't know, I – I don't think I – I was anti-German at all. I love the German language, for one. To tell you the truth, wa – a-and my holocaust is limited to **Holland**. I've given all my books about **Schindler** and all of that to the Jewish library at the Holocaust Center in **Toronto**. My knowledge o – my holocaust took place in **Holland**. And the reason that **Holland** had such a large loss percentage, is really due to the civil service, which carried out its orders to the letter. To the police, to the **burgomasters**, to the officials in the civil registry, I think the Jewish council that is being blamed in – all over the place, had very little to do with whatever there was. If they hadn't been there, it would have – it would have taken place anyway. So, I – I like to exonerate the Jewish council. They brought a lot of solace to a lot of people who were destined to die anyway, and they – they did the best they could under the circumstances. You are not trained to survive these kind of things. You learn on the job.

Q: You're absolutely right.

A: Yeah, so it – and I told you about the lock tight syndrome. I don't like to ask people about what they went through. If they want to tell me, fine. I'm not volunteering – I'm not trying to in – to induce them to volunteer information. I am on a number of boards. I am on the board of Dying with Dignity. I am on the board of my professional Financial Planners Association. I am on the board of The Holocaust Center of **Toronto**. I am 78 years old. I don't look too bad and I don't feel too bad, and life's okay.

Q: Thank you.

A: You're welcome.

Q: Thank you very, very much.

A: Okay.

Q: This concludes the **United States** Holocaust Me-Memorial Museum interview with **Leonard Vis**, on November 9th, 2008. Thanks very much.

A: You're welcome. **Kristallnacht**.

Q: Yeah.

End of File Two

Conclusion of Interview