

Transcript:

Leonard Chill

A06

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Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about life in Poland pre-war.

Leonard Chill: Well, I come from a middle class family. My father and mother probably were pretty well assimilated, thought of themselves more as Poles perhaps than Jews. My hometown was Vilna, Vilnius today then Poland now capital of Lithuania. My father was a lawyer in that town, also involved as a theatrical local producer. So he led a somewhat bohemian lifestyle. My mother came from Białystok where her parents or her father was a textile manufacturer. I'm sure as far as I remember and remember when the war broke out I was seven to eight years old as far as I can recall. We didn't have too many cares.

Interviewer: How many children in your family?

Leonard Chill: I'm the only one.

Interviewer: You're an only child.

Leonard Chill: Yeah.

Interviewer: What did you know about what was happening in the beginning of the Nuremberg laws and things that were changing in the '30s. What did you know that was happening?

Leonard Chill: I would say my knowledge of what happened in the 30s was about nil.

Interviewer: Do you think your parents had any understanding of what was coming to be before the invasion? Had they...

Leonard Chill: Before 1939?

Interviewer: Uh-hmm.

Leonard Chill: I would say no. I cannot be absolutely sure, but I would say that took them totally by surprise.

Interviewer: So you said they were probably more assimilated as Poles than as Jews, do you think that they felt more sense of nationalism in being Polish?

Leonard Chill: My father probably did. My father probably did. The - indicative of how they felt most of the Jews spoke Yiddish at home but in our home Yiddish was not spoken, just Polish. And of course as a lawyer he was in the mainstream of Polish society as well as Jewish.

Interviewer: Tell me about 1939.

Leonard Chill: 1939, found me vacationing with my grandparents in unpronounceable but I can pronounce it, a little town called [unintelligible 0:02:40.4] near Lublin, and I think that would be Ukraine now by the way. And I still remember planes flew over us and started dropping bombs and at first we thought it was all children with this. I thought it was all kind of a game and it was not a game it was the beginning of the war. We were briefly occupied by the Germans perhaps a week or two after the war broke out then the eastern Poland that was ceded to the Soviet Union, so the Germans were replaced by the Russians and that time I'm not sure which was really better. Well, probably the Russians were better because they persecuted people not because of their religious or ethnic origin, but because of what they stood for. If you were a Zionist it was bad, if you're a socialist that was bad, if you're a Catholic it was bad, if you're a farmer it was bad, just about there was nothing that was good even if you're communist it was bad. Communist cannibalize themselves very quickly too. In fact my grandfather who was a minor official, that's my father's father was arrested and died in the Russian prison. My father's brother, my uncle and my grandmother

were deported to Siberia and they didn't know it was lucky by the way because that meant that at least that my uncle survived. He returned back to Poland after the war. I think the Germans turned on the Russians I believe in 1941 at that time we were back, my father and I, in Vilnius. My mother by a stroke of luck was in France when the war broke out so she never came back to Poland and spent the war years, in fact in Canada. So I was with my father, we returned to Vilnius and...

Interviewer: You were at this age...9, 10?

Leonard Chill: Nine-ish.

Interviewer: What did you know that was happening now?

Leonard Chill: Oh yeah by that time I was...I was pretty aware of what was happening because we couldn't get back. Our apartment has got a room there and I remember the police use to come every now and then to pick up people, deport them. That was the Russian police by the way or Lithuanian police I suppose. So one's friend was disappearing and there was no normal school, although, I have to say I did go to school for a while but it was a Lithuanian school, so it was not a normal school, it was what we thought was normal. So I think...at that time I think children grew up quickly and it was probably eight or nine going on 20 by that time.

Interviewer: You were in the ghetto?

Leonard Chill: Well, that was under Russia, there was no ghetto then. In '41 Germans came and very shortly, but I don't remember exactly how many months it took them, but it wasn't long before they established a ghetto in Vilna and the Jews...

Interviewer: Vilna and Warsaw, correct?

Leonard Chill: Yes, I don't know which preceded which, but I remember by the time Vilna fell to the Germans it was already two years after World War II broke out, so they already have their experience in mistreating Jews by that time. So anyway...

Interviewer: So you were in the ghetto?

Leonard Chill: So we were in the Vilna ghetto for a while...

Interviewer: Ten years old maybe?

Leonard Chill: Maybe 9.

Interviewer: Nine?

Leonard Chill: Yeah.

Interviewer: What do you remember about the ghetto?

Leonard Chill: Horrendous overcrowding. Horrendous overcrowding, in one room there might have been I don't know four, five families. The floor space for sleeping is all you had and lack of food. These two, I still remember.

Interviewer: What time of the year was this?

Leonard Chill: I would say that would have been in...the war broke out I think early-- it would have been probably winter.

Interviewer: Do you remember the cold?

Leonard Chill: I remember the cold, although, it's not that vivid. I do remember being-- because we had very little clothes, we had very little food. My father decided in his wisdom thank God that the ghetto wasn't for us and we made our escape from the ghetto...

Interviewer: Tell me about the escape.

Leonard Chill: All I remember is we were...we got into...the Germans with little money could do a lot of things and we got onto a truck that went from Vilna to Warsaw and that's all I remember that we ended up in Warsaw. The reason for going to Warsaw my father was a very prominent citizen, there was no way for him to hide in Vilna and not be recognized. In Warsaw, we now changed our identity. We all became very Polish, as best as we could. Got new documents, new names, in fact one of the papers I was going to bring with me I couldn't find it, was the school certificate under my then assumed name.

Interviewer: What was your assumed name?

Leonard Chill: I had a couple of them. The first one was Skierniewski and later on had to be changed because when my father was arrested it was not a good name to have, so printed another document with a name called Wiśniewski. Wiśniewski, by the way wiśnia is "cherry"

for whatever it was worth -- Cherry man. So anyway we went to Warsaw, I was lucky that in the whole group and there were maybe two, three, four maybe six, seven of us in that group, I was the only one who look Polish. I was very blonde and that sort of helped. The others particularly my father looked very Jewish and that was very awkward and difficult for him to get out because he would be recognized. His cover story was he was Armenian and how many Armenians were in Poland.

Interviewer: Where did you get the documents from? How did you get them?

Leonard Chill: Oh, remember Poland was one vast underground. Jews were obviously hiding, the Poles were committing acts of sabotage, there was a home army and so on, so there were many places, many people who would print documents. I still remember that first document was brand new so we had to make it look like it was 10 years old, and I remember rolling it in the dust, rubbing it on the floor and all sorts of things to give it age. But I was never in true hiding – all that I was hiding was my true identity. I got around, I walk, I went out, I...

Interviewer: So you were hidden but out in the open?

Leonard Chill: Yeah I was hidden in the open and everybody would send me out to do shopping because they were afraid to get out and that in fact saved my life, but anyway getting back after a while my dad, I think that money was running out or whatever assets he had so went to...and the Jewish situation, the ghetto situation in Vilna sort of seemed to become stable so he took us back now to the Warsaw ghetto, not the Vilna ghetto, the Warsaw ghetto. Warsaw ghetto was like one big city really and I mean many good things going on, the restaurants, libraries, theater, concerts. I still remember that there was a pretty thriving cultural life side by side with terrible property and terrible hunger. If you had any money you were OK, if you didn't people were sleeping in the streets, dying in the streets. I remember once I was sent to buy a loaf of bread and the guy a young man probably a teenager just pulled it away from me and run off with it and passers-by grabbed him and got the bread back but by that time was mostly eaten anyway so...

Interviewer: You were how old?

Leonard Chill: By that time I would say probably about 10, 10-ish.

Interviewer: And your mother was in France?

Leonard Chill: My mother started being in France. From there as the Germans came to France, she went to Portugal, from Portugal she went to Canada and spend the war years in Canada.

Interviewer: And you were in touch with her?

Leonard Chill: No.

Interviewer: No?

Leonard Chill: No, I had no idea where she was. She had no idea where I was. My mother and father had been separated before the war, so there was not a living together situation for the whole family, but we went to ghetto which of course as luck would have it, was the wrong thing to do, a few months or maybe less than a few months the Germans started liquidating the ghetto and we had to escape

from the ghetto and my father escaped because he worked on the road gang and he just was able to detached himself from the gang and make his way to the lodging that we had with the rest of the group that escaped with us from Vilna were still there, so he just went there. I did it simply much simpler I just walked out of the ghetto and again was one those of lucky things that there was a—a van came and the Germans were checking out the van in the way the Poles who were returning from working in the ghetto with us, you know, traffic both ways, waved them on and I was one of them and I was gone. You know my life has been at that time was just one lucky coincidence after another. Nothing was planned, they just happened that way. So both of us were out of the ghetto back to the, I wouldn't call it apartment, it was a room, lodging, in the place where certainly the landlady had no idea, I'm sure she didn't know, that we were Jewish, because harboring a Jew was the same as being Jewish in those days, too. Those who provided shelter, the whole family would have gone to the concentration camps, if they lived that long. So we pretty much returned back to what we had...the way we had live before, but now our Jewish identity became somehow known and we were blackmailed by Polish policemen and then life was getting more and more precarious on the Arian side. We started looking for some...for another place to live and one Sunday morning I still remember it, I was sent maybe, yeah, sent out to do some shopping, food shopping and I was coming back I saw my father and the rest of the group led out to a van by I think a mixture of Polish and German police. Again I was lucky I just happen not to be there, if I had been there five minutes earlier, five minutes later I wouldn't be here today.

Interviewer: But you're also 10 and without your father.

Leonard Chill: Yes, now that...

Interviewer: How was that?

Leonard Chill: How was that? Well, it wasn't easy I was on my own. We had already made some arrangements to have a bed to sleep in and then in another location, so I went there and I had shelter, I had no money and I remember names of a couple of Polish friends of my father in Warsaw, so they gave me a little money and I went to business. I used to go to the market buy fruit and vegetables bring it back to our neighborhood and sell door to door.

Interviewer: As a Polish vendor?

Leonard Chill: As a Polish vendor, yeah. I mean life was screwy in those days. It wasn't anything normal. I don't even think there was a school for the Poles that belong to the Jews and of course the Jews were hiding [unintelligible 0:16:09.3] has lived on the non-Jewish side.

Interviewer: You find it amazing that a boy of 10 that could do this virtually on his own

Leonard Chill: I know, I know sounds strange, but it wasn't a surprise, it wasn't amazing then. The problem when you're dealing food is you also in fact consuming your inventories for...

Interviewer: You're still a boy at 10?

Leonard Chill: Yeah and I was sort of again I was lucky one of my clients was a lady and she asked me if I wanted...she knew I was on my own. She lived right pretty much across from where I was and she asked me if I would like to stay with her. This is like heaven.

Interviewer: Knowing you were on your own, how did you explain were your Polish father was?

Leonard Chill: In prison.

Interviewer: In prison?

Leonard Chill: Yeah, I think Jews were exterminated, Poles were persecuted so it's not that the Poles had it easy and there are all sorts of people and it was one vast underground really Poland was in those days. Everybody was anti-German and anti-Jewish unfortunately. They seem to combine those two extremely well in Poland, extremely well. So I don't think...I couldn't expect the Poles not to turn you in and the lady who took me in, I'm not sure if she ever thought I was Jewish or not, I really don't know.

Interviewer: How long did you live there?

Leonard Chill: With her about a year, a year and a half.

Interviewer: Still having no contact with your father?

Leonard Chill: Well that changed. About...I don't know was six months or so after I moved in with her, my father reappeared and he in a group of 10 made an escape from prison in Warsaw. In fact a book has been written about it. And now he was free and then another gentleman who wrote the book about their escape was free and a bunch of other people. My father's freedom was short lived. He was caught again and shot while he was trying to escape, but now a gentleman who escaped, a man who escaped with him took care of me after we were liberated so I had the way out, which also led to finding out my family. My family, my uncles lived in London, had been well established in London so they were found.

Interviewer: Where were you during liberation?

Leonard Chill: I'm sorry?

Interviewer: Where were you at the time of liberation?

Leonard Chill: Warsaw.

Interviewer: You were in Warsaw?

Leonard Chill: Yeah.

Interviewer: You were in?

Leonard Chill: We were in a part of Warsaw called Praga. This was a part of Warsaw that was liberated maybe six months or so ahead of the Warsaw proper, while the

Warsaw uprising was going on the Russians decided in their wisdom, decided to stop and let the Germans massacre the Poles and destroy Warsaw. We were lucky we were on the side that was already occupied by the Russians or the...in fact it was the Polish army that occupied us.

Interviewer: You said you attribute your freedom or your life to a series of narrow escapes.

Leonard Chill: Well yes, or luck I don't know which.

Interviewer: How soon did you find your mother?

Leonard Chill: What happened was the man who took me away from this Polish lady after the war and who by the way also married, remarried about this time had friends who had, who left from Poland to Sweden and he ask to give them my families last name. These people happen to have a brother in London who looked them up in the telephone directory, and the only two names that were spelled the way my family was spelled were my uncles, my mother's brother and my mother's sister. So one of my uncles came to Sweden and made arrangements for me to leave Poland and go to Sweden which is what I did. That was legal by the way by that time.

Interviewer: So how old were you when you saw your mom for the first time?

Leonard Chill: OK and there when I was in Sweden my mother came. So I would say about 13 or so, 13...

Interviewer: And what was that like?

Leonard Chill: Well you know...for my mother it was very emotional. For me it wasn't that emotional. I think one thing you lose living the way I did, you think the emotions are, you lose the ability to be too emotional and to this day by the way.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Leonard Chill: I'm sorry?

Interviewer: I've heard that before.

Leonard Chill: Oh hear it from others?

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Leonard Chill: I think if you are too sensitive, which I suppose may mean being emotional is, you couldn't live with yourself for the horrible experiences of the war. I was lucky I was young enough in one hand so perhaps, perhaps I never totally, totally grasped with full impact. I knew what was going on. I mean it's not that I didn't know what was going on, but that was the age of, I think maybe...innocence.

Interviewer: So you stayed with your mother after that?

Leonard Chill: After that I was able to go to London where my mother and her husband, new husband came and lived while I was completing my school and growing up.

Interviewer: So by that time when you were 13, she was aware of what had happened to your father?

Leonard Chill: Yes. Yes as soon as I was coming my family was able to contact me, they knew what happened to my father and...

Interviewer: When did you come to the States?

Leonard Chill: I was educated in England went to high school and a university, then I work in England for a few years, got married, had a daughter born in England. When I was, let me think, about 1960 or thereabouts decided that England did not offer

me a good future so we went to Canada, lived in Canada for a few years and then came to the States.

Interviewer: Where in the States did you first stop?

Leonard Chill: Clifton, New Jersey.

Interviewer: Clifton, New Jersey. You stayed there?

Leonard Chill: Had a cousin there who had a factory and she offered me a job so we came.

Interviewer: And you stayed in New Jersey?

Leonard Chill: Stayed in New Jersey maybe three or four years. From New Jersey I got a job in California, so we lived in California maybe seven or eight years.

Interviewer: Where in California?

Leonard Chill: East Bay which is near San Francisco and the last couple of years in Corona del Mar, which is south towards San Diego, yes, near Newport Beach.

Interviewer: I'm an LA girl, so you're right in between the two.

Leonard Chill: OK a beautiful beach in Corona del Mar.

Interviewer: That's right. So you...

Leonard Chill: I work in Paramount.

Interviewer: Oh, I know it very well. What brought you to Tennessee then?

Leonard Chill: I was sort of an inventor in those days and I developed some product, which led—basically, gave me a good name in the industry and when the company needed somebody to run it better they thought, they offered me a job here in Tennessee, it's a big career promotion for me.

Interviewer: So how old were you...what year are we talking when you came to Tennessee?

Leonard Chill: Oh, we are now talking 1973, 30 years ago.

Interviewer: You've been here for 30 years. How do you feel about Tennessee? Did you come straight to this area to the actual Chattanooga area or did you come to by the other cities?

Leonard Chill: In Tennessee?

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Leonard Chill: No, we came straight to Signal Mountain in fact and lived there maybe for a couple of years. By that time, we had three children. Had a girl, daughter born in England, son was born in Canada, and another son was born in California. So as we moved, we multiplied, but there was nobody born in Tennessee.

Interviewer: So...

Leonard Chill: My job location was in Chickamauga, Georgia, so basically it's a few miles outside of Chattanooga.

Interviewer: Did you feel supported? I know that you said you don't feel incredibly scarred by your experience.

Leonard Chill: I don't feel scarred at all.

Interviewer: Do you find that surprising?

Leonard Chill: Yes.

Interviewer: From an outsider, like me...

Leonard Chill: You would say I'm very scarred.

Interviewer: I'm scarred by what I've heard. You know, I mean I look at a 10-year-old child and I imagine that experience and I...where do you...where do you attribute that resilience and that...?

Leonard Chill: I don't know. I think all of us have a will to survive. If you were in my position at my age you would have probably done...you probably done the same. You may have been luckier or less lucky than I was, but you have amazing resources to draw upon when you have to have and I'm sure soldiers in battle find that -- those who never thought they could shoot straight all of a sudden they can become heroes and go back to normal afterwards.

Interviewer: Sure. You have three children they've all been 10 once, you see how young that it?

Leonard Chill: Oh yes. Oh yes. Yes. I have grandchildren who are much older than that and certainly at 10 they were children.

Interviewer: What do you...?

Leonard Chill: I think I lost my childhood there's no question, it's skipped me.

Interviewer: What do you want people to know about what happened?

Leonard Chill: For a long time I was sort of in denial. I tried not to think about it, not to act on it and not to talk to my family about it. Today my view is totally different, I think—I think those of us who were lucky to survive I think survived for a reason and the reason is that we need to tell others what happened and I do give a few talks every now and then by the way. I'm not a good member of Holocaust Commission even though I'm a member. I don't seem to be a good joiner for some reason or maybe it comes from those days when I was on my own but I think holocaust must be remembered and I think all survivors feel very strongly that way, in fact you read about those who did not survive and one of the common messages was tell others what happened.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you're fulfilling that?

Leonard Chill: I think today somewhat, somewhat.

Interviewer: Is that what brings you to events like these?

Leonard Chill: Yes.

Interviewer: You do it driven by the need to tell people?

Leonard Chill: Now, there was another change in my life, my first wife, I'm a widower, died maybe two years ago and I remarried. My wife was not Jewish, so our family was a bit confused about that. So now that I remarried and I married a wonderful Jewish lady this time, so I think it's much easier for me to be Jewish and be more focused on Jewish past.

Interviewer: Were you actively Jewish in your first marriage?

Leonard Chill: No, inactively Jewish.

Interviewer: Inactively Jewish. Do you think that assisted in your ability to stay away from memories of the holocaust and because you were out of that circuit?

Leonard Chill: Probably so. Probably so, although my wife was very sympathetic and always encouraged me to try to talk about it and get in touch with it but I couldn't for some reason.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you're doing that now?

Leonard Chill: Yes. Maybe to getting older, maybe to getting retired; although, I sort of rejoined the Holocaust, the member's movement while my wife was still alive.

Interviewer: Thank you Mr. Chill.

Leonard Chill: You're welcome.

Interviewer: What a pleasure. I am going to...

Interviewer 2: I have one question that and I didn't know if you finished this. That you said that – you said briefly that the shopping experiences save your life, and I wondered how...

Leonard Chill: Oh OK. What happened was that I went for a walk and to pick up some groceries I believe and by the time I was approaching our lodgings, as I was approaching lodging I saw activity there which basically was a policeman and the police were taking out my father and the whole group of several others who were hiding with us and they drove them by just as I was coming back, of course I never went back.

Interviewer 2: So you hadn't planned to escape? You really weren't, you know, you were just doing your shopping because you knew that was the time to go because you saw

Leonard Chill: Yeah well there...Absolutely and I knew that our neighbors would have turned me in, I mean, to protect themselves.

Interviewer 2: Is that something that you have talked about as a family and planned for or did you have to face that?

Leonard Chill: No, we did not...what we were planning to do is to get away from that location because we were blackmailed by a Polish policeman so obviously the danger of being picked up was real and then apparently that's probably what happened.

Interviewer 2: So you mean you were 10, you attribute a lot to luck or coincidence and I wonder how much it seems like your dad too maybe was sort of an entrepreneurial, I mean, if he escaped from prison, you know, then it seemed like that maybe naturally transferred to your life as well or did you look after in some ways that you're not aware of.

Leonard Chill: Yes. I'm not really religious, but sometimes I have to wonder "why me" and...

Interviewer: I know when you started this interview you said it's not a very dramatic interview and I find the survival of a 10 year old child in the middle of the war-torn Poland unbelievably dramatic so maybe it's...

Leonard Chill: Yeah and you're a mother huh?

Interviewer: I'm a mother.

Leonard Chill: How old are your children?

Interviewer: My children are eight and three.

Leonard Chill: OK so. One is approaching that age.

Interviewer: You know and that's part of it, but truly I find that an amazing story. I mean I find it amazing that you live under a false identity and alone and sold vegetables and fruit door to door as a Polish vendor. I find that astounding. I just wanted to bring that up because you said that this is not dramatic.

Leonard Chill: And I was never a brilliant business man afterwards.

Interviewer: I think there is something to be said for the fruit falling from the tree because it definitely sounds like you came from a very smart stock.

Leonard Chill: OK, I'll take that as a compliment.

Interviewer: I find you dismissive of your experience, which I think is interesting because I really I find it amazing, I really do.

Leonard Chill: Well, when I give my talks I usually start by saying that mine was a holocaust-lite because I was not in a concentration camp. I was closest I came to death I suppose was in the Warsaw ghetto.

Interviewer: It's interesting that--

Leonard Chill: Because I could have been deported...

Interviewer: --that being without your parents, losing your father, living on the street, at some point people's homes, door to door as a vendor age of 10 and you look at that as a holocaust light, interesting. It says something about you I just find that interesting.

Leonard Chill: I guess I'm a...I think I'm slightly understated.

Interviewer: It's the journalist in me going in and going in...

Leonard Chill: No, I have an understated personality.

Interviewer: I find it very...I find you understating your experience and I think it's interesting because I find it from the outside looking in. Sure I'm a Jewish mother from the

city, but I've heard this. I've read this. I've studied this. I found that amazing. I find your story unbelievably amazing.

Leonard Chill: Really? Remember this was about '55, war ended in '45 for me it probably ended in '44, so we are looking about 59 years ago...something 58, amazing.

Interviewer: Quick math.

Leonard Chill: But I have no problem at school...I mean I have to learn English of course. I did well at school. I did reasonably well in college and I've had a pretty good career, so I'm retired unfortunately or fortunately.

Interviewer: Unfortunately or fortunately?

Leonard Chill: I think it's fortunately. So about 71 I think it's time and in good health too. I have a wonderful second wife and had a good first wife, so life has been good to me really.