

Transcript:

Leonid Saharovici

A24

37m59s

Leonid Saharovici: I was thinking about all these things when I wrote you down the information so I would like you to go over the information and then you can ask me question, I can repeat whatever is written here, we can expand so we'll not take your time.

Interviewer: You were born in Romania 1927.

Leonid Saharovici: I'm born in Romania in July 1927, which brings it to July 2003, 76 years.

Interviewer: 76 years old.

Leonid Saharovici: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about your earliest memories of anti-Semitism in Romania.

Leonid Saharovici: Well, my earliest memory of Jewish persecution goes back to the time when I was a child. Short after the Nazis occupied Romania. I was eliminated from the school, the [unintelligible 0:01:23.0], that I wanted to attend.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Leonid Saharovici: Because Jews could not attend anymore neither public nor private Romanian schools.

Interviewer: And this was when, do you remember?

Leonid Saharovici: In 1940.

Interviewer: In 1940.

Leonid Saharovici: Yes.

Interviewer: So you were 13.

Leonid Saharovici: Exactly.

Interviewer: And you remember being eliminated?

Leonid Saharovici: And I remember being kicked out. The same year, I remember being kicked out from my home. In one day, we were thrown out from our home and our furniture and every belonging were put on the street. Lucky enough, one of my aunts, my mother's sister, was living in a home that was owned by a Christian. So, we were allowed to move there so in one room we were living six people. This was beginning of the war and immediately, in 1941, we witnessed probably one of the worst pogroms in the history of Romania. There are two pogroms that are usually listed. One is the one in Bucharest and the other one is the one in Yash. The pogrom in Bucharest, they practically took out Jews from their homes, from their streets, from the streets, from the businesses.

Interviewer: How did they do that?

Leonid Saharovici: By force. Putting them in trucks, taking them to a slaughter house where they killed animals and putting them on hooks. They didn't have enough ammunition. The rest of them were taken in the forest and it's probably one of the very renowned stories that happened during this Legionnaire pogrom in Bucharest Romania when my friend that I was able to see after 40 years in Israel a few years ago with a reunion told the story. One day they came in '41 and took him from home. His two brothers and his father, they took him to the forest of Jilava. The father took the children in his arm and they start shooting. After half an hour, the men realized that the two sons are dead and he is alive because the bullet...the children being in his arm protected him so he survived and the children died.

Interviewer: In his arms.

Leonid Saharovici: In his arms. The man, my friend who is now a rabbi in Israel, rabbi Gutman retold the stories that we know because he didn't come to school for a week or two and then when he came, he told us what happened to his brother. His father that I have seen later after a few months, used to have a big black beard and his beard was changed in white completely as the trauma that he saw. I remember going to see if we can find friends of relatives weeks after the program and we saw the Institute of Forensic in Bucharest, they were waiting for them to make the autopsy and they were on the floor and on the tables, dead people. The synagogue, one of the most beautiful synagogues was destroyed. They threw the Torahs on the floor. So these are vivid memories that stayed with me and that's when I was 13 years old. My father was sent to a labor camp in Hagien where he worked for [unintelligible 0:05:12.9] I haven't seen him during the war at all. And tragically, he came back after the war alive and as he went to our home, a bombardment happened. He went to hide in a basement on a hospital thinking that they're not going to bomb the hospital. They threw two bombs and he remained paralyzed and after a few years he died. So, at least we had him for a few years with us.

Interviewer: You were sent to a labor camp and that was...

Leonid Saharovici: I was sent to a labor camp in 19...when I was 15 years old. And I have here a document that I keep as a memorabilia. It's my identification card to the labor camp. Can you read what's written here? The word. Evreu, which means the Jew. We were not identified as Mr. and Mrs. but as a Jew Leonid Saharovici, and I keep it as a souvenir that stays with me for the rest of my life because it's a document.

Interviewer: Did you give this to Joseph by any chance?

Leonid Saharovici: To Joseph?

Interviewer: Joseph is scanning documents in the back so...

Leonid Saharovici: I can give it to him.

Interviewer: He has...

Leonid Saharovici: I can give it to him.

Interviewer: Just to make sure you have...

Leonid Saharovici: I can give it to him. Yes, I will give it to him.

Interviewer: What was the name of that document, do you remember?

Leonid Saharovici: Yes.

Interviewer: Is it a pass?

Leonid Saharovici: It's an ident...it's called detasament de munca, labor camp, it's a disposition of the city hall of the City of Bucharest. Identification card 261.

Interviewer: So it's your labor camp ID card.

Leonid Saharovici: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: And you had to keep that on you—

Leonid Saharovici: Every day, when I come in the morning, this was a transit camp so in the morning when we came to the appeal, to the call, we had to bring the card with us and we were making the sign that we...the Jew Saharovici Leonid, yes. We were not called Mr. and Mrs., we were...that was how we were identified. It's a little—

Interviewer: 261 was your number?

Leonid Saharovici: Yeah. When you say number, because many people are asking, your number is not tattooed. Tattoo were only people who were in extermination camps.

Interviewer: You were in a transit camp.

Leonid Saharovici: In a transit camp, this was our identification card. Opposite to the people in the camp and I want to call your attention to a lady who is going to come here for the interview, especially for you, for Mr. Milan. Robert, if Mrs. Diamond is coming here...

Interviewer: She has been here.

Male: Yes, we've already talked to her.

Male: This morning, we just—

Leonid Saharovici: I'll bring her back because she is a unique case. Her number is tattooed.

Interviewer: Right.

Leonid Saharovici: Did he show you?

Interviewer: It's on her arm.

Leonid Saharovici: No, but by mistake, they put a wrong number and asked her to come back to burn her again with the correct number. I'm going to bring her tomorrow to take this picture because it's a very unique case. Harriet...

Interviewer: Harriet Diamond.

Leonid Saharovici: Not Harriet Diamond.

Interviewer: Henrietta?

Leonid Saharovici: No. Henrietta is...what's her name, Ruti Diamond.

Interviewer: That's Ruth Diamond, we met her as well.

Leonid Saharovici: OK, good. Now let's continue.

Interviewer: OK. Tell me about your time at Bucharest.

Leonid Saharovici: My time in Bucharest, I can tell you not only my time in Bucharest, my parents both came from what is called in the history of the Jews, Shtetl. The Shtetl is a small village that keeps tradition and continues the Jewish life. My father was born in Tigina, Bessarabia and my mother was born in Sadagura, Bukovina. They both belong to Romania or force them back to Austria-Hungaria, to Russia and so on. As a child, I used to visit these cities and in my memories, will always stay for instance, the wedding of my cousins who were outside. Traditional weddings are under the sky, winter with the rabbi, old men being brought to the wedding to celebrate. The music, the dances, the Yiddish theater in Bucharest, we used to have...Bucharest Yiddish theater is a place that Goldfaden created the Yiddish theater in Europe. And to the day, we have a Yiddish theater with translation for the people who do not understand Yiddish. When I went to England to visit Shakespeare Theater, in the lobby, I saw a picture with a troupe, with a group from Romania from the Yiddish theater that performed Hamlet in Yiddish. So they were a very rich cultural life with a lot of tradition, synagogues, beautiful synagogues, people... the Jewish people were very active not only in business but in science, in art, in theater, in movies, in music, composers, scientists. Even today, the president of the remaining Jews, 6,000 Jews that remained from 800,000 who used to be in Romania, 400 were killed during the holocaust and all these people are people who had brought their contribution to the development of Romania.

Interviewer: Your job in the camp? Dismantling unexploded bombs...

Leonid Saharovici: There were many jobs that we used to have in the camp.

Interviewer: OK.

Leonid Saharovici: I will take it for all the seasons because it's very interesting. In summer, we used to work in a vegetable garden from morning until night. And help producing vegetables, they were put...

Interviewer: Did you eat them?

Leonid Saharovici: Stealing them we could eat them. So, on this hand, I can say that we had an advantage working into a garden. But the most dangerous jobs was dismantling unexploded bombs. They were bombs that were thrown out with a timer so after a bomb was hitting the ground and did not explode, people will know that it's an unexploded bomb. The task was to go and to dismantle the timer so the bomb will not explode. It was quite a dangerous job and it was reserved for Jewish young people. After a bombardment, we were called to clean the debris. Well, cleaning the debris, you could find dead people under the...and that we had to take out. It was not too pleasant for a child 15 years old to do such jobs but we had to do them. And probably one of the very, very dramatic tragic work was during the winter and Romania has heavy winters. We were supposed to clean the snow from the street and I remember talking about anti-Semitism that in a winter, a lady called to give us tea to warm up and we appreciate the gesture very much and she gave us glasses of teas with a little bit of bread and we were very happy.

Interviewer: And this was when?

Leonid Saharovici: That was during the war, a woman, a woman. Her husband came back and starts screaming to her. "Why do you do such things? These are dirty Jews, they have to die, let them freeze, how did..."so she pushed him into the house and said, "You finish drinking and leave"but her heart was good. And you know, Sir Martin Gilbert that I mentioned to you wrote a book about the righteous gentiles and he asked me if I can furnish him some information about righteous gentiles from Romania and I sent him the information about the woman who was working for the Red Cross as a volunteer. VioriciAgarici is her name and she's very famous. YadVashem gave her the title of righteous gentiles. She put herself in front of the...

Interviewer: (Sneezes)

Leonid Saharovici: Bless you, that means that what I say to you is true.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Leonid Saharovici: She put herself in front of a train that was transporting the Jews from Yash and said, this train is not going to leave until you do not open the doors and we take out the people. And the German were scared and the Romanian, then they let the people be freed and so she saved so many hundreds of people. And after the war, this woman was declared Righteous Gentile and she was given a YadVashem, the honor and that he was building her honor.

Interviewer: Let me stop you right there because I want to ask you something. We've interviewed several survivors so far, many of them feel, out of all the people they had encountered, that it was the neighbors, the teachers, the doctors, the grocers that were, as Daniel Goldhagen calls them, Hitler's Willing Executioners. We had one woman say that she was more betrayed by the neighbors than by the Nazis because the Nazis were animals but these were people turned animal. When I hear stories like what you just said, do you feel like there were more righteous gentiles than we can recall?

Leonid Saharovici: Yeah, this question...I put myself this question many, many times and my answer to you is that in a forest, you have good trees and bad trees. You have to go to see the good trees and the bad trees. Evidently, the good trees were a minority during the war. If we would have had only good trees, we probably wouldn't have had 6 million Jews to be killed. More and more have been saved. But meantime, we have to recognize that we are good people too. Take the people for instance...

Interviewer: What makes them good? What made her gave you tea and her husband tells you to get out?

Leonid Saharovici: That's a very, very good question. People are different, individual, one from another. This was a good woman. She was a mother of children. She saw children like her children on the street, winter, freezing, so she felt she had to do something for these kids. She came out, she gave us

what? A glass of hot water, that was a tea. Her husband was probably a fanatic anti-Semite. I'll give you another example.

Interviewer: But a father.

Leonid Saharovici: But he was a father...but a father with a stone heart, not with a soft heart, not with a human aspect. That's why we cannot understand. For instance, my oldest uncle was killed in one of the most horrible way. The Romanian came into Taghina, they took him out from the home in front of his wife, tied his hand and his leg to a horse and a carriage and start beating the horses and ran with him until they brought him back bone, skin, flesh, and blood. And everybody was looking to this and nobody was protesting. My wife has another powerful story that she is going to share with you that was written on paper about one of her uncles and you are going to see what means good people...it's a physician, a Jewish physician saving the life of a Christian woman and then she said to him, I have to share with you a drama. Go to the synagogue here a few miles and you will see a scene and he went to the synagogue, opened the synagogue and find all the Jews killed on the floor and he took...and on the wall, and he is writing, my wife has in writing all these things, on the wall, they put the swastika made from what? From Jewish blood. They dipped their hand in Jewish blood and made a swastika on the wall and he cut off this plaster. So, generally speaking, I was confronted with this question in many, many times. It all depends for instance during the war when the rebellion of the Legionnaires came, a good friend of mine from childhood, I used to play with him soccer and a wonderful man came and said, I would like you to come to stay with us because it's dangerous for you. I said, but I have parents, I have grandparents, I cannot leave them. He said, well, we don't have room for all of you. So I was his friend for him I was close to so he invited me to save my life and I have to still remember him as a good man and there were many, many good men but not enough, not enough to say that they could have shown more understanding for the tragedy and do more. And you are going to hear survivors here like Mrs. [unintelligible 0:20:19.5] that you are going to interview who was saved by Poles who kept her in the basement. So there are examples. Yes, generally speaking, they were good people but they were in a minority. We cannot talk about general...the general population was supportive for what happened to the Jewish people.

Interviewer: Tell me about the camp.

Leonid Saharovici: Yeah.

Interviewer: You told me about your jobs.

Leonid Saharovici: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did you do it? How did you get through every day?

Leonid Saharovici: Knowing that you have to survive, knowing that—

Interviewer: Why?

Leonid Saharovici: Because it was very important. We believed, especially those who were religious like myself, believed in God. Believed that God is here but not...not God exterminate the Jews, it's the Nazis. God was a prisoner like we were there and we had...the feelings that we have to be strong and determined and do whatever they were asking us, to work in dangerous places to survive and we survived and thank God that we survived and we would rebuild our lives and goes on.

Interviewer: What did you tell yourself that God was during that time?

Leonid Saharovici: Many times, many times, we were asking for instance, there were boys who had to say, you know boys, Jews remember the days of the [unintelligible 0:22:02.5] with saying Kaddish and there were boys who have to say Kaddish for dearest ones. Now, where do you say Kaddish in a camp? We went to the places where they kept the horses in the stall and 10 people were sitting there and the men would say the prayer. And then we were thinking and thinking, God look, what is a Kaddish? The Kaddish is...very many people do not know the content or the meaning. We praise God and we were praising. We were continuing to

praise God because we saw that not God is responsible for what happened to us but the Nazis.

Interviewer: There are several people who said God left them there and it was at that moment that they abandoned all religious upbringings. In fact, there was one woman who says, she's not an atheist because she'll never let Him, being God, she'll never let Him be absent. She says, "I want Him to know I know He's there and He left me." How do you explain her anger and your faith? I'm not going to ask you to explain her but where does your faith come from?

Leonid Saharovici: My faith comes from my upbringing. I was brought up in a very observant home where God was praised every moment and this gave me and instilled in me the confidence and the belief that God will help us survive like He helped us in many moments of crisis. It all depends on how strong you are. You can see the same thing happened in Auschwitz no? Thank you. In Auschwitz, you find an Elie Wiesel who grew up in a religious family, an observant family and he sees his father, his mother dying near him and still believes in God. And here you have near him in the same camp, another famous Jew, Primo Levi, who questioned God. "Where have you been God?" And he is right. You know that...when there was a war, Jews were putting God on trial. Religious Jews asking, "Where were you?" And the answer was where were us, where were we? God was there. It were the inhuman Germans, Nazis, Italian fascists, who did what, to us what happened. They were the Ukrainian, the Russian, do not hesitate a moment to believe that this war, this horrible job was carried on only by the Nazis. Take BabiYar, do you think that the hand of Nazis could have exterminated tens of thousands of Jews if it wouldn't have been the help of the local people? Take 50 years later, the Poles in [unintelligible 0:25:32.0]. For 50 years they have said that Jews were killed in [unintelligible 0:25:39.2] by the Germans. Only after 50 years they came to sense, recognizing we were the ones who killed the Jews. We poured the gasoline and the fire on the barn and exterminated the Jews. It takes a long time to come to recognize for those who have been involved in the holocaust. But the conclusion is, and that has to stay with us, that Hitler and Mussolini could not finish the final solution without the help of many local people.

Interviewer: Hitler's willing executioners.

Leonid Saharovici: Yeah, call them.

Interviewer: What do you remember the most?

Leonid Saharovici: Well, there are so many things that I remember then I share, that I continue to share. I do not know from such large groups of things that happened to me, the one that were dear to me, what I have seen in my life, what I have heard from other survivors that I have met in my life. I'm very familiar with the life of the survivors from Memphis because I formed the holocaust memorial committee here and I considered that I did this because I want them to have a place where they should share and keep alive the memory of the holocaust. We suffered a lot of persecution. We suffered a lot of humiliation, moral degradation. What to say, it's so hard to find examples and examples of how horrible we were persecuted during the war. But finally, it came for me, August 23rd when I was liberated by the Russian. I could not believe that—

Interviewer: Tell me about that day.

Leonid Saharovici: We were at work in the camp and first came a tank. It could not come to the camp because of the road. So a Russian on a horse came and said in Yiddish, [unintelligible 0:28:24.2] and I said...people could not understand what is he...he could not say, only a few words [unintelligible 0:28:31.8] "Jews you are free." And of course immediately, we went to the tank and they start taking out chocolate and giving to people and people were eating. I said the result is going to be...many were going to have diarrhea after eating these, after not eating for so many days. But we were happy, we were pleased, we went home. The radio started broadcasting songs. For instance, many times, people are asking me why do I think that my favorite song is "The Four Seasons" by Vivaldi. I was coming home and I was very, very without energy and I was making many stops. I didn't have any money to take the street car so I was walking from the camp to home.

Interviewer: Which was how far?

Leonid Saharovici: Not too far, two hours. And to tell you a story, that I came home and my mother said, very happy that he saw me. She said, what happened to your underwear, they are so green? I said mother, we did not have toilet papers so we used leaves.

Interviewer: And your...you were gone how long in Bucharest?

Leonid Saharovici: Two years almost.

Interviewer: Two years.

Leonid Saharovici: Two years.

Interviewer: And your mother?

Leonid Saharovici: Oh, I...

Interviewer: She got sent to a camp?

Leonid Saharovici: No, mother...no, father was sent to a camp for four years, to a labor camp in a—

Interviewer: He survived?

Leonid Saharovici: He survived, yes. I told you the story.

Interviewer: Oh that's right, you told me that. He came back.

Leonid Saharovici: Yes, yeah.

Interviewer: Your mother was not sent to a camp?

Leonid Saharovici: No.

Interviewer: How did that happen?

Leonid Saharovici: It happened because they did not have camps. Many people are asking, why did you survive? The simple answer is Hitler did not have the transportations and means to send them to Auschwitz and did not have the means at Auschwitz to work faster. Do you know what happened in Wannsee when they had the conference to discuss the final solution? They said, it will take us years and years to exterminate all the Jewish population and they made an appeal to the German intelligentsia, discover something to exterminate them faster and that's how it come, the Zyklon B bomb. When the Zyklon B bomb came, I mean, the chemical product came, the gas, they could exterminate from morning until night, Jews. If they would have had the means, I wouldn't have been here to talk to you. I probably would have end up in one of the extermination camp. But lucky, they did not have the means, the war finished and I'm here.

Interviewer: What do you want people to know?

Leonid Saharovici: Well, I want the people to know that this tragedy could happen again and we see in our days forms of genocide. The holocaust is a form of genocide against the Jewish people. We were killed because we did not have blue eyes, blonde hair, we did not look like the pure Germans and we have affected what Hitler considered the purity of the German nation. So we want pure people like the Germans to exist. The same thing happened today, no? We have many forms of genocide. Take the Hutus in Zimbabwe no, they killed each other, take Saddam Hussein who killed his own people, and many...take what happened in Yugoslavia. Innocent people who were killed day by day and we discover in every day another mass grave with people that were exterminated.

Interviewer: How do we stop it?

Leonid Saharovici: How do we stop it? We stop it only with the answer to your question, remembering and not forgetting, keeping alive the memory of the holocaust, telling the story to the people, making them aware. You know, when Elie Wiesel said that the holocaust can instill caution and fortify restraint and prevent against other similar situation, he was referring not just to the holocaust but what can happen to the rest of the world in our days. That's why, when I came to America, I said, I have to dedicate all my efforts to tell the story, to make those who suffered to tell their story, that's why we formed that Baron Hirsch, a holocaust memorial committee. That's why when I got the chance to meet Gore and Sundquist 20 years ago in Washington, I said to them, help me to build a holocaust committee in Tennessee. They did and that's why we have today a holocaust committee in Tennessee. We are going to celebrate 20 years in the next year with God's help and we have done many, many things. How do you think that it could have happened that a small village in Tennessee like...

Interviewer: Paper Clips Project.

Leonid Saharovici: Paper Clips Project. No Jew is there.

Interviewer: Not one Jew.

Leonid Saharovici: No one Jew but they tell the story, they educate their children. The Germans were impressed, they send them a box car.

Interviewer: This is the story in a small town of Tennessee children, 13...this is the story of the Tennessee children—

Leonid Saharovici: In Whitwell Tennessee.

Interviewer: That collected 6 million paper clips.

Leonid Saharovici: 6 million paper clips. Now they have a monument in Whitwell Tennessee, not in Baron Hirsch or in Memphis or in Nashville but in Whitwell Tennessee.

Interviewer: I sent them 23 paper clips.

Leonid Saharovici: I sent them a package. It doesn't matter. Important is that you are willing to remember and that's what they wanted to do and that's what I wanted to do and that's what you all wanted to do and to work for the remembering of the holocaust.

Interviewer: For all the work you've done, all the exposure, all the efforts like the Baron Hirsch Holocaust Memorial Committee, charter member and former president of the Jewish Historical Society in the mid-south, vice president and member of the executive committee of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, with several congregations or several committees that you're a member of, are there still some very difficult nights for you?

Leonid Saharovici: No, I have a great satisfaction. I sleep very easy during the night. I think that I have inspired, modestly to speak, many other people to do good things for the memory of the holocaust. With me, for 20 years, I have seen great teachers, people from the entire country who come to work to prepare education for holocaust education. We wrote books, we have outreach program, we have many, many positive things and that's because people are aware that only by hard work we'll keep alive the memory of the holocaust. So think that we have done in Tennessee great things, great things and I'm very proud of every achievement. Teachers, take the teachers, you know, we have the Belz-Lipman Award. By the way, I have formed, I have another award that I give with Jack. This is Belz-Lipman, but this is Belz-Saharovici award that I give at Rhodes College to a student who exceeds in teaching the holocaust. At Rhodes College, one of the best colleges in United States, we teach holocaust. That's a great pleasure for me. The fact that we have a waiting list for the 20 seats assigned every semester for this class. That's great. That's really...makes proud all the Memphians and that

was possible because we created a good atmosphere to remember this holocaust.

Interviewer: It has been an honor to talk to you.

Leonid Saharovici: It's my pleasure to be here with you.

Interviewer: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Leonid Saharovici: I want it to make easier for you because I know that you are—

Interviewer: No, it's helpful. I'm going to put this in my file because—

Leonid Saharovici: You can use it because it...

Interviewer: I will use it.

Leonid Saharovici: It's going to help.

Interviewer: But it has been a pleasure talking to you.

Leonid Saharovici: And I want to thank you all who are here. It's fantastic, it's great. When more people like you we are going to have in Tennessee, the better the story is going to be told. That's it.