

Leon Grunte
Oral History Transcript

Historian: What was life like in the DP [displaced persons] camp?

Leon Grunte: Well, we didn't do very much of anything. It's a black market, didn't have to do any work. Miserable living conditions. In the room, there were six beds and you had one of those. And some people did better than others. All you did was black market.

I ended up in the general hospital, to start training as a nurse. And that's when I met [my wife] Mary.

Historian: And did you keep in touch with your mom?

Leon Grunte: Yes, I did. And I was really sad. She came to join us in America.

Historian: When did you go to America?

Leon Grunte: 1955. Because they were desperately short of nurses, even then. So, they interviewed me a lot to swear that I've never been a member of the Communist Party, God forbid. And they'd let us on the British quarter. So 50,000 a year and then of 35,000 was being used. So, I ended up in New York. Again, I met friends, relatives.

Historian: You said your mom came with you?

Leon Grunte: She came with us, and she couldn't get along with my wife. She was a little too... you know, the European mothers, they want to take care of you. And if you don't let them, they get antsy about it. So she had to move out and she was alright for a while, you know. But then eventually she committed suicide. She hanged herself. She had suffered from depression in Latvia, but there was nobody, I mean I could have, now that I think back, I could have recognized the symptoms. I was training in psychiatry, but, you know, when you have your own... You're dealing with your own family, you never pick them up.

Historian: So, you think she just suffered from everything with the war?

Leon Grunte: Depression.

Historian: I mean, it was a lot for her to go through.

Leon Grunte: God, yes.

Historian: Did she ever talk about losing her husband, or what she went through?

Leon Grunte: Oh, yeah. Some. He wrote to her. They communicated. You could write to each other and she would send him food, food parcels and whatever. And he was being released, was going to be released in a few months time. But he had a hernia and he had never taken care of it, and it ruptured and he died of that, you know.

Historian: Did she talk to you about what she went through?

Leon Grunte: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. One time when I got her, I took her to the doctors and they prescribed medication for her, vitamins. She was fine for a while. She traveled quite a bit with friends of hers to Florida and whatever. The depression got worse and worse, and I never picked up the signs. I should have left her peacefully in Latvia.

Now, Mary says, "Your mother hasn't seen you for 30 years. Don't you think you should see her?" Yeah, I suppose so. You know, I wasn't looking for her to come over, but one thing led to another, and she got virtually her own apartment. She shared with the two people. One slept in the kitchen and another grandmother slept in the same room as she did.

But they both died. So she ended up with an apartment. And when she left, the Russians moved in seven children, and she kissed the ground. And she said, this is the first time she's had an apartment of her own.

Historian: How would you say the war and your entire experience, how did it affect you?

Leon Grunte: You know, it's hard to tell. You kind of let it go, dismiss it, you know. Just think of the funny things that happened. When I was interviewing to go into the [German] air force, I made some friends with some Latvian air force officers, and they were so keen on flying. This is 1944.

The Germans, they would give them proper planes. They were given double deckers and bombs that they could drop whenever opportunity presented itself, and they were delighted to do it. So they'd fly behind the Russian lines. Russians would be sitting around campfires drinking borscht or whatever, you know, and they would drop a bomb in the middle, you know, but you can't win the war that way.

But you can sure as hell hit a lot, a hell of a lot of Russians that way, you know. It was, Hitler should have said, "Okay, enough's enough. Let's go. Let's see if we can negotiate peace." You wouldn't hear of it. [Hermann] Göring said, you know, "My fear, we're finished. You talk like that, I'll have you shot."

Historian: Well, do you feel...

Leon Grunte: But you know, you can't, you're the little little guy and a war's like, like a millstone. It keeps on grinding.