Ernest Hartog

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Q: When and where were you born?

A: On June 22, 1928 in Aachen which is right at the border of Belgium and Holland – the western border – it’s the Rhineland.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your education in Aachen?

A: Well the education is almost nil. I guess I went for two years in a local public school and literally bodily was thrown out of the school and then I went for another year or 1 ½ to a Jewish parochial type school and that’s about the time we left Germany.

Q: When you say you were bodily thrown out of school, how did that happen?

A: It was very simple. I was one of the few Jews in the grade school and all the venom and all the ill feelings were imposed or encumbered on the two or three Jews in that class and we got our share of beatings and our share of punishment and insult and more importantly during prayer sessions and catechism sessions, we had to go out as a known course of action so that became intolerable in effect we were literally told to pack our bag and go to another school.

Q: How old were you?

A: I guess six to eight.

Q: Had you ever been physically beaten before this incident?

A: Not in the sense of “you are a Jew, you are going to get a beating” As kids, you always get a beating, you always get into scuffles but not in the sense of four or five attackin you because you are the unicorn type individual

Q: As a child of six or eight, what kind of impressions did you have when you saw all this venom vented?

A: I don’t know. I’m sure that I felt underprivileged, like the black sheep in the crowd and why couldn’t I be like the others and why me? And what do I do different from the others. Religion to me in those days meant very little except that I wanted to be one of the crowd and in effect was not. I was not permitted to be one of the crowd.

Q: Did you ever go home and tell your parents these feelings or what happened?

A: As often as I could and my parents only reaction was bear with it or stay with it or it will change and we’ll talk to the teacher and we’ll talk to the principal and we’ll talk to the mayor and we’ll talk to everybody to alleviate the situation. But the kids, the grass roots individuals weren’t to be talked to.

Q: You were quite young then, but do you know if those kids belonged to the Hitler Jugend or the BDM?

A: I don’t think in those days. Maybe their older brothers and sisters did but the kids themselves, certainly not but I’m sure they learned enough at home and listening to the radio reading the newspapers, and probably directly from their parents. They were well aware of who a Jew was and who wasn’t.

Q: Did the teachers ever intervene either on your behalf or to the negative?

A: No, I would say if anything against me but probably the majority were neutral. They were standing by either closing their eyes or ignoring the situation.

Q: How did you feel about going to this all Jewish school after you were thrown out of this school?

A: I preferred the open grade school. First of all, let me make a correction. Although I was born in Aachen, we lived in a rather small town called Gangelt which had about two thousand or 2500 inhabitants. The public school that I was talking about is in that small town. And that’s where I grew up and that’s where I had all my friends, that’s where I had all my acquaintances and that’s where I really felt comfortable. The parochial school was in Aachen which was about 10 KM removed and therefore it required that I take the train on Monday morning – about 40 kilometers – all by my eight year old self, to go to Aachen, go to school and then I stayed all week with some very remote relatives in Aachen and then on Friday nights back home. So in fact at a young age, I was totally removed from my home place and I saw my parents at best, twice a week. So I didn’t feel comfortable in Aachen to say the least.

Q: Were these relatives close to you?

A: No, they were more like boarders to me. They put me up, and they charged my parents for it and they gave me food and they offered me a bed to sleep in but there was no close feelings with them. They were simply boarders who happened to be distant relatives.

Q: Before you went to Aachen then, did you have any non – Jewish friends in Gangelt?

A: The majority were non – Jewish friends. There was only one Jewish friend who happened to be my cousin and he was in the same boat I was in.

Q: Did you ever notice a specific change in their attitude towards you?

A: There was no difference until suddenly. It appeared or it came overnight. I was a very playful boy, I was in the midst of everything, thick or thin and always had great fun participating with all the other kids. We were very active and sometimes a little too active but we were a group. And then suddenly, like one day to the other, I became the outsider.

Q: That must have been very difficult for a young kid.

A: I’m sure – looking back at it I’m sure I didn’t recognize the impact of it but probably at that time, it must have affected me.

Q: Do you remember at this time any discussions in your home about emigration?

A: Not that I was aware of. If there was an effort underfoot to emigrate, I just never sensed it. I was there from day to day taking care of my studies and doing my thing and had no feelings for whether my parents were involved in this. I do know at the time that simply to do as the others did, we took out a number for emigrating to the States and I remember that my number was something in the 34,000 and that time they were handling much much smaller numbers so that there was no anticipation of emigrating in any short time.

Q: What type of business were your parents in?

A: We had a department store – like a Woolworth or W.T. Grant type store.

Q: Were most of the customers Jewish or gentile?

A: Decisively gentile, overwhelming.

Q: How was your father’s business affected in those years, to your knowledge?

A: Not at all until Kristallnacht. As a matter of fact, we were the center of the entire region. Not only were we the store for the community itself but we covered a very wide radius of clientele came on typical shopping days to do their shopping in our store. It was the center of attraction for the region. They were all gentile and they were all farmer type and a preponderance non – Jewish population.

Q: Were there ever any signs Juden Unerwuenscht or Juden Verboten?

A: Not until November 1oth, 1938. Unheard of.

Q: Just to clarify, when did you go to Aachen?

A: In 1937.

Q: What happened to you on Kristallnacht?

A: I was in Aachen at the time. My first observation of something happening was when I saw the synagogue in flames. My father was immediately arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen. My mother was in desperate urgency for getting hold of me so that I don’t get lost in the shuffle and she indeed sent our maid and our own car to Aachen to retrieve me. And the store was badly damaged. Half of the merchandise being removed and I guess sometime during the next day I came back to Gangelt and stayed with my mother. As part of the transactions to sell the store to non – Jewish owners, my father eventually was freed from Sachsenhausen – two or three weeks later. By that time, we had moved out of Gangelt and lived shortly with the so – called boarder or so called relatives of ours that I stayed with and we then, when my father was freed, we then lived in Cologne for two weeks with other relatives and then moved back to Gangelt to finish all the other transactions and shortly after that – it was early 1939, we illegally crossed the border and went to Belgium.

Q: Let me just go back for a moment, when you were in Aachen on Kristallnacht, were you out in the street at all?

A: I can’t recall what time all these activities started and I’m not sure I saw the synagogues burning during the night or the next morning. When I did go out, the streets were filled with people. The stores, all those that I was aware of being Jewish owned were all demolished and there was glass all over the streets. Population by the either large masses, plundering stores. The memories of this are not as clear as I would like but it reminded me of the black out night in New York City. We lived in a heavily populated area near the railroad station and main shopping area and as I came down and a good percentage of the stores were owned by Jews and these stores were all broken into and plundered and masses of people were in the streets.

Q: When the maid came to your relative’s houses, were you at all frightened?

A: I don’t think so. I think I was more amazed, awed, inspired by the unusual events taking place. I don’t think fear in those days meant very much to me – just something unusual did happen and I just passed it off as an unusual event without knowing the consequences or the implications of it.

Q: When you got back to Gangelt, how did your mother tell you that your father had been imprisoned?

A: In tears, in tears probably for job for finding me alive again and then she told me they had taken my father away. They, was probably not even clear then to me – that they had taken my father away and that he would be back soon and not to worry about it and we will take care of ourselves. Luckily, as I said, a cousin lived in the same town with us and so my mother and my aunt mingled together and then within a day or two after Kristillnacht, we left to go to Aachen and then to Cologne. So we were kind of removed from the scene or at least from where I stood – I didn’t realize that things were in such a critical condition.

Q: Did your mother have to make any plans in order to get your father released?

A: Yes. She had to make a commitment of willfully relinquishing or selling out the store and passing it on to an Aryan.

Q: Do you remember this?

A: Yes. We talked about it. My mother saying to my aunt rather than having a conversation with me but saying look, you have to sell your store and we have to sell it, so let’s get rid of it and somehow get out of this country. It’s the only way of continuing in existence. So, this was part of the conversation which I as a child absorbed.

Q: Up until Kristallnacht, did your family believe that Hitler would not last too much longer?

A: No. I always heard my parents in discussion with other grown – ups say yes, Hitler’s here and he’s for real but he really won’t touch us. We’re well to do people – we really have all the money that we need and we can probably pay our way through this passing phase but nothing will ever happen to us.

Q: Had your father served in the first world war?

A: Yes. He had and he was very proud of displaying his Iron Cross with honors and he said we did serve for Germany and Germany still has an obligation to us. A lot of what appears at this time nonsense, but they firmly believed it in those days.

Q: Do you remember the day your father returned from Sachsenhausen?

A: Yes. That was a very emotional day because it had taken a lot longer than we had anticipated. We thought it would be an overnight issue but it did take weeks and when he did come back he looked emaciated and it was very emotional. Everybody cried.

Q: Did he ever discuss what happened in Sachsenhausen?

A: No. If there was any discussion, it was always in my absence. It was hush – hushed. As far as I knew, he was there, he didn’t get much food to eat, he came back a skeleton but he came back.

Q: From your point of view as a child, did you notice any difference in your father from before he was taken to after he returned?

A: None other than his saying at this time, we want to leave Germany. Prior to Kristallnacht, there was absolutely no question of ever leaving Germany. That was our country, we belong here, nobody will drive us away from here. After Kristallnacht, there was only conversation about getting out one way or another.

Q: You mentioned that when your father came back, you went to Aachen and then Cologne. Why did you go to Cologne?

A: Probably and I don’t know all the logistics of it, but all the transactions and remember this is a hierarchy of municipal or national offices and probably all the agencies and all the transactions had to go through Cologne being probably the center of the legal chain of events to get my father out. Rather than transacting through mail, I guess it was more effective and convenient to direct the release of my father directly through the offices in Cologne. And since we had relatives in Cologne as well as in Aachen, it was more practical to be at the scene and get transactions moving faster.

Q: How did your father go about getting rid of the business?

A: Oh that was easy. It was a very fruitful and effective business and one other competitor in town with a very similar business but far less effective and much smaller always wanted to buy the business out – ever since Hitler had come to power – and of course on the very first occasion where it was openly offered, he was a buyer. He bought it.

Q: When you say he bought it...

A: He stole it. I guess the business was worth in those days in the 7 or 8 figures and he probably got it in the 5 or 6 figures. It was literally given away. He also happened to be a member of the SS or SA and literally took it away. It was a legal transaction but it was a giveaway.

Q: What had happened to the store on Kristallnacht?

A: It was completely destroyed. As a department store, an awful lot was glassware, crystal and porcelain etc. and what was not removed was in bits and pieces all over the floor. There was incredible damage done – and probably 60 or 70% of the inventory that was in the warehouse and the store was gone by the time everything had subsided.

Q: Was your family affected by the billion mark fine after Kristallnacht?

A: I’m quite sure that the fine money came out of either bank accounts or contributions.

Q: You mentioned that you went to Belgium illegally. How much in advance did your parents tell you?

A: Kristallnacht was Nov. ’38 and we must have left middle ’39. I don’t think I knew much about getting away from where I was except a day or two earlier I was told that we are going to go for a trip and we will prepare for it – pack whatever necessities I needed but I don’t think there was much of an announcement. As far as I was concerned, it was equivalent to going from Aachen to Cologne or from Cologne to Essen or something like this. It didn’t affect me until we were actually on the way when I was told to keep quiet and don’t make any noise and we are now going across the border illegally and it was pitch dark and we were walking and walking but other than that I was very naive and simple minded child. I didn’t know what it all was.

Q: Between Kristallnacht and when you left mid – 1939, you didn’t go to school anymore did you?

A: No.

Q: What was your daily routine?

A: Fun. The greatest thing on earth. I didn’t have to study. Whatever we did – whatever my mother did, I followed her footsteps wherever. You walked around, and see around and again my cousin was with us so we had plenty of playing to do and we had a great old time.

Q: Did you ever notice any Nazi parades during that time or...

A: All the time. That was one of the inconveniences of all this free time – to see all these brown shirts and black shirted people walking by and having seen other Jews being beaten up in the streets. But this was really inconsequential to me as child. Well, okay so they are beating people up – maybe they are bad people. I still did not realize in those days that they were beaten up solely for being Jews.

Q: Did you belong to a congregation?

A: We had a very small congregation in Gangelt and I guess every Jew belonged to that congregation except we were not very religious in those days and other than on the High Holidays I very rarely did go to synagogue.

Q: Do you ever remember any conversations your parents had either with their friends or members of the congregation trying to decide what to do about getting out of Germany?

A: We, Gangelt was a small community and I guess there were at the most 7 or eight Jewish families in that town and we were all very close and every Saturday night, they had card parties in one or the other house and they always discussed matters which were of importance to them. Not that I participated in these discussions but our concensus between my parents and my uncle and aunt that we are not going to go out of Germany. We are going to stay here and we are going to survive here. There were never any discussions of emigration. The only thing they did was to take out some numbers for possible emigration to the U.S. if things got really bad. They had no anticipation of doing that either in the middle and late thirties. They did not. Now remember Gangelt was a town which was literally separated by the Holland custom house in the middle of town so that as often as we walked on German soil also walked on Holland soil. We had every opportunity to just cross the border and be in Holland and stay there. We just had no intention. They had every intention of staying in Germany.

Q: After Kristallnacht, when did they change their minds? was there any opportunity at that point to cross into Holland?

A: I guess at that point there were economic elements that crept into the picture. Number one, first of all my father was not there and my mother and I would not have considered leaving without my father being free. After my father was free, then there was the winding down of all the affairs – the selling of the store and converting the bank accounts and possibly absorbing whatever financing was absorbable and securing them elsewhere. So in effect, when we did leave eventually, we had a nest egg across the border. So, after Kristallnacht, it was only a question of assorting the affairs and then packing and go.

Q: I don’t know that you can answer this, but how did your father go about making these preparations?

A: I don’t know how he did it. I can only imagine from the vantage point that we were at. We knew a lot of people in Holland and Belgium – we were close to the border. And prior to Kristallnacht, part of business was importing goods from Holland and Belgium so I would imagine that my father had the necessary contacts and knew all the necessary people that he trusted. As far as Germany was concerned, not only did we own the store but we had a lot of other assets –m jewelry and gold coins and other currency metals and I’m sure it was a question of as much secrecy as possible converting as much of that into some transactable value or entity and getting it across the border. But again, our maid was from Holland and a lot of our sales personnel was from Holland and I’m sure those were people that my father trusted and must have simply handed over packages and told them to take it to Rotterdam and give it to X Y or Z. It must have been relatively simple because we were at the source – we were always living in that environment.

Q: On the day that you left, you mentioned that it was at night. Can you describe how you actually left Germany?

A: Well, shortly after Kristallnacht, my mother and I lived in Aachen, then we moved to Cologne and then my father joined us there and then we could no longer return to Gangelt because by that time the house had been sold and the store had been sold which was part of the release transaction for my father. We took an apartment in Aachen and we lived there until we departed. The only memory I have of leaving Aachen was that we packed what little we needed as bare necessities and I don’t believe we had a car anymore in those days and we must have taken a cab and we drove to a point which was I guess a collecting point. From that point on, I remember being buried in a horse pulled hay wagon where the hay was on top of us and below us and we were sandwiched in between those layers of hay. And there were more than just my father, my mother and I. There were other people in that group. And that hay wagon pulled us to a farm house where we were told to go to the hay loft and we stayed in that hay loft until late at night and then we walked and we walked and walked and walked and when we stopped walking we were at another farm and from there we took some kind of transportation to the train and shortly thereafter we found ourselves in Brussels.

Q: Do you remember what was going through your mind at the time?

A: Nothing but how exciting – almost like a novel, like a police story. I don’t think I had any emotions one way or another. Leaving home – I’m not sure whether I was aware of leaving Germany permanently. I’m not sure that my parents told me that. To me, this was an adventure.

Q: Did you still have many relatives in Germany?

A: We had a very large family in Germany. My mother’s brother, my aunt and cousin lived in Gangelt with us. They did not come across the border with us. Another uncle and aunt and cousin lived in Dortmund. My father had several brothers and sisters also living in Germany. We were a fairly large family. Other than the three of us crossing that night into Belgium we were the only ones of the family ever leaving Germany and we were the only ones who stayed alive. As a matter of fact, my father didn’t make it but of the entire family, we were the only ones who left Germany.

Q: In watching your parents on that night when you left, how would you describe them?

A: I don’t think I could. One thing I remember – I said before that we left mid 1939, we didn’t leave mid – 1939. As a matter of fact, I know exactly when we left. We left on Yom Kippur day and the only reason I remember it was Yom Kippur was when we arrived in the first farm house where we stayed for several hours until it got completely dark outside, my father and my mother ate for the first time – broke the fast in that farmhouse. Even though we weren’t religious, Yom Kippur was the one thing we kept and I remember they didn’t eat until then. But I don’t remember the emotions nor do I remember if they were excited or heart broken.

Q: During this trip on the hay wagon, in the farm house and on the way to Brussels, who supplied you with food?

A: We had it in our bag. There was food with us.

Q: During this time, did your parents prepare you in case someone stopped you and asked questions?

A: Nothing other than just quiet – don’t sneeze, don’t cough, don’t talk – just quiet. Keep your mouth shut.

Q: When you were walking that night, did you walk across the border?

A: We walked. I don’t know where we were walking. We were a group of 10 or 12 people and there was someone in front who led the group and there was someone in back that trailed the group and we just walked. We stopped at another farmhouse and I remember there was a little joy saying we were now free. From this second farmhouse, we went in an open wagon pulled by horse to the train and then with the train we went straight to Brussels and in Brussels, I remember some other very distant relative picking us up at the station and taking us home. But the sigh of relief is what I remember and my parents jubilance at being free now and being able to speak and being free to move about.

Q: Did you stay with relatives in Brussels?

A: No. We very quickly, within a day or two, rented a furnished room and subsequently moved to a larger apartment. But we were pretty quickly on our own two feet.

Q: What were the family intentions at that point? Did he want to reestablish a business in Brussels?

A: I don’t know exactly what his intentions were. He was busy. He was gone all day long, whether he was transacting business in those days, I don’t remember but he was a very active man and he ran around all day long and whether it was a question of getting work papers from the Belgian community or whether he was still transacting business in Germany or whether he was actually doing an effective business I don’t know but he was gone most of the day and I was more than busy, being in a foreign country and not speaking the tongue. I know within short order after I got to Belgium, I was enrolled in school and that was a traumatic experience because again, I was the individual – the black sheep in the crowd – not this time, because I was Jewish but because I couldn’t communicate with anybody. As far as I was concerned, I was more than busy trying to learn the language so that I could speak to the kids.

Q: Was it very difficult for you those first couple of weeks in school?

A: It was very very difficult. It was next to impossible. I was very frustrated and stymied because other than my immediate environment, I was incommunicado. I was very frustrated – a young kid always active, being in the midst of things and here I was the outsider. But I guess the learning powers were very strong in those days and I learned French very quickly.

Q: In looking back, who helped you the most in overcoming the difficulty of these times?

A: Unquestionably my father. My father was the stern disciplinarian but also my idol and I looked up to him. My mother was the cuddly mother whose child could never do anything wrong and she protected me all the way and if there was any bad news to be imparted, it certainly would not have come from my mother, she would have changed the whole situation around. So certainly it was my father.

Q: Was he bilingual at that time?

A: He spoke five languages and he spoke French prior to departure.

Q: How long did you stay in school in Brussels?

A: Yom Kippur must have been sometime in September so from then until May, 1940 so it was about 9 or 10 months – just long enough for me to learn the language and to become acquainted with my environment before the invasion of Belgium took place. At this time again, my father was arrested. This time not as Jew but as an enemy alien because he was considered German and taken away from us but this time for good.

Q: Who arrested your father?

A: The Belgian police – as a matter of fat, they didn’t arrest him, they simply announced on the radio that all citizens or members of German nationality had to report to police headquarters which my father rightfully did assuming no serious consequences and he never came back.

Q: Was there any question in Belgium of having entered illegally?

A: No. I think that was part of my father’s business of trying to get himself established and we weren’t the only ones who went that route and apparently we got rightful papers to reside in Belgium very quickly.

Q: How did you find out that your father had been arrested?

A: We didn’t find out. My father simply went to the police to register under the Alien Edict and within two or three hours, we got notification from the police that he would be detained as an enemy and that if we wanted to provide him with clothing and other necessities, to bring a suitcase to the police headquarters. So within several hours, we had things packed for him and we brought the suitcase and we still assumed this was a temporary measure.

Q: When you took the suitcase, did you see your father?

A: Yes, we did. We spoke with him and he said don’t worry about a thing. They are going to protect us from the Germans and take care of us and don’t worry, I will write you.

Q: Was he in fact able to write after that?

A: Oh yes. He was taken from Brussels – eventually he ended up in St. Cyprien, in southern France and after a while, from St. Cyprien to Gurs and in this whole period until 1942, he stayed in Gurs and then in 1942, when the Germans finally caught up with us, or with him, he was then deported.

Q: When did you begin to realize that he wasn’t coming back or at least not in the foreseeable future?

A: Well, from the 10th of May when the Germans came into Belgium after my father was arrested and the Germans physically inundated Brussels – we listened to the radio and found out that the Germans overran Belgium. My mother and I packed a handbag – we collected all our precious belongings and took one of the very last trains leaving Brussels station and just went – in whatever direction the train took us. The train took us towards the French border and I guess we went from Brussels to Ghent and the train stopped there and that was the end of it. And then we walked with the crowd, by this time there were thousands of people on the roads, we walked across the French border and made it to Roubaix or somewhere in the northern part of France, I not entirely sure of the name of the town. But the Germans were more mobile and much faster than we were on foot and they eventually caught up with us. And while we were one night being bombed and strafed by machine gunning aircraft laying in a haystack – eventually we heard the German tanks rolling by on the street and the next morning there they were. We were surrounded by the German armies.

Q: Did you know at that point where your father was?

A: No. We had no idea where he was.

Q: Before we go on, when you were faced with the decision of having to leave Brussels and your father not there, do you remember your mother making this decision?

A: No. I don’t think my mother made the decision. At that time we had some relatives in Belgium who had taken us off the train and I think that woman made the decision. Her husband had been taken away too and that woman, Mrs. Rosenthal, she made the decision let us leave here. We can’t stay here. We have to get away from the Germans – let’s leave. And so we just left, period. I don’t remember the emotions of it but I’m sure they were very panicky. In those days, under those circumstances, both of them having husbands taken away and they just went with the masses.

Q: Were you aware that you were going to flee the Nazis?

A: No. I think from one moment to the other the decision was made pack whatever you need – just take the essentials and let’s get going. And we just boarded a train whatever direction it went and it happened to go in the right direction.

Q: You mentioned the train stopped in Ghent, and you walked from there.

A: I’m not sure that I knew where I was going nor did my mother and the others know where they were going but we were part of the crowd and by this time there was mass hysteria. If the leader would have gone to the ocean, I’m sure that’s where we would have gone. We followed the crowd. It was totally disorganized.

Q: What did you do for food and lodging?

A: This all took place in short order – within a day or two. We grabbed something to eat along the way. We stopped at a farm and I remember getting bread and cold cuts there, probably for good money but I don’t remember that but I don’t think we were concerned with where the food would come from. We just managed to eat and this was only for a few days. We slept either on the train or in a hayloft or on the farm.

Q: What happened when the Germans caught up with you?

A: It happened again at night – on a dark night – we were walking along the road and the most vivid memories which I have are of machine gun strafing flying over the road where there were thousands of walking bodies and their just shooting. I saw an awful lot of writhing bodies and screaming and yelling – people getting hit. And we just luckily got off the road and to a hayloft and just stayed there until the next morning when we heard the German tanks driving by the farm. So by this time we were amongst the Germans and we spoke German and I don’t think I looked Jewish in those days and my mother certainly didn’t look Jewish and simply, we managed to talk to some Germans – soldiers in uniform who gave us food and the only thing I remember is that sometime shortly thereafter we physically took a seat in a German truck which drove us back to Brussels. Out purpose at this point was that we were not going to avoid the Germans and remember, I didn’t take part in the decision making. I was just dragging along and I remember the two women saying that we had better get back to Brussels if we ever want to hear of our husbands again – that’s the only point of contact we had which was common prior to these events. So eventually, I found myself in a German truck with my mother and we were driven back to Brussels.

Q: These Germans must have assumed something – what were you doing in France or going back to Brussels?

A: I have no idea other than that my mother must have convinced them that we were refugees and they tried to avoid the war and the frontline and they just ran with the rest of the people and now that the Germans are here, we’re glad to have you on board – please take us back home again.

Q: Was there any hysteria with thousands of people on the road?

A: No hysteria other than an awful lot of moaning and groaning and people wither being hit or being hungry but nothing – again, as a child, I probably must have had enough to eat because I don’t remember hunger pains and as far as I was concerned this was great excitement. I didn’t have to go to school. I had no homework to do. There were a lot of new and unusual and different circumstances and to me as a kid, this was part of a great adventure.

Q: When you did get back to Brussels, what happened to you then?

A: It was an uneventful time as a matter of fact it was a very dull time as far as I was concerned. We got back to Brussels, we got back into our apartment, which was untouched, unhurt, unmoved – everything was there as it was. We did have ample financial supplies so this was no concern – we weren’t hungry.

Q: When you say ample financial supplies – during the time you went into France, this was a hasty move, was your mother able to take anything that would tide her over?

A: I don’t think so. I think she might have taken whatever jewelry she had and loose cash but I don’t think there was much funding. She had enough to get us where we did go and back. But in Brussels we had no financial problems as far as I was concerned and my mother was pretty well off as far as feeding us and the only concern we had was hearing from my father. Shortly thereafter and again time has no meaning to me, I don’t remember how soon after but we finally did get a word through the Red Cross that my father was at this time in St. Cyprien. As a mater of fact it didn’t come as an individual announcement. I remember my mother every morning very religiously going to I think it was to the school that I attended in those days and looking at a long list of people of people who had been taken away or had gotten lost during these hectic days and listing the names and their locations. Day after day we went to look at the list and finally my father’s name appeared on the list and then we knew where he was.

Q: Did you understand what St. Cyprien meant?

A: No. To me it was just another location but as far as I was concerned I knew now that my father was somewhere and we were in touch with him and subsequently extensive correspondence took place between my mother and my father – almost daily or every second day we received a card or a letter from my father.

Q: In those letters, was there ever any description or advice given by him?

A: None that I know of except that my mother would always tell me there is a special kiss from Dad for you or something to that effect but I did not read the correspondence. By the way I still have sample letters here which came from Gurs. Now, we knew that my father was in the southern part of France and we were in Brussels. I know we went through the almost religion of weekly packages – that is we were packing and I went with my mother shopping and what would Dad like this week and this all went into a carton and was shipped to St. Cyprien and to Gurs. So we literally fed my father almost on a daily basis from wherever we were. But I remember my mother saying okay he is now in the southern part of France and we are in Belgium, there is no purpose for us staying here – we better get closer to where he is and so one day we decided to pack our bags and leave Brussels to go to Paris. Again, that was not a legal move – that was permitted to us so we packed whatever necessities we had and the rest we gave to whoever was left behind and another trip across the border illegally at night to get to Paris.

Q: Who helped you to do this? Did arrangements have to be made?

A: We paid for that – there was X number of dollars to pay. I remember that we spoke about substantial sums of money to get it done and as far as I’m concerned, I packed a small bag and one day went on a train again and drove to close to the French border and then again the mechanism of a hay loft and a truck and a horse pulled carriage and then walking. And then shortly thereafter another train ride and then I found myself in Paris.

Q: During all this time, the Nazis were well entrenched in Brussels...

A: They were indeed, yes.

Q: Did that affect you in school or...

A: I don’t think I ever went back to school after the May day in 1940. We went to France and then back to Brussels and after that, time got very erratic and very hectic trying to find my father. I don’t think the schools were yet open. Remember this was May and in June, the schools would normally close for the summer anyway and I would imagine it was before school reopened that we were on our way to Paris. So in effect since May 1940 I had not set foot in a school.

Q: Did the Nazis in Brussels affect your everyday life?

A: I’m convinced it must have but as far as I was concerned I didn’t notice it.

Q: In other words, no restrictions on you?

A: No restrictions on us. Remember we were not legally listed as Jews – we were just living there and I don’t think there were any restrictions.

Q: When you came to Paris, were the Germans already there?

A: They had preceded us and they were in full force there.

Q: How did you manage in a strange...

A: We – I don’t know the transition – what exactly happened the day we arrived in Paris and who took care of us – but in those days there was a strong Jewish bond or community in France which was really funded and I guess organized by the Catholic community. L’armee Christien – several organizations which took care of Jews and I guess somewhere along the arrival in Paris, we went to a popular kitchen or something and we said here we are, what can we do. Eventually we ended up in a hotel – in a room in a hotel in a Jewish section – Rue de Rosee – which was a famous Paris Jewish section and we had a room there – a room and a roof over our heads and we stayed there quite a while. And our neighbor was really the man who took care of us. I remember him vividly – Mr. Reitzer – he was a young Talmudic student, very orthodox, very religious. He took care of all our needs. My mother at that time became rather sickly and I was an eleven year old child and Mr. Reitzer became certainly my chaperone, my guidance. He took care of some of our needs and life moved on – badly or whatever. I ate for several weeks at the popular kitchen. We went there religiously at 12 o’clock and got our meal. I don’t think we paid for that. We had no food stamps. Shortly after the Germans came, food stamps were issued but since we were illegal, we had no food stamps issued. We lived – not well, I remember that but we lived.

Q: Did the Nazis bother you in this Jewish section?

A: We were non – existent to the Nazis in terms of identity. However, during all the time that we lived in Paris, the only fear factor that I as a child remember were the famous ratzias – they would close up a quarter, a few city blocks, and anybody that was caught within that cordoned off area was scrutinized for identity, Jewish ness, and those that were on the wrong side of the fence were taken away in a paddy wagon and generally not heard from again.

Q: Was this a random...

A: Totally random, totally erratic and again, my mother was very attuned to this and apparently had developed contacts in Paris to get beforehand information. I remember one very vivid evening when it was advised that they probably would close off the section where we stayed and we just packed a handbag and moved to some other location where we had friends who had an apartment and I remember sleeping one night on a chair and coming back the next morning to the apartment only to find out that they did not indeed cordon off that area.

Q: You mentioned identity. You had no identity papers. What if someone had stopped you?

A: We would have been lost.

Q: You had no forged papers?

A: No. We just lived – we’re here and hopefully we’ll get by.

Q: You lived in a Jewish section – Rue de Rosee – other than what you just described, was there any damage done to the section or any physical violence by the Nazis?

A: I think we – and I can only say in retrospect now – that God must have protected us or there was a fortunate protective cover. We seemed to in total ignorance walk away from danger at all times, not at all being aware of it. We lived in the middle of a Jewish section which should have the first focal point of attack from the German point of view – yet, they did not. What they did in the Rue de Rosee, they would come up at 5: 30 or 6:00 in the afternoon and close up a restaurant and walk through the restaurant and take everybody away who was in the restaurant. We happened not to be in the restaurant at that time. Or they would come back three days later and walk through a grocery store and take everybody away who was in the grocery store . We happened not to be there. But they never made a decisive attack on the Rue de Rosee which they did shortly after we left Paris, within weeks after that they just closed up all the Rue de Rosee and from there on, that became a ghost street. But that was after. Somehow we were always a microsecond ahead of where the attack was. As a matter of fact, as I said we lived in a soup kitchen in a popular free food dish out set up and that would have been the most natural focal point for Germans to attack. We ate there and we survived through that until the day we left.

Q: Two questions came at me at the same time. Did you go to school or have any kind of education during your stay in Paris?

A: No.

Q: What made up your daily routine during this time?

A: Walked with my mother wherever she walked. Her main concern at this point was to free my father out of wherever he was at the time either St. Cyprien or Gurs – to get him free. And she walked from one end of town to the other to meet Mr. X who had connections to get him out and I think whatever money my mother had during those days vanished in trying to free my father. She would pay somebody 5000 francs and he would assure her that he would get father out of camp and bring him home and the five thousand francs disappeared and my father didn’t come out. So, our prime occupation, our prime concern during that year in Paris was getting my father free and packing cartons to be sent to the camp.

Q: Were you aware of the fact that her funds were disappearing?

A: As far as I was concerned the funds were limitless and we just did what was necessary to get father out.

Q: What made you decide to leave Paris?

A: Okay, Paris was occupied. Southern France was still free. My father was in southern France. He was under French occupation – the Germans weren’t going to touch him. Why should we be in Paris – let’s go where he is. Our concern was in Paris – free my father one way or another and also, get out of Paris – get out of occupied France and get into the unoccupied France. So eventually it paid off. We again, on the train crossed the border – crossed the border at night, we were halfway across the border, got close to the separation zone and were literally apprehended by seeing Germans walking 50 feet in front of us, dogs barking, quickly returned. We weren’t stopped again somehow by sheer magic our group wasn’t stopped but the group right in back of us was apprehended. So we went back to Paris by train, the trip was a big failure. We paid more and finally again, out to the separation line – this time made it across and we ended up in Lyon. This Mr. Reitzer who took care of us in Paris happened to be already in Lyon – that’s why we were on our way to Lyon. He took us in again and we continued to live exactly the way we lived in Paris except now in a different locale. We had some furnished room somewhere in some god forsaken town on some god forsaken street and we lived literally off the popular kitchen – off the handouts from Christian donations.

Q: Your mother had to be pretty courageous.

A: She was, she was.

Q: What kept her going?

A: The sheer hope of getting my father free – the sheer hope of getting away from them and getting together with my father. She was a sickly woman – she had infantile paralysis when she was a child and the excitement and the hardships brought the disease a little bit closer to the surface again but she was incredibly courageous, especially since she had all her life been dependent up on father and certainly now she was on her own. But she managed.

Q: Did Mr. Reitzer give her the ideas or help her get into unoccupied France?

A: I’m not sure whether he was the one – my mother was always a very likeable person – she knew God and the world and she was surrounded by everybody who knew whom and who knew where and knew what and I guess she got all kinds of information from all kinds of people and I don’t know whether he got her transportation but somehow she knew who to contact and who to pay and how to get across.

Q: She knew he was in Lyon?

A: He had preceded us by several weeks and he was there like a reception committee to receive us.

Q: Was your mother still in contact with your father when you got to Lyon?

A: Continuously. We never lost contact since we came back from Brussels. We got a postcard from him on a daily or bi – daily basis and he received mail from us with the same frequency.

Q: You did all this illegally. Letting him know where you were was dangerous...

A: Yes, it was. In retrospect, it was next to suicidal but I don’t think anybody realized the consequences or paid any heed to them.

Q: What was your life like in Lyon?

A: No different at all from Paris except we were free – there were no Germans around – for a very very short period of time and our emphasis was getting him out of camp and packing packages and indeed our whole life revolved around those two activities – either we were shopping for packages or we were wrapping the packages or we were carrying it to the post office or we were waiting for mail or we were paying someone to bring him out of camp. This was a daily occupation and apparently took a great deal of time.

Q: How different was it for you to be in an area where there were no Germans?

A”: The only difference I felt and some of these sentiments are obscure and cloudy, but I think the difference I felt was that in Paris, every time I saw a man in a raincoat walking behind me, my heart beat at twice the rate whereas when I saw a man in a raincoat in Lyon walking the street, it didn’t bother me. To that extent, I remember the difference between occupied and unoccupied territory but that’s about the extent of it. I was still a child and by that time I spoke a fluent French, I probably spoke just as the natives did so as far as I was concerned I was there and I didn’t have to go to school. I ate reasonably well. Here was a lot of excitement in the air, a lot of tenseness in the air but it was fun.

Q: You mentioned that you were still a child. Do you think that you were a child?

A: No. I probably was by this time a very mature individual who had developed an incredible thick skin and callousness and deviousness of survival. Unbeknownst to me, there were many techniques and way of life that were all survival ways. How did I – not all could be luck – how did I know when to displace myself from one location to another. I think it was a fifth sense or something mother and I both developed that made us both survive. I can’t believe that under normal circumstances that we would have survived – the noose was too tight. Every step we made was dangerous yet we managed to get out of it. I’m sure we developed an acute awareness of the dangers – just like the animals sense it sufficiently in advance to avoid the danger.

Q: An acute sense of who to trust.

A: Probably of who to trust and probably more importantly to develop whatever contact we developed both my mother and I – to know the important information that we needed to know.

Q: When did the Germans come to Lyon?

A: Within a very short order. No sooner were we established in Lyon and made some very deep inroads in getting father freed, here they were. The street was filled with the German army and here they were.

Q: What made you think you had made deep inroads towards getting your father free?

A: We had by that time paid again 14 different people off trying to get him free and 13 of them were fakes and the 14th one was very close to getting him freed. As a matter of fact, we had legal papers for my father to leave the camp just about the time that the Germans moved in and as a matter of fact, these legal papers were in my father’s possession and I think within a week after the Germans moved in, he had permission to leave Gurs and go to Bordeaux to get a medical examination because he had apparently developed by that time a stomach ulcer and they allowed him to go to Bordeaux to have an examination.

Q: Was that part of the legal...

A: That was part of the package and he did go to Bordeaux but in Bordeaux, the papers said from Gurs to Bordeaux back to Gurs. And where we expedited someone to pick him up in Bordeaux and bring him back to Lyon, somehow that encounter was missed and he went back to Gurs again and that was the end.

Q: When the Germans came to Lyon, how did you manage?

A: Back to the old story. Hiding and avoiding the ratzias and avoiding the Nazis and continuously writing to my father and continuously having packages sent to him.

Q: You use the word hiding, where were you living?

A: We lived in one room and I’m not sure that we were registered under our proper name then. We must have already been registered under another name but – let’s see, this must have been end of 1941 – we stayed about a year in Paris. We left Paris in June or July of 1941 so this is probably the last half of 1941 We lived under false names and by that time my mother picked up a new profession – she became an ardent seller in black market goods. Her sales ability now came to the fore – I remember vividly carrying all illegal merchandise at night from some point to our home and selling it during the day like an open store...

Q: Who did you sell it to?

A: To everybody we knew – a lot of people and my mother became a focus – a focal center of a large group of people which we met through the kitchen or whatever other agencies we dealt with and we survived on selling on the black market and we managed to ship all the packages to my father, paying off people to bring him out.

Q: Did your mother start out in this black market business because of dwindling finances?

A: Yes. It was a very risky business and there were a lot of heart throbs as a result of it but I’m sure she was forced into that position. At this point, our funds had all disappeared. But we survived – we managed to eat and to sleep and eventually, I remember, I took on a new identity. Eventually I got a false identification card which I have here and we took the name of Ardolle. We suddenly vanished. We also not only took the name of Ardolle but we now moved from the location that – partly now that I remember had been identified as Hartog in terms of in conjunction with camp de Gurs. There’s an event that took place – back early in 1942, we finally received a return letter from Gurs saying that my father had left for an unknown destination and that was the last time we heard from him.

Q: Were you both aware of what...

A: Yes. It was a very traumatic day. That was a day that I will never forget. And that was a day that I don’t think my mother ever forgot. It was one that caused all kinds of screaming and crying and giving up life – not wanting to continue to live anymore and that took a long time – it took weeks until my mother recovered from that. She was just nobody anymore. I had to take over and I was 12 at that point. My mother gave up. That was it. It was very traumatic – people had to stay with her day in and day out and I took over at that point.

Q: It must have been quire traumatic for you too.

A: Yes, it was. It was a total change. Till then, I was a child. That letter made me grow up instantly.

Q: How did you take charge?

A: I was 12 and I know shortly thereafter, again time is a little bit cloudy at this point, but I took my first job. I took a job in a water metering factory which made water meters – a very dirty filthy job. The meters had to be washed in acid and I remember coming home nights with my hands all burned open from the acid because the gloves they gave us leaked but I know I had a false identity - I had a French carte D’itentite. I called myself Ernest Ardolle and by that time I was a Frenchman. I was no longer a German, I was no longer a Jew – I became a Frenchman and this all came instantly.

Q: When had you gotten this false identification?

A: Shortly after my father disappeared.

Q: Who made these arrangements?

A: My mother paid for it or I discovered somebody – Mr. Reitzer says hey you better change. Okay, I got the identification papers – I got one for my mother and one for me. I took a job and then I looked for an apartment – I know I personally went to look for a room because I knew we had to get out of where we were which was tagged with our old identity and I found a room.

Q: When you say tagged with your old identity...

A: We apparently were registered there under our proper name.

Q: You were there illegally – what do you mean by registered?

A: Registered in France in those days – you went to the concierge and you were registered. And the concierge apparently reported it to the police so although we were illegal, it was literally registered under the name of Hartog.

Q: Why did you think it was important at that point to change your identity?

A: I don’t know. Somebody must have instructed or advised me to do this and to get away from there. So I searched, went through newspapers, found a room and literally moved my mother and me from Rue de Bordeaux to Rue St. George and Rue St. George I register under the name of Ardolle and we lived there until liberation under the name of Ardolle. I put my mother in the room which was way on top of a mountain with about 180 steps to climb up to – a wide open – terrible location – bitter cold in the winter but I put her in the room and she never left the house after that.

Q: When you say she never left, was it because of the news of...

A: Yes. She was terribly – totally annihilated and as I said she had been a sickly person and at that point she became literally paralyzed. She couldn’t move any more. She did not speak French in any sense fluently enough and at that point I felt better if she just stayed up there. I did the shopping. I did the providing for all the necessary daily activities and I had a job.

Q: How did you get a job as a 12 year old boy?

A: These were war conditions. There weren’t so many men around. The abled men were either in prisoner of war camps or they were part of some uniformed activities – there weren’t men around and anybody that was able and willing to could get a job. I guess there were many more kids in those days that were able and willing to work. I worked steady and managed to feed my mother and myself with the money that I got out of there but I worked in this place for a very short while – I guess just a few weeks simply because my hands – my only problem was that my hands were completely falling apart because of the acid condition so I had to leave that job. And then I got a job as a cashier and again Soup Populaire which was one of those places where they dished out food for the impoverished people – not only Jews but Catholic as well. I worked in this for several months and the longer I worked there, the more Jews appeared lunch and dinner time and also not only was I cashier but I was a private assistant to the directrice of this place. I guess I must have had some pride left although I didn’t think I did.but I must have had some pride left because she forced me to clean her private bathroom and that was more than my dignity permitted me and I didn’t want to clean her private bathroom and one day after lunch, I decided I would quit. I could no longer work in this place because she made me do things that I felt were beneath my dignity. I left at 2 o’clock and the same evening at 6 o’clock, they cordoned off the restaurant and those that were in were taken away. Again, a fifth sense or sense of survival - call it whatever you may but in almost instantaneous reaction to my leaving, they were there.

Q: During all this time when you lost your childhood so quickly and had so much responsibility, who did you turn to? Everybody sometimes needs somebody...

A: The only person I could have turned to – I did turn to Mr. Reitzer who was always in the background. Remember, I knew him in Paris, he helped us along in Lyon. He was a bachelor in Paris – he was married very shortly after he came to Lyon. He was a young guy. I was an infant and he was 20 or 25 and my mother was 40 and he got married shortly after he arrived in Lyon and married a lovely woman and she fell in love with me – I was her baby and I guess Reitzer was my guidance and my advisor although I don’t know exactly how often I saw him but he must have advised me. Again, I don’t know exactly who my father image was in those days but I do know I was pretty damned self - sufficient for that age.

Q: After the Nazis raided the soup kitchen and you had already quit that job, how did you manage to support yourself then?

A: I did everything permissible and not permissible. I took any odd jobs – I worked in a neighborhood store, I stole food from wherever I worked. I remember getting up at five o’clock in the morning, standing on the bread line to get a loaf of bread at 8 o’clock. I remember working for a bakery and stealing loaves of bread to take home to my mother. I remember schlepping home 50 lb. bags of coal from a place where I worked – I shoveled the coal in a bag and dragged it on my back up to my mother’s so that we could heat – I did anything and everything after I left the soup kitchen – I had no permanent job. I managed to survive.

Q: Having come from a very traditional home, with a strong emphasis on education and on moral values, how did you deal with these things?

A: I simply knew that we had to eat. I simply knew that I had to take care of my mother. I simply knew that in order to do these things, you did them. I don’t think there was any rationalization. I don’t think there was any conscience. I don’t think there was any awareness. You just did what you had to do.

Q: Were you physically afraid of the Nazis at that time?

A: No. The only thing I was afraid of was the raincoat. A hat and a raincoat – that was my only fear factor – no other fears I wasn’t afraid of the uniforms. I wasn’t afraid of soldiers I was afraid of a raincoat and a hat.

Q: What created that image for you?

A: The Gestapo always had a raincoat and hat on and I was afraid of the Gestapo. I was not afraid of the Wehrmacht. The SS was uniformed – I was not afraid of them. I was afraid of the Gestapo – the raincoat and the hat.

Q: Why were you more afraid of the Gestapo than a uniformed SS man?

A: I saw them – they were visible. If they went to the right, I could have gone to the left. But those I didn’t know – was he a Frenchman, was he just an ordinary man. That was the unknown. The known I thought I could cope with – the unknown was my fear.

Q: You continued in this way until the liberation?

A: Yes, April, 1944.

Q: How did you find out about the liberation?

A: We lived in Rue St. George, 180 steps above the ground and you can’t picture what this is – this is a five story apartment building down below and on the second floor, we went through the building and then went up in free open air 180 steps – the building was on the bottom of a mountain and on top of the mountain stood that one pavilion which was a one room shack and we lived there. And from there you had visibility over the whole city of Lyon – it would have been a magnificent observation post or tourist haven if it would have been cultivated but it was rather shabby, ice cold up there and on famous freedom day, we saw the Germans literally driving up with trucks and putting TNT on the bridges and I’ll never forget the night when suddenly all these bridges were exploded and the very next morning the Americans were there.

Q: Did you have a radio?

A: Yes, we had a radio. We knew. For a while, we could only get the news from the BBC. It was a clandestine way of obtaining it but towards the end it was official – the Germans were leaving, the Germans were packing. And we saw them packing. We saw the trucks leaving with archives and we knew the day was very close.

Q: Liberation was two years after you got the news about your father. Did your mother recover...

A: She recovered but by this time her only purpose in life was to make sure that I will thrive and survive and she cooked and she cleaned and she cleaned and she cooked and that’s it. There was very little motive left in her – all the energy had dissipated in that one message. She regained a lot of her energy later on but it wasn’t the same person anymore.

Q: Do you feel that she helped you more or that you helped her more?

A: I helped my mother survive and she helped me in staying alive by doing the things that I probably couldn’t have done – washing and cooking and keeping me clean. It was a two way street. I needed her but she certainly needed me.

Q: At the point of liberation, after you were free, did your life change?

A: My life changed, yes. It didn’t change mother’s life. She became dreadfully ill after liberation. I think it was a chain reaction at this point. She kept keyed up or tense for the rest of the occupation period but when it was all over with, suddenly the guards were left down and she became dreadfully ill and the paralysis set in very strongly and she just had no interest in life anymore. But as far as I was concerned, suddenly I was free. I didn’t have to look for the raincoat and the hat anymore but survival was still very important in those days – there was no food, there was nothing of any sort. So again, it was a question of food. I remember that my mother got so sick that the doctor – finally we could call a doctor – remember, we lived under false premises and we were just to ourselves.

Q: Even with the false identification papers?

A: we had French papers but my mother did not speak French or very broken French and any exposure to the elements might have been exposure to the police. But after the occupation, we called a doctor and she needed a special diet and the special diet wasn’t obtainable – very mild food to strengthen her, to give her energy – ham and milk and butter which was not available and so I set out to get ham and milk and butter for her and I did.

Q: How did you go about this?

A: Pleading with shop owners or working for them or getting them what they needed and by that time we contacted the States after liberation and one of our very remote relatives Hertz, Walter Hertz, who is still very close to us, started sending us Care packages immediately so we traded the rice and farina and everything else that we didn’t need against what my mother did need. Somehow we made it and when we were liberated, I was 16 years old and happened to – a girl fell in love with me and she happened to be the daughter of a big grocery store owner and somehow I managed to get groceries all of a sudden. God only knows what makes these things happen but they did. But the important thing is by now I’m 16 and the last time I was in school, I was 10 and I had not set foot in a school and I wasn’t prepared to.

Q: How aware were you? Were you thinking about it?

A: Yes. I most certainly was because at that time I knew that Europe was finished as far as I was concerned. I must get away and the only part of the world that I thought would be appropriate would be the States, the United States.

Q: What made you think that?

A: To me it didn’t mean anything except that was the conversation – everybody that’s young, that’s eager and willing must leave Europe and must go to the United States. That is the only place in the world – it wasn’t Australia and it wasn’t Israel – it was America. So since I didn’t know any better – that’s what I did.

Q: How did you make plans to get to America?

A: That was very difficult. All our family had been back in Germany and no family existed in the States and yet we needed an affidavit – we needed somebody to help us in the States.

Q: When you say all your family was in Germany, were you aware of what happened to them?

A: Yes. After liberation then we knew that they were all annihilated and vanished.

Q: That must have been very difficult for your mother again. How did that affect her?

A: Yes. More listlessness, more hopelessness, more giving up, more not being willing to fight anymore.

Q: How were you able to get an affidavit?

A: One fine day, I took the bull by the horn and I said mom, we have to get out of here. I would like to go to the United States. Who do we know there? Whom do we have left? Well, my mother searched her memory and there were two people that she could come up with – one was a somewhat remote relative by the name of Hartog that lived in Buffalo and one was this Walter Hertz that lived in New York. I guess I forced my mother to write a letter to both of them and see if they would not help us. We promptly got a letter back from Hertz saying we will take care of you. And from there on in it was very short and painless. He kept sending Care packages after that– that initial contact was shortly after liberation and he sent us an affidavit and he got another very remote – a second or third cousin of my mother that she didn’t even know was here – to give a second affidavit –Walter Hertz did all these things for us. We had two affidavits and we went to the American Consulate and there were no quota system any more in those days and I got very quickly a visa – we got very quickly a visa. The only problem we had at this time was getting passage on any kind of a line to come over – there was just none available. And again, as luck wanted it, we knew a family in Lyon who happened to be a salesman for Lever Bros. He was a Frenchman and he was selling soap for Lever Bros. And he says you know a funny thing – at Lever Bros, the President of the French Lever Bros. Organization is a man by the name of Hartog – Harold S. Hartog. Might he not be a relative of yours? I said the only way that I’ll find out is by talking to him. Again, I was pretty much energetic in those days and I wrote a letter to Hartog and he wrote me back and to make a long story short, he invited me to visit him in Paris in his office and I went to visit him in a palacious environment...

Q: How did you get enough money to go to Paris?

A: He sent me transportation money to get to Paris. Apparently, this Mr. Postrum, the salesman, must have gotten his message to Hartog and he paid me for the transportation and I went to Paris. He liked what he saw and he sent me back home with a check in my pocket and while I sat in his office, he picked up the phone and called up the president of the Holland – American Line and said I would like to have a passage on the Ss Veendam that leaves Rotterdam on July the 11th. Would you please have two berths for me on board ship. And it was done.

Q: How did you and your mother get from Lyon to Rotterdam?

A: Hartog paid for all the transportation.

Q: Was he a relative?

A: He was a fifth or sixth removed member. Apparently his great great great grandfather was the same as mine.

Stopped for a break.

A: Before we get to the States, I mentioned earlier that I worked in this soup kitchen in Lyon and I couldn’t take it any more because of the little pride left in me and I left there and the night subsequent to my leaving, they had ( illegible in original transcript copy) off the place and taken everybody with them. While I worked in the kitchen, I befriended myself to the gardener. That kitchen was part of a large building with a large yard in the back and the gardener had actually cultivated that yard and had extensive vegetables that grew in there and after I left and after the ratzia, he like contacted me and said, hey, come to me periodically and I’ll give you all fresh vegetables that grow in the garden which was the ultimate luxury because carrots, and peas and parsley and potatoes was unheard of – I mean we just didn’t have any. So every Saturday morning, I went to Ely and he filled a bag full of vegetables and this was the highlight of our existence. And one Saturday as I walked into the building and there was a large inner courtyard and that’s where I met Ely all the time. I walked into the courtyard and as I walked into the courtyard, 3 uniformed Germans jumped at me with drawn revolver and literally arrested me and they kept me under guard for 45 minutes with the revolver pointed at my breast. That probably was the most traumatic experience of my life because I was definitely convinced at this point that I was going the route of everybody else. And I just stood there and they spoke to me in German and I made believe I didn’t understand a thing and I showed my identification card that I was a Frenchman and that I was coming to visit Ely and that I wanted to get some of his vegetables. I spoke that in French and they mostly in broken French and in German answered me and I just remained there under arrest for a long, what appeared like days of time, but in fact was only ¾ of an hour at which time a German officer walked in and in unequivocal German yelled at these 3 guys – you idiots, you nincompoops, what are you holding this kid here under a gun when the black marketeers went over the back wall, through the garden and through the back door and disappeared! And he shouted and he kicked these people and then he turned to me and shouted, what are you doing here? Mach das du heraus komst. That was the first time that I understood German so I turned around and walked out to freedom.

Q: Wasn’t it dangerous to have understood that?

A: I don’t think that my mind lit a warning light. I simply reacted to his motion. I understood of course what he said but I just reacted – I just turned around and walked away and I was out in the street and the paddy wagon was standing in front of house and I walked in front of the paddy wagon away fast and I don’t think I set foot in the street after that event for at least four weeks. I just could not go out in the street again. That was an absolutely traumatic experience which must have aged me by several years.

Q: When you say you didn’t go out in the street, were you still able to earn some money somehow?

A: No. I just didn’t go out and whatever food we had left, we ate and whatever little I could get from the neighbors, we ate but I just gave up for a while and then shortly thereafter, I realized that you can’t give up, that the world continues and I again had to face the reality out there and I guess I packed up enough energy to go back out again.

Q: At a time like this. What gave you this energy to keep going?

A: Necessity is the mother of all resourcefulness. There was a need – we had no food, we had no warmth, we had no running water. We had to continue – either lie back and die or pack up and go and I wasn’t ready to die. Luckily this was towards the end and freedom was on the horizon and I guess it was also this awareness that the Germans took significant reverses in the battlefield and that the Allies were very close – they had already covered a good portion of the northern part of France and were coming up from the southern flank and we knew that the horizon was brighter.

Q: You had mentioned before that you stole coal, did you have this kind of job?

A: That was again in the famous kitchen where I worked and we had a cellar full of coal and since I was not only a cashier but also attended to miscellaneous other things, I of course had access to many locations. I had access to the food storage area and had access to the cellar and had the keys because that was part of my cleaning chores and so just in the absence of anybody around, I shoveled coal in a bag and dragged it home.

Q: Had you been caught doing any of this, this was a Christian organization would they have understood?

A: I think, in retrospect, they must have known. I think they closed their eyes. They realized that theft was going on and I think they realized how hungry we were and I think they realized how cold we were and I think they just ignored it. Certainly I had no fear of being apprehended or being caught red – handed and being turned over to the police. That was the furthest thing from my mind – it never occurred to me. I just had to do it,

Q: Where did the soup kitchen get its funds from?

A: The money came from either the Catholic Church or whoever organized the affair – I really don’t know but it was organized like the Salvation Army.

Q: When you told your mother you were going to the U.S. how did she feel about it?

A: She followed the leader and at this point, I was the leader and she thought if I thought it was appropriate to go, then it would be appropriate for her to go. This was a normal course of action. There was no purpose in staying in Europe anymore. There was nobody there that we had. At least in the States, we had some distant, distant relatives and more importantly, youth indicated that you don’t want to be caught dead in Europe – this was the end of the world. So we were in agreement that that’s what we should do.

Q: How did you go from Lyon to Rotterdam”

A: We went by train from Lyon to Paris and from Paris to Brussels where we stopped off in some old hangouts to see if they were still standing. From Brussels to Rotterdam, stayed overnight and boarded the boat the next day.

Q: How did it feel when you went back to the old hangouts?

A: I don’t think we encountered anybody we knew. We simply stopped there and walked around and remembered scenes that were still vividly engraved but I don’t think that we had too much emotional reaction to it – just go there and visit and continued. We wanted to take a last glimpse at where we had come from and go. In fact, now that I think of it, we never did go back to Germany to these those places – apparently we had no desire, no feeling at all to go back to Gangelt or Aachen.

Q: This was the last place that you had all been together, it must have been tough for your mother.

A: I don’t know what her reaction was. As I said, she was a broken down woman at that point and if it hadn’t been for me, I’m sure she would not be alive but her whole hopes in life was making sure that I went through and so I guess she just went for the ride.

Q: What were your aspirations for yourself at that point?

A: Prior to coming to the States, as I said, we were liberated in 1944 and we left France in 1947, and in 1945, it was known that I should not think of emigrating to the States without having some kind of profession. It would be in my interest to come over with some kind of knowledge. Remember, that I had no scholastic knowledge whatsoever. At this point, I just barely knew how to read and write vaguely in German, fairly well in French. So I decided to join an organization which was not ORT which existed in France in those days as well. I joined the CET which means professional training school and I picked up electricity and radio repair. I thought this was better than nothing at all. So I went to school for a period of about a year and I learned how to repair radios and handle electricity. The ambition was of course, that when I came to the States, I open up a radio store or do something in electricity to tide me over.

Q: Did you have to pay for school?

A: That was funded by – after liberation, a myriad of organizations took care of refugees and ill affordable destitute humans.

Q: But you still had to live – were you able to work at the same time?

A: I think we continued to operate on the black market. After liberation, there was not enough of anything around and we continued to number 1, sell on the black market and as I said, I knew this girl whose father owned the grocery store, and I got potatoes and vegetables through her which we sold on the black market. We got packages from the States, which we partially exchanged. I did not change. I did not have a job. Through a myriad of little activities, we managed to either accumulate sufficient money or certainly pay for what our sheer necessities were. Remember, we lived in a little rat hold, we paid very little rent and so we had very little expenses. And clothing we – there was none available first of all and whatever clothing we got was either shipped from the States or I got out of Christian organizations or welfare organizations so really we had no expenses other than our bread and butter.

Q: Speaking of clothing, it occurs to me that when you left Germany you were 10 – you grew out of clothing along the way. How did you get things to wear?

A: Hand me downs exclusively. From neighbors, from friends, from welfare organizations, from Catholic charities – strictly whatever was handed to me. Sometimes they were too large, sometimes, they were too small but enough to have a shirt on my back.

Q: From Holland, how did you get to the U.S.?

A: It was a small Holland boat – the SS Van Dam which took us 12 days to get across and the people on the boat spoke either Dutch or English, neither of which I could speak so it was my my mother and UI against the elements. By our standards, it was a very elegant boat.

Q: When you got off the boat in New York, who met you?

A: Walter Hertz and his brother met us in Hoboken and took care of us for at least the immediate future.

Q: When you say took care of us, what do you mean?

A: Fed us, dressed us, took a room for us, boarded us and took care of all the necessities. We had exactly twenty five dollars in our pocket.

Q: How did you go about getting your first job?

A: The first job I got exactly two weeks after I got off the boat. Again, friends of Walter or friends of friends told me that Mr. XYZ made powder puffs and that they needed somebody to help in the factory. So my first job was 48c an hour in 1947 cutting skins and making powder puffs out of animal skins. I stayed in that job about 4 or 5 weeks and with all the overtime – I worked about 12 or 13 hours a day and I made enough money to be no longer dependent on Walter Hertz to pay for our room. Then I got another job with a Mr. Rubel on 162nd Street to work in a leather goods operation in the Bronx where I cut wallets and other leather goods and I got 60c an hour.

Q: You never worked in this kind of thing before, how did you learn?

A: God gave me one gift – to be very handy. I just was shown 2 minutes and a few minutes later, I was an expert. Both of these places, I was very much liked and did a good job and in the leather goods store, somebody that I met there, befriended me, knew of a place in Brooklyn where they build and repaired and serviced radios and would I not want to go there. So I took an interview and I got the job in Brooklyn which later turned out to be CBS – Columbia and I got the job for 85c an hour so in short succession I had doubled my salary and I stayed there five years.

Q: How did you manage with the language?

A: I had in the last six months prior to coming here some courses on my – that is read books and started – took a course that was issued by Berlitz and I spent four weeks in a Berlitz school and I knew a table from a table and a chair from a chair but I was not conversant but I was young and I picked it up rather quickly.

Q: These first two places that you worked, were these German...

A: Yes, these were German and they spoke German exclusively. Of course, when I went to Brooklyn to the radio factory, they used English only. Also, I arrived in July and in September, I started going to George Washington to English for foreigners and I picked it up quickly. Remember, I spoke German, French and English wasn’t that hard to be learned.

Q: You went to GW to night school?

A: Yes.

Q: When you went to CBS factory, you met other people – other than German refugees, was it difficult for you?

A: No, not particularly. I had lived under the most difficult times. Anything after that was anti – climatic. We were free, I would do anything I wanted. I could travel where I wanted, do what I wanted and if I didn’t speak English too well, that wasn’t such a problem – I lived in Washington Heights where German was the native language. As a matter of fact, I don’t think I ever had any problems with English – my friends either were from France or Germany and I made a decided effort very shortly not to speak anything but English and I did.

Q: Did you join any organizations or...

A: Yes. I think I belonged to the New World Club and to the Maccabees – I was amazingly for what I had gone through – a very active member of society and participated in all things. I just went wild – I presume all of this energy that was boxed up during the last five years or so, I finally let go and was very active.

Q: When you went to CBS, how were you able to afford clothes and...

A: Most of the clothes in those days were still hand me downs but now it was not rags but more typical American fashion. I got a brand new shirt from some friends and it wasn’t a problem. – I had more clothing than I knew what to do with,

Q: How were you accepted in CBS by your co –workers?

A: I was immediately accepted and became much liked. Considering that I had a language problem at first. I made a meteoric rise in the organization. I came there as a simple pair of hands and within the year, I was made a professional tester and then I eventually became the equivalent of a full fledged engineer even though I had no idea what engineering was all about but I did progress very rapidly through the ranks.

Q: When you say the equivalent of a full fledged engineer – you didn’t have the schooling...

A: I didn’t have the schooling, I didn’t have the theory, I didn’t have the knowledge. I had nothing – I just did things by feeling and by sense and awareness.

Q: What made you decide to go to school?

A: Precisely my rapid rise and suddenly becoming aware of what am I doing right and why am I doing it right and it must be more to my decision making process then to my intuitive feeling and so a sudden urge of knowing more and more importantly filling a gap of what is a part of life – just knowing the basics. And so now, I had a very difficult time because I had no grade school education, I had no intermediate school education, I had no high school education but I was a 20 year old boy growing up rapidly –what do I do. So the conclusion that I drew with some of my friends was the heck with High School – I would go to George Washington and take the minimum requirement in English, the minimum requirement in mathematics, the minimum requirement in American History and I would go to college. That’s exactly what I did. I took English 7-8 and took the Regents. I took advanced algebra and trigonometry and took the Regents. I took American History and took the Regents. And I applied to City College.

Q: Was this all available to you at night?

A: It was available at night. So I went to George Washington and I took ’47- ’48- English for foreigners, ’48 –’50 or early ’51 the various courses and although I never got a high school diploma, in 1951 I applied to City College.

Q: You had made this decision while you were at CBS?

A: Yes. Remember when I came, I was a technician and I quickly rose in the ranks and I looked at all my peers who were degreed engineers and I said, that’s what I want to be and I set out to do it. When I came to City College, they said there is no way that you can get into here, you have to have at least a high school diploma etc. And I again faked my way through the hierarchy of admissions and I told them that I had all this schooling in Europe but that was all bombed out and all eradicated and would they not take me on probation. So they took me as a special student and I had to maintain a reasonably high average to matriculate and within a year, I was matriculated.

Q: Did you know that you would have a future with CBS?

A: No. But I wasn’t concerned about CBS. In those days, engineering was a good profession and I felt I would always get a job.

Q: During all this time, were most of your friends mainly from the refugee community?

A: Yes. Exclusively.

Q: You must have met other fellows in CBS...

A: They were acquaintances but not friends.

Q: Why do you think that was so?

A: There was a sociological gap which was insurmountable. They were nice people to associate with on the job – they were not nice people to associate with socially. So we were exclusively refugees.

Q: What made you feel this gap?

A: Many elements. First of all, economics. I could not afford to go out to a theater or a show or to a big dinner afterwards. I just didn’t have the money or if I had the money, I wasn’t going to squander it in that direction. The girls psychology were different from where we came and although I dated American girls, again their demands on life were different. Everybody had a car even in those days. I traveled by subway and even there I was careful not to travel too far because the fares were too high or by bus. The girls didn’t take lightly to this. They like to sit in a car and neck in the back seat of a car and I did not have a car. So there were many logistic problems which became literally insurmountable. I didn’t have that problem with the European or the refugee girls and boys – they were all in the same boat. They empathized with our hardships and our feelings.

Q: When you dated these American girls, did you ever make an attempt to explain what your life had been like before?

A: Ya. But there was no sympathetic ear. There was no feeling of poor guy or if there was one, I didn’t want to be put in the position of do me a favor kind of situation. It just wasn’t worth my while.

Q: Are your friends today still mostly of the German or French community?

A: Yes. Though we have native American friends, the real serious deep down profound friendships are all of the same background.

Q: Why do you think that persisted even though the years have erased some of the earlier problems?

A: I just think the psychology, the seriousness, the way of behavior, the way of life participation is different. I can’t pin down exactly what it is. We are reasonably conservative type people. My American counterparts even today, live a much easier life, much more free with their finance considerations. There is a philosophy difference – it’s a profound philosophy difference.

Q: Do you think you saw this difference as a parent. Do you think you are a different parents from your American counterparts?

A: I think I am. I think we are stricter with our children. I don’t believe we espouse to some of the freedoms and privileges which some of our American counterparts permit for their children.

Q: Do you think there is a different emphasis on the values which you choose to place on your children?

A: I think there is. Again, I may be totally wrong because I’m not an American parent with an American child. But from what I see, I think this is true.

Q: But your children are American children, do they ever point up the differences?

A: I don’t think so. I don’t think they notice it.

Q: Do you think you are more a part of the American mainstream or more a part of the German Jewish refugee community in New York?

A: I think I am a part of the American mainstream. For example, I’m part of the Hebrew Tabernacle – is that American mainstream or is that a refugee camp?

Q: Are you asking me? Well, there is a lot of refugee influence.

A: Yes, but it’s also a part of the American mainstream. Rabbi Lehman would not identify himself as a refugee camp inhabitant – I think he is part of the American mainstream and in that sense, I guess I’m part of the American mainstream. I’m working in an organization which is absolutely American mainstream – as a matter of fact, they didn’t have a Jew or a refugee on their executive level until I came along. We live in a community – Hudson View Gardens which is certainly American mainstream which didn’t have Jews until 10 or 15 years ago and I’m a member of the Board of Directors here. So, I feel I’m part of the American mainstream.

Q: Do you feel you are a transitional generation?

A: No question.

Q: In what way?

A: I have made the transition from a refugee – from a European Jewish refugee to the American mainstream.

Q: Do you feel that you have had an opportunity here?

A: I have had and still have every opportunity that this country has to offer. And the only limitation is self – imposed limitations. I could have been President of General Motors if I had the aspiration and knowledge to be that. I don’t think there has been any hurdle or any willful restrictions imposed on me to not let me get to wherever I want to go.

Q: In connection with that, how do you feel about Jewish successes in American big business and politics?

A: From my vantage point, there is absolutely no restriction on the Jew as a Jew. Now in my level of activity, I do cross swords with the chairman of the Board of large banks, Bank of America, First National City Bank and I do indeed see there are very few Jews in financial institutions so I presume there is some limitations but from where I come and the path I have there has never been any limitation.

Q: What I was after was do you like to see Jews in positions of power or influence?

A: I take the position that if they are able and they have the skills and the wherewith - all, they will be there. I have never seen that it was a question of Jewish - ness, only a question of skills.

Q: What about blame in an exposed position?

A: I have never seen a sign of blame because they were Jews – but simply assigned blame because they did something which was blameful. I don’t see that distinction in this country. And it may be there – maybe I’m closing my eyes to it. Maybe I’m willfully ignoring it but I don’t see that limitation.

Q: In looking back, what do you think was the greatest adjustment which you had to make when you came here?

A: The adjustment was one of partaking in an easy way of life having come from an extremely hard way of life – of partaking in everything this country had to offer. An easy way of life – everything available – food available, clothing available, everything, jobs available. I never had a hard time getting a job. I never was unemployed so I had to make very little adjustment.

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