Kurt Schloss, November 11, 1977

Q: Could you tell me when and where you were born?

A: I was born on Jan. 23, 1911 in Cologne. My family was in the furniture business, a firm that was established in the lat 90’s from first a wholesale business to a manufacturing business and then a retail business. This business was founded by my uncle and my father and I entered this business in the 1930’s. I went to school in Cologne and from there I went to Berlin and from there came back to Cologne in 1930.

Q: Why did you go to Berlin?

A: I had a job offer in Berlin and I didn’t want to stay home all the time and I stayed there for about two years and then my uncle died and my father was already of age then and he wanted me to take over some of the load which this business naturally entailed.

Q: Can you tell me something about your educational background?

A: I went to a Real Gymnasium and then I went to a commercial school and prepared myself for my future.

Q: What did you think or hope that your future would entail.

A: Well, originally I wanted to study law but I was the only son and it was customary at that time and particularly in Jewish circles that the son was expected to take over the father’s business and I was influenced then by my father who told me well, I’m getting on in years. Who’s going to take over this business. For whom did we build. And so first reluctantly, I was his point and I acceded to his wishes. I also took courses in interior-decorating- this was the major portion of this business. We had two stores – one for very fine furniture – interior decorating was part of it and then we had another store where we had more commercial furniture.

Q: About how many people did your business employ?

A: We employed, I can only estimate it now, on the average between 60 and 80 people.

Q: Were these mostly Jewish people?

A: The minority was Jewish – as a matter of fact – until 1933 our customers were predominantly Gentile. I would say 96% of the customers who we had were gentile. And we had very prominent people – we had the Adenauer family as our customers. We had near Cologne, there was Baer-Leverkusen which is now – it was called at that time I.G. Farben – there was a merger going on and a goodly number of Baer employees were customers of my firm so from a business point of view the Jewish trade didn’t mean very much to us because we had hardly any. This picture changed radically in 1933 although not so abruptly because for the following two or three years, we still had in spite of all the vicious propaganda that went on, we still had a goodly amount of Gentile trade. There could not be, in the beginning at least, so easily persuaded to boycott the Jewish stores in general and ours in particular. There were very strong ties, you know, things were a little different then they are in this country, basically, the way I recall it, people do not shop around so much when they buy especially big items like furniture. It’s more a question of confidence and they – children usually buy where their parents tell them to buy – that is where their parents bought their things. And so automatically they found their way to our stores. The only thing that we had to do was that we had to eliminate the name from the delivery trucks so – remember this happened after the boycott day in 1933, that people said the only request that we make and this is the way it started out, that do no deliver the furniture in a truck bearing the firm’s name.

Q: What was the firm’s name?

A: Blum and Schloss, the same name that we had here. So, then gradually it changed. A good number of Jewish people who bought furniture for the immigration came to us and so we had more and more Jewish customers. Naturally, over the years, the percentage of the Gentile customers dropped considerably.

Q: When you say the customers did not want you to deliver in a truck marked Blum and Schloss, how did you resolve this.

A: We just took the name off – there was no name on the truck.

Q: How did you feel about such requests and the continuing Nazi propaganda?

A: Well, we engaged and I must plead guilty too, to this fallacy that this will blow over. Alright, we heard this so often, especially the older generation, they said it cannot last. Economically, we are in such a mess. If he stays for another six months, this is the extent of it. This will be the limit. Then, of course you have to realize that we were misguided by the directives which came from Schacht who was the Minister of Finance in Germany at that time – I’m talking about 1933 where time and again he proclaimed no interference – no economic interference in trade, no restrictions in trade. And we grabbed this – we were so, I wouldn’t say desperate, at this time we were certainly not desperate, but this was a confirmation as far as we were concerned to our belief that the whole ear was of relatively short duration – that he just could not continue and that economics would play a much larger part than it did. Of course, he did as we well know. Of course, he solved all the financial difficulties that Germany found herself in but we couldn’t foresee this.

Q: You mentioned the boycott of 1933, was your business affected?

A: Of course it was, I member vividly the day of the boycott. I had a visitor, a distant second cousin. I didn’t know where he came from – from a small town – and it happened that he was visiting with us just on that day. Our stores were of course among the prominent Jewish stores in the city were immediately – in the first place, they put signs on the store windows “Jewish store” and then there were S.A. troopers posted in front of these stores and they were shouting don’t buy from Jews and all this kind of thing. But coming back to this young man – he was curious what the picture in the street was – how people reacted. And unfortunately, he was carrying a camera with him and he wanted to take pictures of – some of the larger department stores were Jewish owned – particularly the large department stores and I walked with him and we had walked not more than 100 feet and we were arrested by S.A. troopers. I should have know better but at that time I didn’t. and fortunately for us we were taken to police headquarters and not tone of the S.S. or S.A. headquarters. And I could immediately identify myself and the charge was espionage because the fallow carried a camera. So they established the relationship between this fellow and myself and I explained that I met him for the first time. However, he is a relative of mine. And since we had a good many customers among higher police officials, I asked for several and fortunately a police – he was a commander of a precinct, happened to be there and I asked that he could identify me and that he could immediately tell them that the charges are ridiculous. And to make a long story shot, the man came and he said yes, I know this man. You release him. There is nothing to this. The man had been well know to me for years – associated with a firm that had been in the city for many years. This young man was released a day or two later. But I went home, no as a matter of fact, I went back to one of the stores, and something very amusing happened to me. I went through a side entrance and there was an S.A. man standing and this was already late in the afternoon and he looked at me and he said “Good afternoon”. I looked at him and he said “Don’t you remember me?”. I said, “No, I don’t”. “Well, I was in your store a couple of weeks ago”. I said, “you were?” he said “yes, my parents bought a bedroom set for me.” I said, “it’s nice to see you especially in your uniform”. “Well” he said, “you know I had to do it”. I said I’m not making any comment about it or something of this nature. So that it was on one hand, it was a warning. On the other hand, in retrospect, we took this much too lightly. We should have know better. But in this kind of situation, business continued business continued in the first years, I’m talking about 1933 to 1935, as if nothing had happened. I mean people came in, the pressure was not as intensive as it became later on.

Q: Between 1933 and 1935, did your business get better along with the general economic condition?

A: I wouldn’t say it was getting better but it certainly didn’t get worse. The fact that so many Jews found there way to our stores compensated for the loss of trade to the – it did more than compensate. We probably did much better than we had done in the early 1930’s so when we contemplated – and of course, I was 25 then – and I became quite apprehensive over the years and when I talked to my father and the older generation, they just couldn’t grasp it. He said, Where did you want to go. We still have this business and business is still going very well so what do you want to do? So, he couldn’t grasp the implications and it was really only brought home to us with a finality when the Kristallnacht came. Then, of course, everybody woke up and it was a rude awakening for us.

Q: Up until Kristallnacht, did the Gentile customers consistently fall away?

A: Gradually, very gradually. Don’t forget also, that I came from an area which was predominantly Catholic and I think, I can make the statement in general terms, they were not under the thumb of the Nazi, of the Party bosses as in other areas in Germany which were Protestant.

Q: Who were the local Nazis? Did you know any of them?

A: The Gaulaiter, a prominent, notorious I should say, Nazi lived across the street from us. We had a house in a suburb, a very beautiful area. He lived almost opposite. His name was Grohe. Knowingly, I never say him. We say his black Mercedes.

Q: But in your business dealings, did you know anyone who was a member of became prominent in the Party?

A: We made this discovery shortly before the events of November, 1938 that some of our employees in the office and the sales staff came in one day with the swastika on their lapel. We didn’t comment and neither did they but no comment was needed. I showed to us that people who had been with us for a number of years.

Q: What was your reaction to having them in your employ and seeing them with the swastika?

A: Well, I remember this happened during the events of November 10th when the stores were smashed that either my cousin or I said to one of our people who had been with us for at least 20 or 25 years and we said, “Now, is this justice” and he looked at us and said “Well, that’s the way it goes, the innocent have to suffer with the guilty” So, he knew us personally very well. He was a salesman with my firm for all those years. He knew that we hadn’t done anything to provoke this. But on the other and, naturally under this tremendous pressure and he was subjected like all Germans to this vicious propaganda, he assumed that we were somewhat different, somewhat different, I say, from the multitude of Jewish businessmen and professionals. Hence, this remark.

Q: Did these employees do anything to undermine your business up to this point?

A: Well, they established an “arbeiterrat”, a council of workers, representing the employees and frequently they had meetings and I remember that I was asked and this happened in the factory where we had factory workers, and I was asked to address the meeting which I did. But there was no outright disturbance, no interference in the management up to the events of 1938. They consulted us frequently or if they had grievances they came forward and voiced the grievances and we did our best to alleviate whatever grievance they had but I don’t think this was basically any different from any employee-employer relationship. There may have been incidents but if there were, they must have been minor.

Q: A thought just occurred to me. These employees were not motivated to become Party members promotions because they were in private enterprise employ, what motivated them then.

A: I really have no way of knowing. But I still remember the remark that he made because I thought it quite astounding.

Q: How did the events of 1938 affect you.

A: We had sold the business, I think in September of 1938. There were several people who were interested and we ended up with one who wanted to take over and there were lengthy negotiations. We had a hard time coming to terms with him because he simply refused to recognize any value and put arbitrary figures on the inventory and when we did not immediately agree, it was made clear to us that the Party would inject themselves.

Q: How was that made clear?

A: It was very – it wasn’t implied. It came out after we said we might as well give it to you, the figure was so ridiculous. So he said if you are not so inclined to accept my very generous offer, I will report your attitude to the Nazi authorities. So what choice did we have. We knew there was no choice and we tried to make the best deal possible. Unfortunately, today it doesn’t matter anymore but this was in his interest also that we wanted to reduce the stock by running a sale and dispose of a good deal of furniture prior to his take over because he paid so little so whatever we took in from private sources would be at least a little compensation of what we had to give away.

Q: How was this in his interest?

A: It was in his interest because he had no cash. He had very little money. His means were limited and he was supposed to pay a certain percentage of the cost price of the goods and since, he didn’t have much, he wanted to take over as little as possible. We were just in the middle of this sale when the events of Nov. 9-10th occurred. The stores still bore our names. I remember during the night, we were awakened by a tremendous noise from the house where I lived. We had moved from our house into an apartment and above us lived – he was a lawyer and he was associated with the Aentralverein “Deutsche Staatsburger Judisohen Glaubens”. At first I didn’t realize what was happening but then it became quite clear that in the first place, this man was apprehended, his furniture was completely destroyed. Fortunately nothing happened to us – we were left alone. Then we got a call between 7 and 8 o’clock in the morning that there were tremendous crowds in front of our store – the main store – and that people smashed the windows and that riots were going on and today I must say innocent as we were, we went down and I remember, I got down there and I saw this yelling, shouting mass of people congregating in front of the store. Most of the damage had already been done. We had furniture of artistic value. I remember we had a number of petit point chairs. They were slashed with huge knives – upholstered furniture with down pillows again were slashed – they were partially on the street, broken to pieces, crystal chandeliers were among the things. There was a huge pile of destroyed furniture in front of the store. Naturally, the plate glass windows were all smashed. My cousin went to the police and they were standing silently by – watching.

Q: This was the regular police?

A: This was the regular – the cop on the street – and we were right near a police station. There was nothing they could do and nothing they would do. We dot some of our people in the early morning hours who helped to such an extent that we had a factory and we got lumber and sealed up the windows and this is the last thing that I remember that we sealed – boarded – the windows. To look around in the store, we gave up because everything was a heap of rubble. Then, we learned by telephone that so many people were taken prisoners by the S.S. and I thought it wise to – now I have to interject something of a personal nature. I met my late wife in Geneva in 1938 and we got engaged. She had her American visa under her maiden name and we planned to get married in the United States. Then somebody advised us, erroneously as it turned out later, that if we were to get married in Germany she could get me on a preference quota – that the waiting time for a visa would be considerably shortened. It was erroneous information – it only worked the other way – a husband could get his wife on a preference quota. Be that as it may, she came back from Switzerland we planned to get married on November 12th. You know in Germany, church and state are not separated as in this country so you had to go to city hall first and actually the marriage ceremony is preformed by an official of the German government. What you do afterwards, the religious ceremony is your private affair. It was not prerequisite for the official ceremony. So while the sale was going on, I took time out and we were married officially in city hall in Cologne and this was on Nov. 8th. The official who preformed the legal ceremony wore a swastika.

Q: Was he allowed to perform this ceremony?

A: Yes, among two Jews, he was allowed. Then the preparations were made to have a short ceremony in the B’nai B’rith Lodge in Dusseldorf where my wife came from on Nov. 12th with Rabbi Eschelbacher officiating. Then, the events of Kristallnacht interfered. It didn’t come to any religious ceremony anymore. On Nov. 12th, the Rabbi was in prison and the synagogue in Dussseldorf like all the other synagogues was burned to the ground. Now, I’ll come back to Nov. 10th. My late wife happened to be in Cologne on that day and we thought it was wise to leave Cologne and we went to Dusseldorf and we arrived in Dusseldorf by car and the same thing was going on there. We say, by observing, we could see pianos lying on the street. By what choice nobody know, but the thing was well organized. They had selected a number of apartments which they completely destroyed and by the same token which was much worse, they had a list of people who they arrested, and who were then taken to prison and then to the concentration camps. We stayed the night with a gentile housekeeper who my parents-in-law knew very well not only that night but one or two nights until things would hopefully calm down. And I was in constant contact with my parents. Thank god nothing happened to them as a matter of fact and it is almost a humorous aspect of it, my father, not understanding – he couldn’t grasp what was going on- in the afternoon, when I pleaded with him to go home and he did – what I didn’t know was that he went to the police precinct in the area where we lived and asked “Now can you explain to me, he asked the sergeant in charge, what is going on”. And the sergeant who knew my father very well said “Mr. Schloss, nothing will happen to you. Go home. I cannot answer any questions”. So my father did that and I was in constant touch with them and if I had been on the list to be arrested, they would have questioned my parents, but nobody showed up. I came home a few days later – I have to go back a little. The synagogue – the main synagogue was in the Rohnstrasse to which we belonged, which had a capacity of almost 3000 was like the others, was burned down but the outer walls were still standing. This was a liberal synagogue. The orthodox synagogue was in the Glockengasse which was a beautiful building in the Moorish style donated by the Oppenheim banking family was completely destroyed. There were smaller synagogues in the suburbs which were also completely destroyed. I remember also it was either on that say or I think it was on that day – on my way to the store, I notice a sanitation truck with a number of Jewish lawyers whom they had taken prisoner on this sanitation truck – some of them personally knew so I immediately realized what we were in for. It was quite obvious from the beginning that this was well organized and not spontaneous.

Q: You mentioned that you had grown apprehensive even before Kristallnacht and that you had made plans with Ilse to emigrate to the U.S.

A: Yes, this was very obvious by 1938 so the thing that I did was that I applied for a waiting list – there was a waiting list at the American consulate in Stuttgart – of which we learned very late because it was well know in the southern part of Germany that there was such a list but when the news traveled to us it was too late to get a low waiting number.

Q: Had you applied for a visa then already?

A: In 1937, I wanted to go to the United States – I didn’t know much what business would be like, what conditions would be like, whether I would find employment. So I went to the American consul in Cologne and applied for a visitor’s visa and this I remember also because I find it extremely significant. He said, “well, what do you want to do there?” I replied that I want to take a trip. That’s not all you want to do there, he said. We have a business here. You’re Jewish? He asked. Yes, of course. Well, he said, I give you a visa but you have to certify that you will never apply for an immigration visa because I was duped too often. At first, I didn’t realize the implication I said what do you mean, duped. Well, that people ask for a visitor’s visa and then they leave the country and then by hook or crook they are trying to establish themselves in the United States – leaving the country, evading the formalities. And from now on this is my policy. And it seemed to me that the man wasn’t – I don’t know if this was a policy established by the Dept. of State of if this was his personal interpretation. Be that as it may, I said to him that “under the conditions under which I’m living, I certainly can’t give you this statement, so I have to do without the trip.” And what I saw as a catastrophe in those days, and this contradicts what I said that I was not apprehensive – yes, I was apprehensive, too- after the boycott day in 1933, we knew that things would be difficult. How difficult they turned out to be, we could not foresee. In any event, a competitor of our had established in the early 1930’s, maybe even in the late 1920’s, a branch store in Holland, in Amsterdam and being so close to Holland, we had a good many Dutch customers who liked German furniture and the way I recollect it, if they bought it in Germany and even if they paid duty on them, it was still lower than if they bought the same furniture in Holland. My cousin and I went to Amsterdam to explore, this was 1933, to explore the possibility of establishing a branch store in Amsterdam or Rotterdam or wherever but we chose Amsterdam and we looked around for stores and we found a store to our liking but the prerequisite was of course that we were allowed to take out furniture, this was mind you 1933 in the very beginning and we went then personally to the authorities before we left for Holland in Cologne and advised them of our intention to open up a store in Holland and they listened to us and asked us how much money is required and if my recollection is correct, we said 100,000 marks. I could be wrong, I don’t remember the figure exactly. And they immediately agreed and they said all right you will get permission, there’s no problem, of exporting X amount of German goods provided that the proceeds will flow back into Germany. We said it is not our intention to leave our business in Germany and shift, of course it was, but we didn’t tell him that, from Cologne to Amsterdam which we would have done had things worked out the way we planned at that time. Now we looked at stores with this thing in our pockets, they had given it to us in writing immediately.

Q: Who was the official?

A: He had to do with the Reichsbank, the Federal Reserve Bank here. The foreign currency control was under their jurisdiction. We went to one, we looked at the store and while we were there and I don’t recall whether this was shortly before or shortly after, it would have been shortly after, the April 1, 1933 boycott. I remember we didn’t know Dutch, we were in the hotel but there was a headline that attracted our attention. And we had some Dutch friends whom we called – the headline that there were new rules and regulations and that German trade would be curtailed as a result of the happenings on that day. And we called immediately a friend who told us that the upshot of this was that they had changed the – they curtailed the import of German goods and based it on a quota system – in other words they said what you imported from Germany in the previous years is the basis for 40% quota of what you can import this year and it will be 30% next year and so on gradually reducing German imports. We took a lawyer and went to the Dutch minister – commercial whatever – to Dutch authorities – put our cards on our table and he said to us or rather to the lawyer as we couldn’t speak Dutch. I wish I could help you but there is nothing I can do. This is the law and there are no exceptions. Well, we thought this was the greatest catastrophe because we were very anxious and it would have worked because we had connections there. But later on we realized that this was a blessing in disguise because as sure as I am sitting here, we- in all likelihood the business would have flourished and we would have stayed in Amsterdam until the Nazis would have overrun it. Now, coming back to my personal life, as I said before, my late wife received her American immigration visa in Bern, Switzerland under her maiden name.

Q: Were both of you in Switzerland in 1938?

A: I was only there for two days. I didn’t have a passport anymore in 1938.

Q: It was taken away from you?

A: Yes, it was taken away – I think at the border coming back from Switzerland. I had no passport – she did. We were legally married. She was supposed to leave on November 15th on the Manhattan – United States Lines from Hamburg. I wanted to see her off and she was apprehensive. She was barely twenty – her birthday was November 14th. I wanted to see her off and she wouldn’t hear of it. In the paper on November 13th, there was a statement I think by Goebbels that all actions against the Jews had been stopped. So I said now you can’t keep me back as long as all actions has been stopped – taking his word. I will go with you. We left Cologne – she was to leave on Nov. 15th in the evening – so we left on Nov. 14th in the evening sitting up on a train to Hamburg. We arrived in Hamburg in the morning and we hardly got off the train when two men approached us “Are you Jewish?” We answered in the affirmative and they said we had to come with them. They were Gestapo. We were taken to a police precinct where they asked us what we were doing and I explained that my wife is leaving for the United States. So the Gestapo said show me your passport and she showed it to him with the American Visa. He said we are only keeping your husband. Hive me all your things, put them on the table, whatever you have, keys, wallet, everything. They gave it to my wife and said your husband doesn’t need it anymore. Now for a girl who is just twenty years old, she behaved remarkably. Then, I was taken to a jail and the door opened and I saw there were several other people there – all Jews as it turned out. Where did they get you? What happened? All the same thing. They were picked up off the street. Also people arriving in the morning – similar cases to mine- salesmen. There must have been at least 30 to 40 people in this cell – it was a huge cell. Then, in the early afternoon, the door opened and I heard my name. I answered immediately, the door slammed again. Then all these people came to me and said “You’re being released”. I said don’t talk foolish – why should I be released and not you – I don’t believe in miracles. But they all insisted and asked that I notify my wife, my mother, nobody knows where I am. I said I will do anything but I don’t believe that I will be released – why should I be released? I have no visa, I have no passport – I can’t go anyplace. Well, we learned that we were to be taken to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen the same day. Then, I would say later in the afternoon, about 4 o’clock, the door opened and again my name was called and I went forward and he said come on and I was taken to a Gestapo official and he said you sign this here. And I would have signed anything. And I read the following that I, the undersigned name living there and there obligate myself to leave Germany within three months. I signed it and they said my wife was outside. I went out and she was waiting there. What she had done after they had given her all my things, she went through my briefcase and there was a letter from a travel agent in Stuttgart and this letter helped her a great deal and it stated erroneously that your waiting number will be called soon and I suggest you book passage as early as possible. The man was a businessman. He had a list somewhere of these people who had applied for an emigration visa and he wanted to sell passages – he was a travel agent – he was Jewish but that’s how he made a living. I don’t know why but the letter was in my file. She found it and came to the Gestapo and she found a man who was, for lack of a better word, let’s say sympathetic and he said – well, she told him that we just got married and my husband is in jail, they graded him this morning and so on. Well, he said if your husband can leave Germany within a reasonable period of time, there is a chance of releasing him. But you have to bring me a passage – a ticket from a line. If you bring this before they leave for Sachsenhausen later this afternoon. So, she went to the Holland-American line and the man told her that he was not allowed to issue open tickets. She said but my husband will be leaving Germany soon. He said how do you know and she showed him the letter. Well, he said he would interpret the letter as indicating early departure. I’m going to give it to you but you have to pay. She had no money so she called my father to wire her the money. She waited and waited and finally she got the telegraphic advice that the money had been wired. And then she took the ticket back to the Gestapo and they tried to reach me and find out what jail I was in and then they called me and as I related above I met her. So then instead of my taking her to the ship she took me to the railroad station and I said I have nothing in writing, the same thing that happened to me this morning can happen again back in Cologne when I get there and I was well known so I was thinking and I called my firm. We had transferred the office to one of our buildings and I spoke to someone there and told him to do exactly as I instructed. We had a chauffeur, a truck driver whom I trusted implicitly, I know that he was decent. I said have this man come to either Duisborg or Essen station and he should go up to the platform where the train from Hamburg arrives and he should meet me upstairs and not downstairs. Coming back to this man, it’s just incidental, this man had been with us for a number of years and when we hired him, a few weeks later, we got an anonymous letter that the man was a jailbird and he committed some crime when he was young and we confronted him with this letter and he said yes, he had done this, he did foolish things in his youth. He said wherever he took on a job it didn’t last because this was a jilted girl who spied on him and wherever the man found employment, she notified anonymously the employer and the end result was that he was fired. And we said to him, this would not influence us to fire you and if you do your job, what’s past is past and if you have adjusted your life, that’s fine. And he said I will, I will. And he never, not even in the darkest days of what happened in November, he never forgot. So he did for us whatever was humanly possible and he repaid us for our faith in him. So, I arrived and this man was about 6 ft. tall and he always wore these storm trooper kind of long boots, even though he was far removed from them so we met and I told him that we are going down and we are going to talk the local patois and tell me a few jokes. So we went down laughing and joking and he looked like the prototype of an Aryan and so nobody questioned us. Then I stayed with relatives of mine for a few days and then I went back to Cologne. One day I got a letter from the Gestapo. I pushed my emigration but I had nothing tangible yet.

Q: When you say you pushed your emigration, what?

A: Well, at that time I applied for an interim visa to England which I finally got. But now yet at this time when I got the summons from the Gestapo. Well, I don’t have to tell you the felling I had when I got this summons. I had been at the Gestapo several times but this was the last time and I went there and they asked if I had signed this document in Hamburg on Nov. 15th. I immediately anticipated that they would want to know why I was still here. So he said to me and I was floored. Well, have you any definite plans yet. And I told him that I was doing my best to leave Germany. He said you don’t have to be in any hurry. We will not hold you to the three months. We will not insist on this deadline. But I want to, I said. That’s fine, he said, but I want you to know that as far as we are concerned, nothing will happen to you if you stay longer. I never say this in writing but he told me that. So, since we had so many Jewish customers who had fled, these Nazis, they were in our store almost every day. They secured the furniture that these people had bought and they seized it often when people were leaving illegally. I was these people everyday. They would come in and say we had a customer by the name of Goldsmith and where’s the furniture. We had to surrender it, what else could we do.

So, this is why I had contact with Gestapo men, with customs men, everyday. It was nothing that we did because this happened because we had so many customers all over the area – I mean this was not limited to one small area – they came from all over to buy new furniture to take along and then maybe they left suddenly and the Gestapo got wind of them and then they seized the furniture.

Q: Let me just backtrack for a moment. The negotiations between you and the men who were to buy the store in September 1938 fell through.

A: Well, the men practically paid nothing because there was nothing left.

Q: Did he take it over at all?

A: Well, he took over the store. Before I continue, in the first place, we had to pay for the damages, there was a penalty.

Q: A billion reichsmark.

A: Right. So we had to pay for the restoring of the store – in other words put the windows in, clean-up and so on. Whatever there was left in furniture was in a warehouse and he took some of it very little but some of it and by the way, we never got any restitution for the business since this store which was the main store was completely destroyed during the war and the man was penniless.

Q: But he only took over after Nov. 10th?

A: Well, whatever there was left, we took out. Whatever was sold and undamaged, we delivered although in most cases we didn’t collect. This was another thing. After this happened, there was a number of pieces sold which we wanted to deliver and people accepted them and then they didn’t pay. So are we going to sure them? I remember I had a discussion with a very educated man by the way and he claimed Well, I owe you about 2000 marks, whatever, and he said let me see the piece. Everything that had been salvaged was in the warehouse that we owned. And of course we had the other store which was not damaged so a number of these bedroom sets and pieces of furniture escaped any physical damage so he said let me see the pieces. I showed them to him and asked if there was anything wrong with them. He said no but I give you only half. I asked why half – we were still very naïve I guess. He said they went thought – they have an ideologically reduced value in German it would be ideologicher minder werd. I asked if there was anything wrong with the furniture. No, he said but they went thought the action of November, these pieces and for me, therefore, the value is reduced. They don’t have the value anymore. So this showed the attitude of the people- just to enrich themselves, to chisel.

Q: It’s called taking advantage of the situation.

A: Exactly. And we didn’t pursue it because what was the use. He could have given nothing.

Q: Did you realize at that point that you could only leave with 10 RM?

A: Yes.

Q: Then all your assets.

A: All the assets were seized. You had to pay the penalty and the damage of course was huge. To revert the store back into its original condition took vast sums of money and then, this also comes to mind. We owned two buildings where we had the other store and these two buildings, we had mortgages on these two buildings which were given by the savings back in Cologne but the savings back was a community bank owned by the community, by the city (different from here). This was also the end of 1938. they advised us that the mortgages were cancelled immediately and you had to pay forthwith, immediately and you had to repay.

Q: Repay the outstanding balance in cash?

A: Yes, repay in cash which we didn’t have naturally. Then we had to look around and find somebody who buys the buildings but from one day to another and we found somebody who took the building over exactly at the – he took over the mortgages. We didn’t get a penny for the buildings. For these buildings, we did get restitution. And the man was also furious. After the war, we got a letter from these people too over the building – it was an industrial concern, very big. And they wrote a letter asking just for formalities sake that we write a letter stating that we have no claims against them. We didn’t know at that time about restitution but we weren’t that naïve to give them that letter. They had to pay.

Q: They took over the building for the balance of the mortgage.

A: They took it over for the balance – it was ridiculous.

Q: How did you leave Germany?

A: I got an interim permit to enter England. This happened in March, 1939.

Q: Was this through someone?

A: Yes, it was through my parents-in-law. They had left four weeks ahead of me to England and they had connections there – they knew somebody who knew me too and was influential in brining this about. From my waiting number, they knew that it would be approximately late that year that I would be getting the American visa so I got a permit to enter England.

Q: Did you need proof that you could support yourself?

A: Yes, that I would be a public charge. A friend of mine gave that for me.

Q: Meantime Ilse was in America?

A: Yes, she was here. She remembered very little about the crossing because it was the first ship that arrived after the events of November 9-10 and there were reporters there and they wanted to interview her because most of the people there were eye-witnesses and if I’m not mistaken the American Ambassador, William Bullitt was on the same boat – he had been recalled. I left Germany in it was on the first day of Pesach in 1939 in the morning and I attended a Seder – we still have a Seder – with friends of mine and they were orthodox people. I remember all the people that were sitting there – there is not one alive. The whole family was wiped out. I left the next morning and I went to the Dutch border on the train and there was S.S. who interrogated me and looked for valuables which I didn’t have and

Q: Did they make it difficult of you?

A: Yes, they made if very difficult. I missed the train – they kept me for a few hours but they didn’t harm me. They finally let me go and I had to take the next train – I went to Holland and form Holland to England. I stayed in England until the end of this year and then as you know on Sept. 1, war broke out and here my parents were still in Germany and I talked to them every night and my father did not want to leave. In the meantime my father knew that he couldn’t stay in Germany but they had had a letter from the American consulate in Stuttgart that they should come to Stuttgart somewhere in Sept. of 1939 so my father said I have the change to get the American visa and I said Father, there will be war and he said No, there will not be war. To make a long story short, I pressured them and I said I will not talk to you again – never mind the visa – I am positive there will be war. So finally they gave in and they came with the last plane – for the first time in their lives, the flew which was an even in itself. They flew from Cologne to London – it was the last plane. I remember I went tout to meet them and my father said I’ll never forgive you – here we could have gotten the visa and I said Father, let’s wait and see.

Q: When you say they could have gotten the American visa, they had applied earlier?

A: Well, they could have gotten it but then how could they get out? They probably could have at that time but who would take that chance. I remember in Sept. when they came we had to register in England. I was already registered but had to register and we went to the Woburn House – the Central Agency for Refugees and we changed buses on Oxford Circus and there we saw the newspapers, “Warsaw bombed” and I said Father, this is it.

Q: On the day that you left Germany, that must have been a very difficult day for you?

A: Yes, it was a very difficult day. But I was relatively sure that my parents would follow me because what others did for me, I did for them as soon as I arrived and I had certain connections and of course I used them. And I had relatives here who also sent a statement that in case of need they would financially help which they never had to but they gave the statement and I got them the permit to stay. Well, I applied, not knowing that I could leave England during the war, I enlisted for the Pioneer Corps in England but in the meantime, they issued a certain amount of immigration visas and I went to the Consul to the American Consul and I got mine and I asked what about my parents. So he said they could follow shortly but it didn’t turn out that way.

Q: What did you do for money in England?

A: Well, we had a little money. We were extremely frugal to say the least – I never walked that much in my life, because the two pence that it cost – we just didn’t have so we walked.

Q: When you say you had a little money, didn’t you have to leave with just the 10 RM?

A: Yes, but I had a little money that I had in Holland before. It was not a huge amount but in the beginning it helped at least to sustain us until we got here. You remember when we went to Holland in the 1930’s, whatever money was left over from this trip, I left there. I didn’t change it back to German money.

Q: You were able to transfer it from Holland to England?

A: Yes, we were able to transfer it and also, we had sold a great deal to Dutch customers and when they paid we told them to give it to us in Dutch guilders and we gave them a break on the price. It was a risky business but it was the only thing to do. So it was a little money but my father and mother were older and he couldn’t work any more.

Q: They were older people and it must have been difficult for them.

A: It was difficult but of course in 1939 after we had gone though, I mean the decision to leave Germany was not a difficult one anymore. At that time, somebody must have been extremely stupid not to have seen it.

Q: When you first came here, how did you earn a living in this country?

A: When I first came, my wife was working. She did all kinds of jobs – odd jobs. She had saved a little money. She came back from Chicago, she had been living in Chicago. She came back to New York to meet me and she continued to work in households, doing laundry, whatever she could find, she did it. She had make her exam as a social secretary in Geneva and again it was a fallacy. It would have entitled her to get into the social field here but it wasn’t so. But finally she got a position, the first position in an office, with this huge organization, the National Refugee Service. She applied, she brought her credentials, she was a professional social worker in Europe. She made her exam in Geneva. They took an interest in her. She knew shorthand and she was very well versed in the language and she knew typing and they told her they could use her in the office. And this of course ended the odd jobs and the jobs that she took when there was nothing else to be gotten. I established myself – we had in the main furniture store in Cologne, we had a gift department which was just incidental but it leant a certain atmosphere to the store and one day a salesman came in, a so-called artist and he had developed this line and he showed it us and it was tiles which made in a studio in Cologne and they were very attractive and we gave him an order. When we saw the handwriting on the wall which was all too late, we thought of this man and we knew that we didn’t have the money to go back into the furniture business and we thought of this man and we went to him and told him that we were leaving Germany soon. We are not going into competition with you – would you like to show us how you make them. First he said no and then he thought it over and he saw a way to make an easy buck and he asked for money. But he said you cannot come during the day because I have people here, you have to come at 9 o’clock in the evening. We have him the money and we came to him. It was very interesting – he used what is called here “decals”. He put a motif, let’s say a ship on a six by six time and he filled the rest – the water he did with a few strokes of oil paint and the sky with a few blue clouds and then he lacquered the whole thing and so for the causal observer it looked as the real thing – like an oil. Actually it was not because the main motif was a decal.

Q: Like decoupage.

A: Exactly, like decoupage. This is how we got started. We got some samples and went from store to store. Of course, unframed we couldn’t sell. We were not familiar with it. What did we know, we knew nothing. Then, I looked up jobbers and I came to a man who was very bug then and he sort of took a liking to the idea and then he said All right, came back and then and he would give us an order but we had to understand one thing – it’s got to be exclusive – this was the beginning of 1940 – exclusive for the whole country. I said how big was the order and he said he would make it worth our while – I think the order was about 800 or 900 dollars. Now, we thought we had it made. We accepted naturally. It took us maybe 4 or six weeks to make up this quantity of tiles that he had framed himself and then . . .

Q: How did you get the money to buy the materials?

A: We had a little money. We paid rent three dollars a month. It was in the basement in one of those houses in Washington Heights. We had an arrangement with the super whereby the super closed his eyes to our being there for a consideration of $3.00 per month. The tiles we paid – he said we could make part shipment and he would pay us which he did –so it was only the first two cases that we and to pay for and then when he paid us we took the money and took on new tiles. So it took us six to eight weeks and we were finished. By the summer, we said what do we do. After the 8 or 900 tiles and after we paid for all the material, there wasn’t so much left. Then I went back to this man and said, “Look, we have to make a living, how do they sell?” Well, he said he doesn’t know yet. Maybe soon reorders will come in. but I told him in the meantime we had to make a living. Okay, he says “boys, you can have New York City” Okay, New York City was big enough for us. And then we also learned by this time that we had to frame them.

Q: When you say boys, who are you referring to?

A: Me and my partner.

Q: Was this the same partner you had in Europe?

A: Yes, we were the sons o the original owners. And then we found somebody who was very helpful and he made samples of frames and we slowly discovered and of course slowly you learn things – the size is wrong, the subjects are wrong and we did other things. We made them smaller and we came to miniatures and I was the outside man – the so called outside man and I tried to sell. First, I took all my courage and I went to Gimbels and at that time in Gimbels they had an elderly man and he said “what do you have?” and I had already frames, items of various sizes, what they have today in groupings and it came up – they group certain things together and we were beginning to know what subjects for instance you cannot sell parrots here- people are superstitious, it means back luck or items with bugs on it – oh no, people wouldn’t touch this. Butterflies, is yes. It was a question of choosing the right subject. Okay, we had this line together and I went to this man who said “okay, I’m going to try it” and he gave me an order for $30.00 and we shipped it and I went back to the wholesaler who said the results were no good, it wasn’t selling. Starting after the season which was October, November, you can sell wherever you want to. So I knew already it’s a failure. But slowly we added other things and in late fall, they have a trade show (1940) and I went there jut to take a look around. We had no telephone, nothing and I wanted to look what was on the market. And I saw this Gimbel’s buyer there and he saw me too and I wanted to duck. I thought oh my god, he’s going to give me – he said come here. I said to myself, now, I’m going to get all the stuff back. We had no confidence at all. He said, “Weren’t you the fellow who sold me those tiles.” I said yes and thought now its coming. He said what’s the matter with you guys? I asked what do you mean what’s the matter. He said don’t you have a telephone? I said we had applied for one – what should I say. He said don’t give me that or something. Are you refugees? I said yes. He said why don’t you come out and say it. My English wasn’t that good and I don’t know exactly what he said but he told me to come and see him tomorrow morning in my office. I still couldn’t figure it out. I thought maybe he wants me to carry the stuff back. I came there and he asked “do you now how to fill out an order?” I said yes and he said here’s my order book. I said than you and he told me to write. What are the style numbers? I said 200, 300, 400, 500 and 600. He said okay, write a dozen of 200, a dozen of 300 ect. and when can you ship. I said I could send it in two weeks and this is the way it got started. Now, of course, this is what we sold for a while and then we added other things until we manufactured a complete line of wall accessories, framed pictures, mirrors, small things, decorative accessories but it took a while. We couldn’t take any money out of the business the first two or three years, not a cent. We lived on what our wives made. Because we started with no capital.

Q: Where was Ilse working during this time.

A: She continued with the National Refugee Service and then she quit and got a position as a secretary and then later on, she helped me.

Q: Do you feel that your business background in Germany helped you here?

A: Well, it did. After all, there was this connection. Interior decorating was something that we were completely familiar with and it entered the decorative field. But to adapt our taste to what the market requires here is something else again. Not what you personally like is saleable.

Q: What about the German way of doing business as compared to the American way.

A: Well, I found out soon enough. I mean when somebody tells you see me after Labor Day, I took it literally in the first year until I found out it doesn’t mean a blessed thing. It’s just how are you, glad to see you. Or we know that there is no – well, let’s put it this way. It’s the polite way of saying no. This is something that you have to get used to. The way I carried on business in Germany and if salesmen come, I would say, No, thank you, I don’t need anything. But here people don’t do that. In the beginning I believed it but it didn’t take me long to find out. Another thing was See me then and then or I will call you or don’t all me, I will call you. If you take these things literally, of course, you’ll be disappointed if it doesn’t happen but you learn.

Q: Where there any other difficult adjustments in the ways of doing business between Germany and here?

A: Well, the firm in Europe had a reputation and this was a tremendous asset for our business it was well known. People were very conservative and they weren’t as price conscious as people are here where they go from one store to another and compare prices. First of all, in this field, it’s difficult to compare because there are mostly different items, different manufactures, different styles. In the second place, this loyalty they had to the store in Germany – they knew they would be satisfied and this was worth something to them. They knew they would be pleased and if there was the slightest complaint, they knew the next day someone would be there to correct it. This is an element that’s completely missing here. You do not have this intense loyalty. Here, often, if somebody is half a penny cheaper, he got the order. They pay one against the other. I don’t want to misjudge this either- they are entitled to buy at the lowest price possible but it’s a difference in attitude and approach.

Q: What did you do for recreation in those early years?

A: Oh my, movies – 15 cents, a quarter on weekends. And radio.

Q: Were most of your customers here Americans?

A: Most of them were Americans, yes. And then of course, when I went out selling, they knew from my accent that I was European born even if they didn’t know exactly that it was German born and then they would talk to me in Yiddish and that was another difficulty. Today, fortunately, I understand Yiddish but at that time, I didn’t and I didn’t speak it either. And then if I didn’t answer back, they resent the fact – they think you want to hide your identity which was the farthest thought to my mind. Before I could convey the thought to them that where I came from, Yiddish was an unknown language, we didn’t know Yiddish and sometimes you don’t have the time for any lengthy explanation, but it was a difficulty. Later on, I picked up some Yiddish expressions and then I used them. In later years, it didn’t occur to them to ask but in the beginning, I know it was an obstacle.

Q: What was the greatest difficulty for you in adjusting to American life?

A: I don’t think I had any major difficulties.

Q: Today, do you feel yourself more a part of the American mainstream or more part of the German Jewish community.

A: That’s an easy question. Look, I’ve lived here longer than I lived in Germany.

Q: Do you have mostly American friends or mostly German Jewish?

A: Mostly German Jewish. Well, of course the affinity still exists. This is something I couldn’t deny. But I would never consider leaving the country, never consider going back to Europe. I have never set foot on German soil and I never will and I told you about the experience I had with German people in Amsterdam.

Q: Why wouldn’t you ever go back to Germany?

A: For me, this chapter is a closed chapter. I don’t want to be reminded neither will I forget. My late wife and I were of the same opinion – we lost so many of our close relatives. Fortunately, my immediate family was saved. I cannot forget and I will never, never go back there.

Q: How do you feel about the Wiedergutmachung.

A: Well, I recognize that some people owe them a debt of gratitude for the German government to put them in a position though restitution to have a financial peace of mind. I don’t see any need for gratitude. Personally, I don’t receive a pension.

Q: By choice?

A: No, not by choice. If they would give it to me, I would take it but that’s besides the point. I also deplore the present trend of the attempt to see history rewritten and there are too many instances of this – the movie that they are showing in Germany.

Q: The idea that this was a career – an example.

A: The movie that they show is a great success, playing all over Germany so one wonders did it really change all that much. Of course, the situation today is different than the one under Hitler but the germ is still there even though there are no Jews. The presence of the Jews – what’s 25,000 – doesn’t alter anything.

Q: How do you feel about Jewish successions in politics like Kissinger or Koch?

A: Very positive. This is a lesson that I have learned. I remember we were super-cautious. When this thing came up in the thirties we were trying to justify – to took for a logical answer to what was happening and this was an opinion that was shared by many – we said for instance, we blamed the department stores for some of the happenings, for the growth of anti-Semitism especially in the business world and we said with a twisted logic, they have one store, they have two stores, do they need 100? Do they have to take the livelihood of the small store owner away? Why this greed?

Q: The department stores were in Jewish hands?

A: They were predominantly Jewish owned all over Germany – to a good extent. And when we say this wave of anti-Semitism and this is one of the instances I remember, the department stores, why? We said what can a man eat. We brought it back to simple terms – one steak a day, he can’t eat more than one steak a day. What do they need it for? And these were the thoughts that went through our minds – foolishly. It had nothing to do with it – whether there was one Jewish department store or 10 or 100 – nothing to do with it. Now as far as your question, people say for instance in the city, you have another Jewish mayor, Koch. They would rather he wasn’t Jewish. And it’s still this ghetto spirit of atmosphere that is guiding our thinking – will it be good or bad for the Jews. It has nothing to do with it. If there is anti-Semitism, it is not based on the fact that Koch is Jewish or Beame was Jewish. That he was a poor mayor had nothing to do with the fact that he was Jewish or Gentile – nothing.

Q: I asked the question as an indicator of our security.

A: I feel very positively about the fact that we are very well represented in Congress – we have 5 Senators which is 5% and we are well represented in the House. We are entitled to have our point of view represented. But as far as anti-Semitism is concerned, this doesn’t have the slightest bearing. And people say well, you have anti-Semitism here. Of course, you have anti-Semitism all over the world but the way I see it – the cardinal difference is that you have a social anti-Semitism. The cardinal difference is this – coming from Germany and seeing what I have seen is this – the anti-Semitism in Europe (including Poland, Austria ect) was in most cases government supported. This is different from anti-Semitism as you encounter it when you apply to a club here. You use the same term but it is something entirely different.

Q: But the problem is when they come together?

A: They came together in Europe but they will never come together here one should never say never but I came here and I opened up the newspaper in 1940 and you had the German Bund very active and Senator Bilbo who was raving against the Jews and kikes and you had the Lindbergh affair and I said my god what kind of country have I come to. Do I have to continue living in this kind of an atmosphere? And it was sort of a let down. And in 1940, Wendell Wilkie ran against Franklin Roosevelt and I read in the paper that Wilkie is of German descent. And I thought my god, the world is coming to an end and we were very naïve in the beginning and then when Wilkie turned out to be a remarkable man and as liberal as anybody could be. But we’ve gone through so many political changes. I cannot agree with somebody who says let’s not get into the limelight and I cannot agree with anybody who says there are too many Jewish lawyers or Jewish doctors or Jewish politicians. I don’t buy that at all. If they have a talent, they are entitled like every other human being to further themselves and it has nothing to do with being careful.