Interview with Mr. Johannes Feenstra

SERIES: SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST – ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewer: Dr. Willis Stoesz.

Begin Tape 1, Side 1 – Jan. 24, 1979.

Q: Ready to start. Mr. Feenstra, I guess I wasn’t given your first name

A: Joe.

Q: Joe. Joseph?

A: No, it is not Joseph. It is Johannes.

Q: Johannes. I see.

A: Johannes Hendricas.

Q: Hendricas Feenstra?

A: Yes.

Q: And you were born in the Netherlands?

A: Yes, in Amsterdam. On January 30, 1916.

Q: And you lived there until?

A: We lived in Amsterdam until 1948.

Q: All through the war?

A: Yes. In 1948 we moved to Indonesia. We lived in Indonesia for about eight years and, in the meantime, we went once with Golfoloph Uloph to Holland in 1950 and, in the meantime, Indonesia became independent in 1950 and the Indonesian government asked us if we would come back and we did and in 1955 we left Indonesia and went back to Holland and we lived for a short time in Holland. We emigrated to the United States in 1956.

Q: You’ve been in Dayton since then?

A: Yes. We came directly to Dayton.

Q: So you’ve been here 20 years or more.

A: Twenty-two years.

Q: Had your father’s family lived in Amsterdam?

A: My father was born in Friesland, the northern province of Holland, and he moved as a young man to Amsterdam. My mother was born in Amsterdam. I just looked it up yesterday. My father would have been, if he was alive, 105 years old today. He was here in the United States.

Q: He visited you here in Dayton?

A: Yes, when he was 92 years old. He came for the first time in an airplane and came to the United States.

Q: The Dutch are a hardy stock. What was his occupation?

A: My father was in diamond design. See what you can get out of the rough diamond to get the most beauty out of the stone by cutting and grinding it on different tables.

Q: He learned that after he came to Amsterdam?

A: Yes, he learned that in Amsterdam. During that time, there were three cities in the world for the diamond industry. The largest industry was in Amsterdam. Later a part went to Antwerp, Belgium but it is still a quite important diamond center.

Q: Were you a religious family?

A: No, my father was really what you can call an atheist and my mother was Roman Catholic. And so, I was really nothing.

Q: Nothing in that sense. Was your family politically interested?

A: My father was. My father was a Socialist, what you call Social Democrat. I think I caught a little bit of that from my father, the social democratic way of living.

Q: Were there brothers and sisters?

A: I have one brother who is still alive. He’s 77.

Q: Still in Holland?

A: He still lives in Holland.

Q: So political questions and political issues were talked about at home quite a bit?

A: Quite a bit, yes. My brother was, in the war years, even more towards the Socialism, more to the left, but became over the years more conservative by having his own business and, you know, people can change their minds. That happened to him real strongly, from being a social thinking man he became a more conservative thinking man.

Q: Were you and he together in political involvement?

A: No, no, our ages were too different. He is 14 years older than I am so there was not much going on.

Q: What was your education?

A: My education was I went first to elementary school and then to high school and from there I went to the dental school and from dental school I opened my own office in Amsterdam in 1938.

Q: In 1938 you opened an office as a dentist?

A: Until 1948 and in 1948 we moved to Indonesia.

Q: Did you practice dentistry there?

A: Yes, I practiced in the hospital in Indonesia.

Q: Are you still working as a dentist?

A: No, I can’t. You see, you have to go back to dental school here in the United States and when we came to the United States I was already 40 years old. My oldest daughter -- I have two daughters -- my oldest daughter was already close to going to college and so, we were talking about what to do, who should go to college. And since I was already, let’s say, over the hill……

Q: It would have taken several years, I suppose.

A: Yes, about three years. So we said that our daughter is of the age and she has her whole life ahead of her. So we thought it was better to let her go to college instead of me. And secondly, we couldn’t afford it for me to go to Columbus or Cleveland where the dental school is, and the family -- we couldn’t make it financially.

Q: Was all of your education in Amsterdam?

A: No, part of my education was in Germany and so, my dental education was mostly in Germany.

Q: Mostly in Germany? In Berlin?

A: No, in Cologne. And from there I came back to Amsterdam and opened my office.

Q: What sort of practice?

A: General dentistry.

Q: You started from scratch?

A: You could say so.

Q: Just by yourself?

A: My wife is in the same profession and so, we worked together. So, when I was arrested in 1942 -- this is something that comes later on.

Q: You were married in 1938?

A: We got married in 1938.

Q: You came back and married a hometown girl?

A: No, it was not a hometown girl. My wife was from Cologne. But she lived in Holland and we went together to dental school.

Q: She came back home with you?

A: She came back to my home but, let’s see, this is not correct. My wife lived in Holland since 1933 with her mother and went to dental school in Cologne. From there we came back together, so she had lived in Holland before we met.

Q: Being born in the Netherlands and going to school in Germany, you must have spoken at least German and Dutch then, and perhaps other languages.

A: The language, I think, is not such a problem. If you have to speak the language it comes a little easier. That way, you just go to school and learn a little bit about it. It was the same way when we came to the United States. Our English which we picked up in high school many years ago and, you know, if you don’t use it you forget so much about it. What we called in high school was really English English (spoken in the U.K). You know, something like: “We will have tea in the car.” And so, it was kind of strange for use and we had to start from scratch.

Q: I’m envious of European people who are born and raised in Europe because it’s much more comfortable for you to speak a number of languages.

A: The country is small. Holland is 155 miles long by about 90 miles wide and then you are in another country. If you go to the east, you are in Germany. If you go to the south, you are in Belgium and you have to speak Flemish and a little further, you speak French. I mean, the distance is so small that is the reason you have to (speak other languages).

Q: Most anyone who is a professional person would speak a number of languages.

A: Quite a few people who speak three or four languages besides their mother language speak mostly French and German and English.

Q: I wonder if maybe Europeans, on that account, have an adaptability that Americans may not have.

A: The chances for an American to speak a foreign language is not so available as it is for people living in Europe. But, on the other side, I always see here there is not much interest in learning a foreign language. My daughter is a teacher, and, at the moment, she is teaching German in Sinclair College. And she teaches French and German and she has her Masters degree from Indiana University. But she could not find a job here in the high school for the simple reason she had too much education. She had a Masters degree. If she didn’t have a Master’s degree, she would have a job here in the school. But while she had a Master’s degree, she came into high class or, what you call it, and no job.

Q: We are missing out, I think. American young people miss out because of that. I admire that quality.

A: Besides that, I think there are people here in the United States who are quite dumb with languages. I can remember so well, we were in 1950 in Indonesia and Indonesia became independent. And all the ambassadorial staff and cultural centers had to be changed when it became independent. So a whole new group of people from all different countries came. The United States installed about 120 people in the Embassy in Jakarta and not a single one spoke the Malaysian or Indonesian languages. The Russians came, with 85 people; from the top, the Ambassador, to the bottom, the chauffeur, all spoke fluently both languages. This is where we went wrong. They could speak with anybody on the street in his own language. When we came, we spoke English but they didn’t understand. We always think that everybody has to speak English and I don’t think it is any different. I wish it was true that we could speak over the whole world the same language. It would be a beautiful thing and I think we would have much fewer conflicts and wars going on if we could speak to each other in the same language.

Q: The Americans need to learn not only more languages but also to have first-hand access to the tragedies of Europe, too. That’s part of the purpose of listening to you and hearing what you have to say. So, let’s see, the Germans came into the Netherlands -- wasn’t it 1940?

A: May, 1940.

Q: Were you politically involved ever before that?

A: I was not politically involved. I was only, well let me see, in 1940 I was 24 years old. So, really, I was not politically active. I didn’t belong to a party.

Q: How was it, then, that you were the one who the Germans would want to put into a camp?

A: That happened in 1942. It was two years later. The war was already going on.

Q: Two years of German occupation had taken place by that time.

A: Yes, and that is, I think, where Hitler went wrong, in my opinion. See, the first two years I can say that they weren’t too bad. Your life was going on pretty smoothly as it was before. There were some restrictions. Let’s say you weren’t allowed to listen to the radio, to the English radio or any foreign radio, only to the German radio and to the Dutch radio. And things like that, you know. But for the rest of life, things were going on pretty normally. And then Hitler went wrong. He started with the Jews. Now there was one thing in all Holland and that is freedom for everybody, whether you were Catholic or Jew or Reformed or whatever you were, it didn’t make any difference. This feeling of the Dutch people, and I think this was one of the reasons why so many Dutch people went and emigrated to the United States, for the religious freedom. Anyway, Hitler started to get after the Jews and arrested them and pogroms followed. That was something that the Dutch people didn’t like, so they had strikes and the streetcars didn’t run and all the things more to bring things to a standstill. This was something the Germans didn’t like; that something gets disturbed. If they wouldn’t have started with the Jews, I don’t think that there would have been much of an Underground. You know, formal action. That came more in 1942, really. There was kind of an underground (from the beginning), but it wasn’t that strong. The Queen was in England; the entire government was in England, and they gave us instructions over the radio, real secretly. You could listen once in a while, if someone watched. Then the Germans took all of the radios. However some people kept them, you know. People came together in the evening and secretly listened to the radio. But I think that if that would not have happened, there would not have been such a strong underground.

Q: Do you remember the date when the anti-Jewish policy began?

A: That was about, I think, in February, 1942. I mean, when it started really. I can look it up for you if you are interested in the correct date but that is in my mind that it really started then. We had in our house every evening -- the radio programs are always in the evening -- during the night. We had quite a few friends of ours, Jewish people, who came to our house and stayed the night with us. Then, in the morning you went home again or to work, whatever they were doing. That was really the beginning of the strong underground work.

Q: The beginning of your involvement?

A: My involvement with the underground, also. Everyone needed kind of an identification card with a fingerprint on it and a picture. And the Jewish people had a big “J” for Jew stamped on it. Now, what we did was to do the falsification of the identification cards for the Jewish people and we tried to push as much as possible to get the Jewish people out of Holland to Belgium and from Belgium to Switzerland. And from there we tried for Portugal and the United States or England. That was what we tried, you know, but many people don’t want to go so easily. You know, if you have your house and family, you know, you just don’t pack up and say, “Up, let’s go!” I don’t think the Jewish people did see, at that time, how dangerous it would be, you know, in the near future. I think the Jewish people still had the hope that it wouldn’t be that bad, not knowing what really was coming up.

Q: There were people who didn’t think that it would be as serious as it came to be?

A: I think that there were some people who had seen it in Germany. They always say in Germany, “We didn’t know!” Well, that is a whole lot of baloney. We knew in Holland in 1938 and 1939 that there were concentration camps in Germany, so the German people can never say: “We didn’t know!” We knew it in Holland, you know. That was one of the real reasons why the Dutch people got really aggravated and upset that things like that could happen. You know that Jewish people were picked up in the street and just sent to Germany. You know, we didn’t know where in Germany.

Q: I wondered. Kristallnacht has come to be a special word. That is November 10, 1938 when Jewish shops and businesses were looted and burned and broken into, all over Germany. Did that Kristallnacht make an impression? You must have heard about it.

A: Oh, yes!

Q: Was that something much different than what had been happening in Holland?

A: Well, it became the same in Holland after 1942.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: Yes, that they burned up the Jewish stores.

Q: I was just wondering if, when the actual Kristallnacht took place, that people began to have their own eyes opened for the first time, or not.

A: You see, we in Holland, we knew about it, but there wasn’t much you could do.

Q: It wasn’t that they began to see Hitler and the Nazi party in a new way after that?

A: Oh yes, they really saw that, but, I mean, nobody did anything. England, with all its military possibility, didn’t do anything. The U.S. didn’t interfere. Nobody interfered with it, so it went like a big oil spot, you know, bigger and bigger. There is one thing. I don’t know if I’m right or if I think just that way, in Germany there was a real Jewish proletariat. Is that the correct term, do you pronounce it proletariat?

Q: Yes, yes.

A: There was a proletariat in Poland and in Lithuania, in Czechoslovakia and in Holland; you know, a Jewish proletariat, a strong Jewish proletariat. But in Germany there were mostly big business people. Oh, you know, factories and stores and things like that. They didn’t have a real Jewish proletariat. That had something to do with it. They always said the Jews had all the money. You know, we are poor and the Jews have all the money, all the big stores, and the banks. They have everything. You know, that is a possibility but I always had a feeling that it started this thing much more than it was in the other countries. Well, that is my personal feeling, maybe I am wrong.

Q: Well, that is an insight. I was not aware of it. Well, the Germans, then came in June or summer of 1940, wasn’t it?

A: In May.

Q: May of 1940. And in rapid order invaded the various Low Countries?

A: Yes, they went into Holland, Belgium, down to France and it went so fast. We had only four days of war.

Q: And the Blitzkrieg over to England, in June of 1940, wasn’t it?

A: If Hitler would have gone on from France right then, England never could have stopped him. But he stopped at that time at the ocean, at the coast of France.

Q: Maybe he thought that the English were Aryans and would wake up to his type of thinking.

A: If he would have gone there, there was no way for England to stop him. Germany was so strong. Oh, they were so strong.

Q: Oh, it must have been that people never thought that it would get as bad as it did and then each year, it got a little worse and worse. That is, in 1942 and ’43.

A: Yes.

Q: That is like a frog in water, maybe, that you warm it up and finally the frog is boiled, before you know it. Maybe that would explain why there wasn’t a massive resistance. But what really made the difference, do you think, as far as the formation of an underground….

A: There was an underground before that, but not strong.

Q: Was there sabotage going on before that?

A: Not much! Here and there, you know, some small groups, not in a large one. See, there was a four-day war and the Germans came in so fast. When they saw that they couldn’t get through as fast as they wanted to, they just threw so many bombs against Rotterdam. And they ruined that city. The city of Rotterdam is gone! That was the end of this government. The government went to England and that was the end of it! Then life took over and everyone started working and there really wasn’t that much. In the beginning, they were quite, let’s say, friendly. There were certain laws which, in the opinion of the Dutch, were not bad. Let’s say we got the socialized medicine. That was pretty good and all the people would be taken care of. There were certain laws which were not so bad. I am really saying that if he would not have started in 1942 with this Jewish people, it would never have (been) an underground.

Q: That was just too much?

A: That was the end of it, that was it. That we don’t accept. These are people and keep your hands off them!

Q: There must have been an organization which formed to try to get Jews out of the country and to falsify identification cards and so on. Was that the same organization which had been there before, or was it a new organization?

A: No, in that time, it was more individual groups. Small little groups who tried it.

Q: Little groups here and there?

A: Who tried it in their own way. That was the reason why there were so many people arrested. You know, they didn’t know; there were not real underground troops. There were just people like I was, not knowing what you get into, to help your friends. And then, the whole thing fell apart. Somebody was arrested and they started talking and the whole group folded up. Now, later on, that was getting much more organized. In 1943 it was quite well organized. Not that many people got arrested anymore.

Q: They were more skillful at it.

A: Yes, more skillful. They went under different names, you know, moved to other cities and so on. The identification cards -- so many people had false identification cards, you know, with different names and so on.

Q: Were there Jewish people involved in the underground? Before?

A: I don’t think that there were too many. If there were any, they were (operating under other names).

Q: It would be riskier for them, anyhow!

A: That may be one of the reasons why they did it. If they got caught that was the end for them.

Q: Even afterwards, the underground was not staffed with Jewish people/

A: No, no, no. Well, there were hardly any Jewish people left. By 1943 more than half of the Jewish population of Amsterdam was gone. And in 1944 there was hardly any left. Well, a few people who lived with Christian people, but they were hiding.

Q: The question of Anne Frank was a case in point. Did you know the story about the Frank family at the time?

A: I don’t know about the Frank family, not personally. I didn’t know them.

Q: That has gotten to be so famous that now…..

A: I didn’t. It was a beautiful play.

Q: Yes.

A: The Diary of Anne Frank. They did it here in Dayton at the Kettering-Oakwood Theater. I directed the play!

Q; Oh, yes?

A: It had a really beautiful write-up in the Dayton Daily News. It is in the paper. A whole page. They described the whole thing.

Q: Have you been interested in drama?

A: Yes, yes. I am a member of the K-O Theater. I mean, one of the founders of the K-O Theater.

Q: K-O Theater?

A: K-O Theater is the Kettering-Oakwood Community Theater. We have a little theater in a little park.

Q: Oh, yes.

A: It is something like the Dayton Theater Guild, something similar.

Q: Yes. Okay, had you been involved in dramatics before?

A: Oh yes. I did it already in Holland.

Q; So you know a lot of people through that, as well as through your profession.

A: Yes, yes. I always loved it, even when I was a little boy, I was interested in theater. I always kept up with it, read quite a few plays.

Q: So, you were involved then from January ’42, when the anti-Jewish policy began. As I remember, you said January.

A: Yes, January or February. I can look it up, the exact date, if you want to know it.

Q: I can ask you next time.

A: OK.

Q: All right. So, you were involved in one of these informal groups to help one another.

A: Informal groups.

Q: For how long could you keep that going?

A: Well we were working on that for about three or four months and we had quite a few identification cards printed and reprinted and so on. And then, one day, our oldest daughter, Melu, when she was born. My wife was still in the hospital, in the early morning they came and arrested me. First I tried to get out of it by playing dumb, that I didn’t know anything about it. But then they came up with names, you know, of people whom I worked together. So one of them, when they arrested him, must have told the whole story about all of us who were in that little group together, you know.

Q; That must have been May 0f ’42.

A; No, that was in July of ’42.

Q: So they took you right off?

A: Yes.

Q: From your office?

A: That was the end of it!

Q: To a police station or to a Gestapo place?

A: First they send me to what is called the SS, oh, kind of a polizei, that is wrong, police headquarters for the SS. And now they started, you know, the questioning. They told me most of what happened which they knew already from the other people who were arrested before me; of what was going on.

Q: That consisted of making ID cards and providing people with food and shelter and a hiding place.

A: Yes. That was not even interesting to them, that we did that; it was mainly identification cards. That is what they arrested us for, mainly. And from there they send us, in the evening after a whole day of interrogation, to a jail in Amsterdam. They kept me there for maybe six weeks.

Q: That was a jail under the SS?

A: Yes, completely under the SS.

Q: Was it a new building or one that had taken over?

A: No, one of the old jails.

Q: For six weeks.

A: Yes, about six weeks. And then from there they sent me to Amersfoort. That is a city in central Holland. That is what they called in German a Durchgangslager. That means that it is a step between jail and concentration camp. That is where they drill you into a concentration camp prisoner. How to stand in a row, how to take off your cap and that you work at things to which you were not used. They ask you right away what is your profession, what is your occupation?

Q: That did not come out yet in the jail in Amsterdam?

A: No, in jail we were just let sit. And I came together with four and I left together with nine in one little cell.

Q; You had known each other?

A: No, I didn’t know anybody!

Q: They were all in for the same reason?

A: Oh, for all different reasons. Oh, there was a lawyer who was in contact with England and people who had put out a pamphlet and a kind of small newspaper. Oh, all kind of little things which they did. In a small little cell, you know, where all these people were together.

Q: Like the end of this room?

A: It wasn’t much bigger, you know, a one person cell. You know, at first, but then nine, you know?

Q: You slept on the floor?

A: Yes, on the floor

Q: This was in the summer time?

A: Yes, it was so hot! No ventilation. And there was no toilet. It was just a typical dump, you know, buckets in the corner.

Q: Buckets, yes?

A: Buckets in the corner. No privacy or anything.

Q: Yes, for six weeks?

A: You couldn’t even get a bath!

Q: Was the food…..

A: It was terrible, awfully bad. In the morning, we got a cup of lukewarm, of what they called erstatz coffee. It was not coffee, it was something which they made. In the name, it was coffee but really it was kind of a brew. It was rotten, it tasted like barley. Well, for lunch you got a little bit of soup, you know, with potatoes and cold stuff and in the evening, you got a small piece of bread.

Q: And everything was a little worse at the second prison, then?

A: Well, when we went to what they call the Durchangslager, you know. I don’t know what to call it: the beginning of concentration camp to drill, you know. The first day when we came in they cut all our hair off. You know, they shaved our hair off.

Q: Then you knew that you were on your way to the concentration camp by then already/

A: No, we didn’t know.

Q: They didn’t tell you?

A: No, we didn’t know what was going to happen to us. No idea.

Q: I see, I see.

A: But the moment you came in, they cut your hair. And then you sat in the chair, they cut your hair and then they showed you. They had big round mirrors and you could see how you looked.

Q: They tried to shame you?

A: It was kind of a funny sight to see yourself and, all of a sudden, no hair. That is to bring you down, just to get you down.

Q: Were they still trying to get information from you then?

A: No, that was already done, the interrogation was over. It was already set. You know, there was no court hearing or anything. It was just so -- he goes to the death camp and he goes to that camp, and so on. They had people executed. One of my cellmates, he was executed, a little bit after I went to Amersfoort. Later on, when I came back, I heard from my wife that he was executed. So, I mean, they were all different, depending on what you had done.

Q: Were there Jews in that?

A: No, there were no Jews in my camp. They went, most of the time, to Westerbork, a little city in the northern part of Holland. They transported them from there to Westerbork. That was the same as what we had, you know, a drill camp. From there, they transported them to Augsburg.

Q: You, I imagine, were political prisoners.

A: Yes, we were political prisoners. We had, I don’t know what you call it?

Q: A badge or a patch?

A: That’s it, a three-cornered one.

Q: A triangle.

A: Yes, a triangle -- red, that means political.

Q: Oh, yes.

A: The black triangle was for black market. You know, people who worked with the black market. Then you had the green -- those were the professional, what do you call it, burglars.

Q: Criminals.

A: Criminals, yes, criminals, professional criminals, the green ones. The pink ones were for the homosexuals and the purple ones was for the Jehovah’s witnesses,

Q: Did you have all these kinds in the Durchgangslager?

A: Oh, yes!

Q: All were there except the Jews, perhaps?

A: No Jews, there were no Jews there.

Q: Jews had the yellow?

A: Yes, Jews had yellow. The Star of David, it said “Jew.”

Q: Were all the different kinds of colors of badges mixed together?

A: Yes, they were all mixed together.

Q: At random? You could be in the same cell with all of them?

A: Yes, but as I said, the cells were all barracks.

Q: All barracks?

A: They were all barracks.

Q; Did people tend to get together on the basis of what color badge they wore?

A: No, no.

Q: That didn’t enter.

A: No, no, I can’t say that. That was no consideration. The only thing I can say is that the criminals were always put at the head of a room, you know, of a commando, work commanders. These were always the criminals which they used for that. In Germany, also, in the camps. It was one of the things they did to bring you down. To kick you down, as it were. That you were directed by a criminal, that you are just nothing. That was the whole principle of the thing.

Q: That was a deliberate policy, that they tried to persuade people in many different ways that they were nothing?

A: Yes, you were less than a number. You were not even a name since you had a number on your jacket.

Q: How long were you in that second place?

A: In November 1942 they sent me to Germany and we were three weeks in a place worse than a jail. Where really bad criminals are. How do you call it here? Is there a name for it?

Q: Incorrigibles?

A: No. Well, this is a special jail.

Q: Maximum security?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Maximum security prison.

A: Oh yes, we stayed there for a couple of weeks. Then they sent us to Berlin, to the well-known Alexanderplatz. That was the police headquarters in Berlin. From there you were transported to the different camps around Berlin.

Q: Did you get to know people that you stayed with during these various moves?

A: I didn’t know anybody! No, I never met friends or such.

Q: Maybe there was a policy to mix people up so that they wouldn’t know each other?

A: I don’t know if there was such a policy or if it was just an accident that I never met anybody. I know in Amersfoort I knew a couple of fellows from my neighborhood -- and in Amsterdam, but that is all. I never really met anyone. But you made friends in the camps.

Q: OK. I want to get at this process of humiliation and shaming people. What other ways were there? Having to stand for a long time in drill would be another way you mentioned and having to take off your cap.

A: Oh, that was something that had to be done all the time. You cannot believe that if thousands of people standing, you know, in a big field and if the commander, you know, the head officer of the SS. Thousands of people had to do that and it had to be “click” like that, ONE. If it was “clack, clack, clack” then we had to do it all over again. Well, later on I will tell you in Oranienburg what happens there, that was really a concentration camp. But in Amersfoot that was a drilling kind of thing, you know, lines, long straight lines so that you could count. You had to keep straight behind the man in front of you, like in the military. Then one of the commanders came by, counted us. If all the prisoners were there still, then they lead us to work. Burn cartons or dig trenches, things like that.

Q: So, a combination of work like that and building the camp?

A: Well, to build the camp and also to cut you down. The first thing they asked you was, what was your profession. Then: Oh, we will teach you to work, yes, we will teach you to work. Things like that, you know. And then they put you to digging trenches or so and the fellows who, in real life, would dig trenches were working in hospitals as orderlies, or things like that.

Q: Nobody could do what they knew how to do?

A: No, there was no way that you could go back into your kind of work, or what you did before.

Q: Was the food cut down?

A: Oh yes, the food was horrible!

Q: So you were hungry?

A: I was always hungry, that is one of the things they get you down with mostly. And then we had to walk with wooden shoes and we got old army uniforms from the Dutch army which had been used. We got to use them. But that was not enough, it was awfully cold. Just a little shirt with a jacket over it. It was always damp, always raining. No raincoats or anything. We came in the evening, all of us came in, and awfully smelly mess of people, we came in damp and wet into the barracks.

Q: Very little change for cleanliness, then?

A: No, there was hardly any way. The toilets were old, just awful, little holes in the wall. And they just put holes in there, and that was for the toilets. There was no privacy, or so. I cannot remember taking a bath in Amersfoort.

Q: Well was there disease?

A: Dysentery was terrible. There were many open wounds, you know, from shortage of protein. Due to shortage of protein, people got wounds, open wounds, all over their legs and so on.

Q: Was there also deprivation of sleep?

A: Depending on what was going on. If the Americans or English, let’s say, dropped some bombs close by, then they led us -- you know, getting out of the beds and we couldn’t go to sleep. You know, what difference, it wouldn’t have done much good anyway.

Q: What was the spirit of the people whom you knew? Were they feeling discouraged?

A: That depended completely on the individual. I can remember so well that we had a day where it was raining and raining and we were so cold and they let us, with what you call it, little carts?

Q: Wheelbarrows?

A: Wheelbarrows bringing clay from one point to another. It was just ridiculous. There is no reason but just to get us to work. Heavy, wet clay and I felt that the whole bunch of boys and men around me were all getting down, you know, morally, mentally. Then one of the guys said, “Come on, let’s not let them get us. Let’s whistle, just let’s whistle, they maybe get upset. Let’s try it, maybe it will help us a little bit.” So we started whistling and they didn’t say anything about it. That brought us up to feeling we are still here, you know, we are still alive, we don’t get so easily down. Well that happened once in awhile, that you get depressed and let yourself go. But usually that is about the end of it. Well, people with not too strong a will and character, you know, they slowly die. They didn’t see any use for life anymore.

Q: There were people even in that one period, in that second prison who gave up?

A: Oh yes. Just faded out. you know it was so typical. These were mostly the intellectuals: doctors, attorneys, priests, preachers, people who never had done any hard work, labor, hard labor. They were the first ones who went “whoot” (gave in, conked out, etc.).

Q: They couldn’t accept it?

A: No, they were not used to the life, to the hard life.

Q: But you were?

A: Right, I was lucky! I was mentally OK. I was young and mentally maybe strong enough to accept it. Besides that I had my wife who, I told you, was in the hospital when I was arrested so I had never seen her after that. And I had never, yes once, I had seen the little baby. So I was living in order to maybe see them again. That maybe gave me the strength to go on. It wouldn’t say that I was such a big shot to go on, but I think that it was just the will to stay alive. You see the baby was little. But there were an awful lot of intellectuals who, just in the beginning who gave up. If you went through a certain period and you got used to the way of life, you had more of the will to go on. But the first, let’s say the first month or six weeks, whatever it was, that was the worst!

Q: Do you know the work of Victor Frankel? He is a man who was in the camps and he wrote about that?

A: No.

Q: I just wondered if you knew about that.

A: No.

Q: Well, it looked pretty serious and people probably did not know whether they would ever see their families again. For sure!

A: No, you didn’t know what was going on, what was happening and what would happen to you. No idea.

Q: No communication, perhaps?

A: We were allowed to write once a month a letter which was censored by the SS.

Q: Were they actually delivered?

A: Yes, they were delivered. Yes. But the only thing you could write that you were all right, that you were OK, that you were healthy and in good shape.

Q: But at least they were delivered, so they knew that you were still alive.

A: Yes. Then came the period where you were transported from one camp to the other that they didn’t hear. There were about six weeks I think when my wife didn’t hear from me, that she did not know if I was still alive or not.

Q: Did you get letters from her at all?

A: Once a month, yes.

Q: Once a month again?

A: But that same thing; only we are OK and so on.

Q: That is not as much as you want to hear but at least…

A: At least they are alive.

Q: Enough to keep your hopes alive, hopes going.

A: But there were no pictures or anything allowed.

Q: Was there any sort of an organization among the men you were in that camp?

A: No.

Q: No association, just the way they were thrown together, that is the way they were together, only?

A: No, there was no organization. It was not possible, you know, you never knew who was your friend or your enemy.

Q: What about the SS men, they were the staff of your camp? Were they the guards and the administrators and so on? Were they all SS men?

A: All SS.

Q: I heard about them in some of the other camps. Was there a Blockfuhrer?

A: Blockfuhrer, Stubeneldester.

Q: Were those prisoners?

A: Stubeneldester were prisoners.

Q: Aha!

A: And then you had the Block officer, also a prisoner.

Q: They kept the records?

A: Well as far as the records, you know, he kept them. And then the Block Altester, that was the highest of the prisoners. And then came the SS. The lowest soldier who was over a barrack and then the hierarchy.

Q: In that camp were they, like the kitchen staff or any of the guards, ever known to be willing to take a bribe in order to do you a small favor of some kind?

A: Well, if you were low enough in camp there were little things you could do if you were working in part of the camp where you could change something for food, then you were in good shape.

Q: Yes, that kind of thing.

A: Insofar, then, you could stay alive.

Q: You had no valuables with you, or money?

A: No.

Q: Nothing at all?

A: No, let’s say there was someone working where they make the uniforms and he made little caps. We had striped caps. Now the fellows who worked, they made little black caps. That meant that you are a little bit higher.

Q: Higher?

A: Yes, one of the older ones in the camp, you know.

Q: I see, seniority!

A: And the little he could make a present to one of the guys in the kitchen.

Q: I see.

Q: Yes, things like that happened. Other than that you were just working in the commando and there was no way in which you could get extra food.

Q: So the word is “commando?”

A: Commando were the work groups where you were.

Q: Did you work with the same group of men each time or did they switch the membership around?

A: One week you were in that commando and another, in another.

Q: So they switched you around?

A: Or you were a specialist in certain things. You know, they had in certain parts of the camp, they had the older guns which had been used and there was something wrong with them. They were sent back and they were repaired and cleaned and so on. These were special workers who knew how to work with guns and such. They stayed in their own commando. If they didn’t have that kind of work like that, they transferred you from one to another.

Q: To take your chances?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay, okay. Life must have been pretty grim!

A: Yes. The beginning of Oranienburg that was, I think, the worst time I had. You had to get up at 4 a.m. Then you had to go and wash yourself and they checked that you washed yourself properly, and it was in the meantime already winter, you know. If you were not washed then……

Second interview -- 1/29/79 -- begins.

[This is probably where the 2nd interview, the one of 1/29/79, started.]

Q: There is a space on a tape talking to Mr. Feenstra, on Jan 29, 1979 at Mr. Feenstra’s house. Our first tape ended in the middle of a sentence, having just gotten to Oranienburg. There was one date we were not clear on last time. I asked about the time when the arresting and the harassing of Jews in Holland began.

A: In Feb. 1941.

Q: 1941. Not 1942.

A: Not 1942.

Q: All right, so that you were active then for over a year rather than for just a number of weeks?

A: Yes, that was when my work with underground started, that was early 1942.

Q: I see. Yes! It was beginning to get worse and worse.

A: When it started to get worse and worse and the situation for the Jews was getting so bad, they really needed help one way or the other.

Q: What was it that decided you and your friends to really start in earnest with the ID cards and such?

A: For the simple reason that we wanted as many Jews as possible to get out of Holland. There was a possibility to go via Belgium, France, to Switzerland, and from Switzerland to Portugal, and from Portugal they would go to England or to the U.S. or wherever.

Q: Did any of these actually get out?

A: Oh yes! Oh yes! I wouldn’t say quite a few but there were some. I don’t know how many. I really couldn’t tell you how many. I would lie if I gave you a number -- but quite a few made it and quite a few didn’t make it. They just made it to the border and there they were (caught).

Q: Well some satisfaction at least to help some.

A: We know of one couple who made it. One couple for sure, they made it to the U.S.

Q: Already in the 40th to the U.S.?

A: No, they went first to Switzerland, from there they made it to Portugal, then first to England and the U.S.

Q: But was there some one thing which the Germans did then, early in ’42, when people said, “No, that’s too much” and started helping?

A: That is when it really, you know, when the underground started to grow.

Q: Yes.

A: We had the lowlands to protect.

Q: So the underground started to be more effective.

A: Effective.

Q: That gave you then the chance to do things for them?

A: And then in ’42, after I was arrested, it really was getting big.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: You could see it on the number I had when I went to the concentration camp, the Durchgangslager at Amersfoort. I was in the 249 number.

Q: That is a low number.

A: It is a low number. That means that, really, the underground was not working that hard yet, otherwise there would have been many more people who had been arrested. Later on it really got bad, many many more people got arrested.

Q: Well, now I would guess from what you were saying last time on the tape, that the people, the Jewish people that you were helping, the first people that were friends of yours, that you knew, who were visiting in your home or that you knew through the theater groups maybe, or…?

A; Oh, just friends, you know. There was in our circle of friends, there was no difference whether you were a Jew. There were Jewish friends, you know, they were already friends before the war.

Q: There was no separation like there was in some European, in some eastern European countries?

A: No, no, no. Amsterdam was a city for the Jews. They were a part, they belonged to the city. Our language is so interwoven with the Yiddish language. Amsterdam’s dialect had so many Jewish words in it. Yes, you just don’t realize how many words you find in Yiddish. Hebrew or Yiddish.

Q: Is that true of other Dutch cities?

A: No, no! Specially Amsterdam. That means that a large, large part of the city was specially Jewish.

Q: Do you know whether the Jews that you were friendly with were closely observant Jews? Did they keep the dietary laws, those whom you knew? Were they strictly orthodox Jews?

A: No, no.

Q: More liberal?

A: More liberal, yes.

Q: More assimilated into the wider society?

A: Yes.

Q: I see, well, it’s natural. Yes.

A: The Orthodox, the Orthodox Jews had a closed together life.

Q: They stayed more to themselves.

A: They didn’t frequent the Christian people or so. The more liberal Jews there, there is no difference.

Q: I was trying to understand what the Jewish community in Amsterdam must have been like, before the war.

A: I wouldn’t say that it was a ghetto. There was a special part of the city where the Jewish people were living. Another part of the city where the richer Jewish people lived.

Q: Did the group to which you belonged; I guess that pretty much went out of operation after you were arrested. Was everyone arrested?

A: Just our trouble is that we were not organized at that time. Everybody did it on his own and everybody made the same mistakes, that is the reason why so many people got arrested. We didn’t have any help from the outside, let’s say from England, with weapons or whatever. That came all later. In that time we were just on our own. What can you do if you don’t know exactly what the green Polizei and the SS -- you know they had such information about everybody that it was easy for them to figure out that somebody was doing something against them.

Q: They were all professionals and you were amateurs.

A: Yes, we were just amateurs. We did our best, that is all we did. But we did so many things wrong, absolutely wrong, you know. So we found out the hard way that we have to organize in groups.

Q: I am just guessing that of the few Jews who got away, most of them must have been people who had gentile friends?

A: I think that must have been the case.

Q: So that out of those 120,000, I don’t know. I have seen the figure of 120 thousand Jews who lost their lives under Hitler from Holland, a much greater proportion of Orthodox than liberal Jews probably died. Would you say so?

A: Well, I don’t know. I wouldn’t say that that is true. There weren’t from our friends. We have not seen too many coming back, not too many. We had, let us say, a group of Jewish friends that was maybe, let’s say 20, and there were about three or four who came back. The rest were never seen.

Q: Of the 20 that you helped leave Amsterdam.

A: Well that was our group of friends; we went around with. And I would say there were maybe three or four at the most who came back, in 1945.

Q: A very high percentage was…?

A: Was killed in the camps.

Q: Yes, yes. Okay. Well, is there anything else about the situation where you were trying in every way you could to work with the Jewish situation that you think is worth telling about now, which we have not yet talked about?

A: It has been told so many times already that I don’t think it is much new. If you read the diary of Anne Frank, it is the whole situation of what happened at that time.

Q: But it was very interesting to hear it from the point of view of an insider in one of those groups. I had never heard that before. I think that it is an important addition to our information. So that’s good. Well, so then they took you off to prison for around six weeks in Amsterdam, then off to Amersfoort [WS spelled it here], the Durchgangslager. We talked quite a bit about the conditions there. Yes, from hindsight you would really say that they were educating everyone about how to act in Oranienburg.

Q: In any camp.

A: So they were breaking them in.

A: They were breaking them in to stand in line so that they can count them every morning and every afternoon.

Q: So it was part of a continuous policy? It was pretty well planned from the beginning.

A: Oh yes, yes.

Q: What happened at Amersfoort?

A: It was a former military camp.

Q: A training camp?

A: Yes, a training camp for the military and they renovated it completely, for mass transportation to the different camps in Germany and Poland.

Q: They put you on a train then?

A: Yes, they put us on a train to Oberhausen, that is a little bit past the border into Germany.

Q: Was that in a boxcar, or in a regular train?

A: No, we were in a regular train, but in each compartment there was an SS. There was no way of escaping during the ride.

Q: You were pretty well guarded and everything?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: So Oberhausen, then to Alexanderplatz?

A: Alexanderplatz in Berlin. That is the headquarters of the “Green Police” in Berlin. And we stayed there to get organized and the next day they transported us to Oranienburg.

Q: That was the SS, the “Schutz Staffel,” doing that?

A: The transporting was always with the SS.

Q: Not the SD, or something like that?

A: The SD is a social “Sicherheit Dienst”. The SS were the troops, the soldiers.

Q: All right. And Alexanderplatz was the place where all the people were gathered?

A: They came from all over, from Belgium, from France, and wherever Germany had its troops and they had prisoners. They were all sent there, whoever came into camps around Berlin and then [distributed].

Q: Do you have any idea how, there was a number of camps, Oranienburg was one of them. There were a number of camps?

A: Oh yes.

Q: How they decided to send one person one place rather than to another?

A: I have never found out how they figured it out, where you had to go.

Q: They must have had some system.

A: They must have had some kind of system.

Q: In Oranienburg there were no, just Dutch, but also Belges…

A: From all over: Russians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, you name them.

Q: No Jews, though?

A: Some Jews, some Jews, yes.

Q: German Jews.

A: I don’t know. The Jews in Oranienburg were used to make the money that was thrown out in England, English money, they printed counterfeit money and dropped it by the millions over England. They tried to bring the whole money market in disorder. That was done in a secret part of the camp and only by Jews. They must have been perfect…

Q: Printing people?

A: Printing people. They must have been the best of the best, they used for that. The counterfeit money must have been so perfect that it was hard to discover.

They sent the Luftwaffe with the planes over London and over the larger cities and dropped the money.

A: I’m not sure I’ve heard of that before.

A: That’s true. That happened.

Q: Was there always a Jewish group in Oranienburg, and when they were done with that they went to do something?

A: We knew that they were there. There was always some people who know a little bit what is going on. We know that they were there. As far as I understand it there was about 50 to 60 who were working there, but I have never heard of whether they escaped or that they were taken prisoner by the Russians or whatever. I don’t know!

Q: As far as you know, that was the only group of Jews there, in Oranienburg?

A: Yes, as far as I know.

Q: A special program? Let’s see if your recollections of Oranienburg, see if we can get those together in an overall kind of systematic way. Maybe if I asked first of all about how the camp was arranged, how big it was, and mentioned as we were talking the other time before the tape that there was a central watch place where they could look into all the buildings.

A: Yes, I don’t know if I explained it on tape or not.

Q: I think before the tape.

A: It was before the tape. OK. The concentration camp of Oranienburg was built in kind of a circle and the circle was divided in two, and one part of the camp was a training camp for the SS and the other part was the concentration camp which was divided by a street. The SS who were used in the training camp at the same time were the kind of police in the camp.

Q: The staff?

A: The staff of the camp. And let’s say, how do we put it, what you call it .We cut the circle in two.

Q: A semi-circle, or the diameter.

A: The diameter of the circle? There was the head building where the Commandant, the highest officer of the camp, had his living quarters and his offices, and above that was a big tower, and he could oversee the whole concentration camp how it was built.

Q: In the radius of the circle?

A: In radius from the center. So they looked down all the streets between the barracks and in the center of this was what they called the “Appelplatz,” where all the prisoners at six o’clock in the morning had to be and at six o’clock in the evening, and they were counted there.

Q: Twice a day counted?

A: Twice a day counted and there were 70 when I came, that is 70,000 prisoners, and when I left there were 72,000 prisoners. So it took quite a time to count all these people. That was the reason that you had to stay in absolute straight rows, so they could count 10 rows deep and 70 long, that is 10 times 70, or 700. And so every SS had a group of so many hundred people he had to count to see that they were there, dead or alive. Even if people who died, they had to be laid down there and had to be counted in the amount of people.

Q: If they died during the previous 12 hours then they would use the bodies to be counted.

A: They used the bodies to put down there and then they were counted in. Otherwise there would not be enough.

Q: It must have been a large Appelplatz. The Appelplatz must have been very large.

A: It was large, enormous, enormous place. Oranienburg was a tremendous large place.

Q: Like a half circle several acres large?

A: Oh yes! Enormous.

Q: A quarter of a mile, or…?

A: You asked me.

Q: Street side might be as much as a half- mile long?

A: How big was it?

A: A very large place?

A: Let’s see. I really have no idea to explain how big. I have no idea to describe.

Q: From here to Smithville Road, maybe like that?

A: At least.

Q: A half mile?

A: At least. I would say that it’s more than that.

Q: I’ll measure it in the car when I drive home after awhile. To get some sense of dimension.

A: It is enormous, enormous place1

Q: Huge, and the whole thing flat and nothing on it at all.

A: Only barracks.

Q: But this open place had nothing on it.

A: The open place that had the open places where they were talking about last week was in the half circle of the camp, there was a street and it went around this half circle and ended. It was divided in old pieces of street material, such as asphalt, sand, gravel, rocks, whatever is used on streets and roads, etc. And in that part the newcomers into the camp had to walk every day from early in the morning until late in the evening and on all kinds of shoes who were thrown out early in the morning and were men’s shoes, ladies shoes with high heels and you would have to walk on that a whole day. They told us that this was done to try out what were the best kind of material to make shoes during the war, that is all what you call ersatz. What is ersatz?

Q: Synthetic.

A: Synthetic material that was used. There was no real leather, of course, so they used wood, and you name it, what they used for material. It was a bad explanation. This was just to make you real real small. You were not allowed to talk, just walk! And at midday you got a bowl of kind of…[fades out, probably made a gesture].

Q: OK! So we have a bit of interruption, but let’s get started again. You just told me about the shoes and how it was with them.

A: You walked the whole day and about midday you got a bowl of you call potato soup, well there was hardly any potatoes in it but they called it potato soup, and that was the meal for lunch, and then you walked on again until evening, and well, you were about crippled from walking over all the different kind of material of stones and gravel and rocks with shoes which didn’t fit you. That was the worst thing. So you had blisters on your feet that were enormous and there was nobody to take care of you and then you have to stand a couple of hours again in the Appelplatz for the counting. And you could be happy if it was over by seven or seven thirty in the evening. I remember so well that we have to stand once 72 hours.

Q: In the Appelplatz?

A; 72 hours long! And there were more than 800 people that died during the 72 hours from exhaustion but they had to stay later and they would have to be counted. The reason was there were three Russian prisoners who had tried to escape and for that reason we had to stand until they were found, and they were somewhere in the forest around Oranienburg. They were on the outside commando. There were some commandos who went outside the camp during the day and worked on projects outside the camp and the three Russians had escaped then. Until they found them we stood there. They were hanged right away and then we were relieved from our standing.

Q: They were hanged in your sight. Did you see it?

A: Oh yes. That was all part of the comedy there. And I will tell you this, maybe you won’t believe it but it is true as I am here. It was Christmas 1942 and the Germans had put up a real large beautiful Christmas tree, the biggest I had ever seen, and there were a couple of prisoners who were just in at Christmas time, everybody was thinking about home and something to eat. And a couple tried to escape and they caught them right away. The Christmas tree was taken away. The gallows were put on the place of the Christmas tree. Three people were hanged. After it was over the gallows was taken away and the Christmas tree was put back in its place.

Q: The huge, big tree. Enormous effort went into it!

A: Not only the effort. That was not the worst thing, the effort. There were thousands of people to help work on it. No, the work was terrible, what a low way of sinking. I can’t express myself.

Q: There would have been plenty of room to put the gallows somewhere else!

A: Think about it! Just a Christmas tree and take the tree away and put the gallows up and hang people and put the Christmas tree back. I mean, I can’t express how low, how dirty, how filthy their thinking must have been to do things like that!

Q: Everyone must have felt angry about it at the time.

A; Pardon?

Q: Everyone must have felt very angry at the Germans at the time. How did people feel about that?

A; I think that we were all so depressed, I think that we were not even angry. We were more depressed about seeing that the festivity of Christianity was handled in such a filthy way. That you would say, how is it possible, how is it possible that somebody can think only about doing a thing like that? That’s one of the things that happened.

Q: It would have had to be the Commandant of the whole camp who would have made that decision to do it that way.

A: Yes, or somebody came up with that and thought it was real funny. It was a real funny idea to do this. Anyway, to come back to the first two weeks or three weeks which were the hardest. We had to do all these things that I told you, walk around, etc.

Q: The shoe trick?

A: That went on for weeks.

Q: Each individual would have to do that for several weeks on coming in?

A: Yes, when you came in, everybody who was new to the camp had to go through this ceremony of “Schuhlaufen” they called it. And then the experiments in the washrooms and in the morning there was one large, really enormously large room in each barrack where you had to wash yourself and there were around this wash places were all the toilets -- open. There was no privacy. And if they thought you didn’t wash yourself good enough they came with the big spray hose and sprayed ice cold water over you, midwinter, and it was cold.

Q: People were naked, no clothes on!

A: No, you had to take everything off. It was in the morning.

Q: Leave your clothes in the bunk?

A; On the side were benches, wooden benches, and you put your clothes on there.

Q: Did they do that every day? Spray people? Not every day?

A: No. Whenever it came up to them, to have some fun, then they did things like that. And we could shower once a month, we could take showers ,and in the winter it was exactly the same. The whole barrack had to go to the shower. It was a special barrack with showers in them, and then you all went in there and you got a shower. It was pretty hot, nice and warm, and you get one towel for three people, and then let you dry outside. You go outside naked and you have to dry yourself -- if you are number three you get a wet towel. In the winter it was not too nice. But it was one of the things to make you feel real small, to bring you down. It was the whole principle of the idea, of course, to make people feel so small.

Q: Where was the road? There were barracks, then, all the men lived and stayed in barracks?

A: Yes.

Q: There must have been a great number of these buildings and arranged in an orderly way.

A: I was in Barrack 54 and I was about in the middle, so I was over 100 barracks.

[Next tape will be Side three, second Cassette]

[Tape two, Side one, conclusion of second interview, that of 1/29/79]

A: I don’t know how many people lived in each barrack, we had four bunk beds above each other and there were two sets in each group. So one group of beds had eight beds and that was on a wooden floor, and on that was a mattress filled with straw. Did you ever lay in straw?

Q: Not for very long.

A: Not for very long? Try it for a couple of days. It is hard! You kept losing it, that is the trouble with it, it becomes hard like a board after a while. You turn it around and it’s just as hard on one side as it is on the other side.

Q: So there must have been about 700 men in each building?

A: Oh yes!

Q: So for 100 buildings -- 70,000 men. And then nothing else in these buildings but these bunks?

A: No, that is what they called the sleeping quarters, then you had what they called the living quarters that had some wooden tables and wooden benches. You could sit down there, in the evening until it was time to go to bed. That was all regulated, you know; that time you come in, and that time you eat, and that time you go to bed, and that time you get up. That was all set times.

Q: What were those times? You got up at? early in the morning?

A: Real early in the morning, depending on -- sometimes they got us out of bed at three A.M; and other times we got out of bed at five A.M. five o’clock, that was the time to get up. And if there was an air raid alarm, then we had to lay the whole night under the beds, on the wooden floors. We had once, I can’t remember whether they were American or Canadian planes, they dropped bombs over the SS half of the camp. Not one single bomb fell in the concentration camp half! But the SS got it!

Q: They must have had accurate information.

A: They did such a beautiful job on that thing. It was just like a piece of cake. Right in the middle!

Q: When was that approximately, do you remember?

A: That must have been the Springtime of 1943. It was right in the Spring.

Q: So the air force, whoever they were, must have had accurate information as to how the camp was laid out.

A; The camps, I believe, were well known by the Americans. Their whereabouts.

Q; The barracks themselves were not very comfortable. Well, plain boards and straw? Did you have blankets?

A: Yes, we had a really thin blanket. It got quite cold during the night.

Q: Not heated.

A: No, the sleeping quarters were not heated, the living quarters they had one stove for the whole quarter.

Q: Was the so-called living quarter big enough that all the men in that building could get into it at one time?

A: We ate most of the time in groups. One group, then when you were finished another group went there to eat.

Q: So, the food was served there also?

A: Yes! Well, the food was so little quantities that there really was not much to eat; you had to be satisfied with whatever you got.

Q: Did you have plates and cutlery?

A: Oh, we had a bowl.

Q: A bowl only.

A: Yes, one bowl and that’s all.

Q: You carried it with you?

A: No, the bowl was in a kind of cupboard.

Q: In a cupboard or a shelf?

A: Yes, in kind of a cupboard. That is what you drank your soup and what you drank your coffee out of in the morning, what you called coffee -- the mixture. You know that it was black, but it didn’t taste like coffee.

Q: Was there food prepared there?

A: No that was in a central kitchen.

Q: So someone came with it then?

A: Yes, it was in big kettles. Well, like it is in the army.

Q: Would prisoners be bringing the food?

A: Yes. The kitchen was in the camp. It was every day the same, the only when we had something special that was on Christmas and one big day for the Nazis. I can’t even remember which it was: May 1st or another. One big holy day for the Nazis! And that, twice a year, we got some kind of a bean soup. That was great.

Q: Always the same food?

A: Yes, every day the same, and never anything different, every day the same kind of, I don’t know what you call it here.

Q: Turnips? Rutabagas?

A: Turnips, cooked, and you were lucky if you got a piece of turnip in there! Well, that was water. Well, when I, in springtime in 1943, I weighed 92 lbs., and dysentery was one of the worst things that was getting around so terribly.

Q: No protein in the diet?

A: No, no protein at all! No protein at all. And that was one of the worst things which killed people down there. And pneumonia -- most people died of pneumonia. We didn’t have enough clothes, you know. The only thing we had was shorts -- real thin, you know, cotton -- and trousers were real thin cotton too. And then you had, if you were lucky, you found a shirt, a cotton shirt; and then your jacket. Then there was the cap, the little cap. And that was what you got in the summer and winter. That was all, always the same! So in the winter, it was quite cold, quite cold.

Q: How was the camp guarded?

A: The camp was guarded by SS.

Q: Guards patrolling the streets, then?

A: Well, there were not that many inside the camp. There were mostly at the outside, in the watchtowers, and around the camp. Around the camp were, at least ten feet high fences. The same thing which I tried to tell you the last time!

Q: I think that you mentioned the triple perimeter?

A: Three!

Q: High fence?

A: First the high fence.

Q: You could walk up to the high fence, if you wanted to?

A: That far!

Q: That far, yes?

A: That’s it, and then you get a stretch with sand. That was guarded with watch dogs. Always with watchdogs. Then you got another fence. Then you had another street and that was taken care of by the watchtowers, with their machine guns in it. And then you had another street with electrical wires. So if you could make it through the machine guns you still had to make it through the electrical wires.

Q: Did anyone get out?

A: No! As long as I was in there, never. The only thing was when you were in an outside commando. When you left the camp and worked on the outside, then some tried to escape. They never escaped! They always caught them.

Q: And this triple track guarded the concentration camp half of the circle, then? The half the prisoners were in, not the other side, the training side?

A: No, no, not on the training side. There, there were just plain barracks.

Q: So that the team with the dogs worked around this half circle?

A: Well, the half circle goes like this, you know; the straight part of the half circle was guarded too.

Q: Oh, I see. So you could not escape into the training part of the camp.

A: Oh no! No way! No, it went all the way around, I mean the street which was dividing the camp -- that was just as well protected by the three safety (fences).

Q: Oh, yes, complete security?

A: Yes, there was no way that you could escape. Absolutely. If someone tells you that he could escape you can tell him straight away that he is a liar. You could never escape from this concentration camp. It was an impossibility.

Q: And how did you spend your time? In the morning and in the evening?

A: After the three weeks of, let us say, training, were over.

Q: That was just the shoes. Did they have other things than the shoes?

A: No, that was the only thing which we did for these three weeks.

Q: So you ended up after two or three weeks with blistered feet?

A: Oh yes, crippled, crippled.

Q: Did anybody believe that the purpose of it was to test the shoes?

A: No, no. That was nonsense, that was just a story.

Q: I wonder if there was anyone who escaped these three weeks without any blisters -- that they were always able to find boots.

A: Oh, there were always big bullies. Oh, you can’t deny the fact that there were big bullies, you know they were strong and they picked out the best shoes. And they saw to it that in the evening when they pulled them off they put them some place. And the next morning they went right away to that spot where they had put them down. You know. There are the bullies who knew how to put things over (on people).

Q: There must have been several thousand shoes?

A: Oh yes, that was just the trouble. Sometimes you didn’t have matching shoes or boots and gym shoes. If you came up with a pair you were very happy, but sometimes you had two different shoes.

Q: So that people were competing against each other already then?

A: Yes, they were already fighting, starting early in the morning, to get a decent pair of shoes.

Q; And then feeling resentful all day long that someone got the shoes that they wanted to have?

A: No, I don’t think that they were resentful. You were happy if you could make it to the evening. With this forced marching you were happy if you could keep up. The trouble was that, if you fell down, you know, you couldn’t go any more, they beat you up and said, “Up you -- start walking.” They beat you so hard. So everybody tried so hard his very best to make it to the evening to see what the next day would bring again.

Q: All right! After that was over then where would the new prisoners go?

A: Then you got on what you call “dividing commandos.” There were the different places where you could work. If you could work inside, that was the best to get, you were safe from cold and rain and wind and snow. But the newcomers, they never made that, they always were first put in outside commandos, digging holes and digging ditches and cutting down trees and digging up trees and all that kind of work, like making railroads, putting down rail for the train which went around the camp and all that sort of thing. I was, at that time, pretty stupid. They asked me, you know the guy who was the commander of that part of work assignment, what my profession was, and I, stupidly, said “dentist.” So he said: “We will teach you to work.” I should never have done that, I now know, I should have just said, “I am a ditch worker” or something like that. That was so stupid, but I found it out later. I still had hope, you know, that they would need me in the hospital and that is what I was looking for, but it didn’t work out that way. So I was sent right away to another camp where the next, shall we say part of the main camp; was.

Q: Inside the boundaries.

A: No, outside.

Q: A satellite camp.

A: Yes, a satellite camp is the right word. They said that they were working there and building a brick factory. Well, we had to lay the rails for the railroad and get the clay up for the stones and break the stones. That is just about the hardest thing I ever did there. Later we found out that it was not a brick factory but that was going to be where they burned the people.

Q: Crematorium?

A: Yes, crematorium. They build a big crematorium, a real big one. I think that we had close to twenty crematorium ovens that were built there.

Q: In that one place.

A: In that place.

Q: What was the name of the place?

A; Klinker, Klinker.

Q: That was built then in 1940.

A: That was built in 1942, no ’43. Let me see, it must have been 1943 because I was working there then.

Q; Early ’43? Spring?

A; That was quite a hard time. I got real sick and lost weight to dysentery. Oh, that dysentery was just formidable. I never had such a case of dysentery in my life.

Q: Did you go back?

A: They send me, after two months or so, back to the main camp.

Q: You used to stay the night at Klinker?

A: Yes, you lived there. You lived there all the time. It was a small concentration camp. It was the same thing, you couldn’t escape, or whatever, there was no way. And two months of that you were taken back to the main camp, if they thought that you wouldn’t make it. Well Klinker was not the crematorium; the crematorium was in the main camp. So, as you died, they had to transport all these dead people. They transported you alive back to the main camp, you could easily die there. They had much less trouble to get rid of you. It had to do with paperwork also. So that was really one of the worst times I had in the concentration camp. It was awfully hard work and no food, no clothing, in the middle of winter, snowstorms and so on. It is awfully cold climate around Berlin. I never thought that it was so cold there, but it is.

Q: if you don’t have any clothes on -- thin clothes only.

A: And no food.

Q; And no food.

A: And no food. From there, I had a friend in the main camp, and he said, “Tomorrow morning they will bring some new guys in and we get the work information again -- tell them that you are a “Schlosser” (a locksmith). So when they came on that commando they asked me what I am and I told them “I am a locksmith.” He wrote it down and I came in that department where my friend was working. I think that I told you that last week, where they used the guns which came back from the front which had to be repaired and cleaned. I worked in that for a while.

Q: That was inside work.

A; That was inside work and it was heaven! But that didn’t take too long, they found out pretty soon that I was not a locksmith. I tried my best to imitate it, but! So they went by what they said right away: “Oh, one of them again!” so they send me back to my old commando and I had to go back to dig ditches, etc.

Q: Did they send you back to Klinker again?

A: No, they did not send me to Klinker, but they send me to one of the outside commandos. I still had quite a bit of dysentery, and one day they decided to put me in a commando that was to take out the bombs which had not exploded. You know that the Americans dropped bombs and they were time bombs which exploded after 24 hours, or after 12 hours or three days -- you know, time bombs which were set to explode after a certain time. And they put me in that commando and that worked in the city of Berlin itself. So early in the morning you went with the whole commando out there and in the evening they brought you back to camp if you had not been blown up. And they called this commando in German: “der Himmelfahrt Commando (it actually means “travel up to the sky.”

Q: Yes, ascension.

A: I don’t know exactly how to translate it.

Q: Well, Himmelfahrt is the Feast of Ascension! That is when Jesus ascended to heaven, right?

A: Yes. Well, the Himmelfahrt Commando.

Q: Did the prisoners call it that, or did the SS?

A: We called it that ourselves -- well so many didn’t come back. They went out in the morning and they were blown up. And one day I was so lucky, really the good luck must have been with me that day. I just -- I had to go to what you might call the restroom -- had to ask “Darf ich austreten?” And he said, “Yes, that is OK, go.” So I had just left when the whole thing blew up. 24 fellows, they were gone, and two of us came back in the evening. And that happened so many times. I dug out 18 bombs in that time and that, for the feelings of the Germans, seemed enough. They then took me out of the commando.

Q: You would be digging earth from underneath them and pick them up with machinery.

A: What we did, the damn things went in there and you never knew how they were laying, some of them were horizontal, some of them sticking in the ground. They lay like this. I don’t know the mechanism exactly of the thing. They tell me that there is mercury in some of the things, and the moment you start moving the thing they exploded. So the head of the thing is to be dismantled. That was always by, what you call a fireworker, that was an SS man who knew exactly how the American bombs were -- and the English bombs -- put together. We had to see that that thing was lying so that he could reach it -- you know, so that he could get to it. We did an awful lot with our hands, you know we couldn’t use metal spades or so. We had to stay away from it, you know if you touched the darn thing it would go up. So we did an awful lot of work in trying to get the earth away from the thing with our hands. After I had helped dig out 18 of them they then send me back to the main camp again, and I could work in the main camp then. This was a pretty good time besides the Angst (fear), being afraid that something should happen, it was a pretty good time. We got extra food. that outside work was under the command of the “Green Polizei,” that was the civilian police. They gave us always extra food. So we had enough. If a commando blew up there was so much food -- the ones who came back always tried to bring a couple of cans back to the barracks and you could give some of your friends. You know the people who were dying, or sick or something, and give them something. So that was a pretty good time, except for the whole day the tension, you know.

Q: Was it far? Oranienburg is what, 20 miles from Berlin? It is outside of Berlin some distance, isn’t it?

A: Well, I really couldn’t tell you how far Oranienburg is from Berlin.

Q: It didn’t take very long to get into the city, though?

A: No, it was! Sometimes we were put on trucks, and brought to some places, depending where things had come down during the night, and what was important. One neighborhood was maybe not important and another neighborhood was more important. So, depending on that I think [they dispatched us].

Q: So you were maybe two to three weeks with the “Himmelfahrt Commando?”

A: Yes, at least. At least three weeks.

Q: That would have been the summer of ’43 already?

A: I think that was in the springtime, yes. It was in the springtime. And then, after that, they put me back to work in the main camps. And I got into a kind of a metal worker. We had to design something for mounting on a gun. A couple of engineers were in charge and they put me in that commando – I don’t know why they put me in that since I didn’t know a thing about it -- maybe kind of a thank you note for the Himmelfahrt Commando. I worked there until I was set free.

Q: When did that happen?

A: In July of 1943. 1943, yes.

Q: So you were in the same camp for about one year?

A: About one year altogether.

Q: That last bit of work was then like two months?

A: Yes. I really can’t remember exactly how long it was. The last part was not too long. I think it was maybe four or six weeks or something like that. I can’t remember that well you know dates and times.

Q: Tell me more about the dehumanization. You mentioned that there were several kinds of dehumanization. Lack of food, not enough clothing, heavy work, everyone was initiated with this shoe business. Did the guards go out of their way to put people down?

A: That depended on the kind of guard. You had guys who were so-so, they were just standing there, bossing you. And there were guys who always called you names or so.

Q: So, depending on the individual guard?

A: Yes, on the guard who was in your neighborhood. But everything was so degrading. Well, let’s say in an open way, the way it was. If you had dysentery, there was no way in which you could make it to the restroom. So your pants were full of excrements, and you had to run around in it all day, until it was evening you came back to the barracks.

Q: This is our third session and it is Jan. 31. When the tape ran out the other day, you were just talking about how smelly it was and how many people had dysentery. How many people had dysentery actually? Almost everyone?

A: I would not say all, but quite a lot. It had to do with the food, you know, not enough [protein]. No solid food, it was always kind of a soup. So there were no vitamins in it.

Q: That would be interesting to have a medical doctor’s insight as to whether there is a certain kind of person in prison who is more likely to get dysentery than another kind of person. But I don’t know of it is possible to generalize about that.

A: Well, you saw it in most camps. The same thing happened in the Far East with the Japanese prisoners who were interned. The Japanese had the same trouble.

Q: And who gets dysentery and who doesn’t? No way of predicting?

A: No, I don’t think that you can predict it, I really don’t think so. I don’t think that it even has to do with the hygiene in the camps. I don’t think that it has. I think that it was plainly the food, the intake of food.

Q: It is not the matter of someone being more optimistic or less despondent than another and therefore less likely to get dysentery? You did not observe anything like that?

A: I don’t think so, I don’t think so really. But it isn’t outside the realm of possibility that it has something to do with the nervous system. But my feeling was that it bothers the system to get people down, to get as many as they could.

Q: People who were sick died mostly of dysentery and pneumonia?

A: Yes. Sometimes what happened was that, let’s say, some high official got killed in one of the countries. You know the high commissioner, a general or some big shot, and he was killed by the underground -- then they just took, you know, out of the group, 100 or 50 or as many as they thought it was worth, you know, they were shot.

Q: They were executed! At random?

A: So you didn’t know from one day to the next whether you would be alive the next day. It was always possible that you were in a group that was selected. You know, it was possible that in Holland, or in Amsterdam, or something else, something had happened and just at random, they took people.

Q: So many of the things which you mentioned bring out the idea that the Germans really were trying to “bring the prisoners down,” dehumanize them, is that a fair term to use? Was that systematic?

A: Yes. I think that was started in the beginning, before the war started. I think the concentration camps were started as an institution for [people] to learn the Nazi ways. Then, if you don’t follow them, then you end up in a concentration camp. And if you had been in a concentration camp, you never, never wanted to get back in a concentration camp. So, the penalty for little things people did, you know, against the Nazi regime, were so terrible that, if you came out all right, you never did something against them again! You knew what would happen.

Q: So, it was kind of an education effort on the part of the Nazis?

A: In the eyes of the Nazis, that was an education.

A: In their eyes, yes.

Q: When you entered the camps, there was a big sign above the entrance, “Arbeit macht frei.” That means, “Work will set you free.” That was not true, that had nothing to do with work or not work.

A: Was that over every camp that you saw?

A: Yes, most of the camps had that.

Q: I wonder if they really meant that, or was that just what they said?

A: That is just what they said, they never meant anything about setting free.

Q: OK, so what about that, yes! So that even in their eyes, the educational effort was minimal?

A: It was only for a small group of people. You have here, I suppose, the “Aryans” -- I don’t know how to explain it, they are the people of Northern blood, you know, they came from the Northern part of Europe, down to Germany and Denmark and such, they were called the “Aryans,” people with blond hair and blue eyes, fair skin. They, this kind of people, had always a little chance to be set free; but if you were a Jew or a gypsy, or someone with a little darker skin, even if you came from the southern part of France or so, you were not an “Aryan,” so you never had a chance. But if you were lucky enough to be blond, blue-eyed, light-skinned -- then there was always a little chance.

Q: So that those who were regarded as “Aryan” by the Germans, they had a chance to be rehabilitated to live in the Nazi society?

A: Yes.

Q: I see.

A: That was in comparison; when it started out before the war it was only one large group, that was the German people who were put in the concentration camps. There were the communists, and the socialists, not the national socialists, but everybody who was against the national socialists (they were the Nazis), there were a lot of people who were, at that time, arrested and put in a concentration camp.

Q: So there was some concept, at least, that they were trying to re-educate people, according to their ideas. Then would that also lead to not giving people very much food and depriving them of enough clothing for warmth and so on, would that be part of it? Was it so regarded that that was what they intended? I have a feeling that, maybe it got out of hand.

A: It was so! After WWII broke out, they came to so many countries and there were so many more people arrested, you know.

Q: The system broke down?

A: Yes. And then there was, I don’t think, any more a question of education; it was the question of killing off as many people as possible who were against them.

Q: It became part of the war effort?

A: Yes. I had the feeling that there were several kinds of degrees in concentration camps, and the worst camps as far as I found out after the war, was Mauthausen. That was, I think, an 80 to 90% Jewish camp. The people were killed off there by the thousands, by the thousands, it was terrible. Mauthausen was really one of the extermination camps, like Dachau and Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen, that was quite a large Jewish concentration camp too. There were so many like Buchenwald and, I don’t know how many there were.

Q: But Oranienburg, you were saying, was not basically an extermination camp? It basically was a labor camp.

A: No, you couldn’t really say that it was a labor camp. I can say that a large percentage of people were killed there. I really couldn’t say how many or the amount of people, but there were lots and lots, a large amount. I think that that was all in the camps. Only, but that was not a concentration camp in Thereienstadt -- that was a Jewish kind of a camp -- and from there, quite a few people came back. Now what the reason was, whether they were half Jews, who had one Christian parent and the other was Jewish, or who had done something for the Nazis before the war or something. Anyway, however it was, quite a few people came back. Jewish people!

Q: Came back?

A: Came back; and from other camps, no, I don’t think so.

Q: At the time you were in Oranienburg, did you know about the other camps?

A: Yes, we knew that there were other camps, we knew. But we didn’t know the situation.

Q: Was there no information?

A: No, there wasn’t any. Even if you came back, you kept your mouth shut.

Q: I see.

A: When I came out in 1943, you know how people are? They wanted to know, “Were you beaten up or so?” You made it always so that there was no way they could tell that you said something wrong about it. You didn’t want to go back. That was the first thing they told you when they set you free: “No words about what happened here! You just worked here and that was it.”

Q: So your information about the other camps is something you learned later.

A: After the war!

Q: After the war? Well, OK, let’s see. There is so much that dehumanized then, whether they intended it, or whether it just happened for various reasons. There is so much dehumanizing which made people discouraged! I noticed though that you were talking about Amersfoort and you talked about whistling, just whistling to keep up the spirits that one day.

A: Yes.

Q: And you mentioned the name of the work detail that was to dig out the bombs, called the Himmelfahrt commando. That is a kind of joke, in a way?

A: That they called it the Himmelfahrt commando?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, that was the Fahrt by the Christians.

Q: Yes, I know!

A: Well, that was the way, you know, you left in the morning and you didn’t know if you came back in the evening, whether you would be blown up or not.

Q: Sure, but there were other examples, can you think of other examples of people keeping their spirits up? What were the other ways that people (did that)?

A: There were certain ways that people tried. First of all, I don’t think that I have ever seen such an enormous amount of people praying, then just in the camps, or in the fields, or in groups.

Q: At night or in the evenings?

A: Yes. It was prohibited. It was prohibited to have meetings. But in secret, you know, a few people came together and prayed together. There were not always just Christians, there were people, Jewish people and Moslems, and whatever religious group they belonged to. There was one group which was really, really strong, they were the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Q: Oh, yes.

A: And I had the most respect for the Jehovah’s Witnesses, since in that time when I saw what these kind of people did for other people, to help other people, to keep them alive. Everybody had nothing to eat, so it did not make any difference which it was, and even from the little piece of bread they had, they gave away something to someone who was really sick. It was a marvelous group of people.

Q: Did they stay together in the same barracks, generally?

A: No, they were spread out, just like any [others], but they stayed together quite strongly. They prayed together in their small little service, you know, secretly.

Q: The Germans must have known that they were doing that,

A: Well, yes, they were pretty much watched, that they wouldn’t spread out. They knew that their mentality was so strong, I think through prayer they had such inner feeling of “we have to go through this, and we have to help other prisoners.” It means that if someone was sick, they were always there to help out, in one way or the other.

Q: Did they get sick in the same proportion as others?

A: No.

Q: They didn’t get sick?

A: No.

Q: No dysentery or nothing else, you mean?

A: No, not in that proportion; well, they got it also, but it seems that they were not affected by it, they were not so easy to bring down. You know dysentery is an illness which you can stop. It is a whole -- what do you call it?

Q: There are some bacteria or amoeba.

A: That is not what I mean. If you had to go, normally you can control it.

Q: Yes.

A: But with dysentery you can’t. it is just a watery mass which escapes your body as Durchfall, that is what they call it in the camps. So there is no way that you could do anything to it. And that makes you so weak, so tremendously weak, and you feel so miserable -- you try to stay away from everybody because you know you smell pretty bad, so mentally you go down. So, it seems to me that these Jehovah’s Witnesses didn’t have that.

Q: Illness?

A; Yes, they had the illness, but they didn’t come mentally down so fast.

Q: Oh, I see. They were not affected mentally.

A: They were not affected mentally by it. It seemed to me that they, you know, had such a strong feeling of wanting to stay alive. That is as though through their prayer they had the power to overcome the weakness and the mental breakdown.

Q: So, then people turned to prayer and religion as far as they could then? To keep their spirits up?

A: Yes.

Q: Have you ever run across, I would be interested to know if people who did that in the camps stayed that way after they got out of the camps, if they did.

A: I don’t think so. I think that it was just so funny -- this has nothing to do with the camp directly, but it is maybe interesting to know. In Holland, the political group -- you know, the Communists, the Socialists, the Catholics, the Social Democrats, well name them – that was, during the war one large group of Dutch people against the Nazis. And the day the war was over, they split up -- they became all again Communists and all, whatever it was.

Q: It was the need which brought out the unison.

A: Yes, the will to stay together, and the moment it was not necessary anymore, it broke in a thousand pieces again.

Q: Well were people generous to each other in the camps?

A: I wouldn’t say that they were generous together, I think that they were more in small little groups; people who became friends and took care of each other. But the larger groups, no. I don’t think that they were all that concerned. If the fellow next to you dies; “that’s too bad,” and you went on. There was no concern about, except if it was one of your buddies.

Q: Someone you were working alongside, maybe?

A: Yes, or with whom you became friends, you know.

Q: Were bunks assigned, or could you choose or change bunks?

A: No, no, they were assigned. Then we had Sunday afternoon, after two o’clock, that was the only time which was free time. Then you had quite a large group of Russians and Ukrainians who were singing and dancing. It was just unbelievable that these people, who were so down, really degraded by the Germans, you know the Russians and the Ukrainians, they could bring up the spirit on Sunday afternoon to entertain a whole barrack by their dancing.

Q: That helped them maybe to keep up their spirits?

A: Oh yes, sure.

Q: You mentioned that in Amersfoort that there tended to be professional people and intellectuals who weakened earlier, was that true in Oranienburg also?

A: Yes, mentally down fast. What you had in Oranienburg was there were quite a few already gone, you know. They had already died in the Durchgangslager. In other camps it was the same thing. The Durchgangslager were not only in Holland, they were in Belgium, in France and wherever. So a large part was already taken care of in the Durchgangslagers.

Q: Those who were going to drop out that way had done it already?

A: Yes. I am not saying that in the larger camps there was not a more systematic way for the Germans to kill off people, as much as they could. They had certain ways to keep you always on your toes. Since something could happen, Once when we were in the Arbeits-commando outside the camp, you know, and working in the forest or so, all of a sudden one day we came as one of these big SS officers came, we had to take all our clothes off -- we stood there, a couple of hundred people all naked -- and we had to dig a ditch. So we thought right away: “well, there we go!” For we knew that it happened, that you had to dig a ditch and then they came with the machine guns, “Brrrt!” and they all fall in the ditch, and they closed the ditch and that was it. So, when we had to dig the ditch, standing there naked, and we thought, “well, that is the end of us.” I never saw so many people stand there and pray, hoping that something would happen. And it really happened. For some reason, I don’t know what it was; anyway, all of a sudden we could put our clothes back on and we went back to camp. So that was something to make you really small.

Q: Another thing to make you small? You don’t know if they used the ditch for some purpose later on?

A; Well, maybe they used it the next day or so. But our group was lucky that nothing happened to us. But we were really so sure, you know, that was the end.

Q: This was in Oranienburg, then?

A: Yes, that was in Oranienburg.

Q: Well, I think that Oranienburg would be kind of a model camp in the system. If they had their training camp, the training grounds in the same general area?

A: Well, I think that that was not only in Oranienburg, I think that there were more of these [training] camps. But that was a good training ground for SS and what they used it also was for the SS who came from the front and were wounded. Let’s say they lost an arm or a leg, or whatever. That was a very good way to learn how to take care of the prisoners. And they went through all the miseries of war and so. So they thought that they had been there, but it wasn’t really all that bad.

Q: I see. They’d rather be there than at the front. There seemed to be a senior officer telling them: “So this is how you scare the prisoners, get their clothes off and have them dig a ditch.” They were teaching the younger ones how to do that, like an internship for the younger officers. Did you notice anything like that? That question, if many of the officers who were in charge of the prisoner side of the Oranienburg camp had returned from the front, then that must have affected their attitude toward the prisoners.

A: Yes.

Q: They took it out on the prisoners?

A: Hm! That is the only reason why they took this kind of people. They were hardened and some of them were missing part of their bodies, and blamed the misfortune on the people who were prisoners in camp. They were against them, they were against them!

Q: It was bad enough already without being hit for something you didn’t do?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, one of the questions I always had about the way that the guards in the camp dealt with the prisoners was the extent to which what an individual guard would do was done on purpose, because it was their orders to do it, or to what extent they just did it because they enjoyed hurting and harming other people. Maybe a mix?

A: I think that there were quite a few sadists who were used for this purpose.

Q: They were purposely picked for that?

A: They picked them for that. It might be an accident, but I think that it was quite a large group of SS men who were used for that. They went out of their way to find out, “what can we do to make them feel like a hole [in the ground]?

Q: So, a good bit of the, maybe half of the guards, or a third of them?

A: I wouldn’t know, I wouldn’t know.

Q: But some proportion, less than half? Or maybe a bigger proportion?

A: I couldn’t tell, really, I couldn’t tell.

Q: Well, anyway, some of them would go out of their way?

A: We really didn’t have that much to do with them. But inside in the camp, they had to do it. There you had to do it, where most of the people who were Stubeneldester, you know, in charge of the rooms in the barracks, and then the Barrackeldester were chief, or however, you want to call them, of the barrack.

Q: Blockeldester?

A: Yes, Blockeldester and that were all were prisoners, they were all prisoners.

Q: What exactly would a, let us say the Stubeneldester would be lowest of the hierarchy, do?

A: Yes, that was the lowest, but that was a prisoner.

Q: Now, what would be that prisoner’s responsibility?

A; To take care of the barracks room, that would be kept clean.

Q: Kept clean?

A: Yes.

Q: To get people up in the morning?

A: That you get out of bed and that we get washed. That the food was divided.

Q: To report any breakage of the rules?

A: To reserve for himself a large portion and a large portion for his friends, and what was left for the rest.

Q: So he had his favorites?

A: Oh yes! Favoritism was a great thing!

Q: You got more food, if you were close to him?

A: Well, that’s very much as it was in regular prisons too. There was quite a bit of homosexuality.

Q: Oh yes?

A: You know, by this kind of characters who had the possibilities to get to food or divide food. Food was the important thing. Clothing you couldn’t, but if they found out that you used more clothing, then you were allowed to -- that was really a hard thing, you know. You really got beaten up. If they found out that you got an extra jacket stolen someplace, or a piece of blanket.

Q: Were there many of the Stubeneldesters , they were all criminals?

A: Mostly criminals. They were mostly criminals who were used for that.

Q: The green badges?

A: Yes.

Q: And many were also homosexuals?

A: Yes, yes! Quite a few of them.

Q: But then you got a pink badge on that account?

A: No, not on that account, that was the people who were taken, arrested outside, you know, the camps, and brought into the camps as homosexuals. And they wore the pink badges.

Q: It is amazing the amount of homosexuality other than just amongst men which you observed.

A: There was some, some going on, yes.

Q: It is a wonder that the people had the energy for any of that.

A: Well, there were always people who got a way to get some extra food and such. They were the ones who mostly belonged to this little group.

Q: Small groups who hang around together?

A: Yes, small groups. The other people, most of the people are not interested in it.

Q: I just wondered whether the nutritional level might have been so low that they would have been?

A: Yes, they were not interested, that was mostly the Stubeneldester and Blockeldester and people working in the hospital who always know how to get out to new food. Most of the people who were sick, they didn’t eat, you know, they were too sick to eat. So, the food came in anyway, and there was, for so many prisoners, so much food -- so they took care of what was too much.

Q: OK! Well, the Stubeneldester did have a chance to exercise some power. How did someone get to be a Stubeneldester?

A: By choice of the SS. They were always Germans. They were always what you call professional goof-offs who went in and out of the prisons.

Q: Habitual criminals? Professional criminals?

A: Yes. Or those who, for some reason did something really bad and then they put them in a concentration camp. They became the big shots, you know, among the prisoners.

Q: Well someone like you that would, maybe, be able to survive for a long time.

A: Oh they survived, they all survived. There were hardly any to whom anything happened, unless they did something wrong that was really against their law.

Q: It never happened that a Stubeneldester would go out of his way to help somebody who was a prisoner?

A: Well, seldom, if it was not a friend. If you were a friend of them, you know that was OK. In the whole barrack, there were always two or three people who stayed in the barracks, to clean the barracks. That was the most beautiful job you could have, you know; but you had to be a real good friend of one of the characters.

Q: They would want something in exchange? They wanted something in exchange?

A: Yes, you had to give them something.

Q: Never real friendship, just exchanging [favors]?

A: And the Blockeldester, that was the one who had the command over the whole barrack. See, the barrack was divided in “Stuben,” in two or three different parts which were called the Stuben, and then the Blockhaus [probably means Blockeldester] was the man who was the commander of one whole block.

Q: Of one whole building? Under one roof?

A: Yes. Then you had another guy who has several barracks under his command .That was the end, that was the top for a prisoner. He couldn’t get any higher than that.

Q: What would be the duties of a Blockeldester?

A: Well, he was a contact man between the prisoners and the SS. If something had to be done, then the SS gave him the idea -- told him what to do -- and he saw to it that it [would be done].

Q: Did he ever deal directly with the prisoners?

A: Yes, he was a prisoner himself.

Q: But he would just transmit orders to the Stubeneldester?

A: Yes, or to the [Stubeneldester], or he did it himself. He let the whole block stand outside and told what had been “misdone.” You know, we had to stand out there during the night, or an extra hour in the Appel, you know, in the evening. Well there were always several things which they could do to pass the time and to make life unbearable.

Q: Would they do that kind of thing just for their personal purposes?

A: Maybe they did, I don’t know. I mean I can’t say that they did. Maybe they did.

Q: I wonder if ever there was a Stubeneldester or a Blockeldester who went out of bounds. So that the SS kept him from going out of bounds?

A: You mean that he would do worst things?

Q: Yes.

A: No, no.

Q: Nothing like that?

A; He was a little boss, among the big bosses.

Q; He could do whatever he wanted?

A: They never would say, we give today half a ration of food because you were bad boys. Nobody would complain about it to the SS, you know. Complain about him?

Q: So there was very little friendship, very little trust outside of these small groups.

A: In the small groups, that was the only way [in which] they trust each other.

Q: You mentioned the man who said he was your friend who suggested that you say you were a “Schlosser,” a locksmith?

A: Yes, that was then one of my best friends, he became my best friend. How could I say? He saved my life by giving me the information and the help that he could. Instead of working on the outside in the winter, I could work inside.

Q: Yes, so that there were then acts of friendship. That could happen?

A: Oh yes, oh yes! Really well. And I had several friends whom I kept after the war.

Q; Oh, you actually kept in touch?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Have you seen them recently?

A; No, he is in, most of them are in Europe, you know. But just before we left for Indonesia, we had real close contact. Then we had, after the war, we had a group of old concentration camp prisoners, kind of a club. They were mostly from certain concentration camps, where people came together once a year, or twice a year; started telling all the stories.

Q: Is there still an organization?

A: There is, in Holland. I just received, last week, it is called the “Stifting -- forty --forty-five.” I don’t know if you want to put it on tape, since it uses up, maybe too much of the tape? It says, “A flower -- you call it here, the daisy -- and it was when the war broke out, Queen Wilhelmina made the daisy the flower of the people who were in the underground.”

Q: I see.

A: And after the war, they gave the people three little marguerites.

Q: Lapel buttons with three daisies?

A: Yes, for a memento. I just received it last week.

Q: From the government, then.

A: That is from my government. A kind of paper. It says here: “For the people who worked in the underground” --

Q: That is from my government. A kind of paper. It says here: “For the people who worked in the underground” -- and it was for 30 years after the war, they came out with this little insignia. And since I am living outside the country it took a while before all the people in other parts of the world got their little signets.

Q: I am sure that you will wear this with pride. So that the people who suffered together also stayed together.

A: They stayed quite solidly together, yes.

Q: You are scattered in different parts of the world now.

A: Yes, and that is kind of funny, if you think about it. I never really thought about it, but now that I do, there are so many people who were in concentration camps have emigrated.

Q: Do you talk about what happened in those years a great deal? Do you find yourself talking about it?

A: Never!

Q: Not? Not?

A: Never! You are the first one, really, since I left the concentration camp to whom I told the whole thing. Even to my wife, I hardly ever talked about it.

Q: It is easier to talk about it to people who know what it is all about.

A: Yes, maybe that you want to bury it, as deep as possible.

Q: I have heard that people sometimes have dreams about those things.

A: That is what I have, really strongly, and that is why I am under the control of a doctor for that. I still get medicine for it, to try to get this [taken off my mind]. Really to sleep. At night I wake up and go through the whole thing again, dreaming. My wife wakes me up and says, “Honey, you are home and you are safe.” So then I fall asleep again. But there is hardly a night which goes by without me waking up screaming and scared. All the time poor [his wife’s name]. But this is something which I think you would never lose, even the smell, the smell of the crematory -- the smell of the crematory is something you never lose. It goes always; why, I don’t know, why a smell can come back to you. But it comes back all the time. I wouldn’t say that it is always there, just at certain moments.

Q: Do you feel that even talking as we have here for the tape, has caused a lot of efforts on your part?

A: I think that it did, it was just a moment. [His wife’s name] woke me up by shaking me and saying, “Wake up, wake up! You started dreaming again, yes, screaming.” So it must have come back stronger than it did before.

Q: Yes.

A: It doesn’t matter, there is only one way to recall and collect together and get all the stories from all the people from different camps together.

Q; OK, well, I appreciate your talking about it, because that is a permanent testimony which we now have to refer to.

A: And it is really strange to think that something like this happened over 35 years ago. But it is something which you can never forget, and never lose, and intentionally you try to forget it. You know, you try not to think about it anymore, but it must be deep somewhere in you, in part of your brain it is stored. And when you rest, when you relax during the night, it comes back. It is exposed, or [something].

Q: I read from someone who was in the camps and who said,” How can you believe in the goodness of man, anymore. In the camps everyone fights against everybody else.” What he was saying was that the protection which society with its mores and laws gives each of us is stripped away there, so you just have people, almost like animals, fighting each other, at least more openly fighting each other. And that after such an experience he could not believe in the goodness of man anymore. The truth about man is that man is an evil animal. But so much of what you say doesn’t, wouldn’t bear that out. talking about friendships, to some extent, people keeping their spirits up; I don’t know, what would you think about that?

A: Well, if you fight for your life, I don’t think that it makes any difference whether you are in a concentration camp or if you are any place else. Something that would happen to me when I was in Amersfoort, I slept in the third bunk, top bed. There were three bunks; in Oranienburg, there were four. The fellow in the bed under me, the second bed, knew that I always saved a little piece of my bread from the evening, for the next morning, so that I didn’t have an empty stomach the whole morning, so I saved always this little piece of my bread and I put it under my pillow. He knew that, and one night he tried to steal it. Now, in Amersfoort we had wooden shoes, you know what they wear on farms. And I took my wooden shoes and put it in my bed too, since that was stolen by other people. You know, I had a good pair. There were no holes in them. so I kept them in bed too. So I took my wooden shoe and hit him on the head so hard when he tried to steal my piece of bread. Now if I would have killed him, I wouldn’t have cared less at the moment -- the animal instinct of surviving

Q: Sure, survival instinct!

A: And I am not a person who wants to hurt somebody, or so. But at that moment I really wouldn’t have felt sorry -- I really would have blasted his brains out.

Q: Kind of a sobering thought then.

A: Well, it was a question of surviving. You know, it is him or you.

Q: That is a terrible question then if I dare to ask it now. If the Nazis wanted to dehumanize people, did they succeed?

A: They succeeded, yes.

q: Temporarily at least. Because I don’t perceive you as a [heartless person].

A: They succeeded. If you, except for a little circle of friends, looked always at everyone else as kind of an enemy. He could steal something from you, in form of your food or a piece of clothing, or make life unbearable for you in one way or the other.

Q: There were a few people, you were saying, who were a close circle of friends -- you probably would trust them with your bread, wouldn’t you?

A: Oh yes, well we gave each other, I mean, in case of sickness or ailment, where somebody needed an extra little bit, you know. We hung together and everybody gave a small part, a small piece that he had an extra meal, let’s say.

Q: Were there individuals, to your observations, that never got into a small group like that?

A: Well, there were always the loners.

A: It seems that they would have a harder time surviving.

A: There were, like it is in the outside world. The loner always has a harder time to get around than people who can make friends..

Q: So that having friends helped in survival?

A: Oh yrs, sure. Yes. There were days when you were so depressed that you really couldn’t care less what happened to you. It didn’t happen too much to me, but that happened maybe three or four times that I had moments where I was so weak, and specifically when I had this terrible dysentery, that I either couldn’t care for the moment whether I died or not. I was not interested in life anymore in life.

Q: So how did you get out of it, when it happened?

A: I had a good friend who said, “come on Jauf, come on guy, come on up, get up and come outside -- you have to stand in line.” I didn’t even want to go out of the barracks in the morning. The cold weather isn’t good for it. The whole day in the cold weather, standing up behind, you know, the tree with my pants -- they want you to go out. I did rather die. But I had a good friend who told you, ‘Come on, come on guy” and they give you the lift, you know, to bring you up and give you some will again, spirit to live. Without them, I think I would have died, if I didn’t have some friends who would have helped me in that moment.

Q: So Hitler did not completely win.

A: No, he didn’t win. He didn’t win.

Q: OK, I was waiting for you [to finish]. And you also did that for him when he was down?

A: Oh yes, the same thing. When you were in better situation. You had days when you felt good, you know, depending on the weather. When the weather was so sunny and warm you felt good and if it was a day when it was cold, freezing rain came down and you didn’t have enough clothing, you know you had to work the whole day in that -- it depressed you as soon as you came outside.

Q: Or your wife’s birthday?

A: Or some days like Christmas and you know, birthdays, and all talk of home generally was kind of a [low point].

Q: I can see that it is not just a physical battle for survival, but also on a personal, emotional, and mental [level]?

A: Mentally, that was one of the strongest things you had to try to overcome. You know, you could get so depressed mentally. I have seen people dying in one night. Some healthy people completely died during one night, by giving up. We have seen, and people will tell you that this is a story, that this is crazy, but it is true, really true; a Frenchman, who was dark -- he had dark hair, you know -- was grey in one night after an SS interrogation. He became completely grey. And people will say that this is impossible --\_but I have seen it happen. The man was really beaten and upset terribly. It was terrible. He made it, he came through it, but I don’t know.

Q: Did you use the term “Muesselsman”?

A: The “Muesselsman,” that were the kind of people who had given up. That’s what we called Muesselsman.

Q: So that term was used.

A: They were the people who had just given up and who couldn’t care less whether they died or not. And if you were called a Muesselsman, it seemed that you didn’t have friends either. I don’t know why, if there were people who were written off or slowly died anyway; so, why should we care about him? And the mentality, it is kind of hard, you know, if you lived through the beginning, I think you became kind of -- you know -- the mentality is not too good, you lived for yourself with the one or two friends you had. And the rest you really could care less, if they would stay alive or not. As long as you yourself could survive .

Q: I think that that is understandable.

A: I think that was awfully hard for people when they came out of the concentration camp alive, and they came home, their life with a family was awfully hard. He couldn’t understand that someone could make a scene that he had a bad headache, or such. So what about the bad headache, or someone was sick. Well, he is sick, sure he is sick, so what? You know, your mentality was so --you didn’t have the [caring] mentality.

Q: It took awhile.

A: It took a while to get into a normal world again and to become a human being again. Yes, for a while you were just like an animal. It took a while to overcome.

Q: A year, a couple of years for some people.

A: I had enormous help from my wife. So it didn’t take me too long, luckily.

Q: And then there was your baby daughter?

A: Yes! That was a bright spot. The funny thing was that my wife had a picture of mine on the mantel. In the hallway you always had an oven at that time, an oven in the living room with a mantel around it. And on that mantlel was a picture. Oh my heaven, the baby went to bed in the evening and my wife said, “Come, we will say goodnight to Daddy!” And she kissed the picture. When I came home, so in the evening, I brought the baby to bed. So [my wife] said, “Well, kiss Daddy goodnight.” So she went to the picture. So her mother said, “No, that is Daddy,” Oh, oh, oh. That was Daddy, the picture, I was not the Daddy. That is a funny story.

Q: It took her a little while…

A: To find out who Daddy really was. It was not that picture.

Q: She was then one year or one and a half years old.

A: She was one year, about.

Q: A year, that is right. Well, there is more about that camp we should find out about. But maybe now is the time to ask how it was that you got out?

A: Well, that is quite a long and interesting story. I don’t know if you have enough tape for that.

Q: Well, let’s see, there are maybe ten minutes left.

A: Well, let’s do it fast and compressed way. In the time that I was in camp, it was in the winter in Amsterdam, there are many canals and quite a few officers walked into the canals, when everything was dark. There were no lights in the city, well everything was dark for the airplanes -- so that they couldn’t see where the city was.

Q: A blackout.

A: So quite a few of these officers who were on drinking parties or so, and they walked along the canals and fell in the canals. Now, somebody who saved a guy and took him out of the canal alive, he had the possibility to ask for a prisoner to be set free. And my wife had found out, through the underground, who one of the fellows in our neighborhood was one who had done such a thing. And for a certain amount of money, which she paid him, he put my name as his friend to be relieved from camp. I don’t know how many times a week my wife went to the headquarters of the SS in Amsterdam -- and all the time asked if I could be set free and so. And, in combination with all that, I think that with my record of taking so many bombs out -- that was, maybe, a good thing on my record in camp. All these things together presented the possibility to get me out of the camp. That is the only explanation we have why I was set free. That didn’t happen too often -- there were maybe two or three a week -- that was about all, out of the 70,000 people.

Q: So that one day -- did you know that this was going on?

A: No! No! No! One morning they called me and there were always two possibilities, that was that you were shot, or that you were set free. If you were called in the morning out to the commander, there were only two possibilities. So I prayed to God. I got called to the big, the biggest commander in the top building there, and he told me that I was chosen.

Q: The tape ended just toward the end of the story about how you were able to go out of prison. The German officer had fallen into the canal in Amsterdam, as sometimes happened. So through that there was a chance for one person to be released from prison, and after Mrs. Feenstra went repeatedly to the SS offices in Amsterdam -- and perhaps some other friends too.

A: Well, mostly her.

Q: Well, mostly her, so OK. You didn’t know anything about that. So you were called one morning, out of your work -- middle of the morning -- to the head office of the entire camp?

A: To the main gate. That is where the highest SS officer, the commander of the camp, was where his office was. Well there were two possibilities there, if you were called to that main gate: you were shot, or you were set free. But you didn’t know it until you arrived there, what would happen, so it was quite an exciting moment to walk down there and to find out what would happen. I was happy to hear that I was to be set free.

Q: They just said it, in just so many words?

A: Well, they told me that I was chosen to be free and that I couldn’t say or tell anything what had happened in my time in camp. If I would do it then there was a good chance that I would come back there. So it was up to me to keep, let’s say, my mouth shut, and not say anything and not tell anything.

Q: When did you start to believe that it would really happen?

A: Pardon me?

Q: When did you start believing that it was really true?

A: When the gate closed behind me.

Q: Not until then”

A: [Laughter] They gave me train tickets to Amsterdam. And from there I didn’t know where to call. I mean, I didn’t know where I really was. So by talking to people, I found out where the train station was and what streetcar to take to the train station.

Q: [Tape Three]

Q: Did they give you clean clothing?

A: I got a part. That was really funny, they had kept it -- I got part of my own clothing back, but only part. And what I got back was my wedding ring.

Q: They kept that evidently!

A: When you came into the camp, you had to give everything you had, watches, or rings or whatever. It all went into a bag with your clothing. We thought, well, we thought, that is the end of it.

Q: You got the wedding ring which you are wearing now, back?

A: Yes. I got my own wedding ring back. Yes.

Q: I would think that they would steal, that people would steal!

A: Well that is what they did, if someone, let us say, died or such. When I was working in the hospital, for a short time, we had to take out all the gold people had in their mouth, bridgework, crowns, and so.

Q: You had to do some of that too?

A: Yes, it was part of my profession.

Q: Ah, you were a dentist, after all.

A: In that time it seems that you get so, without feeling, without feeling! Everything which happened did not touch you anymore. I mean, if somebody fell dead next to you, well, that was too bad. You didn’t make a drama about it. It just happened, so. It seems like your feeling for other people was completely gone.

Q: But if one of the members of your close group of friends, if something happened to them, you might?

A: Well, that is a different thing. There was nothing closer than the few friends you had, and that was mostly not too large a group. Maybe two or three., that was about the biggest group..

Q: I suppose that you couldn’t let yourself feel over committed to anybody because you never knew what would happen to them either..

A: Yes, what would happen to him. I want to say that you get so hard -- I think that that was the only way to make it. I think that if you would get too much into it and let your feelings go, then for everything that happened you feel sorry about someone else, I think you would never have made it.

Q: I see where that could be a survival instinct, something which you would do for the sake of surviving.

A: Yes, it seems like it. I mean, I never have been a person who was not feeling sorry for someone who is sick, or had trouble in the family. Always, you know, tried to help. But in camp, after a while, you really didn’t care, what happened to someone else -- as long as it didn’t happen to you. This may be kind of an egoistical point of view, but that was the way it was.

Q: And a Muesselsman was someone who stopped caring for himself too, I suppose.

A: Yes, I think a Muesselsman was completely -- well, I don’t think that he thought anymore -- that he thought about living or dying. He was just waiting until it was all over. They didn’t struggle for life anymore. Normally you do everything to stay alive, whatever, but a Muesselsman was somebody who had just plain given up.

Q: So everybody, except the Muesselsman, well anyone between a Muesselsman and the friends of the Stubeneldester, who would have a little more easy way of life, slightly more easy way of life, in between, that group of people would always have to struggle, every day, a struggle.

A: Yes, it was always a struggle to, let’s say, we got sometimes a couple of potatoes. They were cooked in the skin, you know, not washed but the way they came out of the soil. They were cooked that way, so on the skin was soil and such. So you had to peel them. It was so that you looked sometimes until you could find some potato peels to eat -- we had enough actual potatoes -- but to find peels in the trashcan and then steal them out of the trashcan and use that as a snack during the afternoon or the next morning. You just can’t understand that. If you have never been hungry, you don’t know how that hurts. How it really hurts. It is not just like I am hungry -- no, it hurts all inside; the intestines are cramping just as if they were tearing themselves apart.

Q: You never get used to it?

A: No, you never get used to it -- it gets worse and worse.

Q: Living with that pain, then, all the time?

A: Yes, and then they observe what sometimes here and which you see people throw away and you say, “Oh, my gosh, there are millions of people who would be so happy if they had just the food which we throw away!” Well, anyway, that was a part of staying alive, you know. And then you were lucky, that every month, the family could send you a package. Now it didn’t always arrive. Most of the time when it came into the blocks, the Blockeldester took his part and the Stubeneldester took his part -- and what was left, you got. So most of the things are gone, but you got at least something. Any my wife had done, in that time, something fantastic: by cooking up something what looked like kind of a jelly, but in that she had put sugar and -- I can’t remember what she put in, ground nuts or something which had some vitamins in it. They thought that there was something wrong, that it was just a jelly or such, and they never stole it out of my package. But that was the most important thing for me, because it had so much vitamins in it. I think that brought me back on my feet again.

Q: Now that would help.

A: Later on when I had left --– when I came home, we kept going sending such packages to my friends, knowing that that was such a good thing. And we put some cookies, and some such thing in -- so that, if the other ones would steal that -- well, we couldn’t care less about stealing the cookies out of it, if they didn’t take the jar with the good stuff.

Q: Before we stop talking about the camps, I wanted to ask about the hospital too. There was that terrible story a couple of tapes ago -- I have forgotten exactly where -- when you started to tell about the Stuben officer who got men on the roof of a house?

A: No, that was the commander who ordered this, the commander of the camp ordered this. He thought that there were too many prisoners in the hospital so, in order to get as many people out of the hospital as possible, he sent the whole commando as carpenters, or whatever you want to call it, on top of the roof. With hammers they had to just sit on the roof and hammer and bang on the roof the whole day long. So, if you were not crazy [when you got up there] you became crazy. As a result of that, people who were not too sick when that happened – they went out because they couldn’t stand it any more. So that was a good way for hi to clear out the hospital.

Q: Was that done for one day, or for many days?

A: No, he did it for I don’t know how long, for a couple of days it was going on. It was one of his funny ideas.

Q: So that, if anyone was really sick and couldn’t move they would be just that much sicker.

A: Well, they went I don’t know where. You can go crazy from that.

Q: Now, what was the hospital like?

A: It was just a barrack with some beds in it.

Q: Warmer blankets maybe, and sheets?

A: No, there were no sheets. Well, I don’t know how you call it here. You know, the rough kind of a blanket which they use for the horses. That was the kind of blanket we had. If you were lucky, you got a pillow, if you were lucky. Let’s say, if there were ten beds, there were maybe two pillows.

Q: They had doctors? M.D.s?

A: They were all prisoners.

Q: Prison doctors? Doctors?

A: They were prisoners, all prisoners, who had to do, let us say, without medicines, and try to do something.

Q: Were they good? Did they try to help?

A: Well, depending on the doctors, here you have bad doctors and good doctors also. You had some good ones and you had some bad ones. But they couldn’t do too much -- I mean, they didn’t operate, or something.

Q: Well just medication, or such?

A: No, there was not much medication available.

Q: Not much?

A: Not too much. No, they applied bandages -- which were all paper. You know, if you had a wound, you put paper bandages on it.

Q: So sanitation would be poor?

A: Yes, but I had a -- you can still see it on my hand, here -- which was all open. They put that paper bandage on it and afterwards, that was while I was still working in the outside commandos, so it was a rainy day, and the paper bandage was gone in a short time again. Then the next morning when I came back to the hospital, they said, “You have pulled it off.” You know, that paper was just softened by the water, you know, by the rain where I had to work with a shovel. That paper was worth nothing.

Q: Well, was there like a time of day when people would go there if they were sick?

A: You could ask to go to the hospital, you know, if you were sick. But you really had to be sick, you couldn’t just say “I don’t feel good,” you know, you had to have a high fever. That was the first thing they did when you came, was to stick the thermometer in your mouth and see whether you really had a fever. If you didn’t have a fever, they beat you.

Q: So people didn’t make it up, did they?

A: No, no, you never made it up. No, no, this was not something which you just said, “I want to lay down for a couple of days” and asked to be taken in. You had to be really sick in order to get in there.

Q: Was it full most of the time?

A: Well, most of the time it was full and you didn’t stay too long in the hospital. Either you died in there, or you got out of it. I would say that ¾ of them who came also died in the hospital.

Q: So ¾ of those who went into the hospital died there?

A: Died in the hospital. They were already that sick, you know, most of the time.

Q: Well, it had to be.

A: Not much to do.

Q: Did you ever, that is beside the wound on your hand, ever go in?

A: I was in there when I had a terrible angina and high fever, so they put me in the hospital -- and after two days they said that I was good enough to get out. I still had a horrible sore throat, but in their opinion, it was good enough to start going back to work.

Q: Well, it wasn’t a terribly helpful kind of hospital, then.

A: No, that really was not the kind of a hospital which we normally see.

Q: And no dentist, either?

A: There was a dentist, yes, there was a dentist, and the only thing he did was pulling teeth.

Q: Well, OK. I think that some other things will occur to us about the camps. I was interested in knowing how you got home, at the time, but I will save that for another time. I will see if there is something else about the camps. Maybe one other question, which I had about the hospital was whether you knew, whether people heard about some of those medical experiments that did happen in some of the caps? Did Oranienburg not have that?

A: I don’t know. I really couldn’t tell you whether it had or not. It happened a lot. I really don’t know. I haven’t seen it, and I didn’t hear about it. So I really couldn’t say yes or no.

Q: Another question which now I remember I was going to ask was, “People had heard about this group of Jews who were making counterfeit money in the camp.” You never saw them?

A: Well, I didn’t see them, but that came out after the war.

Q: Oh, after the war, I see.

A: After the war. You know, the moment that they were set free -- the Russians came to Oranienburg, and the moment that they were free all that came out and my friends who were still in camp came to Holland and they told me what that little part of the camp was. We always thought, “What happens here? What is going on?” Everyone was guessing. We didn’t know. A little camp within the camp. You know, all surrounded with wires and the whole thing. You couldn’t get in there. And we never saw anyone on the outside, you know, walking. So it was, for us, always something secretive. You know, “What is going on? What do they do there?” But after the war, when people came out of there, then we found out.

Q: But was there much visiting back and forth? I mean Sunday afternoon, when there was some free time.

A: Oh, in Oranianburg?

Q: Oh, the news that something had happened in one part of the camp, and the news would spread?

A: Oh, always, you know, like it is in a jail -- guys always gather rumors, which go on, stories such as, “We will be home by Christmas! The war is over! Or will be over by Christmas.”

Q: Counting the bombers flying overhead, or something like that?

A: Yes, that was always a good sound during the night, when they came over.

Q: I was just wondering what they -- there was no such thing as a radio, a secret radio, or anything like that?

A: No, not anything like that, that would have been the end!

Q: Did anybody have the chance to hide things away at all?

A: No, there was no way.

Q: No place to hide it, I suppose.

A: There was no way. Let’s see, a couple of times a week, they turned the whole barracks over --every little cabinet and nook was completely cleaned out. There was always inspections for everything. No, there was no way.

Q: The SS would come and do the inspecting?

A: Yes. No, there was no way you could hide anything. They would shoot you if they found anything. That was a dangerous thing in the civil world, for the people outside. If they had a radio, they were executed right away.

Q: In Germany, at the time.

A: And in Holland. Well the minute they found a radio, that was Bang! Bang!, that was the end.

Q: There was no way you could get a radio into the camp?

A: No.

Q: So that one morning, when was that, that was in 1943, July, as I recall?

A: When I was released? Yes, that was in 1943.

Q: In July. So you got just part of your clothes back and your wedding ring, and a pair of shoes?

A: Yes, I got my own hat and my raincoat -- and the rest must have been for someone else, it didn’t fit me at all -- anyway, that was good enough for me.

Q: You found the train station at Oranienburg?

A: Yes.

Q: You had no trouble getting home, then?

A: No, I got a paper from camp.

Q: An ID?

A: What they call an “Entlassungsschein” [a certificate of release].

Q: Permission to travel?

A: Permission to travel to Amsterdam. And when I came back to Amsterdam, I had to go right away to the SS commander in Amsterdam, to show that I was back, and then I had to come the first three weeks every day. Then after three weeks, I think that it was twice a week, or three times, and I had to do that for about three months.

Q: Just to go and check in?

A: Yes, just show that I was still there, and was a good boy.

Q: Did your wife know that you were coming?

A: No, she did not know, she did not know a thing about it.

Q: You went to your house?

A: I just went home and surprised her.

Q: That must have been a homecoming?

A: Yes. I never forgot it.

Q: Well, I assume that your friends would hear about this soon.

A: And then came the hardest time. I think that was the hardest time in our marriage. To get used to each other again. I mean, if my wife had a terrible headache, I would say that was nothing. I would say somebody is sick or shuff off. Sick? That’s too bad. To grow back into a normal life again. I think that that was the hardest thing to get used to, civilized life again, you know. To get the feeling that you were a human being again instead of like a kind of an animal.

Q: Yes, one needs the patience of one’s family.

A: I think that it was an awfully hard time for my wife.

Q: There you were, but you were different somehow.

A: I was a different person, hard and rough and not caring. I think that it took me quite a while before I started getting into normal life again.

Q: A year? Or more?

A: And then the friends came. I always wanted to hear the stories about what went on -- you couldn’t say anything.

Q: You had to be careful?

A: So you always said, “I’d rather not talk about it.” I think about that, I believe I talked to you about it last week -- I had never talked to anyone about it, with anybody, except you. So, you didn’t talk of the things, especially about what happened.

Q: I think that it would have helped you at that time, if you had been able to talk about it at the time.

A: That would have been, maybe better, mentally.

Q: Mentally, yes!

A: If you could have, you know, spread out the whole thing, tell the whole story, yes. But it seems like this, you tried as much as possible to forget, but it is deep inside and you can’t forget.

Q: Did you feel as though you wanted to forget?

A: I think so. I think that you wanted to bury it.

Q: To get over that thing, and not have it cluttering up your mind?

A: Yes. For the single reason that there were too many things which were so terrible, that you rather not think about it.

Q: Were you able to take up dentistry again? Practice?

A: Yes, I did some work. My wife had taken care of the office.

Q: Oh yes, that’s true, she was a dentist.

Q: But it was quite hard since she had the baby, but she did a fantastic job.

Q: You got used to things again gradually.

A: Yes. Now I didn’t do anything in the underground. I was watched really closely, you know, that I wouldn’t do anything wrong.

Q: Did they send people around to check up on you at home?

A: Well, they had, let’s say, a patient of ours was an SS man and he became real friendly, you know. I don’t know if he was sent or if it was just by accident that he came. as far as the rest, I don’t know that they came to the house, but I know that they watched by the Sicherheits Polizei, the secret police. So I didn’t do anything in the underground until 1944, and then I started with the little newspaper which was called the “Parol,” which is now one of the largest newspapers in Amsterdam.

Q: Is it still called that, “Parol”?

A: Yes. It is still called the “Parol.” Every day the latest radio which came from London, in print; and that was distributed through the neighborhood. You did that then always in the evening, after dark. But that was quite a dangerous thing to do, in 1944, we had to go inside after eight P.M. After eight o’clock you were not allowed to go on the street anymore until the next morning at four o’clock. So you had to do it just in the, let’s say the hour before eight o’clock, when it was dark, so you had time to distribute it. Then, later on, they reprinted some of the papers in our basement. We had a basement under the house. We had a stencil machine. We stenciled it. We got the thing already typed up -- we stenciled it and then distributed it.

Q; That must have been somewhat risky, though?

A: Well, at that time, we were so full of hate that you didn’t think about it, about the danger any more. You were so full of hate about it, about what the Germans did. Because at that tine, it was getting worse and worse, they really took people off of the streets and just sat them against the wall and shot them. There was no judgment anymore, it was just that, if a German soldier was killed for some reason, or even if he was in an accident, they said it was done by the underground and they just picked people up in the street and Bang, Bang, Bang. So we really got so full of hate, against the whole Nazis, and I don’t think that we did care too much anymore, as long as we could get it over as fast as possible.

Q: Well, then, was it the British then who came through Amsterdam?

A; The Canadians.

Q: The Canadians came then?

A: The Canadians, yes.

Q: Early 1945?

A: Pardon me?

Q: In early 1945?

A: It was May, May ’45. And then the American troops, they dropped food packages -- and that was something. For the first time in so many years, that we got white bread. That was something. We were eating tulip bulbs, and the bad thing was that we didn’t know that the kernel, you call it? The kernel in the bulb?

Q: The seed?

A: The seed, that was poison, but we didn’t know that. And the people got sick when they were eating it. They found out that they had to cut that out first, before they cooked it.

Q: Oh, I see. People just didn’t know that.

A: No, they didn’t know that. They were eating the bulbs and they didn’t know that you had to cut that out first before you could cook them. It made people sick, you know, diarrhea and such. But there was hardly anything to eat anymore. You didn’t have any bread or anything else. We didn’t have bread for, I don’t know how long. No gas, no electricity, everything dark, no trains -- trains were all stopped. The whole traffic was gone.

Q: No food coming in from the farms then?

A: No, there was no distribution system. Everything, you know, food was distributed, but that entire system fell apart. There was no food -- the Germans didn’t send anything and the Americans were only in the southern part of Holland tat had been liberated.

Q: These were difficult times. But the camp, in a way, was the worst of all, don’t you think?

A: Yes!

Q: By far?

A: Yes.

Q: It is hard to know what you would do from hindsight, but one question that people might wonder is, “You knew you were running the risk of being arrested and being sent to a camp when you were helping your friends to escape and so forth, at first?”

A: You knew the risk, you knew that the risk was there, that something. You didn’t look at it that closely, I mean, you knew that there was a risk. That it could happen.

Q: Now, if people would be willing to -- would have been as willing to help them, if they had known what the camps were like.

A: I don’t think that it would have made too much difference. They did it anyway. Don’t forget that you become a kind of a fanatic -- and once you are a fanatic, the reasoning is gone. You know what I mean?

Q: I think so.

A: If you are a fanatic about something, your thinking, your realistic thinking is gone. If you are a fanatic about something. Like say, what just happened a couple of months ago, the Johnstown incident, the man was a fanatic and his.

Q: So the anti-German feeling would make people become that committed that they would not consider the consequences?

A: No, they did not think of the consequences while they tried to stop it. It was just being too much like a fanatic, thinking “Go on, go on, let’s do everything we can do together to get rid of them.” And since we have the feeling that it couldn’t take too long anymore -- you know, with the Americans and the Canadians and the English troops being so close by. We thought that Holland would be overtaken soon -- but it took still from September to May before, you know, peace came. So, I think it was one of the worst times during the war, the last six or seven months. After the tape is over, I will show you a book about it. It is only a picture book. It does not have a story, the pictures tell enough about the situation, to see how horrible it was.

Q: I have a feeling that people here in Dayton and in the United States may not be ready to hear it yet. There has been this television program now on the Holocaust and so on, and maybe people wouldn’t believe it if [they were told what actually took place]?

A: Well, “The Holocaust” didn’t tell the true story. “The Holocaust,” it was, for people who had been there, understandable, but for people who had never been there it was not a complete story. It was too much a piece taken from here and a piece taken from there -- I think that they could have been better if they would had been taken from the beginning to the end. How much worse it was every day, every day you got a spoon more of misery. Life in camps was really not shown. Showing a bunch of dead people laying naked there in heaps. Well, that was a normal sight for us, I mean. At least 100 or 200 people on a heap, laying there waiting to be cremated.

Q: Every day?

A: Yes, that was, for us, nothing special. We saw it all the time. But if you showed it in a movie, to people who have never been there? [“The Holocaust”] didn’t say much. I mean, did it say much to you, when you saw that picture? It was horrible. How did it happen? How come all these people were dead? That they died from hunger and misery and sickness? Maybe beaten to death or shot?

Q: There is a man who has written a book, and he says that it is all a story which was made up. That it is not true.

A: No? I wish I could talk to him for a while.

Q: Yes, there is so much evidence. It is hard to know how he can write such a book.

A: I mean, all the people who are on tape, they should make up all the same story? I mean, my tape will be pretty close to the story someone else tells. Maybe in a different way, but basically it comes down to the same thing. Well, the killings were there, and the beatings were there, how can you otherwise let people die by the thousands, if it is not someone murdering and gassing people?

Q: I wondered about the play. You said that you helped put on the play about the diary of Anne Frank here in the local theater? Did you think that play helped people understand a little about it?

A: No, not in the form such as we would have done it. You never can bring people to [see it]. We are so spoiled here, in the U.S., with everything. It is unbelievable for people to see, even in the imagination, what had happened in that time. If you never have been hurt, I can tell you that I was hungry and it hurts, but it doesn’t mean anything to you. You believe it, but you never have felt it, how horrible it is. I don’t think that you can [truly feel it].

Q: It is part of our problem that it is so far from our experience here that it is hard to imagine that, even if you want to.

A: Yes, I don’t think that you can understand it if you haven’t been there. You have to live through it. The same with the war in Viet Nam. But what they went through, horrible, it was, well that was in Viet Nam and they had a hard time. But how many of these boys really should be in a mental hospital, they are so sick mentally? And I think those tremendous killings and such which go on, has a lot to do with the kind of people who have been through the war in Viet Nam. A life to them is nothing anymore. If they kill somebody, they have maybe killed 100 over in Viet Nam -- if you kill here two or three, it doesn’t mean anything to them.

Q: Kind of hardening?

A: Yes, these people are not accepted here as patients. They brought them back and they went directly in the community again, instead of bringing them maybe through a kind of sanatorium or camp, whatever you want to call it, and to educate them back to normal life slowly. You can’t put people back out of a war, back in normal life again.

Q: What should we learn? Is there something that we should learn -- that people should understand, or something that should be said to people now about the camps and about Nazism? Could it happen again, for example?

A: I am afraid so, yes. I am afraid that it could happen again.

Q: In this country, perhaps, even?

A: I don’t know here. I think we are too lucky -- I don’t see that it could happen here, but you never know. If the situation would be bad enough. But as long as people are not going hungry to bed, they have clothing and TV and everything what we have here, I don’t think that it would happen. But I can see that it could happen in other countries, like we have talked about, such as South America and countries like that. Countries which are really poor, where they have poor people who hardly have anything to eat. In countries like that something of this kind can happen. It doesn’t have to be Nazism, it can be Communism, or whatever you want to call it. If there is a strong man who has influence enough on the people and tells them that they can have everything much better than they ever had before, and people believe him and follow him. A man like that can be a second Hitler.

Q: What should we tell the young people? About Nazi Germany, and about the camps, and about the Holocaust, and so forth? What should we tell them?

A: I don’t think it will help too much, if you tell them. I really don’t think that it really [will help].

Q; But we must not forget, either?

A: No, we should not forget, we really shouldn’t forget, and that, is what I hope to accomplish by taping things like this, and the stories in the TV -- how horrible it is -- how horrible it can be, and that we should do everything to make the world better and to see to it that there is no hunger in the world. That every country should see to it that its people can make a normal living and don’t have to go to bed hungry.

Q: Do you feel optimistic about the world and how things are going? Do you think of yourself as an optimistic person?

A: I think that I am an optimistic person. I think so. I personally, that is my opinion, that there is a kind of a Communism is spreading all over the world. I think that we can stop it in the Far East. I don’t think that we can stop it in Africa. Here in the U.S., there is no need for it, we live much too good here. We are not ripe for Communism, or any kind of ism, Nazism, Communism, etc. But you can see it in the rest of the world -- it is spreading, more and more. So fast in the last ten or fifteen years. I don’t think that you can stop it.

Q: So that would be cause for pessimism, in one sense, maybe, I don’t know.

A: Well, in our way, in the way we live. But you look now in the way they live in China -- where millions of people die each year from hunger. It doesn’t happen anymore in China. And so, it means that it is better for the people. They have a better way of life. I can see that they are under totalitarianism, OK. I just got a beautiful letter from a friend of mine who was born in China from Canadian missionary parents. They had to go home to Canada when the Chinese Revolution started. He went recently to China again and visited there for three months, and he wrote that it was unbelievable, just unbelievable, the progress which was made in China since he left. He said that he spoke to several of his old friends, Chinese friends, professors fro universities, and he says it is just [unbelievable] that Shanghai, which was one of the dirtiest, filthiest cities in the world, is now one of the most beautiful cities, clean, with parks that you can’t believe that it is the same city. This and other things, that is spreading.

Q: So for them, it is an improvement. What I am wondering about is what we should do in a world where there has been the camp system and Nazism and the Holocaust?

A: In what way?

Q: Well, I don’t know. What we should do? What difference does it make to us that all that happened? What should we do differently because we knew this and we are finding it out?

A: It has taught me one lesson; that you are better off if you are a loser than a winner.

Q: Better a loser than a winner?

A: Yes. See, in Germany and Japan, they are much better off than we are. They lost the war.

Q: I see, they are better off than if they hadn’t lost. There is a lot more to be told after hearing about the experiences you had during the war.

A: That is one of the reasons why I hope that Germany never will be one again. I hope that they will keep them separated forever. And the moment West and East Germany come together, oh gosh, we have the same thing in a short time again. I have the high hope that they never let them come together again --– and make them again “Deutchland, Deutchland uberalles.” . Still the same song, nothing has changed. “We are the best, we make the best, we work the hardest.” Well, it is true, they work hard.

Q: Well, you have enjoyed living in the United States for twenty years?

A: Oh, yes!

Q: It has been a good move for you?

A: My fatherland.

Q: It is now your fatherland? Did you become a citizen?

A: Yes, right after five years. I think this is the greatest country in the world. It was for us an unbelievable thing, when we came here with absolutely nothing, that we were accepted as one of them. We were not just immigrants, we were part of the family. And what the people did for us, total strangers, is something we couldn’t get, we couldn’t understand it, you know, that you did something for total strangers, for people you had never seen before in your life, and the warmth, the friendship, it was just fantastic.

Q: It was through the Westminster Presbyterian Church ?

A: Yes, they sponsored us, they sponsored us. But not only the church, I mean all around us, people are always so helpful, friendly. We had an awfully hard time with the language. You know, people tried to understand us, and make us feel at home. Really, it was just unbelievable.

Q: Did people know that you had been in the camp for a year?

A: No. Well, that came out in talking about it. We didn’t make a big thing out of it. Sometimes you talked about it. Generally, you know -- during the war, what happened, what did you do during the war, or things like that. If you didn’t use it, it doesn’t make all that much difference.

Q: Did it make a difference to people, when they heard about it?

A: I don’t think so.

Q: Maybe they didn’t know what it was, fully?

A: No, I don’t think so. I don’t think that it would have made any difference if I had been, or never been, in the camp.

Q: How about your children? Your two daughters? You hadn’t talked about that much to them?

A: No, we never talked much to them about that.

Q: Did they ask about that?

A: Oh, for the children, we have so much literature, so many books about it. They have read about it.

Q: They know that you were in a camp?

A: They know that I didn’t want to talk about it. So they have never asked me too many questions.

Q: It might be that eventually when the copies of the tapes are in your hand, you might make it available for them to hear about it.

A: Pardon?

Q: Maybe when they have a chance in the future to listen to these very tapes.

A: Maybe they would like to listen to them.

Q: I was going to ask Mrs. Feenstra also, about how she got along when Mr. Feenstra got arrested, and you didn’t.

[Mrs. Feenstra = MF]

MF: Well, the most frustrating thing, the most awkward thing is that I didn’t know where my husband was. Because at that time, you know he was arrested, he was taken to the Devesstadt, that was the Gestapo headquarters -- and that was all. So, going to the Gestapo and find out, ask questions, just didn’t lead to anything. They would let you sit there all day. Then when the men had gone home I could go home and go the next day and have the same story. So my mother, who was German, she tried to go to some of the land offices of the Red Cross patronized by the secretaries of the Gestapo, and where the people would be.

Q: There were German secretaries.

MF: There were German secretaries, they were all Germans, and they were all strictly from that particular building. We had lived in that area, so we knew pretty well what places were available and where they would go. So she found out then the name from somebody, of one of the people who had had a hand on my husband’s case. So we went to see him, he was a civilian, and he told me that my husband had done something and had an affair with a Jewish woman, and had done things against the Third Reich. That was about the end of the session. So, next time, I tried again. I just thought that if I could make him [mad] and he will even yell something at me, and then I can find out more about it, about the case, where my husband is, what happened. And that night the Americans had bombed, there had been an air raid. He said to me, “What do you want from me? You come here to look for your husband who had done some things against us, and my family, my children, my wife may be dead, and you want sympathy from me?” I said, “I don’t want sympathy, I just want to know where my husband is.”

Q: Finally getting to talk to someone, an SS man in civilian clothes, who was trying to put you off by telling you about an air raid on his hometown, he didn’t have time to talk to you.

MF: I didn’t want to have sympathy. Well, I thought that we wouldn’t get anywhere there, so we tried to find other ways to get in contact with my husband. So I gathered all the patient cards and went to the SS and said, “Well, this is what my husband has been working on and these are his patients now and anyone who has any complaint, I will send here, to you.” And they said, “You are crazy! Who do you think you are?” and I said, “Well, there can be treatments that are important and which can be harmful to the patients. I have to see my husband and I don’t want to see him personally. I just want to talk to him on business.” Well, the first time, it didn’t work and my mother went back and my mother finally came with a visiting pass for 15 minutes to the jail. I could see my husband at the Amsterdam jail for 15 minutes. I was not allowed to talk about anything private, but just talk business. Well, I said, “If I can take my little baby and go to jail, and he sees us and sees that we are well, that might be helpful to him. Maybe we can get some sign which will help us to find out something.” That is what we did. So at least I knew that he was still in Amsterdam, he was in jail, and the saddest moment in my life was when I saw my husband, without a tie, without shoestrings, without a belt, coming just with chicken wire between us, and seeing his child for the first time. Indeed we managed to stay to the business jargon. We could understand, since we could ask questions and he could answer some of the things. At least he had seen us, and I knew that he was well, he had been questioned, but they didn’t have anything specific on him. Naturally, the 15 minutes were over in no time and we had to leave. And, in a way, I was happy to see him and was satisfied. Now I had something to go by. Naturally we knew from the underground that it was hard to get messages to him. It was not possible. I just couldn’t make a connection. The only thing that we had was that every Friday we had to bring clean clothes and Monday we would take a package of dirty clothes away. Naturally they were searched inch by inch, and sure enough, one time, my husband had managed to put a piece of cigarette paper -- at that time you had collars with little stays in them, and he had managed, he had, with a brush from a toothbrush, he had punched in a message. And I managed to get, one time, a little picture from the baby, and he knew that everything was still going alright. Then, one day, we brought the clean clothes and there was nobody there. I mean that we didn’t know where he was and I couldn’t find out anything. I kept going to the SS, to the Headquarters office, and I couldn’t find out anything. But through all kinds of means and ways -- by talking to people; my mother would stick around there and talk to people and try to get connections, and she heard about an SS man who was handling his case. And I said, if I could just talk to somebody, and know a little more about it, so just know where he is. You know, sending your thoughts out to nowhere is very difficult. So, one day I got this name, and I knew where he was staying, and I called him in his hotel. And I said, “Well, I had heard about him and I wanted to talk with him, and I wanted to get acquainted with him.” Naturally he had something completely different in mind, and he said, “Sure, I can come and pick you up or I can send somebody.” And I said, “No, I have to think about my name. I cannot do that, I want to meet you at your office.” He said, “Oh, fine! Good! We will take it fro there.” I said, “All right.” So when I came the next day to the Gestapo and to the doorman, and I said, “I want to see Mr. So-&-So.” And he said, “Sure, he is expecting you, go to room 204.” And that never had happened before. So I was there, and he asked me to sit down and he was very friendly and offered me a cigarette, and he said, “What can I do for you?’ nicely. And I said, “Well, I might disappoint you, but I am coming here to try to find out what happened to my husband.” He was not very happy with that, and he really laid it on me. He really gave me a hard time. Well, I really let him yell and scream -- finally he had to come up for a breath. And I said, “You are German and I was born German, and you always have been taught in life to be a good sport, now I have outsmarted you so why don’t you take it as a good sport. I am not here to sleep with you and I will not go with you.” He said, “\Why don’t you just have dinner with me?” I said, “No!” and I said, “I outsmarted you and I came here and why can’t you be helpful to me? Why can’t you give me just one answer?” He said that he just couldn’t do it and that it was impossible. So I said, “OK!” So I left, but I had the name and the doorman knew that this man had said, “If that lady comes, let her in.” From that day on, I had always a way in -- and he was too embarrassed to say that he hadn’t gotten what he had expected. So I would go over there and he would say, “What do you want?” and I would say, “Well, you know what I want. Just tell me where my husband is.” “What did you do?” and he looked at me in a threatening manner. “You are so terrible – I could send you to a concentration camp right now!” I said, “OK, fine! Send me to the one where he is -- maybe I will find out about it,” you know, jokingly. Well, finally the Germans, there were lots of Dutch people that attacked Germans and threw them in the canals and such, and until a certain time they had a reward out [for fishing Germans back out of the canals], and they could either get people for favors, you know, who had been taken for custody, free, or they could get money. Now, I had made contact with the -- what is it called, the “Kriegsgericht,” the military court. And said to a young man -- we had given him something for his family and so, and talked with him -- now, if someone comes and asks you for an award, will you send them to us before he gets to the Gestapo. Because all the things went through the Gestapo, and maybe he can help us. And, sure enough, one day he contacted my mother and said. “Now he will be, tomorrow morning, at the Gestapo --see that you can reach him before. He told me at 11 about it, so we went to the man’s home and I said, “I heard that you saved two high military officers lives and you will get a reward for this.” He said, “Yes, what about it?” He was a really shady figure, but I didn’t know that at that time; but anyway I said, “OK I make a deal with you, I pay you now, or they will pay you.” -- there was a set fee for that -- and you will sign a letter for me that you have known my husband and that he was a good friend of yours. That you know that he was taken into custody, he never has been tried, and that you want him free, and for two high ranking officers, that will be a good deal.” I said, “When my husband comes back, I will pay you the same amount again.” Well, he was just a little reluctant. He said, “I don’t know your husband and I don’t know if I can get into trouble.” I said, “What kind of trouble, what can happen? You go to the authorities yourself and they give you maybe 100 bucks, maybe 500 bucks (obviously meaning the currency in use), and then, maybe you don’t get anything, maybe they say that you had done it [throwing the officers in the canal]. Well, that was a marvelous idea, so he said, “I don’t write letters like that.” I said, “OK, I will write a letter, I will translate it for you. I will come and give it to you for your signature, and I will give you a copy of it.” And he said, “OK.” So we went home and we contacted this young man at the court, and we said, “How do you set up a letter like this that is respectful and how do you get it to the right place?” He said, “You have to go over to the Gestapo, and when he comes, then you know, get your nerve up, so that he can explain to them that this is a good friend and so on, and that he does not want the money reward.” And he said, “Well, the only way I know of is that I could come to your house and I type it, and I bring my typewriter.” My mother said, “Well, with German characters on the typewriter, that is a little risky. How about if you come and I fix you something to eat and, you know, you are in the family, and then you sit down and tell us, and we write it.” And that’s what we did. So he got his letter off typed and written up, and went then to the man and he signed it. He wanted some more money, but we finally did agree and he signed it. And he went the next morning to the Gestapo, I went the same day, to the same man to whom I had been going and I said, “Hey, listen, I heard this and this happened, and I hope that you put in a good word for me.” And he said, “How, in heaven’s name, can I do that; these are navy people, or marine people -- I have nothing to do with them!” I said, “It all goes through the Gestapo. They can’t do anything without you.” And he said, “Well, just wait until I get this letter,’ and I brought him a copy so he knew what he was looking for, and he got the letter and he said to me, “OK, I will send the letter, under one promise: that you will not show up here for two weeks.” I said, “Well, but how do I know that you really send this letter?” “Well, this is once, my word against yours. I trust you, that you will not show up for two weeks, and I send the letter.” And I said, “Well, OK, it is a deal.” He said, “Well there is something else, if your husband had done during his time while he was under arrest anything that is against him, this will not work. And I can’t promise you that it will work, but I will send it and, if anything can be done, it will be done.” He did. Because later, I received a letter where it was stated that he had sent it by “Kurier,” you know, by personal messenger,and he had gotten the answer back that they were looking into it and there was work done in Oranienburg. And then he said, “Look, the only thing I can do is wait.” And “I hope he has not done anything that was against him. You know I could really get into trouble with this!” And I said, “Well, can’t you speed it up a little bit, and get us both out of trouble?” And he said, “No, you will just have to wait!” You know, one time he was really friendly and one time he was plain nasty, but I would go every day and see him. And sometimes you know, he was really upset with me. But I said, “Now, listen, I just want to know where my husband is!” So he obviously just took it in stride and he was a sport and he gave me the answer to his submission that he had sent it to Doenitz, that is Great Admiral Doenitz, and that they were taking it from there. So the only thing I could do was wait. Go every day and find out if he had heard something. Now, in the meantime, I had a lot of trouble with the patients, who were very well-meaning, but were really touching, because when my husband was in Amersfoort camp, they would say, “Amersfoort, oh my gosh, oh my gosh1 I was just [talking to?] somebody who had somebody brought from Amersfoort, but it never happened, there never was anyone brought from Amersfoort, but it never happened, there never was anyone brought from a camp, but he was tortured and every bone in his body was broken.” And they had seen it, and they heard it. I mean, just to hear somebody talk that way and this out of the same idea that they want to do you a favor, and give you a message with some encouraging words, that was sheer torture. I finally had to develop a technique to put a patient in the chair and put one of these cotton things in his mouth, that they keep the mouth open. Then I would go on and wash my hands and then I would treat them, because sometimes, I just couldn’t stand it. You know, it gets on your nerves, especially if you know that they are telling you stories that they had no way of knowing -- absolutely no way.

Q: Well you could drill them a little harder. [meaning the teeth]

MF: I tell you, I had one time, and I can see now that someone can murder anybody, and in Europe every Sunday somebody has duty. There is always, in every neighborhood, one doctor, one dentist, one pharmacist on duty. One Sunday I was on duty, and three young soldiers came in, and they wanted to be treated, they couldn’t get to the clinic or someplace. Somebody had recommended them, and I tell you, that moment I was so full of hate I think that, if I could have gotten away with it, I would have cut their throats. And this is so frightful to me, that a human being can be so possessed with an idea, and so full of hate that I said, enough, this is terrible. I treated them and got them out as fast as I could. I never, ever, had anybody [like that] come in. But then I had this young man from the SS, the watchman, he came in and he wanted to be treated, but on the other hand, he had helped me so -- he was a Dutch fellow -- and by talking to him I learned a little bit more about him and his background, and I could understand his attitude a little bit more, as well as his way. He was really, later on, just a victim of his youthful enthusiasm and black and white style of life. You know, with young people there is very little grey between there. But it was very, very hard, and even shortly before my husband came home -- soon after the message had been sent -- one of the patients, he let everybody else go in ahead of him, and “Oh my gosh, what is waiting now for me again?” [I thought]. He finally came in and he said, ‘I want to talk to you!” And I said, ‘OK, what do you want to talk about?” He said that I shouldn’t be working so hard and why I did all of this because there was no end to it and he had very good connections in this and this bar, the people from the underground and from the Germans were eating and changing things and he had seen my husband’s dossiers. But I knew that that was impossible, because I knew where they were. He said that my husband had been arrested for treason and that he would either be shot, or never would come home. There was just no chance. Well, I couldn’t tell him that there was something else that was working at the moment. So I said, ‘why can people be so gruesome to somebody, and all under the auspices of doing you some good?” He really meant it. But why, in heaven’s name, would people i.e. for this thing? I never have understood it and all these rumors and all these stories which were going around, they were so frightful. They were all spun around by people who, maybe, meant very well, but had no reason to just talk so and torture people who had relatives who had been arrested and so.

Q: Did you get together with other women whose husbands were in prison?

MF: Oh, very little. I always had been a working woman and I have always been quite independent, and I knew about some of them and I would talk to them. But there, they would often listen to all these gruesome stories and would come crying and I always said, “I know that my husband is coming home -- he is coming home.” They always thought I was crazy. I lived for about 11:30 or 11:45 in the morning, and when my husband hadn’t shown up by that time, then the only time he could have come home [that day] was close to 12 o’clock at night. There was another train from Berlin coming then. That is what I lived for. And I lived from day to day.

Q: Oh, you knew that he was in Oranienburg?

A: I knew by that time that he was in Oranienburg. I had received a letter and I was able to send him packages.

Q: Send him packages, yes.

MF: And even the postman got very much upset with me because he thought that because we didn’t have enough to eat, it was ridiculous that I would send somebody, who maybe deserved to be in Germany for being picked up and sent to camp, to send him anything was ridiculous. And people, there were still people who believed what was in the paper and all these stories. We all knew that it was worse than we could ever dream of; but later it really showed up as it was because in 1942, my mother was a courier from the underground and she would go to forced laborers that were taken to Germany to work in a factory. She would go from the underground and make contact and so on and she had brought messages back and she had heard about the crematories which were built, in ’42! Nobody believed that! So what use is it to talk to anyone, to anybody, about my husband. And I had the very strong belief -- and this is the only thing which kept me going, day and night, that my husband will come home and he shall come home! This just, at first, kept me going and kept me going to the Gestapo every day. Sometimes they were very nasty to me. I said, “Well, it’s worth it, but he will come home. And sure enough, one of these days, he did come home. And I said, ‘You should have gone first to the Gestapo.” And he said, “No. I wanted to come home first to you and see you.” And I said, ‘Well, let’s go then together.” Did he tell you what the man said?

Q: No.

MF: Well, when he arrived, while he stood for a moment, he didn’t want me to go in with him. But the man I went to see every day, he had said, “Now if your husband comes home, you make sure that he shows up here right away!” When he showed up then, we did go there and he said, “Now you stay outside!” And he stayed by the door and he showed his Entlassungschein. And he didn’t pay any attention to it, and finally he looked at us and said, “Feenstra, Feenstra, Oh thank heaven you are back, get me relief from your wife, listen.” But he really was happy, and normally we were not allowed to leave town because he had to report every time [JF had stated that it was every day for the first while] to the Gestapo. I had asked him, I had said that I needed rest, and my husband needed rest -- and I thought that maybe he needed rest, because I had come to visit him so often, that I said, “I might come to haunt you some more.” So he gave the permission that we could go away, out of town, somewhere. And then he had to go and report every week. There is more to this story: the same man became a prisoner of war in France – and when he became a prisoner of war he wrote me a card and asked me if I please would send him a package.

Q: Mh, Mh!

MF: There, you see, I have been brought up with the theory that everything in life will repeat itself as the German expression goes, “Will wiedererlebt werden” (will be experienced again). There, you see, and it always has been true. Because he asked me for a favor and I did it. Because, although it was frightful and nerve-wracking and he was sometimes very nasty, and , when he wasn’t nasty, someone else would be very nasty, and they slapped me around one time; but there came another time that he had to ask us for a favor -- and he was in the same position. Maybe he remembered that many times and that his father might have come to know it.

Q: Well, he was high up in the SS, wasn’t he?

MF: Yes, he was high. I am so dumb in rank when it comes to military, that I truly don’t know. He was a Lt. Col. Or a Col. or something, but he had lots of stripes, eagles, and all kind of stuff. Because he has a private office and he had three or four secretaries there.

Q: Did you ever hear of him after the war?

MF: No. after I sent him the package, that was it. When we were moving, one time in Indonesia I believe, I found his name -- you know, the prisoner of war [list] -- it had been lost, so much of our luggage had been lost during transports, that I [forgot about him]. If I had known his name, I would have searched and found out what he was doing now, because every German will tell you, “We didn’t know! We didn’t find out what happened!” I would have been very curious to find out if he would.

Q: Make that same claim?

MF: He had a human quality about him. I always thought that he had a human quality about him. Oh, he was outrageous, and many times he said that if I would once again step in his office again, he would have arrested me and I don’t know what else he threatened. And I said, “So what, [you can’t hurt me anymore!”

Q: Were you surprised by how much your husband had been affected by his year he spent in prison? It affected him, he had lost weight and he was [different].

MF: Sure, it affected him mentally. And I will tell you, even up to today. He had nightmares, and he wakes up during the night and he screams.

Q; He was telling me about it.

MF: And he had, in the beginning, much more. No, I was really happy that, because he could come back into the groove of a family again, well, I just had to bear with it. Because he would, all of a sudden, get up, put on his coat, and go away, and not say a thing. I thought that that was part of, you know, the whole situation, because, mentally, it must have done terrible things to him. And then there was something else, he had come home -- he has thought this once, and he had so many things with him -- and this might have helped him to come home -- and when he was home, he felt so badly about his friends who were still there. And he could hardly stand it and that was the reason why, as soon as the war was over, we just closed up shop and we searched for the people, and worked for the repatriation of the people. We searched for them, and found a lot of them, and we took lots of them home -- and from them I had letters, because he never wanted to talk about anything. I never questioned him, because I felt that, whenever the time would be ready, he will tell me, and that I should not force him to tell me. That would be just inhuman.

Q: All in good time?

MF: Yes, I just have to wait, that the time comes. Then he found some of his friends who didn’t have a home, and they didn’t have [a place to go to] and we, you know how the situation was, we didn’t have much food, or anything, so when they had to leave the camp, well, we all took them in. And nine people came and shared with us. We just shared clothing and food and everything we had. They stayed with us until they found either their homes or they found somebody they could go to. But from them I found out a lot. For instance, one of the young men -- we had seven squatters upstairs -- and sometimes I would ask him, “Oh why don’t you go upstairs and do this or that for me?” And he did the laundry or something. And whenever it was done, he would just stretch and stretch, until finally I forgot about it, or he didn’t have to go. And one time I said, ‘Please go and get it, right now, for me!” And he went and came downstairs -- and he was white as a sheet and he was out of breath. I said, “Stan, what is wrong?” “Don’t ever ask me again to do this.” And he never went -- and later on he had told me that when he was freed in Austria, where the Russians were -- and he had seen lots of perverts and he was just petrified. So it was funny, like, wherever I would go they would go as a group with me. In the neighborhood they would say, “There is Mrs. Feenstra with her entourage.” They would go to the grocery -- they didn’t want to be alone. Then, by their being together, and I would just sit there, they would talk about things, and I would find out things gradually. Then, I would sometimes ask them something. But I knew that I just could not possibly ask him to tell me what had gone on. There still are certain things which remain as scars and which, when you mention them, he will just crawl in his shell, so I never mention them. When they were all together, they would talk about it. “You know when this happened, or when that happened” and “So-and-so did this to us” and so on.

Q: Well, you both experienced things that should never happen again.

MF: No, it should never have happened in the first place. But how do you word it? And there are still people that do not believe. When they read in papers what happened to the people. We had too many [experiences] -- I had my husband, we had so many friends, people that came from Bergen-Belsen. One of our young friends, his father was still alive, but he had lost his mother, and he had lost everybody. We talked to so many of these people, when we were working in the camps. Women with their nipples ripped off1 How do you touch those people, and how do you ask them for their choice? That’s impossible.

Q: That has to be their choice.

MF: That’s their choice, and sometimes, when you sit in a corner with them and they might have an urge to just let it come out. They might talk, it doesn’t have to be a good friend. It just has to be a willing ear. Because many people which we have seen there in Kastin-Erde which I had never seen before and will never see afterwards would sit there, and tell you the story of, you know, what happened to them. Then your imagination, you have to be very careful that your imagination does not take over, because otherwise you just can’t cope with it. Because, from the story that you hear, from other people, you relate to what your husband has been through and what has happened in between times [he saw you].

Q: Then you begin to think to yourself and wonder if he had that also happen to him.

MF: Well, no, I was sure that a lot of those thing [happened] and I had heard a lot of the things they had talked about. You know, these men had been together in camp and they had shared a lot of those things like Kolnisa. I don’t know if he talked to you about it, he talked to him when he came back from Klinker and he came to the workmen [locksmith] workshop, and so. And those people when they were together, I would just sit quietly back and I wouldn’t say anything. So they would gradually talk freely about things. Then they acted like it hadn’t been that bad and the memory, just getting rid of it, get it out of their minds, because I think, after they talked about it, they could easier cope with it. A lot of them had gone in there [the concentration camps] as young men and they came back as adults and had found a completely different world. They had a hard time coping with it. Many people that we knew have gotten divorces because the husband said, “You don’t know what I have been through!” and the wife said, “What do you think that I went through here, all by myself, and how everything went!” And very soon there was a breach and it became bigger and bigger and they just couldn’t stand each other anymore and they broke up. It was very sad, a very very bad thing. But I never, never had a day where I thought that my husband wouldn’t come back; and I don’t know why. There were days where I was very depressed, and later on we compared dates and such, and he said that these were the days when he had had it very bad. So we must have been very close, and there must have been a special relationship between us. That helped us!

Q; I can well believe it!

MF: When my husband came home he was very jealous of our little girl. I wanted her to stay very little. She was a tiny little girl, but she was developed -- she talked so quickly, so clearly, and she walked, potty trained and everything before she was one year old. When he came home and I said, “Say good night to Daddy!” and she said, “No, this is Uncle, my Daddy is there.” And he was the picture on the mantel.

A: I told him that!

MF: I was run down and I had overdone it a little bit, so I didn’t feel too good, and we went out of town, to a little house outside Amsterdam. We would go for a walk in the afternoon with the little girl, and when we came home I had plans that she would go to bed fairly early and that I had the whole evening for my husband. When we came home after walking, I was very tired, and I said, “Now I have to take care of her now and get her to bed.” He said, ‘No, I am hungry too! I don’t want you to make dinner for me right now. I can wait and so can she!” I said, ‘No, the child is different. I have to take care of her and then we will have time together again.” It was very hard for him to adjust to that, because when he left we were just a twosome. He knew that there was this baby and we had waited for it, and we wanted so badly. But he never had experienced it, and he never really had had a person with us, you know, which you have to consider.

Q: All the extra problems that these people had to live through.

MF; Yes, yes! If cut in slices, now this corner now, with nothing around it, that would be so much easier. Families, everything! It was a problem. We were very lucky then. We worked very hard on that and we made a go of it and stayed together.

Q: And here you are1

MF: Yes, married for 30 years and still together.

Q: I thank you very much for adding to this. We hadn’t really anticipated that you would also add something to the tape, but that was a very important dimension, a very important side. We can understand [a lot more now].

MF: In our relationship?

Q: Yes.

MF: I had only one wish: I wanted to work and keep everything in the way it was so that when he came back, if he wanted to he could step right into his office and into the house and take it from there, if he ever could forget.

Q: It must have helped to have everything still there.

MF: Oh yes, because the only thing I think which kept me going was my belief that he would come back. I think that if I had lost, for one day, that, I could not have coped.

Q: Was your mother there, the whole time?

MF: Well, my mother was with me most of the time, you see, she had a German soldier in her house, so she had to go every so often to her house. Then she would go on trips for the underground. You see, whenever she had to go, then she had to leave us.

Q: She was a courier?

MF: Yes. She was native German, so she spoke German, but she had traveled so much, and she had the ability to speak so many dialects -- and she could adapt to a dialect so quickly. She would put on an old coat and a babushka on and she would go just like one of the peasant women. This did help her tremendously in getting around.

Q: She did that all through the war then?

MF: Yes.

Q: That is amazing!

MF: You see, my mother had learned about Hitler in 1922 from a friend of hers who had said to her, “Beware of this man, he will cause us a lot of trouble,” a dear friend of hers who died. Before he died he said, ‘You have to promise me that you leave Germany.’ My mother left Germany in 1927 and went to the Netherlands. Then I went back to Germany to study. She had been very much aware politically of what was going on. My mother came from an area that was “Sudetenland,” it was Polish and German and many Jews had lived there. She had been brought up in that area and she knew so much about it and she had interests in everything which was going on in the world and was very much aware of everything. So she felt that she had to contribute something. You see, as a German, she was hated by the Dutch and the Irish and she was hated by the Germans also, because she did not want to conform. My mother lost everything also, because she had a pension -- and all of her friends’ parents practically lived there, because the children did not want the parents. And so it grew! Then, when the Germans came into Amsterdam and, one time they -- I don’t know, but it had to do something with her passport -- or so. Certainly, they were aware of her, and they came and offered her so much of security if she would take the German girls into her home. You know, like the WACS, or whatever the name is, you know, the German girls in uniform. My mother wouldn’t do it. She lost [the house]. At two P.M. they came and told her that the next day she had to be out of the house. Leave everything she had!

Q: Even the dog!

MF: Yes, she had gotten a dog. It was in the neighborhood where Gestapo office was. The house had belonged to a representative from the Coca Cola [company]. He was married to a German singer, a very famous singer. They had a chalet in Switzerland, and they had a house in Spain. They were on a trip either to Spain or to Switzerland, I can’t remember, when the war broke out. Well, they had said that the maid could stay there -- then the lawyer contacted my mother and asked if she wanted to buy the house next to her. She lived next door to it. My mother said, “Yes!” that she would like to. Then the maid had seen to it she got rid of [the personal belongings].

Q: Well, there is, I am sure, a great deal more to it. I am thinking that when I come back and bring you the tapes, if you have thought of some more which really should be on the tape, we can see you again then and put it on.