*Tape three, side one:*

NL: This is tape #3, side #1, of an interview with Mr. Harold Stern, September 10, 1981, Nora Levin interviewing. We last left your narrative, Harold, where the ship received instructions to turn back. Do you have an idea why this decision was made?

HS: I have no idea. I presume that Australia had made arrangements to receive prisoners of war, and since there were no prisoners of war to send at that time, they just sent us being the most available material. The Canadian camps were probably filled and perhaps it was the safer route to go to begin with. Also, England was very dependent on boats coming back from Australia as much as from Canada and from India with raw materials and food, and all that. So by shipping us there there may be all kinds of reasons why they changed their minds. We never found out.

NL: What date was this approximately? How long had you been on the seas?

HS: We were on the seas for about ten weeks. It was a very long trip because first we went half-way across the Atlantic and, then, we went along the west coast of Africa. I am trying to think which the first port was. The first port was a little town called Takuradi, which today is Shana, and we stayed there for a short period of time, two or three days, and then we went down the coast to a city called Freetown, which must be Bechuanaland, because the butter that was served afterwards on the ship was called Bechuanaland butter. I remember that distinctly.

NL: Was the food getting a little better as you...?

HS: Not really. Maybe we got an apple for a change, which we hadn’t seen for a long time, and we got butter, which we hadn’t seen for a long time. But generally speaking there wasn’t any improvement. There just wasn’t very much that could be done. The boat was equipped for a certain passage that took on no provisions, and then we went to Capetown.

NL: Was the treatment being meted out to you somewhat decent?

HS: No, we were still allowed only 20 minutes on deck. There was no way of protesting. In fact some of the soldiers amused themselves by throwing empty beer bottles under the feet of people walking on the deck barefoot.

NL: How do you account for so much hostility? Did they think you were Germans?

HS: Of course. We were enemy aliens. They had come through Dunkirk.

NL: They had no conception of what was happening to Jews?

HS: This was too sophisticated a situation for anybody to grasp. No one had heard of German refugees, probably. In spite of the fact that they were religious people, Orthodox people, people with long beards, people with Orthodox clothing.

NL: Were there any children on the ship?

HS: Oh, no, only men. There was one section that was full of Germans and Italians, and then the rest of the people on board were all German refugees or Austrian refugees.

NL: You didn’t mix?

HS: They were kept in a separate area, which was arranged beforehand somehow.

NL: You said there was a somewhat better internal organization of this group.

HS: Well, one gets used to everything, of course. By that time people were ready to clean up the various messes. People learned to live with the conditions. I mean it wasn’t that the garrison came down to beat anybody up any more, but people had lost everything and were very despondent. They didn’t know where they were going, what was happening to them...

NL: You heard no news about what was happening elsewhere?

HS: No, no. Nothing, just rumors. We had no fresh fruit whatsoever. You had a table with twenty people, which was folded down and set to eat. At one time we had an apple for each one. While you had this arrangement, two people always had to go to the kitchen to get a bucketful of tea and a bucketful of food. Well, you could rest assured that by the time the person came back from the kitchen, his apple was no more there. It happened to me. Was no big shakes...what is one apple? But this is how people lived, and there was a lot of selfishness on the part of some people and, I must say, I was amazed that a lot of people who had been through concentration camps were totally selfish, and others, who had led completely different lives, people who had been to colleges in England...we had some very fine persons there...One was a son of the Bleichroeder family, so they behaved totally humane and helpful, and tried to do everything they could to make life easier. About that time there were a lot of intellectual people there, and, of course, politically oriented people, so they started lectures, or they read from the Bible with commentaries. So, at least, you had some food for thought and didn’t linger like animals waiting to be fed. It got more bearable except for the hunger and the general situation. Well, we got to Capetown and were there for three days. We were never allowed on deck in the harbor but we lined up to look out at the Table Mountain through a latrine window, at least, so we saw a beautiful city with the mountain in back of it beautifully lit up.

NL: So far away...

HS: Yes. Then we went to Perth and Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. At Sydney we disembarked. This whole trip took ten weeks. Then we got off and we looked pretty bad and very disheveled. We were practically loaded from the boat onto a passenger train, and in the evening the passenger train left. For the first time, we were handed a box lunch with fresh fruit, sandwiches, things we hadn’t tasted in months.

NL: Who arranged this? The municipality or...?

HS: No, the Jews didn’t even know we were there. They couldn’t know. This was all government and military supplied. Of course there was plenty of good food in Australia. We didn’t have to skimp on anything, but they had expected Italian and German soldiers, prisoners of war, and instead of the paratroopers, they got the people from the Kitchener Camp, and the German refugees, and the Orthodox Jews, and they had quite a surprise. They didn’t know what to do with us. I mean the government was completely baffled. As we were on the train, we took a very long trip and, while it was very nice and warm when we got on the train, it got colder and colder overnight and we found out later on that we went through mountains and it was just a trip from Sydney in New South Wales into the interior. As we woke up in the morning, the heat was terrific and, by that time, we really were in the Outback. We saw ostriches, kangaroos, and our spirits lifted a bit, but then there was no more vegetation to speak of. It wasn’t really desert, but very, very sparse. There were eucalyptus trees here and there, and, as we drove through these little stations along the way, we saw signs “Beware of tarantulas,” “Beware of such a snake, such a spider,” and it was a totally new exotic setting. So we finally arrived about noontime in a very, very flat landscape. That was the city of Hay in New South Wales.

NL: How many days had you been on the train?

HS: We had been on the train from 6:00 at night until 12 noon the next day.

NL: Sounds like a long, long journey.

HS: We got unloaded, so to speak, and in the distance, there was a great big compound with barbed wire, with huts reflecting the sunlight in a sparkling fashion. It was just like everything was waving in the heat, and we marched into that place, and had our first hot meal, which the army there had prepared, and then went into those different huts and tried to arrange to stay together in groups of friends, and that was O.K. After we had eaten and before we went into these camps, we were waiting to be allotted to those different areas and a tremendous sandstorm arose. It went through everything, and even after we got into the huts later on, which were two bunks in rows one on top of the other. Because of the heat, you could not have the huts closed up with a full wall under the roof. There was a space between the outer wall and the roof, which was filled in with chicken wire to let the air come in all the time and to circulate, and the sand and the dust blew right through. By that time we were dreadfully exhausted and [wondered] why should we be in this camp? For what reason? But there we were...

NL: Did anyone address you? To tell you what lay in store for you?

HS: I think the authorities were so surprised about what they were getting that they had simply nothing to say, and, of course, very shortly a camp leadership emerged, and there were enough doctors, lawyers, even members of the British Bar, totally anglicized, who had a way of talking to the authorities. Within a very short time we got life organized in these camps. Lecturers were springing up, lecture series, and after a while it became almost pleasant but in an unjustified fashion. We didn’t know, of course, why we shouldn’t, as enemies of the Germans, why we should be behind barbed wire sitting in Australia.

NL: Were you put to work?

HS: No, not really. There was so much to do in camp, digging ditches around the huts, for instance, to have the water flow off...

NL: But this was on your own initiative?

HS: Yeah. Our strength came back. We had a medical hut, of course. We had medical doctors from Vienna and Berlin, all kinds of specialists. There were musicians. Everything.

NL: You had concerts?

HS: We had nothing, of course, to work with. After a while people in Melbourne became aware of us. We wrote to the Jewish community there. They were very surprised. Of course, they had read about us in the papers, but somehow it quite didn’t sink in, and there was one organization which was simply marvelous. It was the Australian Christian Student Movement under a Miss Margaret Holmes, who took us under their wings, and they fed us all kinds of books, lecture books, and supplied us with material as if we were a university. The Australian Christian Student Movement. I met Miss Holmes in New York many years ago. But it was due to their specific effort that we really could continue our education and kept our minds active.

NL: How do you account for this interest, Harold? Was it Miss Holmes who took this project upon herself?

HS: I don’t know if she is still alive. But she was a marvelous, marvelous woman. And she had all of these resources at her disposal. Of course she was not the only one. There was a Zionist organization, the Jewish Welfare Board. Again, some of them wanted to have nothing to do with us. There was one rabbi in Melbourne who said, “Why are these people coming here, why don’t they shake the dust off their shoes and go back where they come from?” And others just couldn’t do enough. I myself was told from America that I had relatives in Melbourne, to whom I wrote. I had never known about them back in Frankfurt, and they had converted to non-Jewish in Frankfurt. I didn’t know about them, but it was a lovely family, and they sent me my first toothbrush and sausage and other things like that. At least I had somebody to write to there, and later on, after I was released I had wonderful times with them.

NL: You couldn’t be in touch with Mother, I suppose?

HS: Well, yes. My mother was still in Germany.

NL: She didn’t leave until ‘41?

HS: And this was ‘40. I had never expected to see my mother ever again, because in the meantime, this lady wrote to me from Frankfurt. I was together with her brother in the internment camp. She wrote to me [how] bored she was, how there was nothing for her to do, and one fine day...The correspondence was with the Red Cross...Prisoner of war. Then one fine day, I didn’t hear from her anymore. The last I heard from her was, “Don’t forget me,” and we went from that camp, which was in Hay, to be a better climate camp in Tatura in Victoria. That had a more moderate climate. Well, in this camp we could work outside, planting tomatoes, and work in the kitchen, and do all that sort of thing.

NL: Why did the encampment from Hay move to Tatura?

HS: There were two camps in Hay, and somehow these camps got dissolved. Part of it went to a place called Orange which I wasn’t lucky enough to get to. I understand it was lovely. And we went to Tatura, where another two camps were established, and this was a better climate and much more moderate and nice. But, of course, you didn’t especially enjoy being interned, because you knew what was going on.

NL: That is to say, you knew how the war was going?

HS: We knew how the war was going; we had newspapers, the radio constantly; you had even mails from Europe through prisoner of war camps. My mother was in touch with the wife of another guy in my camp, in Frankfurt, and she told me later on that this poor woman was actually recruited for working service in Frankfurt. Every morning she had to get up at 5:00 in the morning to do some kind of slave work in the factory an hour and a half away from Frankfurt, and that lady never got out anymore. Her name was Stern, too, by the way. So they exchanged information, whatever little there was.

NL: How long did you stay in Tatura?

HS: I was interned altogether twenty months, considering the time in England, the few weeks in England and the boat and being released. But I was out on a working party one time in Tatura and came back, and when the gate opened, that friend of mine who just came to visit us a month ago, came to me and said, “Harold, you have a telegram and I didn’t want you to open it. I took the liberty to open it in case it was bad news. But it is good news. Your mother has arrived in the States.” That was in September, 1940 just before December and Pearl Harbor.

NL: 1941?

HS: Yes. 1941. So we knew what was going on in Europe, that all the Jews were rounded up, and about the gas chambers and all of that. My friend, who had his sister still there and his parents, got terribly schizophrenic, had a nervous breakdown, later on had to go to a sanitarium, and to this day he is still very much on the nervous side. Because of what was going on in Europe. So, if we, we in the internment camp in Australia, knew what was going on in Germany, nobody can tell me that nobody knew what was going on in Europe.

NL: Of course in September ‘41 the massive deportations had not yet taken place.

HS: Well, they had started, because my mother already had in Frankfurt packed her bag in readiness for a transport, they were told. [There were transports from Germany to Lodz and Riga at this time.] The only thing that saved her was an Allied air attack on Frankfurt. The result was that the people in Frankfurt had better things to do than rounding up Jews and deporting them. She was supposed to go to Gurs, [A concentration camp in France.] I understand, in the Pyrenees.

NL: To Gurs? I see. I know they were sending German Jews to Riga and Lodz in 1941. I didn’t know about Gurs. So she was saved from that?

HS: Yes. Everything was just a coincidence. It’s all a miracle that we are here today. And then, well, came December, and the war broke out with Japan, and after a while the Australian authorities remembered, “Ah, there are other friendly enemy aliens sitting behind barbed wire?” Under Australian law, you could not join the army as a foreigner and become a citizen. Under Australian law, you could join a non-combatant unit in the army, but you did not become a citizen. You had to wait your five years, as an inhabitant of the British Empire, no matter where, until they granted you citizenship, be it in Australia or anywhere else. I said to myself, I’m not going to sit here vegetating for the rest of my life for the war, and I am certainly not going back to England. What I had forgotten to tell you was that, after we had been sent to Australia, there was a tremendous outcry in the British Parliament about the internment of aliens, and there was a tremendous debate. Subsequently everybody got released, was returned to their homes, to their jobs; the people were allowed to join the Pioneer Corps, and some of them even joined Paratroopers, and they sent a Major Layton to Australia as a high commissioner to set things right for the people who were sent there. He interviewed every single person. This is quite a story. This man was born in Germany, and at an early date had moved to England where he changed his name, had joined the army and subsequently became, was put in charge of the Kitchener Camp. And that was Colonel Julian Layton. He was a very nice man.

NL: He knew a great deal about Germany.

HS: Yes, of course, he was born there. I can’t vouch for it, but they say his name was Loewenstein in Stuttgart. He had left Germany quite early and had become a British citizen. He, of course, had a marvelous position there as an intermediary between these poor people and the British authorities. So, he was then a Major Layton, and later became a Colonel Layton, and came to Australia, and whatever people had lost, they only had to tell him what they had lost, whether it was a hundred pounds or a suitcase or whatever. It was put down and, if it could be verified and was not too much of an amount, that was all refunded as much as possible by the British. On top of that, people were allowed to go back to England and join the Pioneer Corps. That was the beginning. And others went to Palestine. There are some interesting things to tell. One of the transports that went back to England was sunk in the Indian Ocean and everybody drowned. I had a couple of friends on that boat, too. It’s very hard to forget these things because these people were, you know you lived with them on a daily basis. One lived in the bunk next to you, or the other one was a little bit crazy and brushed his teeth every two hours, and, suddenly, you know, they all drowned. One was a Communist from Czechoslovakia who pulled me out of the river when I had a nose bleed. These are the little things. But the guy who was in charge of this garrison, he got court-martialed England when he came back. The O’Neil fellow.

NL: On the ship?

HS: Yes. He got court-martialed and he died in prison.

NL: And what were the German Jews going to Palestine to do?

HS: They were Zionists.

*Tape three, side two:*

NL: This is tape #3, side #2, of an interview with Mr. Harold Stern, September 10, 1981, Nora Levin interviewing.

HS: They were Zionists.

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NL: What did you do in the army, Harold?

HS: Well, we did mostly transport work which is like you would be in a munitions camp and get shipments ready for New Guinea. And one very important aspect of Australia is the fact, at least at that time, today it is different, in colonial times each state had its own railroad, and why it happened nobody knows, I guess, but each state had a different gauge. So Victoria has a different railroad gauge than New South Wales, and South Australia has a different gauge than New South Wales. Then you come to the border, and on the border of New South Wales and Victoria is a little town called Albury, quite a little town. This is the point where the trans-shipments take place. You have a platform. On one side is the platform with the Victorian gauge, on the other side is a platform of the New South Wales gauge, and what happens is that, across the platform, you load from one train into the other train by means of dollies or hand-to-hand or whatever you have. And, of course, with the war effort, this was a very important operation. So we did a lot of that. We were stationed in Albury. Then there is another place called Tocumwal which was a munitions depot. Then, we did quite a bit of work in and around Melbourne, being attached to warehouses where the Americans were establishing their headquarters, and different people were attached to various phases of storage and trans-shipment. I remember, I had a very nice job for a while in a big depot with tools. At that time, America had brought over a tremendous amount of material, and what we had to do is fill orders for different areas that went to New Guinea. We would dip these, for instance, a heavy shipment of metal files, we would wrap these files in oil-proof paper, seal it up, dip it in hot wax, let it cool and then put them altogether in boxes. We sometimes had to cut down the boxes. It was a very nice job. Got it ready for shipment to New Guinea and Rabaul. I was in the army for 4-1/2 years, and it’s the price you pay for safety, I suppose. We had quite a nice time in Melbourne. We were not in any danger. The Jewish community took us very much to heart when we came out of the camp. The synagogues gave teas and receptions. The universities opened their doors. The correspondence courses flourished.

NL: About how many Jews do you think were there, in the whole country? Thousands?

HS: In the whole country, of course, there was quite a population, in Sydney and Melbourne. There were not many refugees in Australia, and I can tell you why. It was very difficult to get to Australia because you needed a certain amount of money, similar to Palestine, to get there, and very few people made it.

NL: There were also immigration restrictions, I think.

HS: Very much so, and it was made very difficult because in my time the popular idea was that babies are Australia’s best immigrants. This has changed so much today, but it is a totally cosmopolitan population in the big cities. People come from all over and are very happily received and welcome, and it’s no longer as insular as it used to be.

NL: Were you released or you released yourself?

HS: Well, we could volunteer for the Australian Army for the Labor Corps, so to speak. It was later called Employment Company and, of course, we had to be utilized so, just at that time you had to join the army, there was a big shortage of work personnel in Australia, because everybody was in the army and overseas, and people had disappeared in Borneo, Malaya, and it was a pretty terrible time with a lot of setbacks. Many of them were in Egypt and Palestine, too, with the British forces, so the country was pretty hard up for manpower. That time, fruit had to be harvested. So before we got into the army, we had to pick fruit in different areas of Victoria. First we picked peaches and then apples, and then we were then allowed to join the army, finally.

NL: And so you were in the army until after the war’s end?

HS: Oh, way after, because the release was by points, and they were applied in not too generous a fashion for us. Anyway, our Captain was a Captain Broughton and for historical reasons, I think, he deserves a mention. He was a wonderful, wonderful person. He was a Maori from new Zealand, a very devout Catholic, who was a member of the Australian forces, a career soldier. Being a Maori, he was looked down upon a little bit by his peers. This man developed a father image for us and knew everybody personally, made it his business to know everybody personally. This was a group of about five hundred people, approximately, who joined this unit. And he just was the nicest guy. He supported everybody, whatever they did in education, and he was so revered, he could ask anything from anybody and people would do it. He was much better than his junior officers, who sometimes thought they were a little bit better than he was because they were Anglo-Saxon. But he had more education and more understanding and feeling than you could ever hope to get from somebody who is that far away from European events. He had fought in the First World War. In the Battle of the Argonne.

NL: And he was your commanding officer until the very end, until you were mustered out?

HS: Captain Broughton, I think...No, not to the very end, but almost to the very end. They replaced him with somebody else who wasn’t half as nice or understanding. He was too nice to us, and so he was released and he died a few years after the war somewhere in the Outback, at some station in the middle of Australia somewhere. But nobody will ever forget him.

NL: I am glad you told us his story so now we have it preserved. And so when were you mustered out?

HS: Well, let me think. By that time, of course, we lived a great deal of time also in Melbourne and it wasn’t so bad. The people who didn’t want to live in camp itself lived outside of camp in boarding houses or somewhere else. We really lived a life which bordered on being a border-line soldier or border-line civilian, whichever way you want to take it. The main thing is that we turned out for roll call and did our work during the day, and after that we were free to do what we wanted. Once in a while we had to stay overnight in camp to be on guard or something like that, to keep up a military appearance, but the work was the more important part of it. So in 1946 or ‘47, I was discharged, and I had a job waiting for me in Melbourne in a shoe store with friends of mine, who had a shoe store in the northern suburbs, and, in the meantime, I had applied for a landing permit for my mother to come in, and had received that. My mother however, was not too willing to leave America.

NL: Where was she living in America?

HS: She lived in New York, and she was working in a factory, and, had I known then the conditions under which she was working and existing, I would have insisted on her coming to Australia. As it was, people told her, “Are you crazy? You are here in New York and you want to go to Australia? Your son is a young man; let him come to America.” By that time I had British citizenship, I was an Australian citizen. I had spent my formative years in Australia, England, and I was very much in favor of...maybe not happy, but I knew nothing else.

NL: You were comfortable.

HS: Yeah. I was a little bit bored in Australia because there really wasn’t very much going on. It was a little bit like the South here. Very provincial, very waspish, very segregated. You had either the country club or you had very poor people, and highly educated people or highly under-educated people. Another thing was that the bulk of the educated...[tape jumps]. Because my mother felt she didn’t want to come to Australia, I felt this may be a good opportunity to come to this country, because on the German quota, I could then be a blood relative of my mother who had by that time become an American citizen. I was able to travel right away and I came here and stayed here.

NL: You came to New York.

HS: Yes.

NL: And you say you came on the German quota? Or was there a DP quota?

HS: No, no. I was not a DP in that sense. I was under German quota, number one, which was not being used right after the war. It was in 1947, and then I was allowed relocation so, either way, I had it made, so to speak. I flew to California and landed in Oakland, and my mother met me there and after a week or two, she went back to New York and I stayed in San Francisco for a while and then I went to New York.

NL: And you lived together?

HS: Not really. She lived in a rooming house hotel on 79th Street near Riverside Drive and I didn’t stay there very long. After I got myself a job I moved to another place.

NL: But you were in the same city?

HS: Yes.

NL: And then you eventually made your way to Philadelphia or did you stay in New York?

HS: I lived in New York for twelve years.

NL: What sort of work did you do?

HS: Well, you know how it is when you start out. You are a perfect greenhorn. Everything you do is wrong.

NL: You had to start from the beginning again.

HS: Yes. It was very annoying because when I left Australia, I was at least a manager of a shoe store, and I knew my way around and I had good prospects. What is more, I could have gone to college there under the G.I. Bill of Australia, as an ex-soldier, so to speak. But here I was in New York, and I had to make a living, and see that my mother was somehow taken care of. So, it was not a matter of pursuing my education. I really hated it. My relatives who, by that time, had been establishing themselves, were of no great help, because they were in fields where I didn’t fit in, and they would use their connections to ask people to employ my nephew or, “Can you employ my cousin?” but really when you had arrived a little bit somewhere I found this very degrading. I started out in my first job in a shoe factory, and you were working for these people who were also refugees but had gotten somewhere in the meantime, and they pitied you for being a new arrival, and somehow, something gets into the blood of refugees or new arrivals. They think everybody, somehow they think that if you arrive, you have to go through the same thing and the same hardships that they themselves had. They won’t give you a lift up at the middle of the ladder; it has to be at bottom of the ladder. Their attitude is: we all went through it, you will make it if you are half-way clever or smart, and you will do as we did. So you get no...big deal out of it.

NL: So it took a number of years to make an adjustment? Thank you very much, Mr. Stern.

HS: It was a real pleasure telling you that.

NL: What a valuable and precious account.

HS: Please call on me if you need any further details.

NL: Thank you very much.