

Good evening. My name is Bernard Weinstein. I'm the director of the Caine College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. Assisting me this evening is Pepe Margolis. And we're happy to welcome Mr. Walter Nachtigall.

Good evening.

Would you like to tell us something about your background, where you came from, your early life?

All right. I'm 58 years old and have lived in America since 1939. I came here when I was not quite nine years old. I was born in Vienna, lived in the Jewish section of Vienna, something akin to what Weequahic used to be in Newark or Flatbush in Brooklyn.

I lived in an apartment house with my parents and an older brother and sister. There was nothing unique or special about my lifestyle, as I remember it. I was too young to cross the street. So all I knew was really the block on which I lived.

Had a tricycle that I used to run up and down the street with. My father had a wholesale leather business, which happened to be a storefront operation in the very building in which we lived. I attended a local Talmud Torah, a Hebrew school, a day school. And we had a pleasant, happy home life.

My first recollection of the coming of the Hitler era was in the sense of jubilation. Not jubilation that emanated from my family, but rather the surroundings, that of the non-Jewish neighbors among whom we lived. When Hitler acquired, well, the Anschluss was in effect-- Germany acquiring Austria-- this was greeted by the Austrian population with a great deal of joy.

The very first day following the annexation, I remembered looking out of my window-- and the house was on a Main Street-- and I saw these huge Nazi banners hanging from each building, including ours. Strange as it seems, my grandmother was the landlord of the house. The superintendent was an Austrian Nazi. And without asking, he simply had acquired and unfurled a huge, huge banner, which was hanging from the front of the house.

Excuse me did you perceive a difference between the attitudes of non-Jews toward Jews prior to the Anschluss and after the Anschluss? Did things change--

Quite frankly, as an the eight-year-old, I simply wasn't aware of it. If it was present, I didn't perceive it. I didn't encounter it directly. The kids in my building or on the street that I played with were typically Jewish children. I went to a Jewish school. So I simply didn't-- I wasn't exposed, nor was I aware of any overt anti-Semitism.

But clearly, it was there, because only after the Nazis in Germany had made its presence felt did that give the local Austrian population a justification for coming out of the shadows, vis a vis their anti-Semitism. They didn't have to hide it. They didn't have to fear it. And that's when it became overt.

I can remember scenes of Hitler Youth, teenagers wearing these short pants-- black pants-- with their leather belts. Kids that couldn't have been more than 16 or 17, walking down the street accosting an elderly Jew with a beard, mocking him, pushing him, hitting him. And passers-by would just walk by, no one's saying a word, total acquiescence, total acceptance. It was simply the thing to do.

Other instances where Jews, men, women, pushed down on their hands and knees, being forced to scrub the sidewalk or gutter, pure humiliation, dehumanizing of people was the name of the game with no effort being made to stop anyone. I saw these things. I couldn't understand them. I couldn't comprehend them.

But they certainly did stand out in my mind. Yet, why would it stick out in the minds of an 8-year-old? It's hard to say. Even lacking the understanding of what is happening then, it was perhaps so far from the norm of behavior that the very sight of it left a significant impact on my mind that it is not difficult to recall.

What emotions did you associate with that impact, fear, hate, what did you feel?

Fear and lack of understanding. It was like why, why, why? I personally didn't feel threatened. But seeing it and not being able to understand something, that in itself leads to fear. It's always-- you know, it's not knowing what's going on leads to fear.

The height to this build-up of this overt anti-Semitism occurred in what we now know as Kristallnacht. Again, I didn't know the politics of the event leading up to it, namely the assassination of a Nazi party leader in France. But I did know something was coming, because the event had occurred in Germany on the 9th. And it only-- the repercussions only occurred in Vienna on the 10th of November.

But apparently, people do speak on the telephone. And people in the Jewish community, friends, teenagers having friends in Germany apparently spoke to one another. And I became aware of the fact that my brother had been alerted that something was amiss in Germany-- that young people, men and women, were being rounded up by the Nazis. And I heard this buzzing, this expression of concern in my home.

Well, to make a long story short, or to encapsulate the immediate events, the morning following Kristallnacht in Austria, our apartment was broken into. Banging on the door-- the front door had a glass pane. And I remember an arm breaking the glass, reaching in, and unlatching the door.

Fortunately, my brother, having been alerted, had left the apartment and was hiding in a girlfriend's home. So only my parents and my sister were still at home when the door was forced open. And in marched about a half a dozen SA troopers, Sturmabteilung. They were the brown shirts.

At the time, they were considered the thugs of the net Nazi party versus the black shirts, or the SS, who were the so-called elite. And again, the ages of these Nazis were rather young, late teens, early 20s. And much to our surprise, my father recognized at least three of them because of his business being in the building.

And again, the same type of humiliation ensued, jostling, pushing, cursing my parents. And my father would ask, "but, Fritz, or Hans, you know, what did we do to you?" And the response, you're a Jew. You're a Jew. That was it.

They proceeded to ransack our apartment, throwing furnishings, pillowcases, blankets, right out of the window to people waiting down in the street. It was a free for all. Grab what you can.

I was simply terrified at what was happening. To see my father pushed and punched and to see that being done to my mother was a frightening and painful experience. And there was no hitting back. It was weathering the storm.

And I asked even then, why, why, what's going on? And my mother was trying to keep me quiet, simply out of fear that I wouldn't arouse the Nazis from doing any greater harm. My father was arrested taken away and taken to Dachau, one of the notorious concentration camps.

We had no idea when, what would be happening. This was happening all over the city. So most Jews-- all Jews were in that same sad state of affairs.

In the course of the day, we heard fire engines. And diagonally across the street from us, there was a synagogue, small shtetl. And we saw it burning. We saw smoke rising from the building. We saw the fire department pull up, firemen jumping off the trucks, running to attach the fire horses to the hydrants.

And the storm troopers, the SA would not allow them to turn on the water. So the firemen responded natural call of duty, doing what they were supposed to do. But the Nazis simply wouldn't let them fight the fire.

Fires were planned. They were well executed. And part of the game plan was let the temples burn. And this sadly as we know, occurred not only across the street from where I live, but that was the pattern all over Vienna, all over Austria and Germany.

Were you aware the same thing was simultaneously happening in both countries and in other cities--

No, I'm sure I was not. I only knew my little world, which was my block. But I'm sure my parents, and in retrospect, we knew of it. I don't think they even knew the extent of that. You simply cannot comprehend what a massive, planned, well-executed effort that was. I mean, this wasn't just a spontaneous happening as a result of a Nazi official being assassinated.

This was a game plan. This was a strategy that had been put into place by the Nazis. Official orders had been issued and circulated through all the levels of the political bureaucracy of the Nazi movement, from major cities, smaller cities, townships. The orders had been cut.

That assassination event simply was the justification for somebody to hit the button and say, all signals are go. Start the fires. Start the looting. Start the breaking in. Start the arrests. But it was all part of a larger game plan.

So no, I didn't know about it. And while my parents, and I think most adults knew that this was happening, not just on our street, I don't think they were aware of the tremendous magnitude of it all. In the weeks and months that followed, we, from time to time, used to get a postcard from my father. They were allowed to write one or two cards every two weeks. And he would write in very small handwriting, trying to get as much of a message onto the card as possible.

Yet, he knew and we knew that the mail would be read by censors. So he had to be very careful about what he could say. But the mere fact that we heard from him was, in itself a blessing that we knew he was alive.

My mother and sister repeatedly would go to the local SS headquarters, waiting in line for hours and hours on end filling out forms, applications, all those things that could possibly be done to get him released. Mind you, this was before the final solution was put into effect by Eichmann, which was at least a year later.

After several months-- well, let me digress for a moment. While my father was in Dachau, there was an organized effort made to evacuate Jewish children from both Germany and Austria, simply to save the lives of the kids. The future was certainly dark and uncertain. And an effort was made to try to evacuate Jewish children.

Can I ask who was involved in that particular effort? Do you know?

I really don't know. The Jewish community was very much involved in organizing it--

From Austria?

From Austria. And I think there were similar efforts being made in Germany. But I don't know with whom they collaborated, with whom they worked. I do know that it came time-- now, this was months after Kristallnacht-- that my sister and I were told by my parents, you're going to be leaving us.

And again, I didn't have the understanding of what was happening. You know, we could have been going on a vacation for all I knew.

What were your ages in comparison to each other-- your brother, your sister?

Well, I was not quite 8. And my sister was 15. My brother was about 18. My sister and I were told that we're going to be leaving on a children's transport. And my recollection of that is being not at the railroad station-- hundreds of children with their parents, some laughing, some weeping, not very unlike a scene of kids going off to camp with the buses.

The young ones were either crying because they were leaving their parents, just as kids nowadays will cry when they're going off to camp. The older ones certainly knew what was going on. So all kinds of emotions were occurring-- parents, children, laughing, crying.

And I remember being in the train with my face pressed against the window, and my mother standing on the platform crying and waving to her as the train pulled away. The train was just comprised of children. We had sandwiches.

And the next thing that I recall must have been very, very early in the morning, perhaps 6 o'clock in the morning, that the train had pulled into a railroad siding. And people came to the train with little parcels of candy and food, cookies. They tried to speak to us. And we were simply-- had lowered the windows on the train and were hanging out of the windows.

Were you still in Austria or Vienna?

No, it turns out we were in Holland. So we must have been driving-- or riding in the train maybe 10 hours or 12 hours. I really don't recall the time episode. But we had been in Rotterdam at this train siding. And the local Dutch people, knowing there were refugee children on the train, came to the train at an ungodly hour, 5 o'clock or so, with little packages of food.

Do you remember sleeping on the train? Or do you remember any--

You know, dozing--

--how you passed the time?

I don't, no. And I remember as the train was pulling out-- now, maybe it was there for changing engines or refueling, whatever-- but as a train pulled out, all the children were chanting, [DUTCH]. And as the train was going faster and faster, the tempo of that phrase just was increased. And it was simply saying-- we were thanking all the Dutch people.

Shortly thereafter, the train must have made its way to the port of embarkation at the English Channel. We took a ferry to England. And then we found ourselves in a large hall, some sort of a-- well, it could have been a school gym for all I know. And there were tables, manned by people and broken down by the alphabet. And you had to go to a table corresponding to your last name.

And there were hundreds and hundreds of kids. And I'm sure they were not just from the train that I was on, but from similar children trains that had come from Austria and Germany. And there apparently, the Jewish community of London was involved in finding homes for these Jewish kids, working in conjunction with other Jewish agencies throughout England and Scotland.

And my sister and I, that very day or evening, found ourselves going on a train to Edinburgh. We had tags attached to our clothing and to our bags. And somebody bussed us over to the local train station. And we were told at Edinburgh, you will get off the train.

And my sister had taken-- had started taking some English in high school in Vienna. So she knew a little bit. But hardly enough to be really verbal.

And we-- nice train ride. It was a sleeper. And that train took somewhere like six, seven hours from London to Edinburgh.

And we were met in Edinburgh by two sets of adults, one to pick me up and one to pick my sister up. But it turns out that I was being given a home by a Jewish physician and his wife. And my sister was being given a home by yet another family also in Edinburgh. But we were on opposite ends of the city.

Was the family she was sent to Jewish also?

Yes. Yeah, both Jewish families. I was very unhappy that first night and the second night, because apparently-- well, certainly the intent must have been a good one. But they didn't quite have a bed for me. It was one of these folding cots put into a storage room. And it was cold, and they only had one blanket, so I was cold in a unpleasant surrounding.

I started to cry, where's my sister? Where's my sister? Where's my mother? And you know, they had trouble communicating. So it was just a very unpleasant experience, having gone through this long train ride and the boat, and it was somewhat traumatic, to say the least.

But I think the day after, two days later my sister did come to visit. She assured me that she's close by. But notwithstanding, an eight-year-old is an eight-year-old, and if you don't have that warmth and comfort, it's a difficult moment.

Well, I was with this family for several weeks. And apparently, they had made plans to go on a golfing holiday. The father was an avid golfer, as was his wife. And they really hadn't counted on taking an eight-year-old on a golfing holiday.

Did they have children in their family, or were they--

They had an older son who was a medical student. He wasn't at home. Now, apparently, this physician also performed some medical services for a Christian foundling home. A little bit hazy on the details.

And I guess in the course of dealing with that foundling home or hospital, I'm sure he mentioned that he is now caring for a Jewish little boy. But he's got a dilemma on his hands. Going on a vacation, what does he do with him?

And someone at this home or hospital-- the matron or the person who ran the place-- indicated that they know of someone that will take in children for a week's time in the back country of Scotland. Something like a Fresh Air Fund where kids from the city would go out into the suburbs into the country for a little bit of a summer air and patch of grass. Well, the doctor with whom I had been living pursued this course of action. And sure enough, this Scottish family, Christian, volunteered to provide a home for me for a week, purely as a charitable gesture of wanting to help somebody out, especially a little refugee boy who was eight years old.

And I went there. And this was about an hour and a half in driving time from Edinburgh. So it really wasn't that far away. But it was a little town called Dysart, a little seaport village on the Firth of Forth, actually, a fishing community, originally.

The family consisted of husband and wife. Their names were Jimmy and Isa-- Isabella-- Salmond, S-A-L-M-O-N-D. And they had two teenage children, Bill and Mae. The daughter at the time, must have been 15, and the son about 17.

This was truly a below middle-income family. The husband was a truck driver, who drove a milk truck for the local dairy. And the daughter and son were in school.

I don't quite recall what that first week was. But it was a pleasant one. I remember going to the movies and seeing a western cowboy picture in the local cinema, walking with Jimmy, the husband. And it was a long walk, because they lived outside of the actual town. And going to the local cinema, you had to walk.

And I remember walking down the street with him holding my hand. And he was a big guy. It felt very comforting to be in his presence.

But then as it turned out, at the end of the week, I asked if I could stay another week-- this was during the summer-- because I liked it there. And he in turn, contacted the matron, who had contacted the doctor-- the Jewish doctor-- and said, would you mind if Walter stayed another week? And they were perfectly willing. And I said a second week, and even a third week, because the experience was such a good one.

Well then, during that third week, a notification had been received that because England was imminently going to war with Germany, that refugees, having gotten to England and Scotland during that period of time, would be evacuated from what they consider critical cities. They were simply afraid that among the refugees, there could be German spies that might have infiltrated. And they simply wanted to remove that potential danger by evacuating refugees from critical

spots.

Edinburgh was one of the places identified as a critical spot. It was almost akin to the panic that occurred here with the American-Japanese on the West Coast being interned, and being deprived of their jobs, et cetera when the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. I think in England, there was a similar overreaction about the Jews who had come there. You know, how many of them are spies?

Well, notification had come out that I would be evacuated from Edinburgh-- that I had to go back to Edinburgh to be evacuated. So Mr. Salmond, in his own inimitable way must have said, Walter isn't being evacuated. I mean, he had a tough enough time leaving his parents and coming all the way to Scotland, one home, another home, and now, when he seems to be at least at ease with himself, we're not going to allow him to go through another trauma of being yet-- being sent somewhere else.

Where would they have been sent? Do you have any idea?

I don't know. They may have been-- gone to sheltered areas.

Out of the country?

No. I'll come back to that in a minute. So he said, Dysart is not a critical war zone, or something to that effect. We'll give him my home, so there won't be any need to evacuate him. And that's exactly what occurred. And what started out as a one week's stopover, turned into an extended period of about a year.

Mind you, this all occurred during the summer period. I enrolled in school and the grade, which was comparable for my age, just wasn't the right thing for me, because the teacher couldn't communicate with me in German. And after all, I had only been in Scotland a couple of months at most.

So while children are prone to pick up the language rather quickly, it was somewhat difficult, particularly in a classroom environment, because of teacher is dealing with a group of 25 some-odd kids. So they put me into a third grade, because the teacher did know German. And she was able to communicate with me.

But I wound up making friends quite readily and simply had a wonderful home life, where Mae and her brother, Bill, were like brother and sister to me. I was a novelty in that town. Not only was I the only Jew in that town-- and I think most of those people never knew, or never had encountered a Jew. And then to compound the oddity, I was a little refugee from Austria who could speak German, who knew all the German anthems.

And I remember friends and neighbors and like, half the town's people would come over to see me. You know, they were reading the newspapers about what was happening. But all those things are all abstractions. My very presence there-- and even though I couldn't really tell them what was happening, because I wasn't aware of it-- but I was in a sense, a living testimony to what was going on.

And they saw it manifest in an eight-year-old taken from his parents, not knowing where his parents are, whether he would see them. And living right in their own community. So my being there created an awareness that I think was very unique, that they wouldn't otherwise have ever been aware of.

Did you have any contact with your sister during this time?

From time to time, yes.

Through letters?

Through letters. She did not visit. But we did have a phone, a party line. And there were calls from time to time.

While this was happening, my father was lucky enough to be able to get out of Dachau. At that time, the Nazis allowed

Jews to leave the country if they had a place to go to. They let them out of the concentration camps. Because that in a way, was getting rid of the Jews.

It's a lot easier, a lot more cost effective to simply say go if you can go. Sadly, there weren't enough places for the Jews to go. No country wanted them. But we were fortunate enough, and my parents were fortunate enough to be able to leave. And they also wound up going to first, London, and then Scotland.

Now, getting back to question about where would Jews be sent. My parents, who worked first in London, shortly after getting there, my father, not my mother, but my father was interned on the Isle of Man. It's an island off the English coast.

Excuse me, was your brother with them too?

No, my brother had also left separately and was also living with another family in the southern part of England. My father was interned. Because again, it was a way of minimizing the potential hazard of German spies. And many adult men-- you know, Jews having come from Austria and Germany were so interned. And this lasted I think only a couple of months before somebody came to their good senses and realized that the threat really isn't as acute as they thought it would be.

My parents ultimately came to Edinburgh. And they were both working for a Christian family as domestics. My mother being the cook. And my father being the handyman.

I was, of course, informed of my parents being in Edinburgh. And my public school teacher would give me money that I could visit them every three or four weeks. Take a train to Edinburgh and spend the day with them and have money to come back.

I mean, the acuteness, or the lack of money was such that our people literally chipped in to make it possible. Not only was my schoolteacher a concerned individual, but this was the mood of all of our friends and neighbors that the Salmonds had.

I remember that the first Christmas that I was there-- who knows from Christmas-- they told me-- or Mae and Bill were wise. They didn't hang Christmas stockings. They had been used to hanging pillowcases, after all, that much more.

And of course, I followed suit, and I hung up a pillowcase. well, the following morning, it would have taken 20 pillowcases to fill what I got. And this was an outpouring of warmth from all the friends and neighbors who just didn't know what they could do for me. Spontaneous-- and it was just, I was simply overwhelmed. I couldn't understand what was happening. But it was just an indication of their love.

My parents knew that I was being well cared for. But my father was concerned about the fact that I was living with a Christian family. We had been an observant, traditional-- observant Jews. And he was truly concerned that I was being converted.

After all, on Sundays, I used to go to church. Jimmy-- you know, typically, in our society, it's a patriarchal situation, where the husband or the father will go to temple and the mother might stay home. Well there, as I recall, it was sort of the reverse. Jimmy on Sunday, used to sleep late, maybe because he was such a hardworking guy during the rest of the week.

But Mrs. Salmond, Isa, and her daughter, Mae would go to church every Sunday. And I would go along with them. And my father knew of this and was alarmed that, are they going to convert me? What's going to happen?

But what he didn't know at the time was that each Sunday following the Sunday service, the local minister would ask me to come into his office. And he would recite with me to Shema. He, too, was a sensitive and caring individual to whom conversion was the last thing on his mind. He wanted, and did what he could to help me retain my Jewish identity. So that was too, a very, very unique and special happening.

Were these Presbyterian?

You know, I don't know. If that's the dominant Christian theology in Scotland, it probably would be. But I really don't know.

Many of the Scottish were Presbyterians. No Hebrew and studied it and probably knew it well.

We had cousins in the United States. And my father had started a dialogue writing back and forth to them. It was only you know, since the war that we had even started this. It was only while we were in England. But we knew of them. And we started to communicate.

And we asked them if they could help us come to America. And there were cousins, quite a large number of cousins. Yet, to all these cousins, we were unknowns. You know, who are these people?

And it was required that anyone making an official effort in behalf of refugees to come into this country would have to sign an affidavit, a formal document, guaranteeing the US government that such refugees, were they to come here, would under no condition be a burden on the state. They had to guarantee the well-being of people.

Now, this sounds easy. You know, just, where's the piece of paper? But you have to put it into perspective. These people had, just a few years earlier, come out of the Depression. They were not well-to-do people, you know, marginal income. Very difficult to put your name on something that guarantees that they would support you if we couldn't manage on our own.

They had to scrimp and save to put a meal on their table and take care of their family. So it wasn't such an easy task. I think too many of us nowadays, living in the comfort and style that we do lose sight of-- that things weren't always so easy.

But we had one cousin, Abe Rosemarin, who was a guy that wouldn't be turned down. And he went from one cousin to another, imploring, pleading. And he was successful in getting the affidavits, which then allowed us to come together in Scotland, my sister, my parents, and I.

First, we lived in Glasgow for a few months prior to leaving for the United States. Then we came over.

With your brother?

No, he had separately also come to the United States, also through the efforts of this cousin. Leaving Dysart in Scotland was a very, very, very sad occurrence. These people had become my parents. Although they always said, you have parents. And they wouldn't allow me to call them mom and dad.

They insisted that I call them by their first name, because you know, they just wanted my parents to be my parents. So it was indeed a very sad parting. And while I don't remember it, they said that I had promised to be back.

And after we came here, I always was in contact, writing letters, exchanging snapshots. And ultimately, as an adult, I did go back. I had to go to Europe on business. And I went to Dysart.

And Jimmy, the father, had passed away. But the mother, Isa, and Mae and Bill, the children were alive. And it was just wonderful, wonderful homecoming.

How long ago was this?

Must've been 30 some odd years ago when I made that first trip back.

And you've seen them since?



And I have been back several times. And the daughter and her husband have been to our home several times, have lived with us. So there's been now a constant back and forth. And I simply consider her my Scottish [NON-ENGLISH].

Is the mother still alive?

No, she's also passed away. If I may--

Please.

Several months ago, at the time of the Kristallnacht episode, when that was in the forefront of everyone's attention, when I had the opportunity to speak of my remembrances, I called Mae, Mae Salmond in Scotland. And I told them what was happening. I even center an article that had appeared in the Jewish News about Kristallnacht, about my own involvement.

And I said to her, Mae, we really haven't ever spoken in a objective way about what occurred. We know what occurred. We've never discussed it.

How did you feel as a 15-year-old with a little Jewish kid being thrust into your home? And I said, it would be very sad if you couldn't put down your thoughts. They're so important. I would value them so.

Take a tape recorder, or take a pad. And just let it flow. What was happening? From your perspective, what was going on? So she, in turn--

Excuse me, Walter, so that you can read this through carefully, we're going to have to stop for a couple of minutes to put in a new tape. So if we could wait, we'll continue in a moment. I wouldn't want to interrupt you in the midst of it, OK.

Let me just-- a moment.