

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **Archives**

### **Oral History Interviews of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center**

**Interview with Robert Mansfeld  
May 15, 1987  
RG-50.002\*0068**

## **PREFACE**

On May 15, 1987, Robert Mansfeld was interviewed on videotape by Selma Dubnick and Bernard Weinstein on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

**Summary of the**  
**Interview with Robert Mansfeld**  
**May 15, 1987**

Robert Mansfeld was born in Amsterdam, Netherlands in 1927. His father was a high-fashion manufacturer who had many business contacts. His family lived in Berlin, Germany from 1930 to 1935 in the same apartment building as Nazi leader Hermann Goering. They returned to Amsterdam in 1935 and his mother and father divorced. Robert and his sister remained with their father but saw their mother frequently. After the German occupation in 1940, his father was arrested with other community leaders. Six months later he was released, but the family got word from their underground contacts that they were to be recaptured. The family split up and went into hiding. Robert was sent off with their plumber and his family for a few months but was then sent to live in Friesland, Netherlands with a family of Dutch Reform farmers. Robert posed as their "cousin" from Amsterdam. After liberation, Robert was reunited with his family. His father had been in Amsterdam and had not seen sunlight for 796 days. Robert finished high school and served in the Dutch army. He then worked as a buyer's assistant in a department store before traveling to Montreal, Canada in 1952, in hopes of starting a new life there. He went to George Willlliam College, but before receiving his degree he met the girl that became his wife and they went to the United States in 1955.

**Time-coded notes of the  
Interview with Robert Mansfeld  
May 15, 1987**

01:01:00

Robert was born in 1927 in Amsterdam, Netherlands. His father was a high-fashion clothing manufacturer. He and his sister moved with their parents to Berlin, Germany from 1930 to 1935 where his father had business contacts. Their neighbor in the apartment building was Hermann Goering. The family witnessed the takeover by Hitler in 1936. He, his mother and sister returned to Amsterdam. He could not recall personal attacks on him for being Jewish. His mother's family was in Berlin. His parents divorced after their return to the Netherlands.

01:06:00

Robert and his sister lived with their father but saw their mother frequently. During the German occupation in 1945, the Nuremberg laws were posted. Dutch people protested, and for a few days, there was a general strike over the German imposition. Meanwhile, Robert was put into a Jewish high school. Each day, students were missing. They were probably shipped to Westerbork, a Dutch transit camp. Things became progressively worse. His father had started to study economics and was asked to take over a government department. Then came the war and his father was picked up and put in the "orange house," a name given to a prison in Scheveningen, Netherlands by Dutch citizens. (Orange refers to prisoners who were supporters of the Dutch royal family of Orange)

01:11:00

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The servants stayed with the family. Later, the Jewish housekeeper was taken and never returned. When the Germans arrested his father, all the family's provisions were taken. Their neighbors and friends helped, particularly a German woman. The head of the Amsterdam Gestapo arrested his father. They accused him of helping Jews. He was released after six months. Amazingly, the provisions were returned.

01:16:00

Life went on during their father's incarceration. There was no overt action except to imprison community and national leaders. Later, all the Jews had to be concentrated in Amsterdam. Many of his father's family had to come to Amsterdam. During this time, Robert had his Bar Mitzvah. Life became more difficult. Only certain Jews were permitted to travel. His father arranged for him to learn the fur trade. There was no ghetto in Amsterdam at this time.

01:21:00

The Germans had very good files on Amsterdam residents, but the underground later destroyed them. Robert was warned that a roundup was about to take place. He was taken with hundreds of others to a holding place. He had to stand still for eight or nine hours. A middle aged woman moved and an SS man dug his heel into her foot and she fainted. Robert held her up. They were brought to a gymnasium. Their names were called out and they were separated "to the left, to the right." He was freed along with his uncle who worked for the Jewish council. Thus, he had a "lease on life." His uncle's immunity was temporary. He was taken later.

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They always had a suitcase packed. His father had friends in the underground. They were warned that the Gestapo was coming for them. At this point, the housekeeper was arrested. Robert was sent off with the plumber. All three of them were separated. He stayed with the plumber and his family for a few months. He was then taken by train to Friesland, the Netherlands to a farm family. His stayed with this family for the remainder of the occupation. He worked as separating milk. There were other children in the family, three boys. The family put their lives on the line to save Robert. He had false papers. He was the "cousin" from Amsterdam.

01:31:00

The family was religious, Dutch-Reform. Robert did gardening and milked cows and goats. He knew that his father was alive. One day, he was asked to visit a certain address in Drachten, the Netherlands. He saw his sister. She had been taken to a children's home which had been betrayed to the Gestapo. She was taken out before the Nazis arrived. Allied raids were taking place. They were "due in" at Arnhem, the Netherlands. Cities were without food. The situation was critical. Farmers, at least, had plentiful amounts of food, even if there was little variety.

01:36:00

The bridge near the farm was a target for the Allies. They saw Germans one day. He and the woman of the house were alone. The Germans wanted bicycles. He pretended not to speak German. He "played the game" and the Germans were not suspicious of him. One day, the Germans came in rag-tag uniforms. They were in retreat and needed shelter. An SS non-

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commissioned officer was at their head. They stayed there one day. Robert stayed and listened and said nothing.

01:41:00

They had bundled wood where a bed could be hidden. He stayed there when there was unusual activity. He slept there, often with animals and mice around him. At least, he was alive. Life was healthy. No one suspected him of being Jewish because he looked Aryan and did not fit the stereotype of a Jew. Other children attended school, although he did not. Later, even non-Jews stayed away from school because the Nazis were rounding them up for labor. Normally, no one showed or acted suspicious of Robert.

01:46:00

Robert developed vitamin deficiency. He was concerned that the doctor might betray him to the Nazis. Towards the end of the war, anything moving on the roads was subject to British Spitfire attacks. They were about fifty miles from the German border. They were an easy target. They had earlier fears of V-2 rockets coming from the Germans. Those made enormous craters. British Spitfires provoked jubilation but there was fear of being hit.

01:51:00

Robert knew they were close. One day, they were liberated. His had been hidden in Amsterdam for 796 days, never seeing daylight. When they were reunited, his father was already past the age of 60. Arrangements were made for his father to take him home. His father looked well considering

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what he had suffered. Aunts, uncles and grandparents were all gone. Of nine children from his extended family, only three survived.

01:56:00

His father was picked up by Ferdinand aus der Fünten, the man who was in charge of the day-to-day administration of the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in the Netherlands. Later, he was tried for war crimes and wanted Robert's father to testify on his behalf. His father refused. Robert finished high school and went into the Dutch army. He replaced the Master Sergeant, the Sergeant, and the Corporal. He earned 25 cents a day. He declined to take the exam to become an officer.

02:01:00

He did not want to go to Indonesia with the Dutch army. He wanted to get back to civilian life. Once he was out of the army, he worked as a buyer's assistant in a department store. He got into the notions department and had to price items under price control regulations. It was interesting work but he was not happy.

02:06:00

His father's cousin in Canada was a wholesale distributor of beauty supplies and wanted Robert to come there. His father was an economic advisor to the Dutch textile industry and was knighted by the Queen. Robert felt that he did not want to succeed on his father's merits. In January of 1952, he emigrated to Montreal, Canada but his cousin died before he left and other family members reneged on his cousin's support of Robert. Robert went to George William College.

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02:11:00

He almost got his degree but he met the girl that became his wife. He wanted to get into the United States but there were quotas and it took seven years. He had been welcomed in Canada because he knew English. He had studied languages rigorously while in the Netherlands. He still keeps in contact with the people with whom he stayed, or rather with their offspring. Two of the original boys are still living.

02:16:00

He came to the United States in 1955 because his wife did not like Montreal. Her father was an American army officer who lived in Paris, France which is where Mrs. Mansfeld was born. They left on the last boat leaving before the German occupation. Robert has two perspectives on the Holocaust: one should help his fellow man, as he was helped; Americans need to prevent the Holocaust from happening again.