

Good morning. My name is Bernard Weinstein. And I'm the director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project at the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Jeannie Miller.

We are privileged to welcome Mr. Bernard Ahrend, a survivor presently living in Elizabeth, New Jersey, who has generously volunteered to give testimony about his experiences before the Holocaust. Mr. Ahrend, I'd like to welcome you. And I'd like you to tell us something about the place where you came from and your early life.

OK, thank you. I was born in Frankfurt am Main. Frankfurt am Main had a large Jewish population. As a matter of fact, the Nazis called it the Jerusalem on the Franconian Jordan. Frankfurt had a total population in 1925 about 475,000 and had a Jewish population of 30,000.

My parents belonged to a very Orthodox congregation. And, of course, I was sent to a Jewish parochial school.

Excuse me, were you an only child?

I was the only child. And we were brought up very strictly Orthodox. And first, I attended the elementary schools. Then, I attended the Jewish high school. The Jewish high school, all the high schools in Germany, were not free. You had to pay tuition. And, of course, the enrollment of high schools in Germany cannot be compared to with those in the United States. And especially the Jewish high schools, the last three grades, where we are not enough pupils, so we had to go to city high school.

When you say that the schools are not comparable to the United States, in what way were they different?

You had to pay tuition.

I see.

Besides that, I mean the whole school system in Germany was completely different. As a matter of fact, in whole Europe is completely different with America. America has the shortest school years in the whole world compared to the rest.

Go ahead, please.

There was always antisemitism in Germany. And when I went to city high school, sometimes somebody would make a antisemitic remark. But at first, nobody would apologize.

Everybody knew that sooner or later, Hitler would come to power. When Hitler came to power on the 30th January of 1933, there was jubilation all over. And you have to remember one fact. And this is, in my opinion, one factor which contributed for the rise of Hitler and Nazism, the professors and the student bodies of the universities and the teachers in all the schools, especially high schools, were anti-democratic from the very beginning. So when Hitler came to power there was jubilation all over.

We were notified we should go home and for the time being then, after everything will be settled, because in Germany, the school year starts after Easter. So we were released on the day before April 1. It was the Boycott Sabbath. And the principal was afraid there would be some action against, demonstration against the Jewish students. So he said, go home, and we will see what will happen when the school year started.

Then he got a notice school year start on such and such day after Easter. Report at classroom so and so. One of the rules was when the teacher enters the class, the students have to salute him with the Hitler salute. We were told, it's up to the Jewish students to do it or not to do it. Of course, we didn't. The school went on without any trouble.

Was there punishment for not doing it? Was there any kind of retaliation?

You know in Germany, obedience was the main factor. You have to obey if you like it or not. And that was one thing that was born into the German mind. It was born into from the very youth, you have to obey. So there was no protest or anything.

Of course, most the teacher handled it as a matter of fact. But one teacher was a little crazy about it. He acted like a sergeant. When he came in, he said, Schultz, you are not standing in line. Smith, to your right, and so on. Of course, it was ridiculous. But he took it.

But the same teacher was a little weird all around. The student sitting next to me was a very nice fellow. And he had, for Germany, an unusual dark complexion. And this particular teacher had the habit always, he pointed to him, the black one, the black one. The name of the student was [? Goerner. ?] One day, he had enough of it, and he said, and said it loud enough to be heard, blank blank hole.

So the teacher said, Ahrend, what did [? Goerner ?] say. So I replied, Dr. [? Zweipel, ?] I didn't understand. The whole class roared with laughter. Afterwards, one of the students said, I was afraid you would squeal. So I said to him, listen, you don't have to be a Nazi to have comradeship.

So at the end of the year, I had decided to finish it, because I wanted to get the Abitur. The Abitur in Germany is this exam, which entitles you to enter any university. So I passed, and everything was all right. So, of course, since they made the decrees that Jews were no more allowed to enter universities, for the time being I went to yeshiva. That's the Jewish rabbinical institution.

In the meantime, more and more laws were passed. Jews were not allowed to go to universities, were not allowed to have positions in state, city, or federal government. And after that the Boycott Sabbath, many Jews decided that's it. There will be no future. But some still had hope.

What were your own aspirations at the time? What did you want to do?

I had originally hoped to study in medicine or dentistry. But this, of course, everything was goodbye. And in 1935, when the Nazis who assembled each and every year at Nuremberg, passed the so-called Nuremberg Laws. The Nuremberg Laws, one specific was the Jews are no more citizens, but only residents of Germany. No Jew is allowed to marry an Aryan-- that's the race they called themselves, the super race-- or have sexual intercourse with anybody. Jews were not allowed to have maids, Christian maids, unless the household consists only of women.

Now, I have to tell a very funny story. A lady worked with my father in the office. Her father had died many years ago. She lived with her mother. And her brother used to come for the holidays to visit them. So she said, listen, if my brother comes and the neighbors see it, there will be some problem, because they might report us. So she went to the police precinct and explained the situation.

So the sergeant said, sorry, lady, but that is not our field. You have to go to the district officer of the party. So she went to the party office, explained again the situation. So the officer asks, lady, how long will your brother stay with you? She said, he usually stays 10 days to two weeks. If he doesn't stay longer than two weeks, it's all right. If he stays longer than two weeks, he has to stay somewhere else.

Everybody laughed. It was absolutely ridiculous. A neighbor of her who belonged to the party, he used to be a very nice guy. He roared with laughter and said, listen, if I want to do something, I don't need two weeks. I don't need even two days. I don't need two minutes. But the antisemitism was planted in the German people, especially the German youth from the very beginning.

In the house next to us lived a Jewish family. They had a boy, Michael, by the age of five. The same house lived an Italian family with boys the same age as the three. Across the street, a Christian family had just moved in. They had a girl age of ten and boy the age of five. Her mother lived with them. She was paralyzed and sat the whole day at the window.

Now, see, kids played together. Sometimes, the boy of the Christian family-- his name was Karl-- Karl would call sometimes Michael dirty Jew. But soon afterwards, he would come back and said, Michael, I am sorry. So the grandmother saw it that the kids played. The mother saw it. Even his sister saw it. Didn't say nothing.

One day I just came home. And the father, he apparently was nothing before he joined the party, came walking haughtily to the house. He looked over, saw the kids playing, and yelled, Karl, how often do I have to tell you, you shouldn't play with this Jewish boy? That shows how viciously some of these people were and how these innocent children who didn't know from better or wrong were forced to accept this vicious concepts.

We had a cleaning woman. And they had a boy who just started elementary school. One day she came in and said, Mrs. Ahrend, can you believe that? Peter came home and said, we are told you should report everything what you see at home. So his mother said to my mother, so my husband and I don't talk until Peter is asleep. That shows how the youth of Germany was poisoned from the very beginning. And this hatred was implanted in them. And there were Germans who in their heart didn't agree, but they didn't have the guts or the courage to stand up or to speak up.

Did you experience any kind of personal attacks or--

No--

Vilification?

No. Until Kristallnacht.

Till Kristallnacht. What about your parents, your father able to stay in his job and do the-- he was a bookkeeper, was he not?

Yes, the company he worked with was an export-import company in metals and chemicals. The owners of the company had a vision and were smart enough to move the office out of Germany in 1930. But they kept an office still there. And my father was one of them and was still working there. And eventually, in 1937, they had to close it too, because there was no more business there.

And what happened to his occupation?

He looked for a job. The yeshiva needed somebody to take care of the building, because the Christian couple had retired. And they wanted to employ some Jews. So my father took the job. That was in late 1937.

Was there any outcry within the Jewish community about what was happening in this period of time from the synagogues or from the Jewish community as a whole?

Of course, the Jews were very upset about all the developments and all the laws. But they were-- as a matter of fact, they didn't have enough representation. I mean, they were forced that the different Jewish organizations formed into a Reichsvertretung für Juden in Deutschland. That means the representation of the Jews of the German Reich. They voiced their opposition sometimes.

For instance, there was a man, Julius Streicher, he published a publication, The Stürmer. And that was full of bigotry and viciousness and lies. And in one special number, he published before Passover in which he said the Jews slaughter children and use the blood for Passover. Of course, at that time, they sent a telegram, protested to Hitler that this publication should be banned. But there was little response.

Shall we get to Kristallnacht? Can you tell us what you remember about that?

Yes, I remember very well. As I said, my parents worked at the time at the yeshiva building. That was next to one of the largest synagogues in Frankfurt as a matter in Germany.

When I heard the news-- not only I, but all of us heard the news-- that vom Rath, the attache to the German embassy in Paris was assassinated by Herschel Grynszpan, all of us said, that's bad, something bad will happen. Of course, nobody knew what then. In the middle of the night, my parents woke me up and said, the synagogue is burning. And I looked out the window, and flames were leaping out of the windows of the towers. The synagogue was very solidly built at the first. And they wouldn't have couldn't have started the fire without straw or paper. And it took a long time until a fire engine came. And when the fire engine came, they just stood there and sprayed the water to the building next to the synagogue.

Then a few hours later he heard steps coming up the staircase. Four guys, husky fellows, grabbed me and my father and pulled me down. And they brought me down the street, streets where people are holding, screaming, dirty Jews and so on. And they brought me to an office, not the regular police precinct. And I was amazed to see a huge stack of forms piled up on the table. And I said to myself-- and remember at that time, there were no Xerox machines-- how could they have all these forms? This must have been planned way in advance. And the whole action must have been, they waited for the right moment in their mind for an incident and they would call it action.

Did the forms contain the names of Jews in the district, in the area?

No, they filled out a form for each and every one. Of course, Jew and so on. And then a few of us were put in a van and brought to the city jail. I and a few others spent the night over there. Many of the officers who were arrested were right brought to the railroad station and sent to a concentration camp.

So the next morning, we were brought to the convention center, where all the Jews had to report. They didn't report by themselves. They were brought there by these party gangsters.

And so you had to report to an officer. He was turning around like a top spin, face to me, face to me, face to me. Report-- and I said my name a couple of times. Louder and so on. Then he stopped and he turned to the few Jews who were already present, how has it you report? Jude, Jew. So you had to report, Jew, Bernard Ahrend. So this went on with each and every new arrival.

Were you separated from your father at that point?

Yeah. I didn't know what had happened.

What was the name of the synagogue that was saw being burned? Friedberger Anlage. It was a beautiful synagogue, one of the most beautiful in Europe.

Was it completely destroyed?

No, as a matter of fact, because it was built by huge stones, like the government buildings, like the courthouse, and so on. This huge-- I don't know, is it basalt stone or what is this?

Basalt, yes.

Basalt stone. They took down stone by stone. As a matter of fact, when I came back from the concentration camp, they still took down the stones. They used it for themselves for buildings.

And how old were you at this time?

23 years. So by late afternoon, the hall had filled up pretty well. And the high press of the party came in. Then one fellow reported to one of the top officers, Herr Gruppenfuhrer, everything is ready. Attention, forward, march. And then we had to sing a folk song, that says, [NON-ENGLISH]. It means, when I leave this little town, I leave my beloved back. When I return, I hope to greet you again. The mob lining the walls roared with laughter.

We all knew we would go to a concentration camp. We didn't know where. We report to a suburban station. And there the railroad was standing.

When we were on the railroad-- the train had already started-- an officer came in, a regular police officer. He said, listen, folks, you apparently know by now that where you will go. You will have very rough times ahead of you. Try to sleep a little bit, and God bless you.

After we passed a certain railroad junction, we knew the destination was Buchenwald. It was late at night when we arrived at Weimar. That is the station nearest to Buchenwald. Army trucks with special SS units were waiting for us. They shoveled us into the trucks. And we had to sit there with our heads between our knees. We didn't want to see where we were going. Of course, everybody knew. Why see? This was absolutely ridiculous, in the pitch dark, we wouldn't recognize anything to begin with.

So when he arrived at Buchenwald, it was late at night. The whole place was light, flood lighted all over.

You had heard of Buchenwald before--

Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, in June of '38, certain choose, amongst them, one of my uncles were arrested and sent to Buchenwald. These Jews had certain police record. For instance, the case of man uncle's, the children were a little noisy and one neighbor complained. If you had any police record, you were bounded up in June.

So when we arrived at Buchenwald, the commander, stockily built man, stood at the tower and barked at us, you Jewish pigs, you are now here in Buchenwald. You have to obey the rules and regulations. Otherwise, you will be punished. Heil Hitler.

Then we were shoved into wooden barracks. And for a couple of days, we didn't know what will happen then. A few hundred of us were put into uniforms. And we were afraid. Oh, my God, now it means hard work at the quarries. But to our amazement, all we did was marching and exercising.

And we, the uniformed, at that time, housed in nice brick buildings, clean beds, decent food. And it was amazing. And, of course, you have to remember one thing-- the concentration camps after Kristallnacht were in no comparison to the ones during the war years. As a matter of fact, after a week or so, all veterans of World War I were released. And then little by little, people were released who could prove they would emigrate within a certain time from Germany.

So as time went on, after about three weeks, we were put again in civilian clothes. It was amazing that amongst the group who had been put in uniforms, there was a group from the same congregation. And we are secretly at night, we huddled together and prayed.

Now, it was five weeks and for the eve of Hanukkah. And all of said, how can we obtain a candle. Somehow we should have the opportunity to lit a light. So that was Friday-- Saturday was the eve of Hanukkah, the same like this year.

On Saturday morning, every morning, over the loud speaker, they made the announcement, will the following people with their belongings report to the main gate? Because my name starts with A, I was one of the first. I was very happy of course. We were giving our original clothes and belongings. And we were shaved. Our heads were shaved like when we came in.

What was the purpose of the shaving of the head?

We should look like criminals. They had the habit to shave the heads of all prisoners. So before we departed for Weimar, the vice commander came-- a very vicious guy, a type of Eichmann-- and he said, I have to say something before you leave. And he said, I don't blame you that you were are happy now to leave this place. You know, you have been released under the conditions that you will leave Germany within in a short time. If you don't, you will come back here and for good. Now, while you are here in Germany, your main concern is to get out. And we won't talk much about here. Once you're out of Germany, don't think you can tell horror stories about this place. Of course, we can do nothing

about you to you. But we can terminate on your families and friends. What this means I hope you have learned here. Heil Hitler.

Did you see any brutalities there while you were there?

I personally didn't see it.

Did you hear of anything?

But to hear, for instance, one man, his son were amongst the same group. One day, he was told his father had died. Cause, of course, unknown. So he said, Kaddish. While we were secretly praying, he was able to say Kaddish. Of course, he never knew what happened to him.

We heard from how many that they were whipped. Besides the death penalty, they had the book. It was a chair without a back to which the prisoner was bound with leather, and said two of these officers beat him with a horse whip, I think, 40 times or what.

And every night was a roll call that happened to us when we were in uniform too and the check if everybody was there. And just a few nights, we were already no more in uniform, the roll call and two were missing. And it was already pretty cold, because Buchenwald is located in Thuringia Hills. And it's very harsh and long winter. And they had to stay at attention the whole night. At the end of the night, a few died. I don't know how many. But there were about two dozen frostbitten with hands and feet.

So how long were you there all together?

5 weeks. So when we left Buchenwald, this time we left by buses. And we went to Weimar. And Weimar, was the city of Goethe and Schiller. And there's a big monument. When we passed this, I said to myself, what a mockery. And Weimar, the city of freedom, of literature, of Goethe and Schiller, both expressed in their writings freedom and liberty, and Weimar and Buchenwald. So when he came to the railroad station--

Was your father with you?

No. My father was released because he was a veteran. When we came to the railroad station, the station master-- the Jewish community had rented one of the waiting rooms and had made a little cafeteria sale. So the station master came in and said, the commander of Buchenwald told us, you should take only the local trains. As long as we run the German railroads, you take the train which comes first. It was three days before Christmas and the trains were packed-- vacation all over, universities, schools, the armed forces. But we didn't mind standing.

So the German rail cars at that time were differently arranged. They were compartments with rolling doors and a little hallway, corridor. So the conductor came for the tickets. And he looked at one compartment and said, is this seat free? And young fellow, not in uniform, but with the party pin snapped, this is my seat. Excuse me, sir, said, I thought, this old gentleman wanted to get a seat for him. Did he ever have pity with us, he snapped. So the conductor looked to him from top to bottom and said, they are human beings too.

There was a high officer of the SR. I checked it because they had so many ribbons and stars. And when one of the stewards came with coffee and sandwiches, he said to him, hold a minute. And he turned to me, may I buy you some coffee or some sandwich? And I said to him, thank you, that's very kind, but we just had our refreshments in Weimar. As I said before, there were people even in the high echelon of the party who didn't agree with it. But as I said, they didn't have the guts or the courage to act and to do something.

Mm, hmm. Yeah.

Now did you spend time in Weimar?

No, we took the first train. When I came home, it was the first night of Hanukkah. I lit a candle. And for the first time in my life, I realized the meaning of the benedictions. You say, Lord of the universe who does miracles, in those days and nowadays. And that was a miracle.

And how long did you stay in Germany after that?

I was supposed to stay only four weeks. But I had to report each and every day to the Gestapo. But the Gestapo officer, listen, he said, I give you an extension. But if you don't be out after the extension, back. But fortunately, it worked out.

So I left in the first week of February and went to London. The former boss of my father was kind enough to give me a permit to stay in London. Otherwise, I doubt if I would have ever have got out, because the American government didn't increase the quarter by one. And people had to wait years until their number was up.

Your parents, of course, stayed behind.

My parents stayed behind. So one day when I was not-- it was May. I got a card from Belgium. And I was surprised, who writes me from Belgium? And I saw the handwriting of my parents. And I said, what is that? And I called up the office of the former boss of my father. And he assured me everything is fine. And later, my parents wrote me, everything is OK.

They had gotten to--

The former boss of my father sent two confidential men to Frankfurt in April. And he told my parents, we will bring you out of Germany. It will involve some risk. We give you a few days to think it over and then let us know. So they brought my parents and another family with a man that worked with the same company by the cover of night in Belgium, Brussels.

Of course, nobody knew at the time that this was not safe either. In 1940, of course, as you know, the Nazis made the second big move. They invaded France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Norway. For a couple of weeks, I didn't hear any news from my parents.

Then I got a letter from my father from southern France, Saint-Cyprien. The French government had established some camps, not concentration camps, camps for refugees. They had hoped it would save the Jews from the Nazis. But unfortunately, as it turned out, it was only temporarily.

What happened to you in the meantime?

Pardon me.

What happened to you?

I was in London. One of the conditions with the permit was you were not allowed to work. You shouldn't take away a job from the English people. With it was-- the person whoever it was had to submit a certain sum of money to enable the person to live.

So I rented a small attic room in the Finsbury Park section of London. And I ate with friends. So I managed to go through with very little of money. Then finally, in November, I got the message from the American Embassy-- report for physical examination. The examination was fine. Everything was OK.

Then I was told, go in touch with the Cunard lines. They will take care of the passage. And here they told me, because in the meantime, on September 1, the Nazis have invaded Poland. And, of course, that means France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. And because of war time, everything had to be secret.

So the Cunard line told me, we will let you know-- we send you first notice. That means prepare yourself, get ready to

leave. At the same time, send a cable to your relatives in America. Just cable, go Cunard. Nothing more was allowed. When my cousin went to the Cunard office in New York, we was told, we let you know when the ship will come.

So it's the last week of January, I got a telegram from Cunard-- report at Liverpool on January 27. When I left London, it started to snow. And it turned into a snow storm. And we arrived in Liverpool, Liverpool at the time was busy, because one of the main parts for the British Navy and besides that, now we see snow storm, people got stuck. And we couldn't get a hotel room.

So we stayed at the waiting room of the railroad station. Next day, we boarded the liner, the ocean liner. The ocean liner was painted gray because of war time. So it couldn't be detected so easily as usual.

We didn't know exact time. When we were sitting at dinner, we heard rumbling of the engines and suddenly we were on the ocean. The weather was first very rough. Some minutes it turned out nice, we went up on board.

And suddenly, I noticed one of the officers took out his telescope. And a tiny object was on the horizon. And we all was a little afraid. What will it be? But fortunately, it turned out to be a Scandinavian merchant ship. So we landed, ironically, on Lincoln's birthday, February 11, in New York.

And it was because of your cousins that you were going there, coming to the United States.

My cousins went first. They left in-- was it, I think '37? They left in '37. The one in '37. The other left on the very day when my uncle was arrested in June '38. And my mother-- he went through Frankfurt-- and my mother cried, and said, Abe, do everything possible to get Bernard out and everybody out.

So my cousin got-- you know, at that time, there was still depression in America and still plenty unemployment. And for someone who had no professional experience or background, it was very tough. Especially if you were an observant Jew, it was very tough to find a job.

How much education and what field did you have your education?

I had a complete high school. And the high school in Germany, the last few years are almost equivalent to the first two years of college. As a matter of fact, when later, when I wanted to start again and I went to high school, they gave me credit and I had to do only two years of high school here in America, because I wanted to get American high school, so that if I would have the opportunity to go to college. So that would be easier if you have a diploma from American high school.

Did you have the opportunity to do further study?

Unfortunately not. I didn't have the money. But I was able to work in the medical field. And somehow, I worked in a laboratories of a hospital. And it was rewarding. And it gave me satisfaction. It was not a physician. But it was a late start, and I was satisfied.

When you landed here, did someone meet you?

Yeah, my cousin.

Your cousin. And did they have a place for you to stay?

Yeah, I stayed with my aunt and her family had come before. And I stayed with for a couple of months.

Where did you live?

At the time, it was in Brooklyn. I don't know, the Flatbush section. I don't know which part of Flatbush, but it was Flatbush.



What were your first impressions of the United States?

Of course, you are awed. You see these gigantic buildings. And it's a different life, you see. The subways-- of course, I experience the subways in London. The subways in London are very really nice. And that was not so much impressive, but the hugeness of New York City, the multitude of people, and the-- of course, at a time, we are not so many are Blacks and especially Hispanics or Asiatic, but nevertheless, it was a completely different world, a world so different in every respect. You had to adjust to it. I mean, it was--

Do remember personal difficulties you had adjusting?

Oh, not so much. So I worked for a couple of years on a chicken farm in south Jersey. My physical condition at the time were not the best. I was examined by the Army and classified 4F. So I worked on a chicken farm. And a neighbor said she knows somebody in the Catholic hospital. And I went to there in Hoboken, and I worked as a helper and I worked in the laboratory, not as a technician, but just cleaning glassware, paraphernalia, and cleaning the place.

And I got in touch with the principal of the high school. And he said you should definitely go to high school. Of course, they didn't have an evening high school. I went to the evening high school in Jersey City. I didn't have looked at textbook for many years. The last time I was in '34. And that was '48.

So I got top grades. I graduated with honors and was awarded the American Legion school award. Then I went to school especially which teaches medical technicians, X-ray technicians, anyhow, people in the medical field. And then applied for a job, and I was lucky to get another job at the Beth Israel Hospital in Newark, New Jersey. And I worked there from '53 until December 31, '82.

So it was a late start. But it was at least some satisfaction. Some people had it worse. I met people-- one person was working in the storeroom of the hospital. He was a judge in the superior court in Breslau, Germany. One man was an orderly. He was a member of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. So I felt myself lucky to have a position like I had.

We're going to pause for a few minutes, and we'll continue. I'd like to go back and hear more about what happened and what you heard from Europe during this time. Thank you.