

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good afternoon. My name is Bernard Weinstein, and I'm the Director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies of Yale University. I am privileged to welcome Irene Buchner of Westfield, New Jersey, who will give us testimony about her experiences before and during the Holocaust. Welcome, Mrs. Buchner.

I wonder if you could begin by telling us when and where you were born, and a little bit about your early background?

Well, I was born in Berlin in 1926. I lived in a nice area near the Tiergarten. And my earliest remembrances, my parents, originally born in Frankfurt, but moved to Berlin, my mother when she was married, my father I think age one. And in 1933--

Where was your mother born, and then your father originally?

Both in Frankfurt.

In Frankfurt.

Right. Although my family comes from the Rhineland, has been there for a long time. In fact, my great grandfather founded the first Jewish sanitarium for mentally handicapped people. It's still there. That it's not under the auspices. It's now Catholic boys school.

So my father, who was a lawyer and district attorney in Berlin, was one of the first really affected by the Nuremberg laws, because any government servant was non Aryan was dismissed I think, already in 1933. The irony was, that of course, as a good bureaucrat in German law, they couldn't take away the fact that he worked for the government for 11 years. So he got a full pension, even though he was dismissed from the government.

And fortunately, he had many interests, literary and others. And so he was very busy. He also was a representative of an American state, which kind of protected him for a while anyway. I have a twin sister. And we went to a public Catholic school first part of my life. Then when we moved to the center Berlin, Kurfurstendamm, which is kind of the Park Avenue of Berlin. And when I was about I think seven, eight years old.

Then again, because of the Nuremberg laws, we were prevented from continuing in the public schools, and we had to go to Jewish school. So my sister and I went to a so-called Waldschule. It was out in the green part of Berlin in the suburbs. We went there by streetcar. It was called the Goldschmidt-Schule. Apparently, it had quite a reputation even before the Nuremberg laws made it necessary for many Jewish students to go there.

Can you contrast in any way, or do you remember a kind of pre-Nuremberg law period, which would tell us a little bit about the effect that the Nuremberg laws had on you personally?

I remember two things. Really, it was pretty early on in my life. One, since we were in a Catholic school, somehow, we were excused from religious classes, but we weren't prevented from going. So I always stayed. I liked it very much.

And I remember once a teacher was asking some question, and nobody in the class knew it, but I did know it. And I raised my hand, and the teacher said, do you have to have a little Jewess tell you the answer? And she wouldn't call me. But finally she did, and I responded.

I do remember also, that it must have been after Hitler already, but somebody who apparently was in the class, or heard about it, that I was a Jew, on the street, yelled after us, "oh, old Jew" or something, "alter Jude." And so I was very indignant, and I turned around and said, "alter Heide," which is old heathen.

And then I remember also before we moved, we were invited to a birthday party of one of our classmates. And her prized possession, her prized present was a little doll in full SA regalia, had a full uniform of a Nazi. And when the father came in later, he also was in full uniform.

But in those early days, apparently, they hadn't thought enough about not inviting us. So my sister and I were invited. It was a lovely party. But I did the recount at home that the father had this uniform on, that this doll had the same uniform. That was sort of interesting to me. I don't know what my parents thought of it. But those are the earliest recollections about Nazism, or anything. I did know that my father was home a good bit more than before.

What was his morale like? His spirit?

Well, I think generally, he felt very transitory phase in German politics and German history. He didn't think that this was going to affect him very much for very long. I think that was his attitude in the beginning, it couldn't happen to him. And as I said, he had many other interests. He wrote [? ballet ?] kind of things. He was a bibliophile.

He even had an exhibit still in 1936, I think it was, maybe it was a little earlier, of his collection of Hugo von Hofmannsthal in the Berlin city library, the big, big library in Berlin. It was a big exhibit. And he was the collector of Hofmannsthal at that time. And he belonged to a very exclusive bibliophilic society, called the Maximilian Gesellschaft. It was like the Grolier Club here.

And they didn't throw him out for a very long time, I think, from '33 until maybe '36, when he finally had to leave. So maybe the whole group was disbanded. I'm not sure. But anyway, he still exhibited his collection. So he was very busy with that. And he wrote an annotated bibliography of Hofmannsthal, and so on.

So I don't remember him being-- our life being terribly upset in the first few years. I do remember that our house servants were no longer with us. We lost my nurse first. And then we lost some of the servants, because again, the Nuremberg laws apparently said non Aryan could not work for-- I mean, an Aryan couldn't work for a non Aryan.

So I do know that after we moved, we only had one servant who was a wonderful woman, was very outspoken against the Nazis and Hitler. Her husband was a socialist and had been imprisoned. And she wasn't afraid to work and help my mother.

Even my nurse, whom we had from age from when we were born until about age four, never said anything about, isn't it a shame what's going on, never made a remark, even though she lived in the family and everything. Never said anything against the Nazis. And my mother even remarked on that.

But other than that, as a child, I don't remember too much, except when we had to go to the Jewish school, and we had to go quite a way on the streetcar. But we didn't mind it. And I do remember once, it must have been just before Kristallnacht, you know, November, I guess it was. My sister said, she saw some SA youth that were chasing kids, my sister having dark hair, and looking a little more Jewish than I did. I had blonde pigtails, and they didn't know that I was Jewish.

They Chased her. They didn't chase me. And we ran home. We didn't know why they were chasing us, but they were chasing us. And that's one recollection. And I do remember once, must have been '38, suddenly, we had a chauffeur, and he came and he told my father to pack his bag. And my father packed his bag, and they disappeared for a whole week.

We didn't know where he was, or where he'd gone to. And some men did come to our house and asked where he was. And apparently, that was because they were rounding up people, and somebody had probably given his name, and they were coming to look for him. And he had been in the Rhineland it turned out. He wasn't there when they came, and they didn't come again, not while we were in Berlin. These were not people in uniform. These were people in civilian clothes. I do remember that.

After '38, I guess, I mean, there wasn't much talk in the house about immigrating, where would we go to. And my father who never knew any English, only French, much preferred the idea of Belgium, or of France. And my mother really would prefer the idea of going to the United States, or to Israel.

And I had joined a youth group, Zionist youth group. And I was very Zionist oriented. And I wanted to go to Israel. And

many of my friends started leaving, going to different countries, and some going to Israel, youth Aliyah. I thought that was the best thing. And I wanted to go too.

But we didn't have-- as far as I know at that time, we might have had a visa, but we didn't have an immigrating number, which apparently, you needed to. So don't forget, I mean, my sister and I were about 11 years old when all this happened.

Did you have a sense of personal endangerment, that your own life at this time might be in danger?

I knew there were disruptions. But my parents acted very coolly, and I think tried to save us from any kind of worry. So my sister and I lived very ordinary lives, despite the things that were going on. We did know about Kristallnacht, because living in Berlin, we saw the signs, and the store windows, and we saw the smashed windows. And we knew that the synagogue had been burned. So we were aware of that.

And I guess children being where they are, I thought, how wonderful it would be to go away and go to Israel. So I thought that was really what I wanted to do. And so we heard that my parents had made some kind of contacts overseas, that there had been letters back and forth.

My grandmother had gone to America, and one of my uncles. And so we knew I suppose, that this was going on, but it didn't really affect our daily life very much until finally, my relatives in America had relatives in England. And it was decided that my sister and I were to be sent to England. Again, we heard of children's transports. This was a children's transport.

Many parents decided that things were too uncertain, their own futures uncertain. They wanted to at least get their children out. So we were two of those. And because we had these relatives that my parents made contact with them, and they found a school for us, and they were still able to write back and forth to England and to America.

And so in 1939, January, I guess it was, we left on the children's transport. My parents brought us to Hamburg from where we were supposed to embark on a ship, and land in Southampton.

And you and your sister were then about 12.

We were just 12, yeah. And my parents again, we had been to all kinds of camps, and we'd been in boarding school in Switzerland at one point. So it wasn't a new experience to leave my parents. We did see a lot of other kids, and a lot of parents crying and carrying on when the children were leaving. And my sisters said to my mother, mommy, if you don't cry, I won't cry. And that was it. We didn't cry.

And we each had a suitcase. We had a big trunk that was being shipped too. And we left. I still remember a Nazi officer apparently with some kind of soft spot in his heart for little girls with blonde pigtails, took my hand, and just took me through customs. They never opened my suitcase. I could have smuggled out the crown jewels, and nobody would have seen it.

Do you think it was because you were blonde?

I guess I was a little girl, and probably not too different from his own. And I don't know why, but I do remember that. And then we went on this terrible voyage across the English Channel with all the kids, and we were all sick. And they had made a special party for us, and so on. I guess whoever organized the transport wanted the kids to be happy. And most of us never made it up to the party. We were terribly sick.

And when we came to England, we were met by these people we'd never seen before in our lives, but who were very nice. And they took us to their home in London. And the next day, drove us to our school. And we spent the school years, well, from 12 to 16 in a English boarding school.

Of course, the war did interfere, because we went to boarding schools in Hove, Sussex. And 1939, when the war broke

out in Europe, my parents were in Berlin. And we were in England. And we could no longer write to each other. We couldn't be in contact. We sent letters to America. And they sent it on to Berlin. And we sent letters to some cousins in Belgium, and they sent it on to Berlin.

We didn't know what they got. And we didn't hear from them very much either. We did get letters maybe once a month. And it was possible to send a Red Cross letter, 25 words every so often, just to make sure they were all right. But you know, there came a time when English planes bombed Germany. And we knew our parents had been in Berlin. It wasn't exactly a pleasant thought. And they of course, heard the news about what was going on in England. And they weren't too happy either.

In 1941, I think it was, our school was evacuated, because we were right on the border. And people were afraid that Germany was going to invade England. And we were evacuated to North Wales. And I spent the rest of my time in England, at least at that school in North Wales. That was also a very unusual thing.

While you were in Hove, or while you were in Wales, did you experience anything as far as Jews?

The funny part was, that even though we were in a Jewish school, they looked upon us as Germans. And when the war was really going furiously, they started calling us Hans. In other words, we became the personification of Germany, even though we were Jews and victims in a sense. As far as the kids were concerned, we were Germans. You know, I mean, that didn't last very long. But anyway, it was sort of ironic twist that we had to suffer as Germans, even though we were the victims of Germans.

Did you live at the school?

Yeah, it was a boarding school. And we graduated at 16. And since British universities did not accept women under the age of 18, we went to a secretarial college, a finishing skilled type thing. And then started a job in England, in London, that was a time of great bombing raids.

So in the meantime, however, my parents had left Germany last minute, 1941. And via Portugal, had managed to get to the United States. But by that time, of course, America was in the war, December '41, and we had no possibility of getting to America, because of the submarines, new boats, and everything. It was much too dangerous at that time to join our parents.

And so actually, it wasn't until December '43. And even that was very risky. And we didn't expect it to happen. But one fine day, somebody came to us and said, we have permission from your parents to let you come to America. And this was at that time, I guess Bloomsbury House took care of Jewish refugees in London. And all arrangements were made through Bloomsbury house, wherever that was. And my parents had given permission for us to come.

But then when the u-boat, danger was so great they had rescinded that permission. But the fact that they took back the permission came too late. Because that time, they had already said taught us that we could go. Within 24 hours, I think, nobody was supposed to know about it.

We hastily packed. And we were taken at night in a dark car to Bristol, because nobody was supposed to know the point of embarkation, because it was very dangerous. If the Germans found out the convoy was going, then it was bound to be attacked.

So this was in '41. And we went on this banana boat. It was a Cunard. I guess, in peacetime, it hauled fruit. But it had some nice staterooms, and they were about 17 kids in the staterooms, all children to be reunited with their parents. And I guess, from age maybe 8, 10, to 17.

And we set out from Bristol at night to join the convoy, and cross the Atlantic in the middle of the winter, zigzag route via Greenland and Iceland, took about three weeks. Terrible, we were getting sick the whole time, all the time we got on the boat to the time we came to America.

And of course, the convoy was attacked. Our boat was not. And we landed in New York, which was blacked out too. And we were met by a representative of the Jewish council, a woman who at that time did this kind of work, and the Red Cross. Nobody in America knew we were arriving in America. Because my parents had thought the permission had been withdrawn, and we weren't coming. So nobody knew we were on the way, or there.

So it was a big shock, a very happy one for my parents. They had been spared the agony of waiting for us, because they didn't think we were coming. And we met them and my grandmother, everybody, after five years separation from 12 to 17 not seeing the family at all.

Did you have any awareness of what was happening at the same time throughout Europe?

Of course. Well, first of all, we went to Jewish school, a school that had catered to Jewish students from all over Europe, Holland, France, Poland. They'd come there to learn English in the summer. And so we had met many of these students. In fact, the summer of '39, we had students from Holland, from Poland, from Belgium. And when the dangers of war seemed ever closer, these kids went back, these Jewish kids.

And I do remember when we heard the news of Germany invading Poland, and thinking of these girls, this is a girls school, what happened to them. And being very concerned about their fate. That certainly impacted on us.

And of course, we followed the war very closely, like all English people at that time, worried. And we knew what was happening in the occupied countries. And we assumed that life was very bad for Jews, those that survived. We of course, didn't know about concentration camps in detail. We did know that people were sent to concentration camps. We even knew where they were, some of them. We had--

How did this information filter through?

Well, I think I'd already heard stories about being rounded up, because I know when we were afraid my father was going to be taken away, my uncle had had an experience of some Nazis, somebody coming to his house, also wanting to take him away. And he was a veteran of World War I. He had all his medals displayed on his mantelpiece.

And when they came, he started showing them to him, to the two men who came. And they talked about the war, and so on. The two men left and didn't take him. That was in the early days, later on, of course, they did. And my uncle also fled and came to England.

He was my father's only brother. And had no possibility. I know he told us stories about taking my grandmother's jewels and selling them in his clothes, and that's what he lived on in England for about four years during the war, because they wouldn't allow him to work.

And so we did know those kind of stories, and we did know that people-- even in when we still heard by United States, and via Belgium, that certain members of the family, old people who hadn't been able to get out, plus one cousin, I remember, of my father's who had been taken to somewhere, transported, was the word. It was usually, euphemistically called transported. We didn't know exactly transported to where or what-- but and certainly moved from where they used to live.

Details, I think it's hard to sort out what we learned later, and what we knew then. But I don't think we knew any great details. We knew that concentration camps existed, that we knew, nothing about a final solution, or killing people in ovens, anything like that. That, we did not know.

We knew it must have been terribly hard for many of the people, that they certainly suffered, we knew that. And that old people rarely survived if they were taken. But other things, we really did not know.

It's really a childhood in peculiar circumstances. And yet, those peculiar circumstances never really registering very deeply, because we sort of took it in stride. I mean, even though we were separated from our parents, the kids in boarding school were separated from their parents too in England. It was quite usual for kids to go to boarding school.

The only thing that was different with my sister and me is that, we never went home. We had nowhere to go during vacation time. So we always stayed in school.

What were these vacations like for you? Well, it's very hard for me to remember exactly if they were different in any way. There were always a few kids who stayed at school during vacation, either their parents, worked, or they were on travels, or they were diplomats or something. And so there was nobody home to take care of the kids.

So there were always a few kids who stayed for vacation. And then there were some kids who came just for vacation to the school. So we weren't alone. But our usual friends, and classmates, they went home, and we didn't. That's really what it amounted to.

They had programs in the summer. We did spend a few weekends or so on when we were still in Hove with these-- we called them aunt and uncle, these relatives of our relatives in America. But they were older people. They really didn't know what to do with us. And so they were happy we could stay at school.

Now, by the time the tide of the war had turned in favor of the allies, you were already in the United States.

Yes, we lived through the more dubious times in England, I mean, the bombing attacks, and the fear of invasion, and when things were going rather badly for the allies. But it's strange. First of all, we were physically removed. We were in North Wales, which is very rural. The closest we got to any bombs at that time was apparently some German plane had been chased, and had to drop its bombs. So in the middle of the sheep meadow, there was suddenly this bomb.

But we weren't bombed ourselves. Of course, we heard and read everything that was going on. And most of the British children were evacuated from the cities at that time were sent to the country. So again, it wasn't that unusual for us. And later on, when we were in, London that was I think the time of the V-12s, or the V-8s.

The V-2s.

V-2s?

V-2s.

V-2s, OK. We were in an apartment building, and we were so blase we didn't even go down into the shelter. We felt, you know, we were indestructible. We couldn't be hit. But that's I think--

In other words, you didn't know what you had actually confronted until you looked at it retrospectively.

Or really, when we began to realize what dangers we had really escaped. Trying just to see it as we saw it then, first of all, it was a great blessing that there were two of us.

I can imagine how lonesome some kids felt who were in our children's transport, who were alone and went to the unknown. We had the great good fortune, first of all, we knew where we were going. I mean, these relatives had written to us, and had encouraged my parents. And we had seen pictures of the school. We had gotten a letter from the principal. So it wasn't a journey into the unknown.

And then there were two of us. Neither one of us knew any English at all when we went to England. Although, I had French my first second language, and my sister took English. So she had at least maybe 20 words. And so she was our spokesperson.

And she had great dramatic ability. And when they asked us to tell her about our trip, she pantomimed the whole journey across the English channel, and of course, was a great hit with all the English kids who had never gone through anything like that.

And we probably learned English within a very short time, because we had special English lessons. As I said, the school that was used to foreigners, foreign kids. And so we had English for the first three months. And then we went into the regular classroom. And felt pretty much part of whatever was going on.

The worst thing, of course, was that we didn't have our parents. And that we really, I suppose, were orphaned, or maybe never looked at it like that, because we knew our parents were somewhere at that time. And trying to think, it certainly was a total disruption of our lives, and of our parents lives, careers, everything.

Later, when we were reunited with our parents in America, you know, the fact that my father, they lived in a small apartment. We heard all the stories. My father had to take any job once the war started. He's a German lawyer. Nothing he could do really, although, he was a financial expert, exchange rates, and things like that.

And he thought first he could do something, but then once the war started, that was out. So he took a job as a cashier at Delmonico's in New York. I guess, the only cashier with a doctorate probably at that time. But it was very good.

He also had worked I think, as a male nurse. Because in World War I, he was in the Red Cross. So that's the only thing he knew. So for a few months, he had worked as a male nurse. When he first came to this country, he was a displaced scholar. And the Quakers wanted displaced scholars.

So he spent a lovely at Haverford College, and in Orono, Maine with the other displaced scholars. But that didn't help him get a job. So finally, by the time we arrived, he was fortunate through a cousin, he heard about jobs in the OSS, Office of Strategic Services in Washington who were looking for foreign experts. And that was the beginning of his career as an American Civil Servant.

And he got a job there. He liked what he was doing, apparently, preparing for at least giving information on the German system. When the war was over, he was taken into the US Office of the Chief of Counsel at the Nuremberg trials. And he went to Nuremberg.

So in a way, he did come back circuitously to the law,

Oh yes, once he was in Washington, he used his knowledge. And in the Nuremberg trials too, which was must have been devastating to him. And so--

When he traveled back to Germany, did you accompany him?

Never.

Or anyone in the family?

That was just after the war. No civilians were allowed to go to Germany. I was in college at the time, even my mother never went. He got a temporary commission in the US Army. He was a Colonel in the US Army. He went in uniform to Germany because, that was post-war, was still very difficult. And he made contact with some of his old friends. And he also had to get people to testify, and witnesses.

And I think it was devastating. He suffered a heart attack there, didn't come home. And suffered a second heart attack, and died in Nuremberg. But it's what he wanted to do. You know, it was really a justification in a sense.

What effect that you were able to see, did all of this migration from one place to another have on your mother?

My mother is a very resilient woman. I mean, she was certainly born to most luxuries, and never had to do anything much. She was trained as a singer, even though she didn't have a professional career, and never worked, never did anything. And so when she came to this country, what could she do?

She decided the only thing she could do, she loved children and babies. She was going to be a baby nurse. And she got a

job as a baby nurse. And that really started her on a kind of a career that she pursued for quite a while. She liked newborn babies. She'd go and help the new mothers, and made many contacts that way. People still write to her from those days.

And since my father didn't have a job, she had at least some money. And that's how they survived. And she never complained. She did it. People loved her, and kept recommending her. She never was short of babies.

And so you know, I mean, as much as she must have missed all her former life, I think it was much easier for her somehow than for my father. My father was not as flexible, as adaptable. He was also older. And of course, everything he knew and everything he did had almost no application in his new life until he got into Washington.

So it was a very, very difficult thing, and language was difficult for him too. My mother knew some English. My father didn't. He learned. He studied. But it never came out very fluently. So that was a handicap to him, particularly, since he was a very-- how should I say it?

His language was very important to him, the way he spoke. And he did it very well in German, or in French. And he studied Latin and Greek too, but not English. So it was always a puzzlement to him.

So when you reflect on things that happened to you to date, what thoughts go through your mind? What do you think of most, your early life?

Well, in America you mean?

Well, in Europe and England.

I would say that, all these years one takes it for granted, that this is part of one's life. I mean, as my mother said, she's lived many different lives. And I have that feeling too a little bit, many different lives that sort of come together, and sort of compartmented in a sense.

The English life had nothing to do with the German life. And American life nothing to do with the English life, or the German life. So it's sort of almost, it's part of me, but it's also--

Compartmentalized, or separated.

Somehow, I met an old friend of mine in Israel whom I played with, and with whom I was in the Zionist organization before we were both 11 years old. And we met, and it's as if we'd seen each other all the time since then. Of course, we had never. And we felt very close. We had gone through the same experiences.

And it was strange. She lived in a kibbutz, and so on. But yet here we were, two middle aged ladies coming together despite our differences, and different languages, different experiences, since we were kids, we somehow could sort of take off from where we ended age 11.

Were your Zionist interests strengthened by what you experienced?

They were always there, I think. Yes, certainly, my parents were very assimilated Jews. And I would never have gotten into Zionist circles if it hadn't been for Hitler. I'm sure of that. And it was always sort of in the back of my mind that I had to see to it that Israel would be there, and the refuge, and so on. I think it made me very conscious of that.

And I guess also, it made me more Jewish, I mean, then I would have been otherwise. It made me want to know as much as I could about Judaism, about Jewish experience, and so on. And I wanted to be sure to pass it on in some way. I didn't want to give Hitler kind of a posthumous victory.

And I think that's one reason why my son studied German literature, and sort of tried to take off also in that vein. Certainly, he was interested in what my father had done. And so probably, I influenced him, even though I didn't do it



very consciously, that there should be a Jewish presence in German literary life somehow.

To give the sense that something had survived this fight?

They survived, and that it was a very major contribution that shouldn't be forgotten.

Yeah. Yeah, what about religion? Was that always, or ever a major part of your Jewish identity and experience?

I felt myself very Jewish from the time that I was little. My mother tells me that I felt so strongly that I said, of all people, I had to have blond hair and blue eyes, you know. I thought I should look more Jewish when I was a kid. My sister had dark hair, so why didn't I?

And I think if I hadn't learned about Judaism because I had to, I probably would have found my way to it somewhere. But it so happened that it was really forced on me. I went to Jewish school in Berlin. And then we were transferred to Jewish school in England.

So it was always there.

It was very much a part of me, yeah. But not really my sister. So it's really the way one looks at it.

Yeah.

Well, I thank you for sharing with us--

You're very welcome.

Your experiences. And you're given us a perspective that very often, we don't have in doing these interviews. Thank you very much, Irene.

You're very welcome. Is this the end?

[MUSIC PLAYING]