

Good afternoon. I'm Bernard Weinstein, director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. Assisting me in this interview today is Pat Wiederhorn. We would like to welcome Mr. Michel Thomas who has come to give testimony about his experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. Mr. Thomas, I'd like to welcome you, and I'd like you to begin by telling us something about your own background in your early life.

-- Very briefly, I was born in Łódź, Poland. And my whole family lived there. I was the only child. But when I was seven, I left Łódź I left Poland, and went to Breslau, to Germany, and lived with my mother's sister and her husband.

May I ask you why you left?

For various reasons. I had my own reasons-- my own reasons because I, as a child, felt very strongly and wanted to get out of Poland. I wanted to get out of Poland because of an experience I had as a child. We lived in, at that time, modern building with a courtyard inside. The courtyard had a well with a big wheel to pump the water just in case we ran out of water. And the children would play in that courtyard.

One day I was out in the garden. I was playing. My mother was calling me. I was not in the courtyard. And the people there said, oh, he is in the well. And they went to the well to call me, down into the water, into the depth of the well.

I was brought back by a kind gentleman. And I can still see masses of people, masses of people. The whole courtyard was filled with people watching the spectacle of a mother at the well in despair--

She thought you had drowned.

--in despair. Yes. And to them it was a big spectacle, the spectacle of a Jewish mother caring for her-- because her child was in bottom of the well. It's unforgettable to me. Unforgettable. I didn't want to be away from my mother anymore.

But I had lost all faith, all trust in others and in people that were capable of committing such, to me, such a heinous crime because there are crimes that go beyond, way beyond physical torture, way beyond physical death, something which I would like to talk about, maybe not now.

It affected me very deeply as a child. I didn't want to have any dealings anymore with Poles. To me, I translated it as a Polish situation against Jews.

I take it the people there were not Jews--

That's right.

--people. You were the only Jews.

[INAUDIBLE]. Like the concierge of the building and the children and everybody. And to them it was just a big spectacle. And so we were traveling. I wanted to be away from it. I was traveling with my mother. We went to areas like Katowice, like Poznan, which was Poznan, all those areas that used to be German which-- we went in Danzig, to Gdansk now. We went to Sopot. Sopot is now, I understand, the residence. It's right outside of Gdansk.

And I felt the differences, the differences between the Polish areas and what I considered as non-Polish areas as a child. As it was at that time that my mother's sister got married and had moved to Breslau.

Was it better in those areas as far as--

Yes.

Even though there were the volksdeutsche living there?

Yes. Yes. It was more civilized to me. And I didn't-- I didn't want to go back to Łódź. I didn't want to live in Łódź. To me, it was the memory of a horror-- of a horror story. And it was arranged that I was, in a way-- it was very difficult to get out. It was very difficult to travel. It was arranged for somebody to take me in a car over the border into Germany. And that's how I got to Breslau where I grew up.

Living with your aunt and uncle.

Living with my aunt and uncle and who were like the best parents to me. My aunt was a great mother. And my mother and my parents came whenever they could.

Yeah. So you didn't lose contact with them, but you--

No. No. I-- constant contact. But I very quickly, very quickly forgot my Polish because I didn't want-- I didn't want to remember it, and very quickly learned German, very quickly. So quickly that in school I was always the best in German. But erased Polish.

My emotional feelings are still very strong, still very strong since childhood which is of maybe in conflict with my rational judgment. But unfortunately, what I experienced as a child has only been-- only corroborated later on with the whole attitude of the Poles as a nation.

Again, if I talk about the Poles as a nation and Poles in general, we have to look at it the same as we look at Germans and at Nazis. We try to talk about what the Nazis did. Who were the Nazis? It was a German nation, and the Germans, whatever was done was done by the Germans and with the knowledge-- with the knowledge of all of Germany.

Whatever was done-- and when chose Poland as a country, as a place of extermination camps and death camps was not by accident that the Germans, not the Nazis, but the Germans knew that they had a collaboration and a proper climate to build death camps to round up Jews, millions of Jews-- men, women, and children-- with the help, either the active help or at least the passive of a whole population. And again, I'm not talking-- one can always find those righteous ones and count them on your fingers.

Given that you crossed the border into Germany and became, in a sense, more at ease, were you surprised when you saw where Germany was heading as you were growing up? Because I assume all of this happened before the beginning of the war, before the beginning-- before the rise of Hitler you're crossing over into German territory. Were you surprised when Germany started becoming aggressive and hostile?

I grew up actually in the environment of the Weimar Republic in Germany and as a free country-- what I considered as a free country. I was in high school gymnasium where I was the only Jew. There was a Jew in another class, who was actually a [NON-ENGLISH] jew-- a converted Jew-- but who was constantly under attack by others. I was the only one to protect him, I was never under attack as a Jew. For various reasons, probably, because I had my pride as a Jew, I never said I'm Jewish and in Germany I would say that [NON-ENGLISH], but straight.

I was just the strongest of us, physically strong, and that was always respected by the Germans. And I was an athlete-- I had my collection of ribbons as an athlete-- that was highly respected. So in a way, in school and in my activities, I was active and popular, and had a strong identification. A strong identification as a Jew-- as a Jew, Jewish peoplehood, as a Zionist in the Zionist environment.

And, religiously, I had my questions. Because I went through a period of time when I felt that one shouldn't respect-- one can only respect what deserves respect. Of course I, always grew up with the teaching of respecting-- so many things one has to respect one-- has to respect all religions, for instance. But then I had to question, and I started questioning, and rejecting, which led me finally, through intensive studies, to come to my own conclusions. And eventually, by the time I was 16, 17, I became a Jew by choice, out of my own convictions.

So that, in my dual feelings as a Jew, ethnically and with the Jewish-- with the strong identity of 4,000-year-old history of the Jewish history-- but also, being happily Jewish religiously. Because I don't find anything and I never found anything in Jewish teaching, the teaching of Jewish religion that is, and can be, or could be, in conflict with my thinking and acting.

Was it possible to observe Judaism in Breslau at that time? Because you said where you lived was very-- you were one of the very few Jews attending your school-- was there a Jewish community?

Oh yes, oh yes, a very strong Jewish community. But it so happens that in the high school where I went, which was a matter of choice, there were very, in the whole school, very few Jews. But there was a strong Jewish community in Breslau, very. And a seminary and some great rabbis, and had very, very significant and good Jewish education. As a matter of fact, the rabbi who prepared me for bar mitzvah in Breslau happens to be, also, the rabbi who married us in Los Angeles.

How wonderful. Did you ever, as we were talking before about Zionism, did you ever have the dream of going to Palestine when you were growing up?

Yes. Yes that is a dream that has always been with me because I strongly feel that my roots, my roots-- 4,000-year-old and 4,000-year deep roots-- are in Israel. But then also then fortunately live in a country where my Jewish feelings-- that to be a good Jew is to be a Good American, to be a good American to be a good Jew. There's no conflict, I don't live in conflict in that respect. And when and wherever they are conflicts, one can stand up and speak or do.

When did you first feel yourself in danger?

I first felt myself in danger in Breslau in 1933 after Hitler came to power. Then a few months later, there were outbreaks of violence, murders, in our youth movement and among students, Jewish students, and I was warned that I was in danger.

Accused of having committed acts I would have been proud of, which I didn't even do-- they attributed to me, acts to me which I didn't-- which I still would have been proud of. But I knew that I had to leave at night, which I did. I was in danger, I left, and went to France. It was not easy when I say I went to France, but I made it.

Was this in '33?

I beg you pardon?

Was this in '33?

That was '33, that was in April '33.

What had you done that you say you would have been proud-- or what had you been accused of doing that you say you would have been proud to have done?

I was accused of having slashed Nazi tires and damaged their vehicles and having committed sabotage, all kinds of sabotage.

Simply because you were Jewish?

I was active, I was active and I was known to have been active, but I didn't do these things. I may have, I could have, I don't know. But I didn't.

Did you have to wear an armband or did you have to wear any kind of insignia that indicated that you were a Jew at that time?

No. No. No, not at that time, no. Also I was not a German Jew, I was a Polish Jew-- I had a Polish passport,

which never helped me much. The Polish passport was taken away from me. I was made stateless by the Poles, by the Polish government, in 1938 when I was in Vienna, during the time of the Anschluss. Where I became stateless. In the beginning of the war, in France, in 1939, I was called in by the Polish consul to offer me my Polish citizenship, which I refused.

May I backtrack just a little bit? Between '33 and '39 you were living mostly in France?

Yes.

Can you tell us a little about that period?

Yes. I was in France from '33 until '37. Mostly in Bordeaux where I studied at the University of Bordeaux. '37, I went to Poland to visit my parents, my family. And I even was able to stop off in Breslau. I spent a few months in Poland, and left and went to Vienna. And this is where I experienced the approach and the happening of the Anschluss.

The German invasion of Austria?

Yes-- I wouldn't call it an invasion though.

Can you describe what you saw of the Anschluss?

Oh, it was expected. It was curious. As a student I loved Vienna, it was beautiful to me, it was [NON-ENGLISH], it was nice. And when I talked to the Jews in Austria and Vienna about what will happen, and what it means and what it will mean, they minimized it.

They said, ah, it cannot-- that cannot-- happen here. This is the age-old response of Jews-- it cannot happen-- and, to me it is a tragedy, a Jewish tragedy that, maybe genetically I don't know, but it is so difficult, because of Jewish education for thousands of years, to accept the finality of evil.

It is something which is practically impossible to the Jewish mind to accept the finality of evil. If we look at the entries of Anne Frank, one of the latest entries before she was taken away, where she says, this is such a Jewish outcry, humanistic, human but also very Jewish. Where she says, quote, "deep down in my heart, I believe in the goodness of man." Deep down in every Jewish heart one wants to believe in the goodness man.

Deep down in the goodness of-- in the depth of-- every Jewish heart, throughout the Holocaust, one couldn't accept it because one believed in the goodness of man somewhere in the world. One believed in America, one believed in civilization.

What was killed in the Holocaust-- and that is not the physical, it is not the death, because throughout history, throughout human history, we talk about martyrs and martyrdom. Martyrs are those who stand and believe, and have a strong belief system that is stronger and transcends the physical death, those are martyrs.

Can we talk about martyrs? Can we talk about martyrs in the Holocaust? Are of a million and a half or two million children slaughtered-- were they martyrs? For Germans to be able to tell-- when the Jews, men, women, and children, were taken to the gas chambers-- to tell them, look, nobody in the wide world wants you, not one single country, not one desert country, not the jungle, no where, nobody. We want you out, but nobody wants to take you, so the one way out is by the chimney.

It is the truth that those who were in concentration camps, those who were in deportation camps, those who were in trains and cattle cars-- and I saw it when I was in the deportation camp, to be deported to Auschwitz in France. If one could come, and I saw at night, in the middle of the night, people come for the crappy piece of paper-- some visa to some country. And they were going from one sealed wagon to the other to look for the one person who had a visa, to take that person out.

The world didn't care. I had my own, I had papers to come to the United States, family here, my parents, my family, all of them. But the United States government decided that what is more important than life is a quota number.

So the State Department and the embassies and consulates said, well you have to wait until your number comes up, yes, you have all your papers. On the altar of the quota numbers, thousands and thousands of men, women, and children have been slaughtered. Including my parents, including my family, and I would have been on that altar if I hadn't managed to escape. To escape and to escape again, a few times.

Then we have to wonder, because what the Germans did-- not the Nazis-- the Germans did, with the help of the Poles, was physical destruction. Something that never happened in human history. It doesn't compare to what happened in Spain, to the Inquisition or whatever, because, in the past, those were mostly religious persecution where one could-- It's a whole history in Judaism.

With every generation for the past 2000 years there was always attrition-- attrition. Those who chose to get out of persecution, to get out of the ghetto, could just go across the street to church and say, here take me. And they said, hallelujah, Jewish soul is saved.

But there was always attrition. The miracle and the strength is that we all are survivors of very strong people who resisted, who didn't give in. But it was always-- so to me through this-- it's not the quantity, but the quality, that survives, because it is humanistic. It's an example, a sample, for all humanity.

But to come back to what happened-- to what happened to human beings being taken to the gas chamber, scratching the walls, and to have been deprived and dis-- and to destroy, to take away that one thing, and that is hope and faith. That's why I feel, I strongly feel, that to kill faith is boundless, it transcends.

The Germans were able to kill physically but what was left, or what we still consider as the civilized world, the civilized world of onlookers who refused to do anything about it, are guilty. And I say guilty, and I pronounce that guilt of killing, of killing the unspeakable, of killing faith, of killing hope. And therefore of depriving the one thing [NON-ENGLISH]-- where is it, where is it, how did they die?

You never found out how your parents died?

Yes, in Auschwitz.

How did you learn, how did you know?

I was with the US army counter-intelligence, I was with the combat troops when we got into Germany-- I joined the US army in August 1944. I was with combat troops when we liberated Dachau and then went to all, to every single camp, the moment we liberated it, and talked to them. To ask, to find out, if anybody-- to give the names of my parents, of my family, of my aunt, of my uncles, my cousins, everybody. Have those who survived to talk to me, this is how I found out.

How I found out-- and going into camps and having children, little children running away from me in terror and hiding, because those Jewish little children could not make the distinction between an SS uniform and an American uniform. To them uniform meant death and terror. So it happened to me, reaching out and the children running in terror and screams.

Then every day, every day for weeks, and weeks, I was getting the lists. Lists, every day, lists of survivors. Every night I would be sitting over these lists. Those lists, to me, meant life or death of my whole family-- whether to find a name, or not to find a name. It was not to be or not to be, but to find a name on those lists and lists that were sent to me, that were brought to me, practically every single day.

And not finding, and never finding. And then finding out from those who were in Auschwitz, who had survived Auschwitz, what happened, and when, to my parents and my close family.

Did your aunt and uncle also perish at that time?

Yes.

Along with your parents or?

In 1938 my uncle, my aunt and uncle, lived in Breslau and they were arrested and put on a train. They were Polish citizens, and the train was shoved to Poland, and the Poles shoved it back. Back and forth-- this was that's how they played games with human beings, in the no man's land, back and forth. Until they managed to get into Poland-- well, to be pushed into Poland-- having to leave everything behind. Everything.

This was at the time when the same things had happened to the parents of somebody by the name of Grynszpan who were shot. Somebody at the consulate, the embassy--

Vom Rath.

--vom Rath-- which was used and prepared already as the excuse for the Kristallnacht.

This was also in '38, when the Anschluss-- the year of the Anschluss?

Oh, the Anschluss was in beginning of '38, Kristallnacht was on November 9th of '38. Which has been hailed by the Germans now-- November 9th-- as very significant, the most significant historical date in this century. Meaning the coming down of the Berlin Wall-- easily forgetting. One can easily forget what one hasn't known or learned, and doesn't want to know.

What do you remember about Kristallnacht personally?

Personally-- I would like to go back to Vienna because I was in Vienna through the Anschluss. And I was wanted and had to-- speaking of hiding-- I had to hide and I did hide in Vienna, within the city, until the end of October of 1938.

What were you wanted for?

h-mm?

What were you wanted for?

For, again, my student activities against the Nazis, and now, since I was stateless-- made stateless by the Poles, I was, as they said, [NON-ENGLISH]-- free game.

Free as a bird. Free game.

You asked me about my experiences or impressions of the Anschluss. I mean to distort realities, to distort history-- and very often we see distortions of history in front of our eyes on television even-- but to distort histories of Austria-- the lie of Austria-- as if it had been victimized, a victim of Nazi aggression, is preposterous, incredible.

It was the most incredible, the most-- the greatest, triumphant entry into a country by Hitler. The welcome to me, in my memory, must have surpassed the triumphant entries of Roman emperors after victories into Rome. The Austrians, the Viennese, were out on the street-- those streets were like running rivers of people, marching from all over, endless.

I went out-- I went out with my then fiance-- and I said we have to live it, in order to remember it. It is not by sitting at home, or hiding, I want to be with it. I want to be there, because only in living it, will I be able to remember it. I'm grateful that I did. The endless, endless, endless processions of people-- and I still can hear it in my ears-- screaming [NON-ENGLISH] and We thank our fuhrer. Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!
Never ending.

And converging on the opera square, Opernplatz, in front of-- I see the corner of a German travel agency with a huge portrait of Hitler and with the glares on it-- and everybody just stopping, like in front of an idol, thanking and thanking and thanking. I see, behind the columns, way under, where the opera is, and we went over. I saw two men covering a woman against the wall because she was crying bitterly, and they didn't want her to be seen, and grabbed, to show her unhappiness.

I can hear Cardinal Innitzer, the Austrian Cardinal, making an appeal for Hitler. Everything changed practically overnight, practically overnight. What took in Germany from 1933 gradually with the Nuremberg laws until 1938 against the Jews, happened overnight in--

Austria.

--Austria. And I've never seen any report of it but on practically every corner, on the corners, there were selling swastikas-- just straight swastikas, not party swastikas-- party swastikas could only be worn by those who were members-- but just swastikas to be worn for everybody. So that one could make a quick distinction, a visual distinction, that those who did not wear swastikas were either anti-Nazis or Jews or both.

Foreign nationals put on their nationality-- some insignia of their nationality-- and then they were stopped and had to identify themselves that they were foreign nationals. So that everybody who did not wear the swastika was immediately exposed to abuse. And if I talk about the abuse I'm not talking about verbal abuse, which was of course-- but physical abuse. Raids on Jews when you were collected out of coffeehouses, restaurants, on the streets-- they had they had orgies.

And I see this in-- I wanted to see this man I knew who was in his 80s and was blind, sightless, who had his family in this country, his sons and daughters and grandchildren. I don't want to mention their names here. And they were attacking him on the street, pulling him down on the street by his beard-- a sightless, old dignified man.

I saw a number of times-- a number of times-- German officers interfering because they could not stand the excesses and brutalities committed by Australians and by the so-called Sudeten Germans who were there too at that time.

The Austrians who are well-represented by Waldheimer and the [INAUDIBLE]. Austrians, after all, Hitler was Austrian, and Eichmann was Austrian, and all the biggest Nazis and criminals were represented, duly represented, by the Austrians. There was never any Austrian resistance, any Austrian significant resistance to speak of.

We're going to pause for just a few minutes because we got to change the tape.