

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Johannes Hamann  
July 19, 1991  
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## **PREFACE**

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## **JOHANNES HAMANN**

### **July 19, 1991**

THE INTERVIEWER: This is July 19, 1991, and we're in Germany. And we're doing an interview with one of Jehovah's Witnesses. And this is Johannes Hamann, and he's going to relate his story and the story of his father, Walter. So, would you please tell us who you are.

MR. HAMANN: Well, I am Johannes Hamann. Right now or this year 75 (sic) years of age. And, well, it's actually, I'm talking more in behalf of my father since my father is now 87 years old, still alive. But he's not in a good health position, so that he cannot stand in front of you to be interviewed, especially he has a bad hearing, his hearing aids, and so this causes him a lot of problems. Beside this, he does not speak English and needed a translator. And that's actually the reason I'm sitting here in behalf of him, so to speak, since I know part of his story.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. Would you tell us the date of your personal birth.

MR. HAMANN: Well, I was born in September 24, 1933.

THE INTERVIEWER: All right.

MR. HAMANN: This means I was four years old when my father was taken into prison.

THE INTERVIEWER: Okay. So, 1933 was the year Hitler came to power.

MR. HAMANN: Exactly, yes.

THE INTERVIEWER: Okay. What was the name of your mother.

MR. HAMANN: My mother's first name is Ortelia. Hamann, of course.

THE INTERVIEWER: And her maiden name?

MR. HAMANN: Plaunover was her family name. She was born in Oelsnitz in Thuringia in the eastern part of Germany. And this birth date is December the 23rd, 1902.

THE INTERVIEWER: Fine. And your father, where was he born; do you recall that?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah. He was born in the city of Krites in Foektchland, Thuringia area. It was in 1904 and March the 9th.

THE INTERVIEWER: I see. What type of work did your father do to take care of your family?

MR. HAMANN: Well, he was a baker and confectioner. He got his, all the master educational Meister Brewferman and actually in the last time, he was occupied in the first cafe in the city of Dusseldorf where we lived at that time, '33, and there he was, he -- master -- the first one of the

backshtouber or bakery and confectionery. He got his, well, his education by various extra schools, especially he was a specialist in artistic window decoration in this -- for confectionery. And as he told me and I have seen pictures of it, quite some of these things, artistic things, he made from painting with sugar and with cacow and cutting out from sugar big things and so on. They were sent to ex -- what do you call it, excerpts (sic) or things to put into competition.

THE INTERVIEWER: Exhibitions.

MR. HAMANN: Exhibitions, right. That's the term. And he got the gold medal several times due to that, so --

THE INTERVIEWER: So he truly was an artist in his field.

MR. HAMANN: In this field, exactly, yes.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. What was your father and mother's religious background before they became Jehovah's Witnesses?

MR. HAMANN: My mother came from a strong Catholic family. My father from a Protestant family. But as I relate from the conversion with my father, they were always God-fearing people within the family. But when my father got the Bible understanding from his brother who became one of Jehovah's Witnesses prior to him. This must have been my uncle, 1921. My father, 1923, I guess he was baptized as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. And so he got it from his brother, actually. And he met my brother (sic) at -- in Plauen in one of the places of occupation, and through my father, my mother was introduced into the Bible understanding. So, relatively in early times they became Jehovah's Witnesses or Bible Students as they were called at that time.

THE INTERVIEWER: I see.

MR. HAMANN: So, when I was born my parents were already Jehovah's Witnesses. My father was baptized in 19 -- I guess -- 20 -- let me just have a look at the note. He was baptized in 1923, March the 4th, in Leipzig. That's also the eastern area of Germany.

THE INTERVIEWER: I see. Did you have a picture there of your father that you'd like to show us.

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, well, I have a picture here. This is the last one, so this means about two -- no, maybe even five or seven years ago. That's the last one I got (indicating).

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. Do you have older ones there?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, sure. For instance, the time in -- I mentioned Dusseldorf just before where he was occupied at the first cafe in the city, so this was a picture in 1933 here that's in front of a famous building in Dusseldorf. And the whole family I can put beside and shows our

family, my father, my mother, my brother, Gundor. He's two years older. This means he's now 59 and here at this picture, this was '55 (sic). I was two and my brother four years old, this picture here. So two years before the imprisonment, the imprisonment of my father (indicating).

THE INTERVIEWER: All right. So, that's 1935, then.

MR. HAMANN: This year, yes.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. Adolph Hitler was in power for two years.

MR. HAMANN: Yeah. Right. I do not know whether you are interested in these. Here's another picture. This is from 1926. This was the time when he was -- when he met my brother - my mother. And here's another picture, both of them, when they were young. This was 1928.

THE INTERVIEWER: Okay. Fine. What was it about the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses that caused your mother and father to change from their Catholic and Protestant backgrounds to want to become Jehovah's Witnesses? Do you recall that at all from conversations with your father and mother?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, well, I can only say my grandfather, he was a good family father. He took along his children into the nature and spoke about God. So, it was quite natural to my father to have a relationship to the supreme being. And through the help of my Uncle Otto, the brother of my father, of course, they read the Bible and came to see the distinction between the official church doctrines and found out that it is not at all true to speak about certain doctrines like hell fire and trinity and such things. And so they were drawn close to the real understanding of the Bible. They just read the Bible and this was so plain and clear to them, that they decided to publish this. And they feel really strongly, strongly convinced about it. And they just wanted to express it, so they started to do this house-to-house preaching and publishing of this information, talking about the Kingdom Hope as the Bible offers it to all serious Christians.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. Now, what do you mean by the Kingdom Hope?

MR. HAMANN: Now, well, generally known, it's the Lord's Prayer. When we pray, "your kingdom come," a kingdom is a government, and, of course, the Kingdom Hope is the Bible offers to true Christians speaks about the God's heavenly government that will care for mankind actually, but it will an invisible rulership in the hands of Jesus Christ, son, -- God's son. And he will actually bless mankind and help mankind and rule over mankind. And we, as Christians, pray, therefore, that this kingdom, this government, may become a reality; therefore, "let your kingdom come." And this hope that all the other governments will finally be done away with and only God's ordership will exist, this is the hope of the kingdom which we mean.

THE INTERVIEWER: So, then, Jehovah's Witnesses put trust in this government and not the Nazi government.

MR. HAMANN: Right. And so this comes here into the picture, the two different -- well, two different governments or the superior kingdom of God and then the man-made government which contradicts, of course, the interests of the heavenly government of Jesus Christ.

THE INTERVIEWER: I see. Now, you said you were four years old when your father was picked up. Who was he picked up by? First of all, do you remember your mother talking about that, your father?

MR. HAMANN: No. Since it happened just that he didn't get home anymore from work. Since they captured him right away from the place of occupation by the, by one of the police cars, that was it. He did not come back home anymore. Me being four, my brother six years of age, and what I remember is later on that there was quite a lot of talking. Still, I mean, I was just four years old, but I remember not what was talk, but we went to the place of occupation with my mother, and there was a lot of discussion. And later on it was a situation, two years later about, that we were allowed to go with our mother to -- or rather my mother was allowed to go with us two children to meet my father in the prison, police prison in Dusseldorf. This was the time after he has finished his sentence of two years and three months. By the way, the reason was that he conducted forbidden meetings of Bible Students and continued to be one of Jehovah's Witnesses. And after that time we were allowed to meet him before he actually was taken to a concentration camp since the guardian, he was friendly with us, or with my father, and he believed that this was the last time he would see his, he would see the family.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. Now, you said your father --

MR. HAMANN: Now, I remember quite clearly the situation. And we were sitting in the prison room, and our father was entering the room, sitting. So, this is actually the first time I personally was confronted with such a situation.

THE INTERVIEWER: So, how did you feel as a young boy? You were six years old then by then?

MR. HAMANN: Four -- yeah, at that time six years.

THE INTERVIEWER: Six.

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, well, it's hard to remember now how I felt at that time. I just -- actually as children are, clinging to their father, but actually my mother did a good job with us to take away the feelings.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

MR. HAMANN: And she trained us, of course, according to the Bible and other all the other Witnesses. Today I know these have been Jehovah's Witnesses. To me these have been uncles and aunts, our association we had.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. How did your brother -- do you remember your brother's reaction at the time since he was just a couple years older than you?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, well, he felt more uncomfortable. That's to lie to say uncomfortable, but he was impressed badly very much or much more than me since he had a little bit more understanding. And I remember he did a lot of crying.

THE INTERVIEWER: Now, your father was sentenced for two years and three months to the penitentiary. Why didn't they release him at this time then? His sentence was over. Since he served his sentence --

MR. HAMANN: Yeah. They, at the close to the end of the time they had several trials on him and wanted to know whether he had changed his mind. And, of course, he --

THE INTERVIEWER: Changed his mind about what?

MR. HAMANN: About being -- not to be one of the Bible Students anymore, but to accept the Nazi government or to -- yeah, to accept and to be -- to introduce himself in the people's community, as they said. So, of course, he was -- didn't change his mind. He even was stronger in his faith due to the fact what he experienced since he knows that all followers of Jesus Christ will be persecuted. Then, exact -- he remembered one sentence that he said. I continue to my conviction. And that is he was at that time in the marshy place in a work camp in the Amslandmore in the north German area. There he was under this discussion or trial to find out his opinion. And since they did not -- it was not possible that he changed his mind or that they changed, yeah, that they changed his mind, he was brought to a penitentiary in Lingen. And then the SS tried it, even in smooth talking, relating he should think about his family, his wife, his children. And then since he did not give in, he even then signed the sentence, I continue through my -- I will be faithful to my conviction, and, if necessary, I will sign this even with my death. And so since they could not do anything in changing his mind, they said that he had to go to the concentration camp, the place never to come back except through the chimney.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. I have read where many times, even in these jails and penitentiaries, that people received very bad treatment there. Was that the case of your father, too?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, well, it's hard for me to express this even or -- also I didn't experience it, but now, being older, I feel more even about it than before. One of the drastic things was when he was put into concentration camp, that they also, this four SS guardians were talking to him and discussing with him why he is believing in Jehovah. And there, of course, he expressed himself again true, faithful to his conviction to believe in the Bible and being one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Actually, they hit him with fists several times and finally threw him out of the room, of the barraken, and then drove him back and forth and pushed him back again, hit with the, I guess you call it a truncheon or piece of rubber, a rubber stick, hit him over the head and back

and kicked him in the back. And with the boots they kicked at his shin bones and then threw him out again and shouting we will kill you and then out. He hardly could -- oh, one time in the barrack they also knocked with him his head several times at the wall. And then being kicked out again, he crawled, more or less, to the latrine, toilet area, where he hid himself for a short time. And later on he heard from the other prisoners that one of those guardians with a bloodhound was searching for him. Of course, this would have been the end, but they didn't find him due to other obligations they had to do at this time, so this was over. This was one of the treatments.

THE INTERVIEWER: So, he was hiding in a latrine in order to recuperate?

MR. HAMANN: Yes, from this moment. And then another situation that brings into actually another person, a brother-in-law of my father. His name is Dietrich Minderman. He was already in Sachsenhausen camp. And not being able to work anymore due to sickness and weakness, all those who were in such a situation too weak to work, they were put in this so-called isolation area. And there they had to stand the whole day from 6 in the morning until 6 in the evening, the time while the others had to work. So, they just had to stand in line, not to be allowed to move. And this is actually a hard treatment. And my father was there also six weeks. And he managed to be beside his brother-in-law. And he actually experienced his death beside him, that he actually then fell down due to weakness and he died there. And he had been in this, in Sachsenhausen, when I remember correctly, four years already. So this is a, of course, causing also from prisoner very deep feelings emotionally, but despite this, he stayed faithful there.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. To regress a little bit, did your father ever relate what it was like the first day he entered Sachsenhausen, what actually happened on that first day? Can you recall when -- how was he transported there, by train or by truck?

MR. HAMANN: When I remember from his, what he told us, he was transported there by truck. But I'm not very sure, but I guess, yes, by truck, especially from the penitentiary in Lingen to Sachsenhausen with stopovers, yes.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

MR. HAMANN: And being in the concentration camp, actually, he believed what they had told him, the place to go into, but never coming out again.

THE INTERVIEWER: They say many of the prisoners were shaven.

MR. HAMANN: Sure, they all were shaven. And what helped him much was the other imprisoned Witnesses already. Since they were put in one area, so they got encouragement by the endurance of the others. He was a newcomer in Sachsenhausen, and he brought in certain thoughts or messages from outside, I mean, to interchange of encouragement from the Bible. And they encouraged him. And so the other ones, imprisoned Witnesses, the company of them, of course, helped him very much.



THE INTERVIEWER: I see. So, he was placed in with others who were Jehovah's Witnesses.

MR. HAMANN: Who were already there, yes.

THE INTERVIEWER: They sort of kept them isolated from the other groups?

MR. HAMANN: Yes, since Jehovah's Witnesses were at that time viewed as the most dangerous people, since within the camp of Sachsenhausen there was a special camp. And all the Witnesses were put in this. This was even behind a fence again, a camp within the camp. The time before he was in the concentration camp, he was in cells in various prisons put together with some other criminals, but he told me once that he requested even to get a single cell for himself since he wouldn't like to be together with the criminals. So, he experienced also a certain time to being in prison just for himself, which was very, very bad for him, too, but still better than having bad company, so to speak. But in the concentration camp, the Jehovah's Witnesses were mostly put together. But, on the other hand, it does not mean that there were only Witnesses in the same barracks. There were some others, too, but the Witnesses were put into barracks with then others for a certain time and then also for a certain time later on they were just for themselves.

THE INTERVIEWER: Did your father ever experience the mistreatment of other prisoners, like the Jewish people or Gypsies or did he ever relate some of that?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah. He related me one experience that one of the Jehovah's Witnesses, he should sign to resign his faith, and they made a special point out of it since this -- we call him a brother, one of Jehovah's Witnesses; it's August Dickman. I hope that I remember the first name correct. At least Dickman was a family name. I guess it was August Dickman, yes. And while all prisoners of Sachsenhausen were standing there on the public square within the camp, they should experience this, and they tried to make the mind of Jehovah's Witnesses change. And they shot him to death after he was allowed to publicize why he is one of Jehovah's Witnesses. And this is what he experienced, too. And they told all of Jehovah's Witnesses would be shot to death if they wouldn't sign. And they were invited, person by person, to sign a letter that they renounce their faith, but actually none did so. But one newly -- new -- newly -- one of the Witnesses who just was imprisoned couple of days, he was not spiritually strong enough, so he had signed this letter, but experiencing this, he went there and changed his signature again. So, he cut it out. So, none of them actually signed. This was one of the things he experienced beside the other normal things when the prisoners were hit or were trampled on or when some others were put to a place where they all knew they will be shot or -- what was he -- one experience. Let me just think. Once my father was thrown into a about six-meter deep water basin by one of the SS people just because he--there was a place in the road which was not so clean. And one of his assignment for a certain time was to clean the waste of the road within the camp. And they found some item there, and they asked for him. And then they hit him, kicked him, and threw him into the water basin, the reason was to drown. But he could swim, and after a while he made it to come out after he was left there for a while. So, this was also one of the bad treatments.

Speak maybe even, speaking about the time before the concentration camp when he was in two different work camps, in Walsum and Nyslestrom, the marshy area or morlager, as they say in German. There all the prisoners had to dig in the ground in order to change the marshy places into, later on, agricultural soil. They had to dig there day by day, whether hot or cold, or even wintertime, 20 square meters ground to change it completely, so they get the lower part with the upper ones. And there they were treated very badly, too, when they just stopped working or whatever.

THE INTERVIEWER: Now, these were German soldiers or German guards treating fellow German people. Was this a little bit hard for your father to understand? How could Germans, who were brought up in the same land together --

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, well, that's -- I really cannot explain this, why it is. It just was at that time so. And the whole situation that the German government, they thought they are the higher class people and everyone who did not accept them had either to work for them or to be put actually to death or -- so, this once being in such a situation, I just, I guess the prisoners like my father, they just had to accept the situation as it is, and not so much to think about how can it be that a German would treat a German like that since these feelings were completely cut off, even from the SS people. They were just like automats. Maybe, I do not know, without feelings.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. In Sachsenhausen, what was your father's main job? Did they give him a specific assignment, or did it change from time to time?

MR. HAMANN: The very first time he had to clean the roads as I said. And afterwards, the last time, I do not know the last year, probably, he had a better treatment since he was allowed to work in the kitchen for the SS guardians, first of all to clean the dishes there, to serve. Being a confectioner, it was, in a way, in his way, to do something. And he even finally was allowed to cook for the SS guardians. So, this gave him a chance to have it a little bit lighter, as well as I recall that he, in this position, being then in the kitchen for the SS people, that he could do something for the other Witnesses of Jehovah in -- by risk of his life, of course, to take away some of the food to arrange it that the others got some pieces of bread or whatever.

THE INTERVIEWER: You mean he was willing to risk his own life to take them food?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, since he was in the kitchen and could do so. And to my mind it does not fit chronological now in the story, but I remember that my father told also there was one area where the SS put their food they did not eat anymore into pots for garbage. And there was one time or there was one place when he cleaned or cleansed the roads, that he just quickly looked into these big pots of the garbage, and when he had found some items eatable, like pieces of bread or so, he took it out and hid it. And when he was at a certain place, this was more or less right close to the watchtower of the SS guardians. There was one angle they could not look into, one tiny little angle, and so the prisoners knew that. And there my father had dug in the ground a little pot and placed the pieces of bread in there. And whenever it was necessary for him or when he had such a great hunger that he was cleaning there this road, he just took away some of

these items he had hid for himself or for the brothers. And so this was the way he did. And he said he never, never would have would have thought that he ever would eat from garbage of other people, but at that time it was like delicious to him.

THE INTERVIEWER: What year was your -- oh, go ahead, please.

MR. HAMANN: Yeah. Once I remember -- not I remember. My father told me that he remembers that his brother, Otto, who was also in the concentration camp --

THE INTERVIEWER: Oh, they were together.

MR. HAMANN: Not together, no. His brother, Otto, he was in Sachsenhausen before my father. Either they were overlapping a couple of weeks, but right when my father came into, a relatively short time he left. So, I'm not very sure whether my father experienced it himself or whether he was, just got it related by others that my Uncle Otto, his older brother, the one who introduced the Bible truth to him, that he was hit on the -- how do they call this instrument called a bock where the prisoner was bound and they turned then the back part upward. And he got 25 above his -- upon his back part. I guess my father experienced it before he -- my Uncle Otto was sent into another concentration camp. Guess it was Feevlesbrook where he went or was transported then. So, such things, of course, were things he experienced himself or saw what happened there.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. If your father was in Sachsenhausen, did he experience, then, what they call the death march?

MR. HAMANN: Yes, he did. He, explaining in few words, they were told all together at the concentration camp Sachsenhausen they would be sent to another camp. And then day and night they arranged certain troops of the prisoners and they marched out. And at that time 230 Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in Sachsenhausen. And they belonged to the relatively last group. They left under the leadership of the SS guardians there. They were leaving Sachsenhausen, direction north. Of course, they -- what was known later, they should reach the North Sea -- not the North Sea, the East Sea, the Oste, where they should be put on boats and the boats were made to sink to bombard or shoot them so that the prisoners were killed in this way. This was the destiny and as far as I know, even quite some were put to death in this way. But the 230 Witnesses, they were the relatively last group who left Sachsenhausen. And they marched day and night for, I guess it were 16 or 19 hours the very first time, all through being too weak. And I asked my father how they could make it being so weak from the imprisonment to march such a long time. Well, he said it was not really like marching. It was more like -- well, I don't know the English term for it, just moving slowly, one feet before the other. They arranged it to sleep at night and under open sky or in woods and so on, but always guarded by the watchmen. And then the last night, actually this was close to Shwerlin, they -- all the prisoners of Sachsenhausen or at least many thousands within wooden area or forest. And the brothers, or let me say the Witnesses, we call them, as you know, call ourselves brothers, they kept always close together. And one thing I like to mention before that. There was one wagon, a flat wagon, with

four wheels. And it was pulled or dragged and pushed by prisoners. This wagon was used for the diamonds and the gold the SS guardians had selected. For instance, the gold from the teeth of the prisoners they were put to death. The gold in the teeth were pulled out and collected. And so it was quite a amount of jewelry and such things. And the SS people wanted to take this along. And, of course, only Jehovah's Witnesses were trustworthy ones, so they got the assignment to pull these wagon and on the wagon where all the boxes with these material. And there was one brother, his name is Winkler, I guess August Winkler. I don't know his first name exactly. Later on he was in Switzerland, I guess, in a branch office of the Watchtower Society working. Arthur Winkler, Arthur was his name, Arthur Winkler. He was so sick he would never have made it, the march, the so-called death march. So, what they did, there was one brother, Zaylieger was his name, my father told me. And he was working in the barrack where the sick people were. And he managed in the last minute, so to speak, to take him out there. And the Witnesses, they placed him on this wagon between the boxes and covered this with certain things, so that no one, just the brothers knew, that there's a person laying on this car. And this was the way they dragged him all the way until Shwerlin on this wagon. So, actually none of the 230 Witnesses was left in the concentration camp. And they took him along and he survived, too, the time, but only through the help of the other prisoners. And, of course, it was under the risk of their life, too, since if the SS would have realized that, they would have got a bad treatment or would even have been killed or whatever. So, back to this forest, the Witnesses stayed together as they always, always did. And the problem was there nothing to eat nothing, to drink. And the worst thing was not having anything to drink. So, what they did, my father was sent by the brothers -- it was relatively a large forest -- look for water, pond or whatever. He didn't find anything. And he returned and said, well, what shall we do. And what they did, with spoons and little pots of whatever they had, they crushed the ground and believe it or not, but he said six-meter meter deep it was sand, sandy ground, not rocky ground. So, they dug in the ground about six meter deep until they found some water. And this actually was the reason that they could survive then. Each and everyone got a sip. They stayed there for a couple of days in this forest, since meanwhile the American troops were coming from the west and the Russian troops from the east. And then finally they realized the SS guardians were just gone. So, they spoke a prayer what to do. The other prisoners, they just camped there, continued to camp there. Some, of course, they may have fled. The Witnesses stayed there, first of all, discussing what to do. And finally they came to the conclusion they should leave as one group. So, they left this forest. Outward they marched away from there. And, as it was, no later than two hours after this the SS people came back and circled the whole forest and shot down by machine guns everyone there. So, this was actually the way the brothers escaped. And then they did not reach the North -- the East Sea yet. So they actually were in the hands, then, of the allied forces.

THE INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. All right. Now, to go back to the time when your father was in Sachsenhausen, your mother evidently was not sent to a prison.

MR. HAMANN: No, she was not. She -- I remember that quite often specially trained women from the government came to see us. They searched our homes several times for literature and for everything. And my mother, she should go to the factories to make munition and such

things. She refused. And we, of course, the children were there and this was one of the -- most likely one of her excuses. I don't remember what the debates she had. But she made it, she arranged it then differently since at that time even the schools were closed in Dusseldorf. The children should be sent to other areas due to the bombing, even, of the city, or they should be trained according to the German government. And so my mother, she arranged that my brother was taken by one of Jehovah's Witnesses in Magdeburg, both my brother and me have been born in Magdeburg, so there were relations to that city. And my brother was sent to Magdeburg being with a family, it was one of Jehovah's Witnesses, a sister call Lotta Schiepner, Lotta Schieber, I guess. I remember the name not correctly. I personally was sent by my mother to my aunt in Bavaria in Germany. They were not Jehovah's Witnesses. It was a strong Catholic family, but, anyway, I was away from Dusseldorf. So, my mother was then just for herself. She had to care for the living, anyway. And she was then quite often not at home, seeing her relatives, her sisters, like in traveling to Thuringia where she worked there in -- two of my uncles had a bakery. She worked there in the bakery in order to make some money for us, for herself. So, quite often when she was looked -- when they looked for her, she was not there in Dusseldorf. And so back and forth, she -- they did not actually get hold of her or on her. And then my brother got homesick, so my mother took my other brother to -- for herself again. So, they stayed for a couple of months then in Thuringia. Also we had our home in Dusseldorf. I, myself, I just experienced through being truly homesick for one week, but I overcame that due to the good treatment of my relatives in Bavaria close to Inganstach in Furing, it was. But then came a situation, it was in a village, coming from a city, of course, being in a village school, you are the better one, better-trained one. And then one time, a special -- two or three people came from the government. They searched all the classes through, and they looked for people for the Adolph Hitler Schule or the -- how do you call it -- the NAPOLAR, the National Political Education Center. They want to have some to be trained there. And they selected young boys who looked like true Aryan people, blue eyes, blond hair and so on, which I was blond at that time, had blue eyes. So, I was a chosen one. So, what they asked me, they would like to send me to this special school as a great privilege. I wrote down, wrote to my mom what was happening. She didn't answer the letter. She just used the next train, took me away from there.

THE INTERVIEWER: So, she was willing to risk her life?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, not really to risk her life. She could do so, but I mean, this was really the best thing she could do, not to have a lot of discussion, just to take me away from this village, so I'm not available there anymore. And I really owe my mother even due to this in life here.

THE INTERVIEWER: And how old were you at that time, then?

MR. HAMANN: It was nine or ten years I should go to the Hitler unit. Of course, even later on then when we were together, my brother, myself, and my mother, we stayed into Thuringia there since Dusseldorf schools were closed, and it was too dangerous for my mother to stay in Dusseldorf, we stayed in Thuringia where she cared for us working in the bakery. There, of course, they always tried to talk us into the Hitler unit. My brother being two years older from

ten years on, you had to be in the Hitler unit. My brother managed it, he was weak and sickly, always due to certain tests from the doctor that he was not in a position to do that. And I, myself, knowing that my father was imprisoned, I knew the background, of course, at that time very definitely. I just used several excuses that I didn't go yet and so on. And so it was we managed it at least although we should have -- I should have been in the Hitler unit at least for one year, we managed it not to be anytime a member of that.

THE INTERVIEWER: How did you -- your family feel when you saw your father coming home? When was that? Do you remember the --

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, actually, I cannot say that he came home, since from Shwerlin, some of the Witnesses, they formed a so-called trek. They used just lost horses and some wagons, put items together, and marched toward west; that is, the nation supposed to be first of all Magdeburg where these people's house was or which is a center of the Watchtower Society at that time. But the Russian troops hindered them actually, and so they directed it to go to western, to the western part. So, it happened actually that they, on their way, ended up in the Weisserbackland and the Weisser, it's a river area, part of West Farlika, and there was a home of one of the brothers being together. And their desire was just to start the preaching campaign again. This they even did in Shwerlin, with having still their clothes of imprisonment.

THE INTERVIEWER: Concentration camp uniforms?

MR. HAMANN: Concentration camp uniforms. They went there even from house to house with one Bible they got preaching. And so you imagine being imprisoned with -- for this purpose, for Jehovah's name. They, of course, must have made a promise to Jehovah whenever they come out only to -- or to do everything in for his honor and to preach out of appreciation. So, this was foremost in their eyes, the preaching activity. Then, meanwhile, there was a borderline drawn in Germany, east and west. My mother, my brother, and me, we were in the eastern part; my father in the western part. And, first of all, we did not know at all where our father was.

THE INTERVIEWER: Or even if he was alive.

MR. HAMANN: No, nothing. As we heard later, he went to Dusseldorf. Just realizing that the home was bombed out, nothing anymore, so he just waited there together with the other brothers in the Weisserbackland area and started to preach and to give talks and encouragement forming congregations. And finally we got from -- we got message from him, it was not so easy due to the borderline, that he is there. So, he didn't come to the eastern area, but we decided -- this means my mother decided -- to come to the western area. So, at that time I met once my Uncle Otto. He was alive. He visited us there and he arranged actually that we then, by means of guardians and spies, came through the so-called green border by night in November time, everything frozen. I remember that very well. We walked for three or four hours through fields and woods and through graveyards, whatever secret ways in order not to be caught by the Russians, and then partially crawling over the borderline and then on open wagons or -- so trucks

and the -- from the train actually. At that time there was no other transport. We traveled and met, then in -- we arrived in Minden, Westfarn, or the next station, Port of West Farlika. And this inn house, bearer, it's the place where we finally met our father.

THE INTERVIEWER: What type of reunion was it?

MR. HAMANN: Hard to describe. Well, to me, I, of course, did not have such a close feeling anymore to my father. I knew his handwriting. I knew his letters when he -- then in a while was allowed to write a few lines, but, well, happy, but strange, you can imagine after, eight years. Four years, when he left, now eleven years when I saw him. And the first time, of course I knew it's my father, but there was no -- not a close feeling anymore. It was for me like an uncle. And when some things needed to be done, more or less, we listened more to the word of our mother, of course, since she did all the years, the training, there was a close relationship. With my mother, I cannot, of course, explain her feelings when she met him, but, well, because of time, it was not easy, I would say, to start to have a true family life again, since this imprisonment had made my father relatively hard, deadening a lot of feelings and all this treatment. By the way, I have one picture here at the time of the year 1945, the last -- the one which was made maybe several months after his release. It's a small one, just a pass photo, but it shows probably the difference to the time before that time which was here (indicating).

THE INTERVIEWER: You mean, the one was before and one was after?

MR. HAMANN: Yeah. I mean, this was relatively long time before. This was 1926, seven years before imprisonment. But this was one year after imprisonment here (indicating).

THE INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MR. HAMANN: By the way, I mentioned this brother-in-law of my father, Dietrich Minderman. And I mentioned Otto Hamann, his brother, both being in Sachsenhausen. There's another one, Hans Hamann is another brother of my father. He also was imprisoned and actually put to death in Sachsenhausen, I guess, yes, in Sachsen -- I guess in Sachsenhausen. I couldn't really read it. He actually starved to death there. And this, I have here a photo of all four of them. This means from left to right, this is Walter Hamann, my father. Next one is Hans Hamann, his brother or my uncle who has died in concentration camp. The third one is Dietrich Minderman, the brother-in-law to my father. He's the one who died beside my father in concentration camp Sachsenhausen, what I mentioned before, being in the isolation, standing there for weeks, the whole day. And the fourth one is my Uncle Otto, the brother of my father (indicating). He was imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp or in various ones, all together nine years or maybe even ten years. Later on he was released. He was working as a -- or serving as we call it, a circuit servant in East Germany for several time. This means he traveled to the various congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses giving talks and encouragement and so on. Later on he was caught by the East German government and imprisoned again for ten years. So, all together ten years under Nazi government, ten years under east communistic government, all together 20 years imprisonment. Finally, most of these time in East Germany he spent in the

Penitentiary Brandenburg close to Berlin. When he was released after these imprisonment, then he lived about eight years, but very sick, very, very sick. And finally he died. So, this is the history of these four belonging to one family. And all together, if you calculate the time they have spent imprisonment, it's all together 41 years.

THE INTERVIEWER: There are people today who say this really didn't happen, that maybe the Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses and Gypsies are exaggerating these things.

MR. HAMANN: Yeah, well, I guess I know even work colleagues of mine, they had such thoughts, but it cannot be denied anymore. Proofs are there. The camps are there and the testimony of those who experienced it. Well, it's just a matter of fact that is not exaggerated. I don't know that -- for instance, my father was imprisoned. I could just tell it and everyone who sees this film may believe it or may not believe it, but for instance, here are some of the letters. Maybe this is a kind of proof. That is dated -- let me see -- it's dated of the 11th of June 1944. This is the letter, photocopy of the letter sent to Ortelia Hamann (indicating). That's my mother. Normally, the prisoners were allowed to write one time per month a letter, but those who stayed faithful to their convictions as Jehovah's Witnesses, they were not privileged to write once per month. They were allowed only to write every three months just six lines. And this is what I can show you here since this is the outward part of the letter. And this is the actual letter, six lines. This means five lines inclusive. And this stamp here proves and it says actually in translation that due to the fact that Walter Hamann here still continues to believe in Jehovah and not to renounce his faith, therefore the privilege of writing more is taken away from him. But one thing this showed to my mother at that time, he remains faithful. And this was the most important point at that time. Since probably being released due to signing, what life would it have been. It would not at all have been a happy life anymore for my father.

THE INTERVIEWER: Well, today, then, you've come a long way since that period of time. Are you married now?

MR. HAMANN: No. I'm not married. I'm living for myself right now.

THE INTERVIEWER: And what type of work do you do personally?

MR. HAMANN: Well, I'm learned, first of all, the occupation as a typesetter. Later on, I spent quite some years in the full-time missionary work of Jehovah's Witnesses. And after that, I did not continue in my original occupation. Now I'm working for an airline and especially caring for the crews of an airline. This means in operation and crew scheduling. This is what I'm doing right now.

THE INTERVIEWER: I see. No doubt since the end of World War II you've spent some happy years with your parents?

MR. HAMANN: Sure, yeah. I mean, the first time my father actually when we are the family together, he was traveling, too. He was quite often not at home, probably only on weekends or



maybe once per month and a weekend since he was serving, as we call it, a circuit overseer for quite some years. This means he was traveling to other congregations to other cities encouraging the brothers, giving talks and actually forming new congregations, establishing the -- yeah, establishing the -- or reorganization, we might say, after the World War II, since it was everywhere due to the preaching activity, it was planning spiritually speaking, and he took an active part in that until finally others were available, younger ones, so that he could stay home and care for his family.

THE INTERVIEWER: Well, we'd like to thank you very much. The United States Holocaust Museum would like to express their appreciation to you for sharing part of your life experience and that of your father and your mother, as well. Thank you very kindly.

MR. HAMANN: You're welcome. Privilege -- I appreciate also the privilege to be used in this way, at least to speak here in behalf of my father, more or less. Of course, a lot of more things he could have related in even more details, but this is just an excerpt of what he told me, what he wrote down, and what I remember. So, being interviewed so suddenly --

THE INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much.

MR. HAMANN: You're welcome.