

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Jerry von Halle
June 26, 1990
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PREFACE

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JERRY VON HALLE

June 26, 1990

01:00:00

Q: Good Afternoon. Would you please tell me, for the record, your name, your date of birth and your place of birth?

A: Well my name was Gerd G-E-R-D Sigmund(ph) von Halle. Was born on December 2, 1922, in Hamburg, Germany.

Q: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

A: I had one brother and his name was Hans Jürgen(ph), and he was 1 year and nine months older than I was.

Q: And what was your father's occupation?

A: My father's occupation – he was an architect, specializing in building department stores in Hamburg.

Q: Would you tell me a little bit about your childhood while you were in Hamburg?

A: Well, it was a very pleasant time. My father was doing rather well as an architect. We lived in a upper middle class neighborhood in Hamburg. We went to public schools there, and life was, was pretty nice although I understand when I was a baby, of course – this was still – we're talking about 1922, '23, there was, they had it was at the end of World War I and the inflation I understand from my mother that they bought a bottle of milk for a million marks and so on, so times were not that easy when I was a baby, but I don't remember that. And we went to public school, went to what they call Oberrealschule¹, which you would call here a junior high school. And then Hitler well, of course, in 1930 and '31 and '32, Hitler became more popular and things became more difficult for the Jews although I was still a young child and not quite aware of everything that was going on. In 1933, Hitler came to power as Chancellor and then, of course, things changed very dramatically. I still remember being in junior high school as an 11 year old and we had to learn how to give the Hitler salute.

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So here we were marching around in the gymnasium giving the Hitler salute in the proper fashion. And whenever there was a holiday every house had to display a flag. It was either the swastika flag or the German flag and we didn't display either one of them, but then we were told that we had to and so my father went out and he bought the German flag black, red and gold flag, and so we displayed that on the balcony and my father was very much aware that there was no future for us. So since he had a sister married to a Dutchman in

¹ Technical high school (German)

Amsterdam, he decided to move to Amsterdam. Furthermore, although we had been thinking in terms of going to America, but America in 1933 wasn't exactly streets weren't lined with gold and I think America didn't need a German architect at that particular time, so we moved to Amsterdam. Amsterdam in those days was an absolutely delightful place to live. I would say probably one of the most wonderful times of my life I've spent in Amsterdam as a young man. It was a very quiet, easy going lifestyle. The Dutch were delightful people. Everything went very slowly. Everything was very neat. Everything was very clean. And so there we, we went to school even though when we arrived there the Dutch schools were way ahead of the German schools and so I was – and both my brother and I, we were both put back one class so we were put back one grade. Holland, as I said, was, was delightful uneventful to a degree and, and we were not – and of course, the war clouds started gathering in the late '30s. And we were not too much worried about Holland being – becoming involved in the war because in the last war, that is, World War I, Holland was neutral. And for whatever reason – I can't give you the reason, but for whatever reason, we felt and the Dutch people felt that because we were neutral in World War I we probably will remain neutral in World War II. Needless to say, that did not turn out to be true and in May of 1940 the German army moved into Holland and the war really was over before it even began because the whole Dutch army had to capitulate within a period of four or five days that we were no match for the German army who came in with a tremendous amount of air power etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

01:07:00

Being a Jew, of course, that was a very, very unsettling time for us. We didn't know what to expect. We saw the German army marching through the streets. For the first time in my life, I see the green uniforms which was the uniform of the Gestapo. I'd never seen that before, and they marched through the streets, and to be very honest, we were quite frightened by all of this. As it turned out, the first year of the occupation was completely uneventful. The Germans in that first year of occupation behaved almost unbelievably gentleman-like. They didn't bother anybody. There were no real problems. Until one day, a group of young Jews were arrested in Amsterdam just haphazardly. They were just taken off the street. There was no reason for it. And they were arrested. And then followed by about a month or so later, there was – I don't know whether it's exactly the way it happened, but there was an explosion in a German officer's club. Now whether it was an explosion or somebody let the soup boil over or whatever happened, I don't know what happened, but they decided to arrest 225 young German Jews. Not Dutch Jews, German Jews. And so one night I was coming home. I came home around four o'clock. My brother was working, learning the metals trade, and my brother came home about I would say around five-thirty. We lived on the ground floor in Amsterdam and our bicycles were outside on the window, so people knew that we were home.

01:10:00

And the door bell rang, and I never gave it a second thought and I walked up to the front door, opened up the door, and two men in brown leather coats pushed their way past me,

went into the living room, and came out with a list and they asked me whether anybody by the name of Hans Jürgen(ph) von Halle lived here. Well, my brother was in the back room and truthfully, I didn't know what to say, and before I could say anything my brother came out of the back room and he wanted to know what was going on and they turned to him and said, "What's your name?" And he said, "My name is Hans Jürgen(ph) von Halle."

01:11:00

And then they said, "Is there a Gerd Carl von Halle here?" I said, "No." They said, "What's your name." I said, "My name is Gerd Sigmund von Halle." They said, "Well, that must be the same one." So they put us under arrest and they pushed us out the front door just the way we were. We did not have time to say goodbye to our parents. And they marched us from our house to the Gestapo headquarters in Amsterdam. Now when I say they marched us, we were not handcuffed. We were just – my brother and I were just walking there individually, and these two Gestapo agents in their leather coats just followed behind about – I don't know – 20 feet behind, and all they did is tell us turn right, turn left, straight ahead. And so that if you had passed us by on the street, you would never in a million years would you have known that these two young boys were under arrest. And we arrived at Gestapo headquarters, oh, I would say around five-thirty, six o'clock. And we were one of the last to arrive, and when I looked around I saw practically all of my friends were there. There were 226 young German Jews all lined up in that Gestapo headquarters which was a former girls school.

01:13:00

And we were lined up down in the basement, and we were shouted at and yelled at and, you know, we had to stand at attention. And we stood at attention from six o'clock until about midnight. And we weren't allowed to talk. We weren't allowed to move. We weren't allowed to go to the bathroom. And around midnight the commandant of the Gestapo headquarters stepped forward and said, "Is there anybody here who has a serious and I mean serious illness to report?" And he explained that anybody who would be fooling him, he explained what the drastic consequences of that would be. My brother, who was standing next to me, pushed me sort of with his elbow and said, "Step forward." and I whispered back to him, I said, "What can I, what can I talk about?" It so turned out as a child I was, I was not one of the strongest kids on the block. I suffered a great deal from bronchitis which 5,000,000 other people suffer from, and my brother said to me, "Tell him you have TB²" I never had TB in my life, thank goodness. And I was very, very, very reluctant to step forward because I was afraid of the consequences because they told me what the consequences would be if you lied. But he sort of insisted on it, and since he was my older brother by a year and almost two years, I stepped forward and I had to go into he took me into a room and he says, "What's the matter with you?" And I said to him, "I suffer from TB" And that's all he wanted to know and I – he – I had to step back in line. As it turned out, there was – I said to you there was 220 – there was 226 young German Jews there. And the order was to arrest these

² tuberculosis

Jews between the ages of 16 and 21. Now, this – there was one kid in this group of 226 who happened to be 15, and in typical German fashion when the order said 16 to 21, you only take people 16 to 21. This kid was 15 and, therefore, around midnight or thereabout, he was dismissed. The kid happened to be not a friend of mine, but he knew me. And he went directly from Gestapo headquarters to my parents' home, told my parents what he saw. My parents could only put two and two together and surmised that probably what I told them that I suffer from TB. They in turn went to my family physician, a Jewish Dutchman doctor by the name of Dr. Hertzberger. Dr. Hertzberger, when my parents told him what had happened wrote out a certificate which I gave to the museum, which states that I am suffering from TB. Now, so we're here now back in the Gestapo headquarters in the basement and around midnight or 1 o'clock in the morning we were transported from Amsterdam in buses to a camp called Schoorl. That's spelled S-C-H-O-O-R-L, which is near Alkmaar in North Holland.

01:18:00

This was a camp surrounded and protected by the Gestapo. And we stayed there for approximately, oh, I would say, somewhere in the neighborhood of six to eight weeks. Our treatment now certainly wasn't good but it wasn't brutal to the degree that you know, we learned later on what happened in concentration camps. We were subjected to all the harassment and so on, but nobody was killed there. One day I was called into the commandant's office, and as I went into the office I snapped at attention and in front of his desk and I looked down on his desk and I saw a letter. I could see it even though it was upside down. I could see it was a letter of Dr. Hertzberger. And the commandant says to me, "What's wrong with you?" And I said to him, "I suffer from TB." And this man seemed to be the kind of individual that certainly did not want to be in the presence of anybody who had a contagious disease and he said to me, "Get out of here and get and get out of the camp immediately." So I ran back to my barracks. I said goodbye to my brother who was with me there, and I was released that day. And now there were 224 boys left. These 224 boys that same day were sent from this local concentration camp to probably one of the most infamous concentration camps of all called Mauthausen in Austria. I came back from camp. I arrived, I had no money. I hitchhiked my way back to Amsterdam from there, and I was very, very busy going around seeing all of the parents of my friends who had been there and telling everybody that everybody was doing well under the circumstances etcetera, etcetera. We received a card from my brother from the concentration camp Mauthausen which is – now remember, we're talking about the year 1941. That was in the early part of the war. We received a letter, a post card from him, which was a sort of a printed post card. It just said, "I," then he filled in his name, "Hans Jürgen von Halle, born May 7th, 1921, am in concentration camp Mauthausen as of such and such a date as prisoner number so and so in barrack number so and so, etcetera." Now it was very unusual to receive a letter like this, but the reason why we received it because as I said before, it was still 1941. We also received two letters from him. The letters I also gave to the Holocaust Museum. We were not a sentimental family. Somehow we were brought up in the – I don't know how to put it. In the – well we were not brought up sentimentally. And when we saw the letter with my brother which started off – he wrote in German because they had to pass the, the what do you call it?

The censor. He wrote in German, "Liebe, liebe, Eltern,"³ "Dear, dear parents." Now that is not the way my brother would speak. He does not say, "Dear, dear parent." That is not his language. And that was not my language. And then he goes through the letter and in the letter you can see – when you read the letter, you can see the absolutely desperation that these boys were in, that he was in. We received two letters and that was it. Shortly after the last letter arrived, I got a – I don't remember whether it was a call or a notice from the Gestapo headquarters in Amsterdam that somebody from the family had to report to Gestapo headquarters.

01:24:00

And my parents wanted to go and I didn't allow them to go and I went there. And what happened is they showed us a list of all 224 boys. Everyone of them had died of "pneumonia" quote unquote. Needless to say, from what I understand Mauthausen was one of the most cruel concentration camps. They didn't have a gas chamber. They didn't have to have a gas chamber. This was a stone quarry, and from what I understand these boys were just lined up at the top of the quarry and just pushed down into the quarry which was – whatever it was, a hundred feet lower below and just pushed to their death. Very efficient way of killing people without bullets, without gas, without anything. Well, I came back home and this was probably one of the most difficult things for me to tell my parents that their – let's see, my brother was maybe 21 or 20, he was 20 – that their 20 year old son, six foot tall, broad shoulders, never been sick in his life, had died of pneumonia. My, my mother who was the strong party in the family stood up very well. My father absolutely disintegrated. He absolutely disintegrated about the news. Couldn't take it. Couldn't hack it. And my mother really sort of was the, as you might say, the Starke⁴. And so that was the first chapter in the story. We then – 1941 – we then continued things – after that, things moved quickly. We were of course Jews were not allowed to go on the street car. Jews were not allowed to have radios. You had to turn them in. Jews weren't allowed to have silver. You had to turn them in.

01:27:00

Then came the yellow star. Everybody had to wear the yellow star. And I'll tell you quite frankly, wearing a yellow star, even though I was certainly very proud to be a Jew, but going out into the street with a star about the size this big with the word Jew or in Dutch Jood⁵, J-O-O-D, printed on it is a very, very strange feeling. Very strange indeed. It's not the kind of a thing that, if you've never experienced it, it's like going on the street today and saying I have, you know, I'm a prisoner or going out on the street with a prison uniform. It's almost the same comparison. More arrests and more arrests and more arrests and before you knew it, these friends were taken prisoners and these friends were taken prisoners. In the meantime, in order to be able to escape from deportation, I took a job learning the

³ Dear, dear Parents (German)

⁴ Strong (German)

⁵ Jew (Dutch)

shoemaker's trade. You were becoming a shoemaker to the Jewish population and for a limited period of time that exempted you from being deported, so I became a shoemaker. And realizing, of course, that this was strictly a limited kind of thing. This was not going to be anything of longstanding and I one day, I said to my parents, "This can't go on. There are too many people have been arrested. Our turn, if it's not today, it will be tomorrow. If it's not tomorrow, it will be next week. We have to get out of here." And so we decided one day, actually from one day to the next we decided to leave our house. And I want you to know that we just left the house just the way it was, with the pictures on the walls and the food in the refrigerator and the clothes in the closet and, and, and nothing was taken. The only thing we did is we gave the key to our apartment to one of our neighbors who we knew and trusted and these were two ladies which I will come back to later on in my story.

01:30:00

And they had a key to the apartment. But we just left. I only attended college for one year. And one of the college professors. His name was Mr. In't Hout, I-N-apostrophe-T H-O-U-T. In't Hout, that was his name. I called him and I told him what our situation was. And without blinking an eye, without hesitating for one minute, he says, "Come right over." And so we walked out of the apartment and we went to Mr. In't Hout's apartment and it was just a small – was a family of four, a husband and wife and two children, a boy and girl about my age. And there was no room for three people. There were only two – it was, it was a three-bedroom apartment and one room was occupied by the parents and one room was occupied by the girl and one room was occupied by the boy, and what they did is they put the boy and the girl together in one room and gave me the third room and their brother-in-law took my parents. Now the problem was, now that we are no longer officially in residence in our regular home, we now no longer have access to rationing cards. Rationing cards is the lifeline to food. And these two ladies who were living above us, they belonged to the Dutch underground, and they supplied us with rationing cards. And so we stayed in that my parents at the in-laws, in the brother-in-law's house and I in Mr. In't Hout's house. We stayed for a couple of months 'til they found a quote permanent residence for us, which was on a farm house in the south of Holland, a small village maybe couple of hundred people in the whole village. The name of the village was Alrijksdaal(ph). A small town not known for anything except they make church bells. We went to Alrijksdaal(ph), and we went to this farm house and it was a great relief because whereas in Amsterdam we had to stay within this one room, in the farm house at night at least, I could go out into the garden and so on and walk around in the middle of the night. And everything was pretty pleasant there 'til one day a Mr. and Mrs. Kahn(ph) arrived also, another Jewish couple. And Mr. Kahn(ph) was a very nice little gentlemen. You might call him in English, in the American slang, you might call him, he was a milky toast. A nothing individual. Very nice, lovely person. His wife, the exact opposite. His wife was a beautiful lady, a tremendous flirt, and before you turned around, she took up an affair with the farmer who had a wife who had children. And I guess the farmer's wife was not quite happy about the situation. And in desperation when to the authorities and told them that there were Jews in there – in this house. Unbeknown to us, of course. And so one night we were sitting at the dinner table, which was downstairs, facing the street and as I'm looking out the window, I all of a sudden see a small car, small German

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army car pulling up with four German Gestapo agents jumping out of the car and running into the house. Well, as we saw the car arriving, we, everybody went different ways. My father went up into the attic. Mrs. Kahn(ph) went out the back door into the woods. Mr. Kahn(ph) went into the bedroom, in his bedroom. My mother went into our bedroom and hid in a closet, and I went into a toilet and behind the toilet there was a little ledge and I sort of crouched behind the ledge. And before I even could turn around I could hear the Gestapo agent arresting my father because I could hear him talking to my father. And Mr. Kahn(ph) was arrested immediately. And the farmer was arrested.

01:36:05

So what they did is they took all of the suitcases from Mrs. Kahn(ph), Mr. and Mrs. Kahn(ph) and they put them into our bedroom. And our suitcases were in the bedroom. And they put the suitcases all in front of my mother's closet where she was hiding. And every closet in the house was opened up except that one closet. Why? Because they themselves barricaded that one closet and so that was the reason why they didn't get in there. They left with the prisoners, with my father, Mr. Kahn(ph) and the and the farmer, and they sealed the room. They sealed the room in which my mother was hiding. They put a wax seal on it and they said they would be back two hours later to get, to get the goodies. And as soon as they left, I got out of my closet, out of my little hiding place in the, in the toilet and I spoke to my mother over the phone. And I'll tell you quite frankly in all my life I have never made a more difficult decision than I did at that point. My mother came out of the closet and we are now discussing what to do next. We couldn't get out of the house because the house was surrounded. If there were 200 families – if there were 200 people in the, in the village, I think all 200 hundred were standing around the house. So there was no way to get her out through the window or anything like that. Beside the window was up on the second floor. So the question was really should you stay in the closet or should you go under the bed. That was the only two alternatives in that little room. And I decided, based on nothing, based on gut feeling if you want to call it, that I wanted her to go under the bed. So she went under the bed and I went back into my little hiding place there. And sure enough, couple of hours later they came back and they opened the room and they emptied out every closet, every suitcase. They took the suitcase, put it on top of the bed. Actually only two men came back. Originally they were four. Now, they only had two men came back. One was standing on one side of the bed. The other guy was standing on the other side of the bed. And they emptied out the suitcases. And I remember like it was yesterday. I had the first electric razor that ever was made. Not that I was the first one, but it was one of the first razors ever made by Phillips. And all of a sudden I hear my razor going. And well these guys had never seen an electric razor. And so, "That was good for me. I'll take the razor." And then they pulled out a suit, and "Well, that suit fits my brother-in-law." And "That dress, that's good for my girlfriend." "And that thing." The entire thing was divided up between these two characters while my mother was under the bed.

01:40:00

I would say they must have spent a minimum of an hour and a half in that room dividing up

the loot. If you analyze it, you think about it, here is a woman under the bed. If she had as much as coughed, sneezed or anything! The difference between – what we sometimes forget is the difference between being caught and not being caught is the difference between being alive or dead. That's the difference. There is no, there is no – you know, if you can always, say, "Well, I got caught. You know, I stole, I stole an apple and the cop on the corner caught me and he put me in a jail for a week and then I got out again." This was not the case. Here if you got caught, that's the end of your life. It's a death sentence. So my mother was – and I might say one other thing. While my father – when my father was arrested and he – you know, he was up in the attic he came down in the they put him into the bedroom where my mother was in the closet in the beginning and he – they must have left him alone for maybe 30 seconds or so. He took off his ring, his wedding band and threw it into the closet and that ring I still have to this day. That was his wedding band that he gave to his wife, my mother, and, and that was the only thing that we saved. So after they took all the, the loot, they couldn't fit it all into their car. They took what they could, sealed the room for the second time, and said they would come back the next morning. So after they left, here's my mother back in that room, sealed and unable to get out. I decided at that point that she had to get out. Come hell or high water, she had to get out of that room because she was lucky twice. First in the closet where they didn't see her, then under the bed where they didn't see her. This will not last for the third time. So around midnight after all the people around the village had gone home and everything was quiet, I put a ladder up against the house.

01:43:00

I went up on the ladder and she came out of the window and put her feet on my shoulder and we sort of – which ever way, we finally made it downstairs and now where do we go from here? Now the farmer had a very, very tall haystack. When I say haystack, one of these huge haystacks with a roof over it. And we decided that we're going to go up on the haystack and see where we're going from there. We didn't know what we're going to do. So we climbed up on the haystack with a ladder which it certainly was not too uncomfortable – was a comfortable place to relax 'til about a couple of hours later we got word from the underground that the Gestapo had found out that there were two more Jews left in the house. And the Gestapo was on their way back to get both my mother and I. Well, with that message in hand, we had to make a decision. Where we're going from here? Here we are in the south of Holland. We decided – I was told also by the underground that the railroad station of Alrijksdaal was surrounded by the Gestapo. And so therefore we could not go there. It was impossible. So I knew that the next railroad station was further south and I didn't know exactly how to get there but I knew in what general direction I had to go, so I took my mother by hand and we walked – I would say we walked somewhere in the neighborhood of probably five to six hours through the woods and probably more than that, 'til we finally reached the next town at the railway station. And we boarded a train and my mother and I both in the same compartment although we did not sit together because if one of us got arrested we didn't want both of us to be arrested. So I sat there with a newspaper in front of me so that my face would not show up. My mother was sitting on the other side of the railroad. And we took off and the next railroad stop was Alrijksdaal. I looked out the window and sure enough, there they were waiting for us, and we just sort of went to

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Amsterdam. When I got back to Amsterdam, I got on the phone and I called my teacher, the only person I knew.

01:46:00

Not the only person I knew, but the only person I knew who might be able to help us. And I called him on the phone and I said, "Here we are. This is what happened. My father was arrested. My mother and I are here." And again without thinking for one second, he says, "Come right over." So this is 1943. We are walking clear across Amsterdam from the railroad station and we wind up back at Mr. In't Hout's house – home. Here again, this little apartment – it's a city apartment. We were there and we stayed in one room. My mother and I stayed in that room for two and a half years. Never left the room. Never saw fresh air, it's a strange feeling. You know even a prisoner is allowed every day to exercise. We could not exercise. We were in that room and so here we are. Then the following year, Mrs. In't Hout died. Of natural causes, she died. And which was a difficult time because now there were a hundred people coming to the apartment and nobody was allowed to know that we were in that little apartment so we stayed in that room and somehow they put some chairs in front of the doors so that nobody would walk into that room where we were hiding.

Q: Let me ask you this. What was it like living in that one room? How did you keep yourself occupied during the day?

A: Very difficult. We did get the underground newspaper which was called Het Volk⁶, V-O-L-K. We read that. These were very religious people. They were Protestant people and they read a great deal about the New Testament and the Old Testament and truthfully, I learned a great deal about the Old Testament and the New testament. I took up sketching. I got some paper and a pencil and I did some sketching and I still have those sketches. I saved them. It's very difficult and then, of course, every day we were always aware. Every time the door bell rang. Every time I heard somebody coming up the stairs, not to our apartment, but up the stairs in the apartment house you could hear. You always worried. Who is this? Who's coming up the stairs. So we decided to – there was a closet and I decided to cut a hole into the roof of the closet. I cut a hole, oh, what would you call this? Two feet? It was about two feet. I cut a, cut a hole two square feet into the attic. And got a ladder up there. Looked in and there I was in the attic. However, so here this is this bare attic. And then I saw at the end of the attic there was a wall, a brick wall.

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And what I did, I took a hammer and a screwdriver and slowly I took out brick by brick by brick, I took out a small section of that wall. Just a triangle, just big enough and every time I took out the brick, I marked the brick with a number one, two, three, four, five, etc. And so what happened is when I took out he brick you got into the next attic and there in the next attic, when I was in that attic, I took the bricks and put them back, one, two, three, four, five, and so it almost became a solid brick wall again. And whenever there was any kind of a problem, my mother and I would go up into this two by two hole, crawl into the – crawl into that attic, into the annex and then put the bricks back in again, etcetera, etcetera. What else did we do during? Well we – I must say, just about every day we practiced. Practiced going up there, making sure that we knew how to do it, and how to do it the quickest way. We became expert. I tell you we were just experts in climbing up the ladder and going through the hole and putting back the bricks, I knew every brick by, by, by sight.

01:52:00

And it was very difficult. Very difficult. Two and a half years in one room without leaving that room. You, you have a tendency of, of – you know, you could lose your mind, but we didn't. Then on top of it, of course, all of Holland – now the, the invasion of Holland took place, the invasion of Europe took place in 1944. D-Day, that was 1944. And the American forces and the British forces and the Canadian forces so on, they liberated every part of Europe, including Berlin. There was one little piece that was not liberated yet. They liberated Arnhem. You may recall the story of the bridge at Arnhem where the Americans lost a tremendous number of people. Well Arnhem, you know, the whole south of Holland, Holland is a small country. The whole southern part of Holland was already liberated. We were still up to the last day, we were still under occupation.

⁶ The People (Dutch)

Q: Let me go back a little bit to, to the room. How, how did your mother handle being in that room for two and a half year? And the interaction between you and your mother and the pressure that came from being in that one room?

A: Well, my mother and I, we were well matched. We were we were easy going people. You might think that living together in one room would present – and especially between a parent and a, and a child – would present a lot of difficulties. I cannot recall that we had any major difficulties. It was very difficult for her, but she was a very understanding individual. She was. She did what she was told to do. She never complained. Never, never complained. I have never heard my mother complain. She was a very, very, very disciplined individual. Very disciplined! It's difficult. It's difficult. It's thank goodness, both of us had a strong background in, in we were disciplined individuals. And every morning that you wake up you thanked God that you were still alive.

01:55:00

Q: Let's bring you back to that funeral story that you started to talk about before we got into the room. Can you pick that story up?

A: The what?

Q: The funeral story?

A: When the wife died?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, the wife died, as I said, of natural causes, and she had, you know, she had to the funeral people had to come in and, and with the casket and the whole thing and take her out. And then the family had – this In't Hout family, they had a large circle of friends and a large circle of family. And all of these people would come to pay condolence calls. And here's this small city apartment of a college professor, not a – you know, on a, on a fixed salary who – with 50 people at one time. And here we are and of course, you cannot – even though this is family and even though these are friends, you cannot afford to tell anybody that you are hiding Jews because even though they may not on purpose want to tell anybody else, these stories go around and before you know it you have a problem. And so it was very difficult to make sure that nobody would walk into our room there. And nobody did.

Q: How did you get how did the food come to you every day?

A: Well, the food come to us. Well, the food was a big, big problem. The last year of occupation was the worst we have had. The hunger was unbelievable. There was nothing to eat. Period! There was in Holland in that part, there was nothing to eat. We ate, we ate sugar beets after the sugar had been extracted. And with sugar beets you extract the sugar and you're left with pulp and the pulp you feed to the animals, to the cows in Holland that is. So

this was stuff that you give to the cows. We ate this pulp every day. And it was cooked on a small, a tiny little, a tiny little—

Q: Hot plate?

A: Well, it wasn't a hot plate. There was no electricity so you put a little stick of wood in, but it was an ingenious kind of a thing. You – it was sort of a little, little pot with an opening and you put a little, little piece of wood in. There wasn't much wood either, and you just cooked this, this pulp, this sugar beets. It tasted horrible. Horrendous! But it's the only thing we had. And as in fact when the war was finally over, my mother had legs three times the size of her normal legs. Was like this. Just from hunger. And so did I.

Q: We're going to change tapes now.

A: Okay.

01:58:50

END OF TAPE #1

TAPE TWO

02:00:00

Q: There was something I wanted to ask you but I missed it a little earlier. Can you tell me about the arrest of your father by the Gestapo, and the events following that?

A: Yeah. Well, as I mentioned to you my father was arrested in the summer of '42 in the farm house. And he was arrested. It was in the summer so he was just wearing his usual summer clothes. And he was sent to a concentration camp called s'Hertogenbosch, H-E-R-T-O-G-E-N-B-O-S-C-H. It was a concentration camp in Holland. We have letter from him. We have about a half a dozen letters than he sent from camp, not to us, because he doesn't know where we were but he sent it to these two ladies, our neighbors upstairs and in every letter, he asked for clothes. He was cold. My father was a sort of a sickly man slightly built, etcetera, and he stayed there through the fall and then the last letter we received from him was, I believe, in November. In November he still had no clothes and at one point he was so sick that we got a letter from him. When I say "we," again it's the two ladies, got a letter from which they forwarded it to us where somebody else wrote in his name he was too sick to write the letter himself pleading for some warm clothes. As it turned out, somewhere in the month of December he plus many other people were lined up, we found out through the through the underground later, were lined up at the railroad track there in s'Hertogenbosch and were stripped of all their clothes and were put into cattle cars stark naked and transported clear across Germany. To where? Nobody knows.

02:03:00

It is obvious to me that he never made it because you can't be naked in a cattle car which is, you know, all open from all sides. And in the middle of December and not die, especially if you are in weakened condition already. So I don't know what happened to him. I have no idea where he died. At least my brother, I knew he died in Mauthausen so that—

Q: Let me go back to the annex if I may.

A: Yes.

Q: Can you recall any other stories or events that occurred while you were in the annex, in that attic?

A: Not really. Not much happened in that annex. We were there over and over and over again, but it was just the two of us. And we didn't sleep in the annex. We only went there wherever we heard something which we felt was out of the ordinary. Footsteps that didn't sound like somebody familiar, we would quickly go into the annex. We didn't live there. We only – this was our second hiding place, so to speak and otherwise, we were just in that one room. That one room which contain, contained – was one of, one of those beds that you push up against when you don't sleep on it, you push up against the wall. So we had two beds there, and there was a little desk and two chairs, and that was it. That was all there was.

Q: Was there any chance that you could be overheard by any other people in the building.

A: Yes. You could, except not us.

Q: But they could, they could hear you—

A: No. Because everything was done in a whisper. You stepped lightly. You didn't walk normally. Everything was done in a whisper. There was no way that anybody could have heard us. We were fully aware of that. The problem with all of this hiding was you were just hoping that the next day would come. And there's one interesting story. Because of the tremendous hunger, you know, we're talking about hungry people.

02:06:00

I hope nobody has to go through hunger the way we did. Hunger is so painful. I would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat and jump up in bed. Why? Because I was dreaming I saw a potato. That was something that, that was like a nightmare. I saw a potato and I thought I could eat it. When, when I woke up it wasn't there. Just a potato. Not, not a meal, a potato. The hunger was unbelievable. We were – it, it, it was – we had nothing to eat. Absolutely nothing to eat! It was, it was – in fact, I remember our Mr. In't Hout one day, he was on a – he was coming home with one or two potatoes.

02:07:00

He found them somewhere on the road. Let me tell you. He came home with these two potatoes. You thought he had found two diamonds in the street. They were just two plain potatoes. The whole family, we were all excited about those two potatoes. You can't believe what it means to be real hungry. Mr. In't Hout had a radio receiver which was completely illegal. And we heard the BBC⁷ with earphones. And I heard messages which were – and I, I only – I remember one message that came over from the BBC to the Dutch underground and it said, "The green cow jumps over the fence." That is one message that I'll never – what it meant, who it was meant for, I have no idea. "The green cow jumps over the fence." And so we had in the attic, in our hiding place, we had a map of Europe. We had little flags, and since we were able to hear the BBC, we were able to see how the German army first moved east, and finally thank goodness moved back west. And we were still – I was still under occupation when Hitler committed suicide. We were still under occupation.

Q: Can you tell me about the events leading up Mr. In't Hout being caught?

A: Yeah. This was about four weeks, four weeks before the end of the war. Mr. In't Hout – and I didn't even know it in the beginning, later on I knew it – was also a member of the underground. He never told me exactly what he did. I don't know whether he told his children what he did. I know he didn't tell me. And four weeks before the end of the war he was out on a mission. What mission? I have no idea. And all of a sudden we get word that

⁷ British Broadcasting Corporation

he was caught doing whatever he was doing and was executed. And that was four weeks before the end of the war. Here we are, two children, teenagers.

02:10:00

The mother had died the year before of natural causes. Their father had just been killed and we had to get out of there in a big, big hurry. Didn't know where to go. The underground found us another teacher. Man I'd never met in my life. So here we are again the last four weeks, we moved from one place to the next place. And that's when we – and that's when finally liberation came. I might say to you liberation came, we were so – the feeling that you have, having lived under German occupation, being called names for five years or being – you know, you, you're the lowest animal on this, on this earth. We were liberated not by the American Army. We were liberated by the Canadian army. Attached to the Canadian army was a small detachment of the Palestinian – there was a Jewish brigade. That's what it was called. The Jewish brigade. Well, I will say this to you. During five years of war, I don't think I have ever cried. When my brother died and when my father died, I think I never really shed a tear. But when I saw, for the first time after five years of occupation, I saw Jewish boys in Canadian uniforms with the Star of David, I absolutely broke down.

02:12:00

I absolutely broke down. I cried like a little, like a little baby. I couldn't believe it. I embraced them. I kissed them. I don't know what I did. Very, very emotional for me. Basically, you can really say that since the Anne Frank story is so well, well known, my story – you know, Anne Frank and I were both born in Germany. We both came to Holland in the early '30s. We both went to school in Holland and Amsterdam. I never met Ann Frank in my life. We both went into attic. We both were underground in hiding, just a few blocks from each other. We both were – had an annex. We both had everything – Anne Frank's and my story are very, very similar. Unfortunately for Anne Frank and fortunately for me, the end of the story was different.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about the surroundings of the last hiding place that you went to for that four week period before liberation?

A: That was, that was–

Q: How you were transported there?

A: We walked. There was no transportation. There was no street cars running any more. There were no cars running. Some people still had bicycles if they still had the tires. Wasn't difficult to have to have bicycles, but the problem was to have tires. And so we just walked. We walked wherever it was. It wasn't that far from where we stayed. It was within the you know, maybe four, five, six blocks. And we just walked there and it was again this happened to be a very young couple, no children, and small apartment. And they again they took us in. Never met them in my life. Had no relationship to them. Marvelous, marvelous people. I might say the Dutch people in those years were fabulous. They were really fabulous. Yes,

there were the Dutch – like the Belgians, like the French, like everybody, there was a Nazi party. And there were Dutch people joining the SS and all of that, but in general the Dutch people were very, very helpful. Very helpful. In fact I might mention to you when my brother and I were arrested in 1941, the entire country of Holland went on strike. There was no railroad running. There was no street car running. There was no factory working. The entire country went on strike. Under German occupation remember. We were under German occupation. For a handful of Jews. And that really tells the story of what happened you know, how the Dutch people behaved.

Q: Can you tell me what happened after liberation?

02:16:00

A: Well, after liberation we – it's a good question. What, what'll what'll you do? Where'll you go. The first place we went back to our former neighbors, the two ladies who had been supplying us with our rationing cards during the war. And they had gone and they had the key to our apartment. And they had taken out quite a bit of stuff from the apartment. They had taken out, for instance, my bicycle. And so the most important thing that I got when I got through the five years of war, I had a bicycle. And let me tell you. That was valuable. That's like here, in America, you have a car. Without a car, what are you going to do? How are you going to get around? Well, in Holland, I had bicycle. That allowed me to do what I had to do. We finally got a room. We rented a room from a lady who was a widow and she gave us a room for nickels and dimes. My mother had two brothers in America who had left Germany before the war. One was a doctor. One was a lawyer. And, and they both married American women, and so when the war finally was over, we wrote to them and they sent us, you know, some dollars so that we could at least buy some food and so on. The strange thing happened. We were – as I said we left Germany in 1933, and we lived in Holland all these years, you know. We never became citizens. Not because you didn't want to become citizens but in Holland you did not – it was very, very, very difficult to become a citizen. It's not like in American, after five years you can become a citizen. So therefore we were foreigners in Holland. After the war, well the reaction of the Dutch people to the Germans was unbelievable. The hate that had built up over the years was unbelievable. They wanted to tear them apart whenever they saw a German. They really were ready to tear them apart. Here we were, after the war, my mother and I had just gone through five years of war. The next thing we find out we're in this little room from this lady. Next thing we have – there is a ring on the door bell rings.

02:19:00

Dutch police arresting my mother and I. Why? Because we were German. According to the passport or whatever. So we were arrested. We were taken to a school where they, where they put all these people temporarily. And who are in that school? All Germans. And here my mother and I, we are put together with the same people that had haunted us, killed us, and we were in the same prison with them. Well, thank goodness, it didn't take very long and we were released because they realized, you know, what, what the situation was. And

let me tell you, that was, that was a strange feeling to be in the same prison with the people who, who murdered your family. Highly emotional.

Q: How did you come to the United States after you contacted your uncles?

A: Well, we had actually applied in 1938. In 1938, we had applied to come to the United States. And all of those papers are also given to the Holocaust Museum. And if the war had started instead of in May of 1945, in June of '45 or maybe July '45, we would have been in the United States before the war, but the war just broke out before we had a chance to get there. So in 1945, after the war we had to go through the whole procedure again applying for permission to immigrate to the United States. And we finally with the help of my two uncles and two aunts, with their affidavits and so on we came to the United States in the late, the last part of 1945. And I guess the rest is history.

Q: How did – how is it to adjust to life in the United States. How did, how did you feel when you got to the United States?

A: Well, the difference in life style, of course, is tremendous from Europe to the United States. I happened to love it. I, I, I had made up my mind from the minute I got off the boat. I came on a troop carrier. I came on a Dutch troop carrier. A troop carrier that brought Dutch merchant marine sailors over here to bring back since the Dutch had lost all of their ships through U-boats and so on, they purchased new ships here in the United States and these sailors brought the ships back to Holland and I was on that ship. And as I got off the boat, I came to this country, I had I think I had five dollars in my pocket. I had no money. I came here and my first residence was with the Stephen Wise⁸ refugee center in Manhattan, off Central Park West. Rabbi Stephen Wise had a refugee center where they put the refugees who came from Europe after the war, so I stayed there for a couple of days. And I might just mention to you. It's an interesting story. So I get here to this country. I had no money – five dollars. And but I knew about one thing. When you come to this country, you buy the New York Times. The New York Times has all the ads for jobs. So I remember my very first day, I went from Central Park to 59th Street – 59th Street in Central Park South. Central Park West and Central Park South. And there is a kiosk. It's still there today. There is a kiosk selling newspapers. And I bought the New York Times for a nickel, and I put the newspaper under my arm and I went to Central Park. And I went into Central Park and I sat down on a bench and I looked at this newspaper. Well, I've never seen anything in my life – I've never seen anything like this in my life. The newspaper was this thick. In Holland, we have a newspaper that is two pages. Here, you know, it took me 10 minutes to find out where the personnel ads are. So I finally sat down. And my English was very poor. And then I read the ads, and everything was abbreviated.

02:25:00

I couldn't read English, never mind the abbreviated English. So I took my newspaper under my arm again and I said to myself, "I'm going to sit down at a bench where somebody else is sitting." So I went, took my newspaper, went to another bench and there was a man sitting

⁸ Rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise

there. So I opened up the newspaper and I turned to him and I said to them, "Could you tell me? What does this mean?" He says, "I not speak English." I thought, "Wait a moment? What is this? I'm in the United States and the man doesn't speak English?" I couldn't understand, I thought everybody.... So I took my newspaper under my arm again, I go to another bench. Sat there and I opened up the newspaper and I turned to this man and said, "Can you explain to me? What does this mean?" He says, "I not understand." I said, "I can't believe it. I can't believe it." I'm in the United States and they don't under– they don't speak English. Well, to make a long story short, I finally got my first job at Gimbels⁹. This was before – this was just before the Christmas – this was just when the Christmas season started. And I went to Gimbels' employment department and they said – the young lady said to me, "What are you looking for?" I said, "What pays the most?" Well, the most right now is we need some wrappers. I said, "Well, whatever you need. I'm here." So they put me to work as a wrapper in the toy department. And everything went very fine until 1 day I dropped a toy, and the toy broke. And the manager came over. It was one of these expensive toys. He says, "Well, this is the end of you." They transferred me from the toy department to the rug department. They figured the guy can't do too much harm in the rug department. So I went to the rug department and I, I – these huge rugs, and I was 130 pounds in those days. So I worked and worked and worked and then I learned my first lesson. My first thing in America. I learned what a pink slip was. Never knew that. Christmas was over, and the day after Christmas I had a pink slip in my envelope. So that, that was my first job in the United States. But I also – you know, had made up my mind, as I got off the boat, the one thing, the one thing I wanted more than anything else, I wanted to become an American. When I say "an American," I wanted to be an American like a real American. I didn't want an accent. I didn't want to sound like a refugee for the rest of my life. And the one ambition I had in life is to speak and talk and act like an American and you know.

02:28:00

And that's what started my journey in America. I was a it was a tough beginning. My second job was in a dental lab. And I was offered a job. My first job I was making 20 dollars a week. And, and that's how I started.

Q: With the benefit of hindsight, how do you think the war and your experiences in the war have impacted on your life?

A: Well, I lost, of course, I lost five years of education. I lost the most important years of my life. When the war broke in 1940 I was 18. The war ended in 1945. I was 23. From 18 to 23, I basically did nothing but hide in a room, run away from the Germans and my entire education was interrupted. And when I came to this country, I couldn't afford to go to school. I had to make a living. I had five dollars. When I walked to Gimbels I didn't take the, the subway which was at that time only a nickel. I didn't have it. I walked there. And I walked back. And whatever I did, I walked because that five dollars was the only thing I had in my pocket. Until I got my first paycheck, it had to last. So, my education was – and you know, the most important years in anybody's life are really the years when you, you know, your college years is, you know, where the average person enjoys and gets what he needs

⁹ Gimbels Department Store

for his future life. I never had that. Basically, I had a high school education. I had one year of college and that was a technical college because my father wanted me to become an architect like he was and I didn't want to become an architect so we settled on engineering school. So I went 1 year to engineering school. That was it. I never was able to really get back to school.

Q: Did your mother come to the United States with you?

A: Yes. My mother followed me about four months later. She couldn't – this troop carrier that I came on, it was strictly for men. That was, you know, all sailors. And my mother came in 1946 and she came by airplane which was fabulous in those days. And she landed here. Now my mother was a trained baby nurse from, from Germany. And obviously she hadn't worked in oodles of years because she was raising a family.

02:32:00

She was a housewife. When she came here, she back into nursing, and she did private nursing. Baby nursing. And she worked, she loved it. She loved children. She worked for the Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations. She brought up the children of Senator Javits¹⁰ and situations like that. My mother's life was a very, very tough life. All her life. After all, in 1933, she was married maybe 12, 13, 14 years from that point on when she left Germany, she was the bread winner. My father wasn't allowed to – we were allowed to live in Holland, but he wasn't allowed to work in Holland. So we rented out rooms and my mother, you know, she was – she worked all her life until the end. Was a tough life.

Q: You mentioned before that you came to Holland because your father had a sister there.

A: Yes.

Q: Did she survive the war?

A: She, she did survive the war. Her husband died during the war. Her daughter died during the war, but she survived. An interesting story. However, she was extremely sick. She was she had cancer. And she had to go to the hospital back and forth for treatment. But there is – there are no ambulances. There are no cars. Nothing. But I had a bicycle, so I put her on the back of my bicycle and I drove her back and forth from her house to the, to the hospital and so on, on the back of my bicycle. That's where the bicycle came in. Very, very important. And, and then she died shortly after the war.

Q: From the years since the end of the war, have you kept in touch with the children of the man who you stayed with for two and a half years?

02:34:42

¹⁰ Senator Jacob Koppel Javits

A: Yes. As a matter of fact, the son whose name was Dick. First name was Dick. D-I-C-K In't Hout. He came to visit us here in the United States and, you know, I took him around and so on and so on. The daughter married a, a Episcopal priest or something and they had children and so on. Very, very lovely people. Very religious people. Very.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A: Needless to say, you ask me, you know, the needless to say I, I just hope that what we have experienced – I just hope that 6,000,000 Jews didn't die in vain. I just hope so! I hope that the world will have learned something from this experience. It's too difficult. It was too difficult at the time. Too many lives were lost. Too many tears were shed. and I just hope that our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren will live the kind of life that we hoped all of us should have.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Thank you.

02:35:40

CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW