

This is a continuation of an interview with Ernest Fontheim on June 4th, 1997. This is tape one, side A. For the record, why don't we begin again with your stating your name, date of birth, and city of birth, if you don't mind.

My name is-- my full name is Ernest Gunter Fontheim. I was born on October 23, 1922 in Berlin, Germany. I might add that my father was a lawyer. He was born in 1881. So he was already over 40 years old when I was born. And he was one of the best known lawyers in Berlin. And I grew up in a very comfortably and in a very assimilated home, assimilated to German culture and with very little awareness of my Judaism.

OK. Do you want to pick up where we left off before?

Yeah. I would-- I would like to say that the transition from-- to the life underground, undergone meaning simply with forged papers and under a different identity, meant, of course, for me also a radical transition in family. My parents had just been arrested and deported. And now I am living-- I was living with a completely different family.

And the family atmosphere was totally different. Where my parents were both actually highly educated and very intellectual, the family of Margaret and her parents, family Haas, were, on the other hand-- I mean, Mr. Haas was a tailor and designer of women's clothes and actually had owned a factory, until the Nazis took it away from him. He was a man who was much more folksy than my parents, had a tremendous sense of humor, and was a very warm person.

And of course, there were frictions now and then. I guess, that is always unavoidable. But in general, I felt comfortable and, of course, also grateful that I was accepted practically as a family member by this new family. Also another big difference was the age difference. As I said, my father was actually quite old. And for a boy of my age, I mean, my mother was 10 years younger than he.

But Margaret's parents were-- they were both of the same age, 20 years younger than my father and 10 years younger than my mother. And I think that also made a difference in the relationship.

What kind of difference are we talking about in terms of your rapport with them?

To some extent in terms of rapport and then also in terms of how they took life. I mean also, I have to say that my parents had gone through unbelievable agony, I mean, starting in 1933. Probably, to some extent, they took it much harder. They surely lost much more because they had more to lose. They were, in those 10 years, starting in 1933, they were robbed of all of their possessions, everything that my father had worked for.

And also their social standing and everything had been taken away from them. And by the time that the deportations started, they were totally devastated. And the atmosphere therefore at home also was always-- oh, how can I describe it? I mean, morbid maybe and just extremely negative. While in spite of all the hardships, Margaret's parents, first of all because they were younger and, secondly, because, I guess, they didn't go quite through the same amount of tremendous radical turmoil and change had retained their sense of humor and also their sort of some sense of adventurism and so on.

And I think, to that extent, I felt comfortable there, in spite of the fact that the loss of my parents and my sister continued to be a tremendous weight. I mean, by that time, of course, I always hoped that they would be in some camp which will be liberated at some point in the future.

So you have-- it was a more fun atmosphere.

Well, fun-- yeah, I mean, to some extent, that is also true. We, for example, we had brought along a phonograph player. We played records, both classical as well as dance music. I didn't know how to dance. And so Margaret, who was an excellent or still is an excellent dancer, taught me how to dance. And yeah, as I said, there was a certain amount of humor and also lightheartedness.

And, of course, that went together with the fact that I and none of us, in fact, was wearing the yellow star anymore, which made us outcasts. We felt sort of, at least I felt, liberated by that. And I mean, all of that contributed to a more

positive mental outlook. In addition, I want to say that we tried to keep, as much as possible, the Jewish holidays. I don't remember anymore how we even knew the dates.

We surely didn't have any Jewish calendars. There were none printed in Germany. But we did know, for example, when Yom Kippur was. And we fasted on it. We did know when Pesach the date was. And we even kept ornamental Seder. Margaret's father, who was in general an excellent cook and baker, baked some approximation of a matzo, which we ate. And, of course, we didn't even have a Haggadah.

But we talked about the exodus from Egypt just from out of our memory. I did have a handwritten copy of the Kiddush. And so every Friday evening, we lit candles and made Kiddush. If we didn't have wine, we used some other liquid, whatever came handy even if it had to be water. And if we didn't have two candles, we could cut one candle into two.

And I derived a lot of strength, I think, from the fact, I mean, of the Jewish religion. And that was actually one important pillar of strength. I had looking back sort of three pillars of strength. One was my Judaism. The second was my unshakable trust in the future. I had almost certainty that Germany would lose the war, even at a time when Germany was still seemed to be winning.

And in fact, I had taken along some books. I had already decided to study physics later. I took a book for self teaching of calculus along, which I worked through from cover to cover in those years. And I had a physics book, which I studied every week. I located some time to do that. And in addition to that, by the way, there was-- in a local bigger town, there was a public library, which we joined, of course, under our assumed names.

And so we checked books out, novels and other things. And I already said that we played music. So we tried to maintain as normal an atmosphere as possible. So and incidentally, I and, in fact, none of the four of us ever had the intention after the end of the war to stay one day longer in Germany than absolutely necessary. And we had, at that time already, always dreamt about coming to America. That was sort of a dream, like almost like a castle in the sky.

And so it was the Judaism and my trust in the future, the two. The third pillar of strength was actually Margaret. As I had indicated earlier, I had at one time, while we were still working at the factory at Siemens, started to fall in love with Margot only to hear that she had a steady boyfriend. Well, by that time, I forgot what happened to the boyfriend. I think he also went underground actually. And anyway, he was not available. And there was no contact.

And so my interest in Margot was of course rekindled. And at that time, finally, it was reciprocated. And actually she was the person really closest to me and who gave me much of the inner strength. Also she was sort of the third leg in that, what kept me going emotionally, I mean, mentally going. I should also say that one thing that I was not aware of at the time but that, with the arrest of my friend Hans which I had mentioned earlier, all people that I had known in my earlier life were gone.

Some of them of course had emigrated. The rest had been deported. There was nobody from my immediate family, my first girlfriend, school friends, factory friends, you name it, relatives. There was nobody. I was totally alone in the world. And the funny thing is or the strange thing is that I was totally unaware of it at that time. It occurred only years after the end of the war when I sort of went through my memory.

It occurred to me that's what actually was the case. And and she was the only one who was close to me and who, as I said, who sustained me. Then I had talked about the primitive nature of the house we lived in. That house is probably a euphemism, maybe a cottage or a hut. I had mentioned the pump in the garden. What I didn't say is people might assume it was an electric pump. It wasn't. It was a hand pump. And you had to work really hard to get water up, pumping it.

And as I also mentioned, in winter, sometimes it froze. The hut itself was built of wooden boards with fairly wide slits of what I would say 1/8 of an inch or so. And that made it obviously very uncomfortable in winter. Through our Nazi friend, whom I had also mentioned before, we had-- we made contact to people where one could get building material.

Building material, of course, were severely rationed and practically impossible to get. And we got sort of insulation plates. And even nails were hard to get. And so we could completely insulated the house from the inside with sort of

some plastic type material. I don't know what it is anymore. And we got all that material really through his connections.

Then one day during our city there, Sundays, the local village policeman came and fortunately while I was out of the house. I was probably in Berlin. And he said he wanted to find out who was living there and asked Margaret's father all kinds of questions, where he worked. And he wanted to see the ID, which he showed him, and where everybody else worked and whatever other questions.

And then-- and he was fairly-- he wasn't outright unfriendly but very businesslike, which is in a rural setting, in that village, is really unusual. People were more like a family there. And at the end, he said, well, I hear there's a young men living here also. And then Mr Haas said, yes, that's my nephew. And his name is so-and-so, Gunter Hessem, and, of course, my assumed false name.

And the policeman then said, well, I want to ask him some questions. When-- and he was also told that I'm working in a factory. And then he asked when I am home. And he was told I'll be back on the weekend. And he said then, well, tell him I'll be here next Saturday. I forgot probably 10 or whatever in the morning. And I want to ask him some questions. And then he left.

And we felt very threatened by that. And, of course, I was the most vulnerable because I was of military age. And I did not have, as I explained earlier, the complete set of required papers. So Margaret's father went immediately to our Nazi district leader friend and complained bitterly about it there that the village policeman-- I remember his name even. His name was Mueller, good German name, had come and interrogated him almost like a criminal.

And he felt very indignant. After all, he is an honest, honorable citizen and so on. And Harry, the Nazi's name, said, ah, don't worry about it Herman. He's a good friend of mine. I'll take care of it. And a few days later, Harry came, paid us a visit, and said, Mueller isn't going to come anymore. I had a beer with him yesterday at the village pub. And I told him that you guys are good friends of mine. And I have known you for years. And you're honest, honorable people. And there was no reason to-- and we never saw Mueller again.

So unwittingly, the guy possibly might have saved our lives. I had once a close brush with arrest in Berlin. As I mentioned also earlier, trips to Berlin were necessary to keep up with our black market contacts and to get food. And I should say also, by the way, that most of the food was obtained by Margaret's father and his wife. They had, of course, many more contacts.

They had lived longer. They knew more people. And but I had a number of people also that I visited usually once a week, sometimes twice a week. So and I was always extremely careful. I think I mentioned some of the strategies already that I used to avoid detection. And when I was riding in the subway, I always rode-- sat on the bench, sort of midway between the doors which were on either end and watching the people who would enter.

And if somebody would enter whom I suspected or even knew, on the door to the right, I would get up and leave to the left, not that it ever came. But at least that was my strategy. Well, on that particular day, it was rush hour. And I entered the train at the Wittenburg Platz station in Witten, in the part of the busiest part of western Berlin business district. And since it was rush hour, the train was packed with people, of course. And I never got to the center.

I just was sort of next to the entrance door where I entered, sort of squeezed in between people. And as I stood there, as the train rumbled and rumbled along, incidentally, after Wittenburg Platz, the train emerged from the tunnel and became then an elevated train. I saw a chubby short man next to me say thank you to a soldier, who was also standing next to him, handing back his ID.

And I immediately knew that was a some sort of a secret policeman. And by that time, it was-- obviously, first of all, I couldn't get out of the train. And if I would have made one move, that would have even aroused suspicion. So I just looked into the air, trying to look as harmless and innocent as I could. But the guy sort of swung around and fixated me with his eyes and said, your papers please.

And he made me very nervous. I had been controlled, I must say, several times before. And usually, it went very--

people looked at my ID. And I greeted them with a snappy Heil, Hitler, and that did the job. Well, he looked at my ID. And I-- the more he looked, the more he noticed he must have been a real professional. He looked back between me and the picture. And it was, of course, my picture.

Then he tried to lift the picture up to see how it was fastened to the material of the ID and asked me one or two questions. And I got so unbelievably nervous that I noticed that my artery in my neck started really to pump very hard. And that was something that I couldn't control. But he must have noticed it. Because he constantly gave me sharp looks.

And then I was already expected to be arrested or at least taken along for further interrogation. Instead, he handed me the paper back and said thank you. And I had the distinct feeling that guy wasn't satisfied. And the reason why he didn't arrest me is he had decided it might be smarter to follow me, because that might lead him somewhere where he could get maybe a bigger catch or something.

So at the next stop which then, as I said, was an elevated stop, Nolendorf Platz, he left the train. He left the car. And I decided immediately that guy didn't leave. There are two possibilities. Either he had another man with him, whom I didn't know who it was, whom we might give him-- have given some wink to follow me. Or he would just have gone to the next car and wait where I would leave.

So I quickly, in my mind, made a plan of how to shake off either him or somebody whom I may not even know. And the next stop was Buellerstrasser. It was one of the busiest intersections in Berlin, Buellerstrasser corner Putstamastrasser. And I left the car then and walked down. And the stairs from the elevated ended in a median strip between the two lanes of traffic, you know, going one way on one side and the opposite way in the other side.

And at the bottom of the stairs, I knew the area like my own pockets. At the bottom of the stairs was a newspaper kiosk. So my plan was, and that's what I did. I stopped at the newspaper kiosk and pretended to read newspapers and headlines and so on, while out of my-- the corner of my right eye I peered up who was coming down the stairs.

And I figured that if somebody whom I didn't know was going to follow me, that person would sort of linger around. And I could sort of make out who it was. Well, the guy himself, of course, I would know. And lo and behold, I had hardly stopped and started looking at the newspaper when I saw that guy come down. So he obviously did what I had suspected. He was in another car and waited for me to leave.

So I ignored him and just kept reading the newspapers. And that was probably not part of his plan, because he had to follow me surreptitiously. And if he had lingered around there, I would have been aware of it. So he didn't-- he stayed, I don't know, maybe 10, 20 seconds or so. And then he crossed over to one side. And that was exactly what I had anticipated. I should say also there was a traffic light at that corner of Buellerstrasser and Putstamastrasser.

So once he crossed over to one side, I waited for the light to be such that traffic was going. And then I made my way, sprinted between cars, to the opposite side so that there were now two lanes of moving traffic between him and me. And then I walked along, not to the busy street which was Putstamastrasser but to the next block, which was a sort of a residential street with very few people only walking there.

And but I, in order not to arouse suspicion, I didn't run. I just walked briskly, the way one walks purposefully in a city if one goes after some appointment or so. And as soon as I had turned the corner, I raced as fast as I could. And it was about a 100 meter dash to the next corner. And there I looked around. And I saw that guy come around also, following me. Then I walked. I turned again the corner and came back at a different block of Putstamastrasser, to that busy street, jumped on a moving trolley car.

In those days, trolley cars had rear platforms without a door. So you could, just by grabbing the handlebars and jumping on, you could even jump on a car while it was-- they didn't go very fast, while it was in the middle of riding or driving. And in this way, I shook that guy off. I am still convinced that he had some suspicion that he was not-- my paper was not that perfect.

I should also say that over the, by that time now, we are into 1944. And many of my friends and acquaintances who had

gone underground or had-- one after another had been caught by the Gestapo. I mentioned that cousin of mine who had gone to Bavaria and his girlfriend. There were various schoolmates from my high school class who got caught. Then that other friend, Galcoun, who wasn't caught but who was murdered.

And of course, that-- that had an effect on our mental outlook, obviously. But I guess, there's a German saying, which sounds really cool, but it was really the case in our case. It's [GERMAN]. It means, you walk forward over graves. And that was all the time what happened to us. We lost a tremendous number of friends. Some of them came back but most did not.

During that period of time, of course, also the military situation changed more and more against Germany. And that gave us a tremendous morale boost. I mean, by that time, in 1943. Italy had already capitulated. And then in early '44, there were continuous rumors of a landing of the Allied forces somewhere in France. And that happened finally on June 6, 1944.

I still remember the day distinctly. Of course, we didn't have any radio in our hut, so we didn't know anything. But Margaret's parents were in the city, in Berlin, on that day, on their various errands to contact black market sources. And they had bought extra editions of newspapers. So when they arrived out in our house, in our cottage in the evening, they came with the news that the Allied had landed in the Normandy.

And for Margaret, that was such a shock of joy that she broke out into tears. I never forget that. And we were just unbelievably happy. Of course, as the Allies then continued to make progress, and I should say also, incidentally, on the eastern front, the successes were tremendous. Even before that, in 1943, I think the biggest tank battle of all time took place in the area of Kossk and Owell in the Western Soviet Union and where Germany suffered a decisive defeat.

And by that time, by 1944, when the Allies landed-- the western Allies landed in the Normandy, the Russians had already taken Warsaw. And from both sides, the Allies were approaching, finally, German territory. And so one response of the Nazis was to create a new unit called Volkssturm, best translated as militia.

And all Germans who were not-- all German males, I should say, between 16 and 60 who were not in the armed forces were immediately conscripted into that Volkssturm. And the conscription, since they didn't want to create a new bureaucracy, was the task of conscription was given to the Nazi party organization, which was already an existing organization with officers and so on.

But now it became necessary to have IDs. Because if you're not in the Wehrmacht, in the armed forces, or any of its branches, you had to be in the Volkssturm. It was either one or the other. So fortunately, Margaret's father had a colleague from earlier days, also-- a Jewish colleague, I mean, from the garment line who was underground. And he had access to blank IDs for the Volkssturm. And but what he couldn't supply was the rubber stamp. It was stamped by the Nazi party district in which one was mustered in-- into the Volkssturm.

And then I remembered that I knew a stamp maker. So I went to-- and he moved me only also under my forged and assumed name, not who I really was. And of course, for stamp makers, it was strictly forbidden to make official stamps. Because they can be used for all kinds of purposes, illegal purposes. So I went to him and told him a long story.

The story basically was that my uncle was working in a local party district, registering Volkssturm members. And that in the crush and the busy work there, somehow the stamp got lost. He thinks it may have fallen off the table into a wastebasket and then emptied out. But he simply didn't know what happened to it. And he reported it immediately to the local, to his boss, the district leader.

And the district leader was very unhappy about that and said, if it got into the wrong hands, you know, anything can be done with forgeries. And he holds him personally responsible. He better look within two days, if he doesn't-- if he has not found the stamp, then he has to face consequences. So and, of course, the consequences in those days usually were that the party would fire him. And then he would be immediately subject to military induction and be shipped to the eastern front.

And so I told that stamp maker, then finally said, I would like to have that stamp within a day. I can give him, first of all, the actual cost, whatever it is, in addition to that, 300 cigarettes, 100 immediately and 200 when I get the stamp. And in those days, cigarettes were almost worth their weight in gold. And so the guy agreed. I had the stamp within less than two days.

And then Margaret's father went back to his friend. And they made a deal that he would give us, free of charge, two Volkssturm membership blanks. And we, in turn, would stamp his own with a party stamp that we had, also free of charge [INAUDIBLE]. So that's what happened. And, of course, women didn't need an ID, as I said, because only males were inducted into the Volkssturm militia.

So we had-- in fact, I still have my Volkssturm ID. And to have that ID was actually terrific because that obviated the need for any military papers. Because only people who were not in the armed forces were inducted into the Volkssturm. And since-- and the party, of course, had all of that background material. So by being in the Volkssturm, that automatically implied that the military status of that person was OK, whatever it was.

And also, of course, as the situation became more desperate for the Nazis, there were more and more ID checks on the streets. I mean they were looking, first of all, for German deserters. They were looking for Allied spies. They were looking for-- they had millions of foreign workers in Germany also that had been forcibly deported to work in the armaments industry. And many of those were on the loose. They just ran away.

So anyway the thing was that having that paper I'm sure saved my life. Because I was then frequently controlled, particularly by military police. Now, on the other hand, as the situation worsened, it also became more and more difficult to get food. I should say, whether we had black market food prices, I believe I mistakenly said in an earlier interview here that the black market prices were 10 times regular prices.

That-- I have to take that back. It's closer to 100 times. In other words, any, say, a pound of meat or whatever which price may have been one mark regularly bought in a store, with food ration stamps would be 100 mark on the black market. But because of increasing shortages, because Germany, of course, used to get a lot of its food from the occupied areas, and they were no longer occupying them, obviously, the scarcity grew higher.

And as the supply dwindled and the demand either stayed the same or increased, obviously, the price increased. So just at that point, that problem was solved for us. What happened was is that on a-- on one day, I was also in Berlin using the subway. And as I sat there a girl, I mean, young woman actually, a year or two older than I, whom I had known from before, in fact, she was a counselor in a vacation camp that I went to in the 1930s, in the mid '30s.

And then later I met her again at Siemens, where she was also forced labor. And she approached me and said, hi, how are you? And I'm so happy to see you. But since one didn't trust anyone whom one hadn't seen continuously, I said, my name isn't Fontheim. And then she said, well, don't you have a smaller sister? I said, no and gave her some fictitious name.

Say like my name is [? Erich ?] [? Bueller ?] and I only have an older brother. And she sort of left the train puzzled. And at that point, I decided she is obviously not working for the Gestapo. Because she wouldn't be put off by such a rude, crude lie. OK. But anyway, about a week or two later, I ran into her again on the same sort of line of the subway where I met her the first time.

And then I admitted that her memory was really correct. And then she said, oh, that's marvelous. And let's sit down at a cafe and have a little talk. And I said, that's a great idea, but I don't have any food ration coupons. And in restaurants and cafes, you also had to pay, obviously, the price and mark, but, in addition, what was much more important, give the food coupons equivalent for whatever you were ordering, even if it was just a piece of cake.

And she said, don't bother, I invite you. So OK, so since I was always hungry, I accepted the invitation. So we sat down in a cafe and talked. Of course, I have to say that I didn't tell her a thing, where I was actually living. We were just talking sort of in general terms. And then she said, yeah, I mean, I asked her whether I couldn't pay for the stamps, coupons that she used on me. She said no. She didn't pay for hers either.

And in fact, she'll show me how to get them free of charge. And all one had to do is find out where the last air raid-- and there were daily air raids now-- where the last air raid was centered at. And that was easy that spread through Berlin like fire, the news, you know, last night this district was hit or that district. So we went to where last night--

Finish your sentence.

--where last night the Allies had bombed and looked up a house that was destroyed.

This is tape one, side B of a continued interview with Ernest Fontheim on June 4th, 1997.

So we arrived at the part of town where last night's air raid had done most of the damage. And then my friend, her name, by the way, is Ursula. She said, what we need to do is, first of all, write down the address of a house that's completely destroyed or at least remember and note it down. So that's what we did. And then the German sort of air raid support system was by years of experience, of course, very well organized.

Each house had, I mean, the people who lived in each house knew exactly where to go if that house became destroyed. It was usually a public-- usually a school nearby, sometimes a church or some such public building. So and that was posted also in and near the building. So after noting the address of the place of the house that was destroyed, of course, that was just one of many houses, and also discovering where to go for further support, we went there.

And, of course, it was a school I remember. And it was in the main auditorium. And the place was mobbed with people who had been bombed out the previous night. Some with some of their belongings still saved and others with nothing. And they were-- and the place was run, again, by a subsidiary of the Nazi party organization. And then I stuck with her.

And we, first of all, registered at a desk, where a man in full Nazi party regalia was sitting. And she would give some fictitious name and that address and saying that she lost all of her belongings, including even her papers. And so they immediately did two things. They gave a person a temporary ID, identifying that person as a bombed out person and also asking then all agencies of the government to sort of give any support possible.

And for people who had lost their food ration cards, they-- Oh no, wait a minute, I'm sorry. I take that back. They did not hand out any food ration. They simply noted down the-- listed the person as totally bombed out. And then they supplied people with sandwiches and cigarettes. And if they needed also an overnight, a simple cot, although people were urged, if possible, to move in with friends or relatives. But those who didn't have either could also stay overnight there.

So, of course, I followed her example, gave a different-- I did not give my name that I had adopted on my papers. I didn't want it to appear there. So I chose just some arbitrary name that came to mind but the same address. And I also got an ID identifying me as bombed out. Now the point was, with that ID, one could go then to any food rationing office and get a set of food ration cards.

And the idea, of course, was you couldn't do it in the same district as the building was located. Because they had, of course, a complete card catalog of people who were living in that district. And of course, neither one of these people even existed. But with the bombed out ID, one-- any other food ration office, suppose one moved to a different part of Berlin than was required to hand out a set of food ration cards.

And of course in another district, they wouldn't have the set of registered people living in that district. Comes to my mind, I'm glad that the tech-- that today's technology didn't exist in those days. Because today, all they would have to do is, on a computer, access a database and look up anyone from any other district. But fortunately, the Nazis didn't have that capability yet. Otherwise, they would have used it.

So what we did is we took the subway to a different part of Berlin. Went there, got our set of food ration cards, and then took off. And that was now the first set, and I enjoyed that game so much. I should add also, by the way, that the sandwiches they handed out were terrific. I had not had such good salami sandwiches in years, in fact. And that alone

was even worth it.

So I start practically every time when I was in Berlin, since there were daily air raids, there were-- every day, there were houses destroyed the preceding night. So all one had to do was sort of ask and find out in what part of the city to go there, look up an address of a destroyed, I mean, house from last night, and then go to the local sort of air raid support facility where people were helped with their first needs and so on, get another ID.

And so I kept doing that. And finally, at the height of the thing, I got-- I got food ration stamps for 16 people without paying a penny for it. So we could just go into stores and buy food at the regular price, controlled prices, which was peanuts. And that, obviously, was a tremendous help also in our, you know, for our budget.

Wasn't there any chance that there was going to be duplication?

Yeah, I mean, I am sure that these card officers, food coupon officers, where I went under an assumed name then would forward my name and address that I gave to the food office in that district. And then within days, they would find out that person never existed there. But by that time, I was gone. And when you are-- the food ration coupons themselves didn't have a name of a person on it.

So you didn't have to be afraid that they knew already that this was-- the whole thing was a fake. I mean, I could use the stamps without being afraid to be identified. It was a marvelous thing. And yeah, also, of course the continuous air raid, by the way, the air raids started, I should say, really to become severe shortly after we moved there. I think I discussed that even, that helped us in our fictitious story that we told people.

And of course, it got worse as the war went on. And usually it was a British bomber fleet coming at night and the Americans during daytime. And it was sometimes an awful-- awesome not awful, an awesome sight during daytime. The Americans were flying in like on a sort of military exercise, in close formation. And the roar of the bombers, there were hundreds usually, filled the heavens.

It was, for us, almost a shout of liberation. And they were just coming. And we could see the anti-aircraft guns of German flock firing at them without much effect. And then when they start dropping their bombs, the bombs sort of had made a whistle sound as they fell down with tremendous speed. And the whistle sound then was followed by seconds of silence and then a tremendous explosion.

And, of course, there were hundreds of them. It was an unbelievable experience. And at night, of course, one couldn't see the bombers anymore. But the noise was the same. And then, of course, the flames that engulfed large parts of the city would always be a-- present a ghostly scene of fire and destruction. And obviously, that had also a tremendous effect on the population. And people reacted differently.

But, by that time, it was obvious, I think, to most sane people at least that the war was lost. And if the war was lost, then all that destruction and all of the German soldiers who were still falling on all fronts were just a total waste, a wasted loss, which wouldn't really do anything for Germany. And so many-- there was a lot of dissatisfaction expressed with the government.

But it was all sort of below the surface. And the reason was, there was a tremendous government terror. And it increased. There wasn't just the Gestapo, but, I mean, the employed agents of the Gestapo. But there was a much larger army of either paid or unpaid informers, or people who are sometimes just out of spite were informing on others. And obviously, that kept people in line.

And they would often grumble only between their four walls or to-- only to people whom they definitely knew to be OK and safe. But there was increasing dissatisfaction as the war came closer to the German borders. And the German government and particularly the propaganda machine of Goebbels had another weapon given to them, and that was actually by the Russians.

While it is understandable that the Russians who had suffered unbelievably under German occupation were not very



kindly disposed towards the Germans, but the atrocities committed by the Russians and the totally wanton destruction in the wake of the Soviet army was such that Goebbels was able to whip up enthusiasm for continuing the fight by basically threatening the Germans with the Russians.

And of course, the worst part of the terror probably were the unbelievable rapes. I must admit that I did not believe the stories at first and thought they were just an outgrowth of Goebbels propaganda, I mean, in the same way how the anti-Semitic press for years had smeared the Jews with all kinds of sexual innuendos and so on, which were just inventions.

But it turns out, I mean, the Russians-- incidentally, the Russians did not only do that in Germany. I mean even in areas that they liberated, countries that were supposed to be allies, like Czechoslovakia, Poland, there were unbelievable rapes in those countries. And so it can't be just explained by the fact that there was an accumulated hatred against the Germans. But, of course, that contributed to it.

But, be that as it may, they handed the Germans a tremendous propaganda weapon. And occasionally, it would happen that the German army would make a counter-offensive and sort of reoccupy some locality which the Russians had already taken before. And then they would immediately send in the entire press corps and interview people. And they would get then sort of firsthand horror stories of how the Russians behaved.

And I'm sure that was part of why the Germans put up resistance to the very end. But the fact is that resistance didn't give them any better results anyway. And I would say that any building that was destroyed and any German that was killed fighting in the latter part of '44 and '45 was just a waste.

Of course, not to forget that during that time also, hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Russians, still were killed. And also Jews were killed in the Holocaust, which continued unabated. I should say on that subject incidentally, the fact that a Holocaust was going on was totally unknown to us. We did-- occasionally we had opportunity to listen to foreign broadcasts. And incidentally, that was strictly forbidden.

And it was under death penalty that if anyone listened to foreign radio broadcasts. But sometimes we had the chance to. And there were reports finally, mainly from BBC, the British radio, that the Nazis were killing, at that time it was said, hundreds of thousands of Jews. And that while it filled us with fear at the number, hundreds of thousands, was so huge that it staggered our imagination. And that was not even 10% of the truth, but we didn't know it then at the time.

Had you heard of some of these notorious extermination centers?

Well, we definitely had heard of Auschwitz. And because that was the-- that was the camp that most Jews from Berlin were deported to. And at least in the later stages, in the beginning, there were also deportations to Riga and other ghettos. But starting, I think, about in the middle of 1942, maybe early fall of 1942, all deportations went to Auschwitz.

Even that was not really officially announced, but it somehow became known. So Auschwitz became known as a destination for the deportations. But the term extermination camp was not known. I mean, what was believed in general, that Jews were worked extremely hard under inhuman conditions. And of course, people die under such conditions also.

But that they were sort of murdered in a mass production style, the way it was actually done, was not known to us. It may have-- now that I have to add that German soldiers, hundreds of thousands, if not millions of them, were in one way or another witnesses of all of these extermination. And of course, they, in most cases, were too fearful to even report or tell.

They were even told to keep that silent. But we were, I mean, in a certain amount of isolation there. And to some extent, I have to say, that it may also have been simply that we, or at least I myself, I can really only talk of myself-- about myself, simply refused to believe that, that it was so horrible. And all the people who were close to me were involved in these deportations.

And maybe, to some extent, it was wishful thinking that I did not believe in what really happened in those camps. But all I can say is that I hoped till the victory and even after that to see my family again.

Was there-- was there, I mean, you said people were fearful to even talk about them. So was there much conversation at all about these places?

No. I mean, even in earlier times, in Siemens I mentioned, for example, that after the Kristallnacht, Jewish males were arrested. They were all told that, unless they wanted to come back there, to keep their mouth shut. And so people only whispered about it. Some didn't talk at all about it and some only to their closest friends or family members what really happened. And these were not extermination camps. They were just sort of, quote, everyday brutalities committed by the SS.

What I'm try-- what I'm trying to get a sense of is, since you were amongst German people, not Jews at this point and for quite a long time, did there seem to be any horror expressed or any remorse of what was going on, other than the fact that the war had inconvenienced them terribly?

No, it was terrible. The horror was only at the impending loss of the war and what might become of Germany and of them personally. I didn't, of course, as I said, people had to be careful. But the people that we associated with, and we had a certain social life there, as I had said earlier. They-- the cruelties against the Jews never even came up. Now that's actually there's one exception.

There was one family, an elderly couple with a son who was about six, seven years older than I and was an officer in the Wehrmacht. They were politically 100%. They often even talked to us. And that surprised us. Because they should have been somewhat mistrustful. But they openly expressed their opposition and their hatred of the Nazis and Hitler.

They were-- one thing, they were a very devout Catholic family. And in northern Germany, where Berlin was located, the vast majority of people, of course, are Protestant. But I don't know whether that was-- but they were, these people actually then played a role in our final survival. And that's the story I'm coming to now.

In March, in March 1945, about six weeks before the end of the war, we heard through one of our friends that we sort of were socializing a really strange story. He met Mr Haas, Margaret's father, and said he has to tell him something very funny. A pensioner, who lived in our area and who earned himself some additional money by working on people's property, and he worked also often on a property of our neighbor, and he was known as a fanatical Nazi.

And that pensioner had told him to be careful with us and stay away from us, because there is something not OK. We-- he is convinced that we are either foreign spies or Jews. And then when that man said, you know, what makes you think so? The man said, well, they have a Berlin address, where Herman Hesser lives. And there is actually a Herman Hesser living. He checked the phonebook.

But he decided to really look into it himself. And so he-- and being a pensioner, you know, he had nothing better to do. He took the subway and went to that address and actually rang the bell. And there's indeed a Herman Hesser living at that place, but it's a completely different person. And we simply used that person's name to legitimize ourselves.

And he told that fellow to be careful and not to say anything to us of stay. And that guy, again, he was also, by the way, secretly very much against the Nazis and made comments. And he interpreted it as saying that now that the way is obviously lost, that fanatical Nazi is sort of becoming-- going out of his mind, losing his mind, and didn't take it seriously, in fact, found it really funny.

And when Margaret's father came back to us, he didn't find it funny at all, nor did we. And we were thinking about what to do now. Now, we knew that that guy probably would, within a day or two, notify the police if he hadn't already done so. And that we had to get out of there. And in fact, we had to get out sort of seemingly just as if we go into the city, in other words, without luggage in order not to allow suspicion.

But we had all of our personal belongings there. And many of them were also necessary for survival. I mean, we-- in those days, it was practically impossible to buy anything, clothes, gloves, clothing, anything you need, shoes, and so on. So we-- and, of course also, we didn't really know where to go. So our first reaction was to talk to that elderly couple

that I just mentioned.

And their son, he was a first lieutenant in the German army, was actually home during that week on furlough. I think he had some sort of a sick leave. He had a slight injury. And we knew that all of them are totally OK. So the plan was that I-- but we wanted to talk to the son alone first. So I went over and asked the son, we'd like to have a card game with him. We sometimes played cards.

And he said, yeah, gladly, he'll be over in a few minutes. So in a few minutes, he came. And we both decided, among the four of us, that the two women would stay in the back room. And Margaret's father and I and he would sort of play the game. So Margaret's father started out, [INAUDIBLE], to mix the cards, to distribute the cards to play the game when he suddenly put down the cards on the table and said, actually, we invited him not to play cards but to discuss some serious business with him.

And then he told him right [INAUDIBLE] that our name isn't actually Hesser. We are Jews who live here in hiding. And our name is so-and-so. And we-- and then he told them what happened with that pensioner, and that we have to get out immediately or within a day at least, and also possibly save some of our belongings. And the officer was in full uniform. His name, incidentally, his first name is Heinz.

He listened in stony silence. Then he got up and said he'll discuss everything with his parents. And we'll be back as soon as possible. After some time that, to us, seemed like an eternity, it was probably not more than 15, 20 minutes, I don't know. They lived just one block over from us. He came back not alone but with his mother.

His mother was a gray-haired, sort of gray-haired, dignified lady, came with a huge basket of food which she plunked on the table with a thump and an angry face and said, listen, you have known our politics for years now. We have known each other close enough. We could have helped you all that time. How come you didn't have confidence in us to tell us that before?

And the food basket contained things which were worth a fortune on the black market, sausage, eggs, and all kinds of things. And their behavior was just incredible. So then they, right, they said, OK, what they would like to, first of all, support us in hiding some of our belongings. And after some discussion, we made the following decision.

As I had mentioned earlier, every night the British Air Force, the Royal Air Force, bombarded Berlin. And of course all surrounding areas had airplane alert and so people would be up. And then after the all clear siren, people, obviously, would go immediately to sleep. Because they had to get up early in the morning to go to work.

So the decision was to wait about half an hour after the all clear, hoping by that time everybody will be sound asleep and, in the meantime, have suitcases with certain necessities packed. And Heinz said he would help us carry them over to their place. And they have a shed behind the house where they could lock them up, and it would be safe there.

And then Heinz said he had a room in the southern borough of Berlin, Tempelhof. It became known later on during the air lift of '48, '50, because there was also an airport that played an important role in the air lift. But anyway in Tempelhof he had a room where he could-- all four of us could at least temporarily stay but or some of us.

And Margaret's mother knew-- had a girlfriend, I mean, a woman friend who was also underground. Now she had succeeded in totally legalizing herself with police registration and so on. And she said that the next day she and Margaret would try to go there. And Margaret's father and I would go to the room that Heinz had.

And then before leaving, Heinz turned around, pulled out his service revolver, gave it to Margaret's father, and said, here's my service revolver. If they should come tonight, just finish them off in self-defense. The war is over soon anyway. And then they left. That was an incredible thing that he did. And then the next day, I mean, then at night, right, everything worked out the way it was planned. We carried the luggage over.

And I don't know whether we got any sleep done or not. We probably didn't feel like it. The next morning, we left, you know, as if going to work with no particular luggage on us and never came back. And I just want to say that, after-- the

few weeks after the Battle of Berlin, I came back to visit the place. And neighbors told us that the following day the Gestapo came looking for us. So that really saved our lives.

So I-- yeah, and then in that room where we stayed, incidentally, Heinz knew that the superintendent of the house, the janitor, was a secret Communist. I never knew how he actually knew that. Because that was itself subject to execution. But anyway, he knew. And he said he will talk to him about us. Because he would-- in the city, apartment house janitors were responsible to have every new person who appears registered with the police.

I discussed that earlier. So-- but he said, if-- he would not tell him that we are Jews, that doesn't fly well with Communists. We are-- he'll just tell him, tell him that we are some Socialist activists and have to hide out. And so that's what he did. And we were introduced. In fact, I remember the janitor's name, [? Kochinski, ?] sort of a Polish name. And but I mean, he was a German.

And but [? Kochinski ?] himself had access to black market pistols. And so I bought a pistol from him and for my own self-protection. And I had never had a gun in my hand in my life. And I decided if I ever have to use it in an emergency, I don't even-- I barely knew where to pull the trigger but not how to aim and so on. So I bought additional ammunition, and that was also expensive.

Each bullet cost, I forgot, a substantial amount of money. And from a piece of paper, I made myself sort of a goal to aim at with concentric circles. And then I traveled out into a forest near Berlin and nailed it to a tree, of course, in a solitary place where no people were around. And then I sort of practiced shot. And I-- and, you know, in those days, these are more old-fashioned guns. I think today-- they had a tremendous sort of a backlash.

And all I remember is I never even hit the outer circle, not to speak of the inner circle. But at least I knew a little bit of how to handle the thing. And actually, I never had to use it. But at least it gave me also some self-confidence just to carry it with me. In the meantime, as I said, Margaret's mother and she herself were with that woman friend of Mrs. Haas.

And in the meantime, they knew some other people through whom they finally found a place in Potsdam. Now Potsdam is a suburb and used to be the summer residence of Prussian kings. And there's particularly one famous castle, the one of Frederick the Great, called Sanssouci, which is French, of course, means without worries or no worries.

And that summer, he was actually a great Francophile and basically even talked mainly French and had his castle, and also his garden surrounding the castle, designed in imitation of Versailles, on a much smaller scale, of course. And it also contained an orangery, like the park in Versailles does. The orangery basically served to keep plants in winter, which were-- which were not durable during winter and also as servants' quarters for their gardeners.

And that orangery had been turned into a huge sort of camp for people who were bombed out and also for refugees. I forgot to say that actually. As the Soviet army moved westward and came into areas which were inhabited by Germans, the Germans were systematically evicted from everywhere. And even that was started already before, I am now talking about March and early April '45.

Even in midwinter, the Germans were evicted. And day and night, you could hear on the country road that passed by near that cottage where we lived horse-drawn carriages with German refugees under them. And although that obviously was tremendous personal misery for these people, it filled me with a tremendous joy to see finally the hardships of the war hitting back at those who had caused all the misery to us but also to other peoples.

And so there were millions and millions of German refugees who were streaming westward into the still unoccupied areas of Germany, including Berlin. And so that orangery, as I said, was a huge camp for such people. And so people whom the Haas' knew, who were themselves out bombed and lived there, they were introduced simply as a family that was bombed out. But they said also they knew of my existence. That it is too unsafe to have me there.

Because why would a young 20, 22-year-old or so man be living there. I mean, he would be normally in the Wehrmacht fighting. So I stayed then alone in that room of Heinz in the city, in the district of Tempelhof. And they were our there.

Of course, I had a bicycle. And I commuted, I forgot, what, once or twice a week out there. One reason also is I had all these food coupons that I collected and kept collecting. And so I also bought food out there, as the war slowly sort of wound down to an end.

Now the Battle of Berlin-- oh, I should say one other thing before the battle. That the Germans made--

Why don't you finish that thought and then--

No, but that's a totally new subject.

OK. Then why don't we stop here.