

**DROSSEL, Heinz**  
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### **Abstract**

Heinz Drossel is a German who received the Righteous Gentile award from Israel in 2000 for saving a number of Jews during World War II, including a woman who would later become his wife. He was born in September, 1916, in Berlin, where his parents owned a small textile store. He received a liberal religious upbringing and had numerous, positive encounters with the Jewish community during his childhood. He completed his legal studies in November, 1939, but was denied a position in the courts because he was not a member of the Nazi party. He was drafted and spent six years at war, first in France, and later, as an officer on the Eastern Front. He describes his ongoing struggle to reconcile his moral integrity and opposition to the Nazi cause, with his responsibility for the welfare of his troops. In 1942, while on leave in Berlin, he saved a young Jewish woman who was about to jump off a bridge. She survived the Holocaust and they were married in 1946. He also saved a number of other Jews, hiding them in his family's apartment. After the war, he continued to encounter obstacles in his legal career, due to the persistence of Nazi sympathies and the fact that his wife was a Jew. He served as a judge for many years before being elected as the head of the prestigious Courts Council, the body that oversees all judicial hiring and promotions. He retired in 1981 and began volunteering as a Zeitzzeuge (Contemporary Witness). He lectures widely to reveal the truth about war and the moral dilemmas that his audience may face. He also warns his listeners that, while human rights in Germany have certainly improved, anti-Semitism and xenophobia are still very real.

### **Tape 1, Side A**

**0:00**

He states that he was born in September, 1916, in Berlin; discusses his childhood during the difficult years following World War I; his father, having lost his pre-war employment as a bookkeeper, ran a textile store in the Tempelhof area of Berlin; the whole family working and the business struggling until the devaluation of 1923. He recalls that they were poor, though never hungry, and lived in a tiny one-and-a-half room apartment behind the store. He comments that he became aware of social problems at a very early age.

**14:40**

He talks about his close relationship with his parents. He says that both parents worked constantly and he began to help out at the age of seven. He recalls running back and forth through old Berlin on errands. He recounts two vivid memories of his childhood: of an elderly Orthodox Jewish neighbor who sat in front of his house and told Heinz stories. He describes this as his first encounter with someone who was "foreign". He describes his second memory of crossing the Jewish ghetto on his errands and the kindness of the elderly Jewish ladies who routinely gave him sweets.

**23:08**

He focuses on his liberal religious upbringing (his father and he were baptized Catholics, his mother of Huguenot stock). He states that his father taught him very early that there was only one God but that everyone viewed him differently; that without the beliefs of the Old Testament, Christianity would not have evolved.

**27:20**

He recalls the positive influence of his father and his grandparents. He comments that his maternal grandfather, an autodidact, was able to explain Kant critiques to him better than any professor.

**Tape 1, Side B**

**30:00**

He continues talking about his grandparents, and recalls his maternal grandmother who protested against the annexation of Austria in 1938. He states that both grandparents were very positive role models.

**34:38**

He describes his schooling, first the grade school years and then his secondary studies at the Real Gymnasium Tempelhof (Tempelhof High School). He recalls the events of 1933: the dismissal of his principal, who was a member of the SPD (German Socialist Party) and attending a Hitler rally, of which he says "it was worth it to see several hundred thousand cheering people."

**41:50**

He talks about making his First Communion in 1929 and the speech his father made, which affected him deeply. He quotes his father as saying "Always remain a *Mensch*, my boy, and be decent, even in trying times, and even if you must sacrifice to do so." He says that he wrote this down and that these words guided him throughout World War II.

**44:50**

He talks about literature and how on the day of the Nazi book burning, he and three like-minded friends decided to hold a secret reading of the banned works. He says he did not join a youth organizations. He recalls the rise of Nazi power and says that the regime thrived on spying and spreading fear. He recalls that a young neighbor was arrested for playing the communist anthem from his open window and that the man's father also disappeared soon thereafter. He mentions asking his father how to pick the right political party from among the thirty-six which prevailed and his father advising him to attend all of the major parties' functions and to listen carefully. He adds that by January 30, 1933, the economic situation was already much better in Germany.

**53:47**

He recalls that the Nazis constantly played music and that he frequently heard the refrain "We will march until Jewish blood gushes from our knives." He explains that he worked his way through *Mein Kampf* and that he would probably have been arrested for his marginalia. He notes that his political consciousness developed quite early, but that he discussed politics only with like-minded friends. He explains that he realized very early, while others were still enthralled with Hitler, that his Nazi policies would lead to war.

## **Tape 2, Side A**

**0:00**

He recalls that within months of Hitler's being named Vice Chancellor in 1933, things moved quickly; measures were taken and laws passed moving Germany to a dictatorship. He says that the burning of the Reichstag did not have a deep impact because it was blamed on the Communists, who were not beloved, and the public book burnings interested only the minority who were readers. He states that he had many books which should have been burned, and that he and several good friends held a clandestine reading of some banned texts.

**5:40**

He talks about his high school years and says that he was voted the class speaker in 1929. He recalls that there was only one Nazi in the class, and that "He didn't bother us and we didn't bother him." He recalls that a Jewish student named Salomon Warman *[ph]* entered the school and they became fast friends. He remembers that in 1936, during the Olympic Games in Berlin, the Nazi party discouraged the display of swastikas.

**11:40**

He discusses his education and his lifelong ambition to become a lawyer. He states that he enrolled at the Law Faculty in Berlin because his father could not afford to send him abroad. He recalls that he went to Italy in 1938, spent three months with his aunt in San Remo, and wanted to emigrate from there with a Jewish couple, but that he did not have enough money to do so. He recalls returning to Germany and thinking "Now you're going back to that huge concentration camp that is Germany."

**18:45**

He talks about returning to Germany and resuming his legal studies. He recalls small acts of anti-Nazi resistance, and states that he was never afraid, then or on the battlefield. He says that perhaps he survived so that he could tell his story later.

**23:00**

He describes the forcible closing of a local Jewish department store and its re-opening several months later under Aryan direction. He recalls thinking that the Nazis had really gone too far; dropping stink bombs throughout the store on the day of the grand opening, which ended abruptly, and the store closing for three more months until the stench subsided. He remembers resistance becoming more and more dangerous, and thinking that he could never live in a Nazi state.

## **Tape 2, Side B**

**30:00**

He talks about the mixed political views of his classmates and professors in 1937-1938, some of whom were Nazi sympathizers, others who resisted. He describes a lecture by a female Nazi professor that was interrupted when the audience began to chant "German women do not smoke." He also describes the attempted arrest of the Bishop, which was successfully prevented when a crowd of students gathered in front of his home and began to sing religious songs until

the SS commander withdrew his troops. He recalls that, despite the jails and camps, there were still small windows of opportunity to protest. He talks about a client of his father's, a colonel whose wife was arrested after she was found to be sneaking through Berlin at night, spraying painting the message "Hitler, that killer, must die." He states that she was released after six weeks, thanks to her husband's position. He adds that the official stance was very changeable and that things started off well, with the rapid defeat of Poland and France.

#### **42:55**

He tells of completing his legal studies on Nov. 27, 1939, at a time when new graduates were permitted to postpone their military service for one year so as to start their professional careers. He talks of going to the court for a job interview and of being asked "strictly as a formality, of no relevance whatsoever" about his party affiliation. He recalls telling the judge that he did not belong to any party, the judge responding that he'd better enlist immediately, and stating that he could not do this in good conscience. He states that he received a special delivery conscription notice the very next morning, ordering him to report to the Spandau Barracks in Berlin, effectively banning him from exercising his profession. He talks about spending six weeks in training and then being assigned to the elite Grenadier Nummer 9 Regiment (known as the *Graf 9* or Count 9) because it had been composed strictly of royalty prior to the war. He recalls that most people thought that the war would end quickly, but that he had the feeling it would drag on.

#### **52:20**

He states that he spent six years at war; that at the outset he did not have a strategy for reconciling his opposition to the regime with loyalty to his comrades; that when he was promoted to an officer, he became aware of his responsibility for himself and the welfare of his men and that he managed this well. He recalls that when his unit marched into France, they had to wait for several days in the rubble of Eyne. He remembers hearing a whimper, finding a young girl surrounded by the bodies of her family, and making arrangements for her to be taken care of by the local priest. He also remembers, shortly after they crossed the Eyne River, the first modern Panzer massacre of the times and the carnage it created.

### **Tape 3, Side A**

#### **0:00**

He states that his unit crossed the border into Germany and moved east to Leslau (Włocławek), a town in the former German corridor that had become Polish. He recalls that it was his first opportunity to enter a ghetto and that, thought it was forbidden, "every soldier had some old Jewish lady to do his laundry" and the troops traded everything from cigarettes to little girls. He says that, in 1941, his unit marched through eastern Prussia to a river on the Russian border where they received orders to undertake a commando attack against the Russian troops on the other bank and to take no prisoners. He recalls that he surprised five or six enemy soldiers and marched them back to his commanding officer; says that his CO told the Russians to run and that the officer had every intention of shooting them in flight, but that he ran alongside them to prevent their murders. He states that the incident was never mentioned, but that from that point forward, the CO knew where he stood.

**13:05**

He recalls that the next weeks were tough, and that Russians were better equipped than the Germans. He describes an incident when two German soldiers captured a Russian officer, a lieutenant told him to take him back to the battalion to be shot; but taking the prisoner through the forest and letting him escape. He recalls that the Russian shook his hand, and that it was one of the most beautiful moments of the war. He says that, once again, no one ever asked about the incident and that, thanks to the complicity of some German officers, you could get around the rules.

**19:05**

He describes witnessing brutality against Jews; marching into a village where a dead Jew was hanging from his front door and German soldiers were standing on either side shouting anti-Semitic slogans. He recalls his amazement that these were almost all men with children but that it didn't bother them to beat a Jewish child to death. He recalls another incident in Dageta [*ph*], Lapland when he was very depressed and requested a few hours to himself. He tells of walking into the forest, encountering a couple of armed German soldiers, and then coming to a cliff from which he could see a mass grave below filled with Jewish bodies. He remembers seeing a soldier shoot a six year-old boy and kick him into the pit, and says that at this moment, he hit rock bottom and realized that there was no mercy any more.

**22:45**

He recalls that though these times were difficult, he knew he had to cope. He says that he was transferred to a unit on the front lines and that he had no choice but to fight the enemy in order to stay alive. He states that by the end of 1941, his unit had reached Lake Seliger (between Moscow and Leningrad) but that from then on, they marched strictly westward. He recalls that it was winter and that he already felt that Germany was losing the war. He also recalls his commanding officer retreating rather than attacking a hill position, stating that it would be suicide and that he had to take care of his men.

**Tape 3, Side B**

**31:20**

He talks about his home leaves in 1942, during which he visited his parents in Berlin and talked with many of their clients who were eager to learn how things really were on the front lines. He states that most of them were not Nazis and that he did not hold back, but that he did not know how much influence he had over them. He recalls that only when it became clear that Germany was losing on all fronts did some people become more observant and listen to the Wehrmacht news with a more critical stance. He states, however, that there were some die-hard Nazis, like the mother of one of his school friends who had been killed in France. He recalls meeting the woman on the street and expressing his condolences only to have her laugh out loud and tell him that he should be congratulating her because her son had died for the Führer.

**37:15**

He recalls an evening in Berlin in late 1942, the last night of his leave, when he crossed the Jungfrauen Bridge, and came across a woman, who was highly agitated and who tried to jump into the Spree River. He says that he pulled her to safety, but that when she saw his military uniform, she broke down completely. He says that he asked her if she were Jewish and assured

her that he would take her to safety in his family's apartment. He recalls withdrawing his life's savings (6000 marks) from the bank and giving it to a friend of his, who promised to take care of the woman and her child. He states that the woman had planned to leave Germany a few days later with her housemates but that when she returned to their home, the house was sealed and her friends were gone. He says that her name was Marianne Hirschfeld and that she later became his wife. He states that she did not succeed in leaving Germany, that she was sent to a camp, but that she and her son, who had been placed in a children's home, both survived the war.

#### **49:10**

He says that at the end of 1942, he was fighting on the Russian Front and that he remained strong, thanks to his faith and the example of his parents. He recalls an episode from his youth, when he spent the Sabbath with a Jewish neighbor, and says that he believes, as his father did, that there is only one God and that what you call him is immaterial. He says that this faith helped him survive and that he benefitted from his exposure to Judaism.

#### **53:25**

He says that, though he saved a woman from suicide, it was clear to him that if Germany was victorious, he would have no opportunities or professional hopes, and that he would take his own life. He says that this is one reason why he was never afraid. He recalls that by this time, the Germans were retreating and that they were surrounded by Russian troops. He recalls being sent into a farmhouse and hearing someone walking around. He says that he had sworn never to shoot another person and trying to address "Him" in Russian, only to discover that "He" was actually a huge brown bear who promptly trotted away. He recalls that afterwards, his friends assured him that "nothing can get you."

### **Tape 4, Side A**

#### **0:00**

He states that Germany was following a scorched earth policy and that he came back from leave to find his unit piling straw in all the houses before burning the village down. He says that the order was rescinded and that they were given new orders to re-join another German regiment. He recalls that they were marching on a Russian road, when another unit marched past and he realized that they were Russians. He says that he saw a gap in their ranks and told his soldiers to fall in behind the enemy. He states that because he was wearing a big Russian coat and spoke Russian, that no one noticed anything, and they managed to regain their German comrades. He recalls thinking that his colleagues were really dim-witted and that when they were ordered to burn something, they could just have said "this isn't any of my business" and come up with an excuse not to do it.

#### **6:04**

He talks about early 1944, when they were heading toward the end of the war and they began to retreat. He states that of the 360 people in his battalion, only 16 returned alive, and recalls crawling between the corpses of his comrades. He talks about trying to lead his men to rejoin their battalion and coming to a deep trench which they had to cross even though the Russians had already set up machine guns to stop them. He recalls that it was a beautiful clear day and that there was only one little cloud in the sky as the men lay down and waited. He says that the next morning, when the commander ordered them to advance lest they freeze to death, that little cloud

descended on the gully and it was so foggy that they were able to make it to the other side. He says this was a miracle.

**9:50**

He says that when his company arrived at Liebau, he contracted a very severe, infectious case of yellow fever, was quarantined, and then transferred to a camp in Magdenburg. He recalls that the Russians had already reached the town and an officer asked him to lead those men who could walk to Marienburg. He states that a doctor met him there with three railway cars containing the severely wounded, some food, and an entire car full of schnapps. He recalls that they bribed an engineer and heater to take them to Danzig, where there was a sanitary camp, and that from there they continued on to Stetin, which was still under SS command. He also recalls that the heater and the engineer promptly got drunk and that he had to take charge of the locomotive.

**20:13**

He recalls being released from the military hospital in Stetin and going back to his family's cottage outside Berlin. He says that he spent four weeks with his parents and that every evening they were joined by four people who came to listen to foreign news broadcasts. He recalls that on his last night of leave, one of the men confided to him that they were Jews, that they had been denounced that day and asked him for help. He says that he hid them in the family's apartment in Berlin and that all four of them survived the war. He recalls an incident after the war, when he was in a Russian POW camp and when several SS members, flush with sacks of Jewish dental gold, tried to tunnel their way out and were caught.

**Tape 4, Side B**

**30:43**

He says that he was captured on May 4, 1945 – just four days before Germany surrendered – in Neu Kolín [*ph*], Czechoslovakia, and sentenced to death. He says that a fellow officer convinced the judge that the sentence had to be signed by the commanding general and that this delay saved his life. He says that he escaped that night, and made his way through Czechoslovakia by train until, fed up, he surrendered to a Czech militiaman. He says that the Czechs turned him over to the Russians, who marched him to Lidice. He recalls that the Russians allowed the Czechs to vent their anger and made the prisoners run a 100 meter-long gauntlet between crowds armed with sticks and bats.

**40:00**

He says that he was treated well in the Russian POW camp because he did not have the tattoos that identified members of the SS and was soon released. He recalls taking the train to Berlin, standing on the platform outside the toilet with eight other men. He says that when he reached his parents' vacation cottage, he was so ragged that his mother did not recognize him. He recalls that he spent one night there and then returned to the family apartment in Berlin.

**47:02**

He says that Günter, one of the Jews that he had helped, was still living in the apartment and that the other three had managed to survive, living underground at the Sans Souci castle, which was filled with refugees and other persons without papers. He states that their names were Günter Vondheim (who called himself Ernest Vondheim when he came to America), his wife Margot,

and an older couple, Lucy and Jake Haas [*ph*]. He says that Jake was running a clothing store in the American sector and that he visited the Haas apartment frequently. He recalls the night that he visited them and there, sitting on the sofa, was Marianne, the woman he had rescued on the bridge. He says that he was condemned to death on May 4, 1945, that he married Marianne on May 4, 1946, and that he was honored as a Righteous Gentile by the state of Israel on May 4, 2000.

#### **52:58**

He says that he did a three-year legal internship, took his second set of exams, and met again with the head of the courts. He says that he was unlucky again as the last judicial vacancy had been filled the day before but that he could start immediately as a clerk for a judge. He says that he learned a great deal from his placement but that it was not what he wanted to do. He states that his wife's great aunt had been a very prominent member of the SPD (German Socialist Party) before the war and that with her help, he was able to make connections and meet many prominent people in Berlin.

### **Tape 5, Side A**

#### **0:00**

He speaks about his wife and children. He says that they had a daughter Ruth together in 1951 and that he had a stepson, Lili, with whom he had a very good relationship. He says that his wife gave birth to a daughter (Judith) during the war, that the child remained in the Jewish Hospital in Berlin, and was sent to Israel on the last children's transport to leave Germany. He says that they located Judith, that she returned to Germany at the age of thirteen, but that she could not adjust and always felt like an outsider. He states that she was very difficult, and that one day she ran away and returned to Israel.

#### **8:55**

He discusses his marriage, states that his wife was very guarded and that it was difficult for them to make acquaintances, much less friends with other Germans. He says that they had a good life together but that they didn't meet many people who wanted to befriend them, and that trust was always an issue.

#### **11:00**

He discusses the persistence of discriminatory hiring practices and the Nazi sympathies that lingered long after the war. He recounts meeting one of his fellow law students after the war and learning that his colleague had been offered a job as a judge immediately upon finishing his studies. He states that he once again approached the courts but was told that there was still no position for him. He says that he was finally hired by the Sozial Gericht (Social Court) thanks to the connections of his wife's aunt and that he spent one year in Berlin. He notes that though he had a very decent supervisor, there were still people in the courts with Nazi convictions; recalls that a senior judge continued to wear his WWII officer's uniform until 1963. He says that he then moved to one of the Staats Gericht (Regional Courts) and stayed there until 1963, when a member of the former Nazi inner circle was appointed to head the senate for which he worked; he protested that, as the husband of a Jew, he could not serve under such a person. He states that several mediation sessions followed, and that he held firm until he was offered a release from his position and the opportunity to leave Berlin.



**22:00**

He says that he was soon contacted by the Minister of Labor who had heard about his difficulties and who offered him a position in the Social Courts in Baden-Württemberg (though at a lower salary), and from that time on he had little contact with Berlin. He says that he spent nine years in Stuttgart, three years in Konstanz, and finally moved to Freiburg. He states that by this time, “he wanted to be the boss,” resigned from his judgeship, and moved to the Richter Rat (Courts Council) which approved judicial hiring, promotions, etc. He recalls that after a year or two, he was overwhelmingly elected to lead the organization and that this was a meaningful position which afforded him significant influence.

**32:00**

He discusses his retirement, in September, 1981, soon after losing his wife to liver cancer. He states that his parents had remained in Berlin, that his mother died in the early nineteen seventies, and that his father, who had been elected the mayor of Sensig, was denounced by communist party members and spent three years in an East German prison.

**43:00**

He discusses his volunteer work as a Zeitzeuge (Contemporary Witness) and says that after being honored in Israel, he knew that he had to become engaged again. He says that he spent his time speaking to students and civil servants, trying to dispel the many misconceptions about war and alerting his listeners to the difficult questions and moral dilemmas that they would face. He states that he is satisfied if he can convince 10 students out of 100 because of the multiplier effect, and says that many schools institute projects and work communities after he speaks.

**50:00**

He discusses the current political climate and his concerns about the Neo-Nazis. He talks about his memoirs (which he published at his own expense in 1990) and which end with the words “When I ask myself today whether people have learned from what they now know, I do still have reservations.” He states that the situation has improved but that anti-Semitism and xenophobia are still very real and that the young must try to look at what is really behind these beliefs and ask themselves whether another holocaust could still be possible.

**54:30**

He discusses his “new family,” people he met after the death of his son in 1989. He says that Renate and Matthias became fast friends and then invited him to live in one of their apartments; that he considered carefully whether he was prepared to give up his freedom; that they take wonderful care of him, and that he has a wonderful relationship with their children. He recalls that when he was honored by the community, he gave a talk and concluded it by saying, “And so, dear friends, for you I remain what I have been – your Grandpa Heinz.”