

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Harry Merin
November 9, 2008
RG-50.030*0555

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Harry Merin, conducted by Stephanie Blyskal on November 9, 2008 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Alexandria, Virginia and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

HARRY MERIN

November 9, 2008

Question: This is the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Harry Merin**, by **Stephanie Blyskal**, on November 9th, 2008, in **Alexandria, Virginia**. Good morning, Mr. **Merin**.

Answer: Good morning.

Q: Could you tell me where you were born, when you were born and what your name was at birth?

A: Okay, it's **Harry Arnold Merin**. I was born in **Holland, Amsterdam**, December 9th, 1941.

Q: Wow, that's interesting. And what were – what were your parents like, what did they do?

A: My – I don't know what my mom did, but my dad sold – actually, during that time, I think he did advertising, he did sign – made signs for stores and so on.

Q: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

A: I have a sister who was born in **Holland** after the war, and then a brother who was born in **Fort Wayne, Indiana**.

Q: Mm-hm. So you're the oldest.

A: I'm the oldest.

Q: Okay, so, obviously you were a baby –

A: Obviously.

Q: – during the war. So tell me a little bit about what your parents were, where they were, what they were doing at this – when you were born.

A: I don't know. I know they moved, I – I'm not that – I don't have the history exactly, of my parents. My parents really never discussed that with me. To me, I was considered too young. I know what he did after the war, I know they were hidden with different families. One of them was in **Broek in Waterland**, would be with – would be **Friese**(ph) and **Preym**(ph) is the persons who they were hidden with – with. And that was right at the end of the war, and my dad used to travel back and forth in **Amsterdam**. He – he had invented and wore the original roller skates, two wheels, and that's what he traveled with, and – and they – they moved pretty fast. So, my dad had s – put money away during the war so he could get to it. And so there were – I do know they were captured once and they escaped. But otherwise, they had left me pretty well in the dark. The only think I knew, I was at – at the camps, I was picked up. I was with a nurse, picked up and taken to the camps. I found out a few years ago that I was part of a group of kids because at my age you feel, how did I survive the camp, you know, when you're two and a half years old? I found out I was with a group called **unver kenter kinder in**, where there's a whole memorial at the museum. There were 51 of us, almost all of us survived.

Q: Hold on. All right. Sorry for the interruption. You were talking about being in the camp.

A: Yes. I know I was in **Bergen-Belsen** and **Theresienstadt**. I was, after the war I was brought to **Hilversum**, and I know my dad picked me up. Again, not much was said, but I do know he had found a motorcycle, and picked me up in a motorcycle from one of the buses, and that he had found my name in a newspaper, under the name **Yettermann**(ph). And when he got there, someone pointed to a sple – school buses, or buses, some type, and he pointed to which bus I would be on. So that is basically more than they used to tell me. Because they used to, you know, f – a group of them got together, per se, my parents' friends, who also either hidden or camp survivors, and they used to discuss things. But I was basically never allowed into the group. I do know my mom has had nightmares. I didn't know how bad, that she basically had nightmare almost every night. But that's – was the point, so –

Q: Was your family religious?

A: My family was not very religious. We kept kosher, but I was not – we're not **glatt** kosher, and I still am not, but we did keep kosher. In **Holland**, if we traveled, we had salads, or fish. And that is – that's it. Oh, except I – I – I know I used to go to services on Saturday, and my dad would join me once in awhile, but most of the time I went to services, they sent me to services. Saturday I went by myself. And that would be probably from the age of six or seven. There was no fear of me getting lost, I had a very good sense of direction. And –

Q: And this was in **Holland** still?

A: This was in **Holland**.

Q: When you were born, did you – did you have a bris?

A: I had a bris. I have records of what hospital I was born in, and I got records of things – the person who discovered me and br-brought me into this organization per se, is **Hans van der Bruk, Kulp(ph)**. **Kulp(ph)** is his Jewish name. And he is the one who basically got this whole group together. And the only reason he's not here this time is because he's down with lung cancer. So – but otherwise, I would not know, and he's – he's had his hands on papers which are not open to the public.

Q: Right.

A: He's been able to get into the files in **Holland** somehow, and got documents which shows that – in fact, the last time when we had the conference in **Holland**, I went to where my grandparents used to live. And, in fact, the first time, I was back about 10 years before that, so it would be about 13 years ago, the first time I went back to **Holland**. And I showed my wife where I used to live. I remember things – I remember what school I went to, how to find that. I went to the **[indecipherable]** park. Again, I showed her my house. I showed her where the grocery was where I used to go. They had a very neat operation there. You can get fresh potatoes peeled. They had a machine where you threw your potatoes in. It peels it, it washes, you buy a pound, you buy two pounds, and you bring it home. And it's some – you know, nobody in the **States** has seen, basically. And when I went back there, I showed my wife where that machine was at. So, things what a small child remembers, that I remember. When we left **Holland**, they didn't even tell me we

were leaving. They – they were very secretive about going anyplace. We just all of a sudden the car was piled up with suitcases, we were going on vacation. They just didn't tell me we weren't coming back. So –

Q: Did you have any family left in **Holland**?

A: There was no family left. My mom's total family was wiped out. My dad had a brother in the **States**, and actually he has a sister who lives in **New York**, my aunt, who was in the **Nuremberg** trials because she was a secretary to the

[indecipherable]

Q: Wow.

A: So, that is all that I really know. And like I said, I'm finding out about my roots, basically, especially the first ca – so I ris – I've have a lot of **incosyncrasies**(ph) in my life, and I found out I wasn't the only one. You know, I – I put more f – more food away than most people, I – you know, we always have extra stuff. I don't believe in wasting food. Of course, that's one of the reason why I got a little fatter, because if the kids didn't eat it all, I'd eat it. You don't leave food on your plate. And I get upset with my son-in-law, who fills up a plate and then leaves half of it, you know. So, it just – so there are some items which I've grown up with, which I've done, which make sense now, but they didn't then.

Q: Let me ask you, do you – this is sort of an odd question, but what do you think your first memory is? What is the thing that you can remember first from your childhood, whether it be a picture of something in your br – in your mind, or –

A: I have a – I have a – a block conference. In other words, anything which is bad, which has happened to me, gets blocked out. I do know that when I was in the second grade, and there was a lady, a girl in the first grade, who works at the Jewish Museum in **Holland**. When I went there the first time 13 years ago, I was looking to see what type of information I can find on me. And I gave her my last name, and she turned around and she says, you're **Harry**. And my mouth dropped open. Because at that time, when was in first grade, I still remembered. But I have forgotten totally.

Q: Right.

A: It's – it's blo – it's in there, but it's blocked. I have phobias which have come into light now, which I've never had.

Q: Right.

A: I've got some thought about it, but I don't know exactly why, but I do know I've got some phobias which I didn't have in the past and they're coming out. So, but the [indecipherable] the shock of, for some odd reason, 40 years later, she remembered my name, my first name, my story and so on.

Q: Wow.

A: So of course that means she's got an excellent memory, maybe that's why she's working at the museum.

Q: Where are you liber – sorry, this is – where are you liberated from?

A: It would have been from **Bergen-Belsen**.

Q: **Bergen-Belsen**, okay, so you were four years old?

A: About four years old, yes.

Q: Do you ha – you don't have any recollection of that?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: I don't remember anything. I do remember the persons, the nurse where I stayed at, I know she was still alive after the war, and I know my parents took me there, once in a great while. And again, I remember things. Her husband, he was hard of hearing and I remember he had a big horn, and you had to speak into that big horn. But, in other words, it's items what a small child will remember, close to the ground.

Q: Right.

A: Those are the things I remember. I remember in **Holland**, when I went to visit the house, which was also very unusual, because there was a fellow who was a cantor, who lived there now, a Jewish fellow. So, when I knocked, some stranger, I'm showing my wife where I used to live 40 years ago. You know, they let me go in and I s – there used to be something down here, you know, like a frog in something. He says, yeah, we moved that – about – after we moved into the house 10 years ago. So those are the things you remember.

Q: Yeah.

A: So it's – I remember my parents used to send me to [indecipherable] a lot. I don't remember how, but there was a place back there, someplace how you can escape out of the backyard, and I used to wander through the – the dunes there.

Q: Right.

A: At the beach. And again, I could be back in time for dinner, and they weren't worried about me –

Q: Right.

A: – I was a regular visitor there. They had a room for me year round.

Q: Right.

A: My parents used to travel a lot. After the war my dad sold ladies' hats and dresses, and he was – he sold hats all through **Europe**. So he had salespeople on the road, and then every so often he'd go to all his clients, you know, personally. But – so – and I know I went to [indecipherable] but I didn't like it.

Q: Okay.

A: It was too structured. But again, you know, for – for a six and seven year old –

Q: Yeah.

A: – just be able to – they put me on a train, someone would pick me up. And it would s – again, one time my sense of direction was –

Q: Yeah.

A: – excellent. And I used to walk from the synagogue where I went to – on Shabbas, for the high holidays, I walk all the way to this [indecipherable]

synagogue downtown in **Amsterdam**. And you know, it's a – probably a good three mile walk, and considering when you're seven and eight years old. You know, people nowadays wouldn't let your child to go that far.

Q: Right.

A: But again, they didn't worry about me, I'd find my way back, so – so it's –

Q: So when did you come to the **United States**? When does your family pack up the car and head into ha – what was the journey like?

A: Well, I remember we went to – my parents had to do something, I was left in a child [**indecipherable**] in **Germany**. Wer – I know we – we left out of **Germany**. I was there, I was two weeks at camp over there. Again, a young person doesn't have any problem communication.

Q: Right.

A: Communication. And there was – oh, you know, you had minefields there and bombs and stuff, but again, you know, I got along with the other kids, and we'd go – used to go scavenging for metal, which you can take to the junkyard, and then you can take that money and buy candies with it. So, you know –

Q: Now it's pretty good.

A: Yeah, and then we were in a – a camp [**indecipherable**] camp, probably for at least six months. And it's like apartment buildings and you know, you – I, of course, pick up the milk in the morning fu – you know, in a bucket, and so on, and I don't remember much else. I know there was – the **Black Forest** was nearby, and

it's one place they said I shouldn't go, because you can get lost in there. But you know, know, they have paths and –

Q: Right.

A: – we used to walk on the paths every so often. And I remember for **Rosh Hashanah**, they had a **Shochet** there and they would bake a live chicken, and it was – **shochet** it, you know, there on the spot and so on. So – but otherwise, no. A-And I remember the boat trip over. We came in December, and they had a nice, big storm. And I know all the adults were sick, and all us kids were happy because we got to go down and – and have all the desserts we want. So –

Q: And where did you arrive into?

A: We arrived actually, December the ninth in **New Orleans**.

Q: Aha.

A: And I have not been able to figure out what ship I came on. I know it was a American destroyer – well, American ship of some type, which was converted to a passenger. But I don't remember –

Q: So you arrived on your birthday.

A: I arrived on my birthday. That made it easy for me to remember. And I remember they had a **TV** there, so you could watch **Hopalong Cassidy** and all these cowboy shows, which of course, I didn't understand, but you know that was – it was a movie. So – and us kids sat there in front of the tube while the adults were busy with everything what was going on. Yeah, I was – I turned 10 when I arrived.

And I know we left **Harlem** when I was – was about eight and a half. We traveled actually to **Europe** for almost a year for –

Q: And – and then you moved to – to [indecipherable]

A: Then we moved from – my mom wanted someplace warm, like someplace like **New Orleans**, and my dad says no, we'll go someplace a little further north, so we ended up in **Saint Louis**, since his brother lived in **Saint Louis**.

Q: Okay.

A: We stayed there one summer, and then we moved to **Detroit**, it was too hot. The only thing you had in **Saint Louis** in those days were window air conditioners. It was very little – you didn't have houses, you had window –

Q: Right.

A: – you know, so that was it. So, like I said, one summer is all that it took.

Q: Move farther north.

A: Move further north. I remember **Eisenhower**, everybody was talking about **Eisenhower**, and I was talking, who's he? So –

Q: And what languages were you speaking at this point?

A: At that point I was still speaking Hollands. I did not know any English. You learned the words yes and no, and so on. And thank you. I went to a Jewish day school in **Saint Louis** for a few months, and my parents didn't think I was learning enough English.

Q: Right.

A: So I went to a public school. And like I said, by that fall we – we were moving –

Q: Right.

A: – to – to **Detroit**. I know we stayed in the apartment for probably about a year, and then we moved into a house.

Q: Mm-hm. And you were speaking more English by this point, were you picking it up? How was –

A: I was – well, I was picking – I was learning more English as I was going along, yes.

Q: And how was school for you?

A: Nowadays, they have persons who speak your language and they take you to through the year right along. In those days they did not. I know I started off in first grade with – with English and then I progressed – you know, I'd skip one or two semester – you know, you – during – during the year I'd move up one more grade. Math I was all right in.

Q: Mm-hm. Cause it's a universal language.

A: But story problems I still have problems with. My wife – in fact, even in college, my wife – I'd write the paper, then my wife translates it, corrects the spelling, and everything. Because in English I'm very poor at spelling. And that's – that's it, but she did my term papers and everything else.

Q: So where did you wind up going to college?

A: I went to, actually, **Perdue** University.

Q: **Perdue.** What did you study?

A: Interior decorating.

Q: Oh wow.

A: So, and that's my field.

Q: Wow. And did you meet your wife in college, or did you know her before?

A: No, I – I knew her before, she was a blind date.

Q: Oh wow.

A: And –

Q: And she's – she's originally from?

A: **Fort Wayne.**

Q: **Fort Wayne.**

A: Yeah, yeah, we got married in '71 and I had been dating her for almost nine years. So –

Q: A-And how many kids do you have?

A: We have three kids, and I got seven grandkids.

Q: Wow, that's wonderful.

A: So – and my two daughters live in **Cincinnati**. My son-in-law, well, a month ago he finally closed – he had a restaurant, a kosher restaurant here. And he did not get support of the city. Ninety percent of his clients during the day were non-Jewish, and he – he finally had to close it.

Q: Yeah. That's too bad.

A: Closed it up just before the holidays because basically with the holidays, you're closed all month anyhow, so.

Q: Right, right. Well, is there anything else you want to mention, anything else you want to add? Anything else you're thinking about?

A: It's basically, like I said, with the conferences, I'm finding out stuff. I don't know almost nothing about my parents. Again, they wouldn't talk about it. I did find out from my aunt that my dad used to live on the border between **Germany** and **Holland**, and then he basically snuck across the border into **Holland**. And my dad says, if you pay taxes and stuff, they'll let you stay.

Q: Right.

A: As long as you're paying them good money, they u – they want you to stay.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And they – he met my mom in **Holland** and they got married. I do have the records of that because I want to – in **Amsterdam**, I want to – what e – whatever the house is, whatever – it's a registrant, you know, for information and I – I got actually copies of my mom's, and I got a copy of my birth certificate there.

Q: Right. But it's just something that you've blocked.

A: Yeah, I wa – that part I didn't block.

Q: Right. But –

A: But I never knew about it.

Q: Right.

A: Again, th-there are incidents in my life which I have blocked.

Q: Right.

A: I just – and I still do that today.

Q: And did you ever ask your parents about any of this, or was it just one of those things that you just didn't do?

A: My parents – no, European-wise, you just didn't do it. And if you did ask, oh, it's not important, it's – you know, we really don't want to – basically, we really don't want to talk about it to you.

Q: Right.

A: Okay. Actually, my brother found out more than I did. And well, by that time – he is 18 years younger than me, and my did didn't have the strength to fight [indecipherable]. So, he is th – he is the baby, and my mom is still alive, but she is not totally coherent any more, she's – she is, but she isn't. She can't – she's bedridden, and she has been for the last three years, totally.

Q: Yeah.

A: So –

Q: It's too hard.

A: Yeah, it just – yeah. And like I said, you do have her story on tape, which –

Q: I do. Well, is there anything else you want to add?

A: No.

Q: Okay, well thank you, Mr. **Merin**. This is – this was the **United States**

Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Harry Merin**. Thank you.

Conclusion of Interview