

Rabbi Bernard Spielman

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Abstract

Soon after Rabbi Bernard Spielman's birth on February 20, 1932 in Essen, Germany, his parents were concerned about Hitler's coming into power and moved to Maastricht, Holland. He was the eldest of four children so the other three were born in Holland. His father was a Polish citizen and his mother was a US citizen as she was born in New York while her parents were there on vacation. His father had been a shoe salesman in Germany and became a traveling optician in Holland. Bernard and his father had to wear Jewish stars and his father lost his job when the Germans occupied Holland and took his car. Bernard was in 3rd grade and the Germans closed his school so they opened Jewish schools. His family was ready to take a ship to the US but the next day they were jailed by the Germans and, luckily, the next door neighbor took all their valuables and kept them until after the war. They went by train to Westerbouk Transit Camp and then to a German Internment Camp in a Convent and then to Vittel Internment camp where they were joined by the father. They had sufficient food, Red Cross packages, lived in a hotel and the children received some education. After liberation around September '44, the inmates were not ready for freedom so were placed in the village of La Bourbolle before being transported to the US. Bernard lived with his grandfather in Brooklyn for a short time to prepare for his Bar Mitzvah and then joined his parents in Orange, NJ. He was happy to be placed in his correct grade of 8th grade with a tutor to catch up. He met his wife at Brandeis. Music and making paper cuts are some of his interests. Bernard feels his family was lucky to be placed in an internment camp instead of a concentration camp and have a neighbor who was humane and kept their valuables in safety. He does not believe that G-d caused the Holocaust but man did so. G-d gives people the freedom to act. Bernard shows some documents at the end.

Summary

00:00 Rabbi Bernard Speilman was born February 20, 1932 in Essen, Germany as Van Hardst (?) Spielman. He will discuss his experiences during the war. Soon after his birth, his parents were concerned about Hitler's coming into power and moved to Maastricht, Holland. The city had a synagogue and a Rabbi who was also the Shochet who slaughtered the animals in a kosher manner. Bernard remembers bringing him a live chicken and after it was slaughtered, it was put in a barrel. The chicken was still jumping so it was horrible. He lived on Luchavshlika #16 in an attached house. He was the eldest of four children so the other three were born in Holland. They were subject to the planned manner how Germans treated Jews. His father's sister, Mirl, lived with them. His birth document shows he was a Polish citizen as his father was born in Poland.

- 05:00 His mother was an American citizen. His parents were given permission to reside in Germany. His mother was born in New York on a trip that the grandparents took between Germany and the US. His grandfather had a shirt factory in Essen. His parents got married in Germany. His father was intelligent but he had no opportunity for an extensive education. He was a shoe salesman and in Holland became an optician. He traveled around Holland selling lenses and would come home for Shabbos. His father's name was Alexander Sender Spielman. His initials on his suitcase were ASS. The three children attended public school and the fourth child was born before they were sent to the internment camp. His father came from Shevous (?) which was sometimes Polish and sometimes Austrian. There was a lot of anti-Semitism in Poland but Bernard does not know why they left. Mirl left with them. Another sister settled in Holland and was hidden during the war and they reunited later. A third sister lived in an Israel Kibbutz and her husband became an expert on farm fishing.
- 10:00 His mother had a sister and three brothers. The sister and two brothers and the parents moved to the US before the war. One lived on a hill near them in Holland and left on the last ship to the US. Bernard's family was crated to go on the next ship but did not. The one who went to the US was a phenomenal businessman who distributed liquor and manufactured ammunition in the US and became a millionaire. The grandparents sold the shirt factory and moved to the US where they settled in Brooklyn. Bernard never knew his father's parents but his siblings survived. Bernard spoke Dutch in Holland and read English newspapers in the US.
- 15:00 None of them have a German accent except for the parents. The next youngest was Magen, then Hannah and Edith. His mother's name was Helen Hudes (?). Maastricht had a small but active Jewish community with a Hebrew School, services and a Shochet. It was an orthodox synagogue with the women sitting upstairs and the men downstairs. The men wore top hats which were kept at the synagogue. After the war, Bernard saw the shelf where they kept the boxes of hats but they were gone. The public school was good. They had a tradition of learning and were encouraged to do well. He does not know if there were other German families in Maastricht. Life was normal. The teachers did not treat them any differently than the others. There was no anti-Semitism there.
- 20:00 The public school permitted them to be absent on Saturday. Bernard completed 3rd grade. The Germans conquered Holland in '39. It was a short war. He saw German soldiers at the Caserne, the military area which the Germans took over. The Germans were methodic as they did not destroy the Jewish community immediately. First they took away their telephones, then their radios and then their cars. His father could not make a living as he traveled in his Chevrolet to work as an optician. The children were forbidden to attend public school so they formed their own Jewish schools. His mother was an American citizen but he and his father were not. The law changed and his brother and Hannah are US citizens but it changed again and Edith is not a citizen.

- 25:00 Bernard and his father were required to wear Jewish stars. A teacher noticed two students not wearing a star and told them if they came again without a star, they would be reported to the Germans. Bernard saw a Jewish star on the sidewalk. A man was going to his job in a suit and hat and sees that Bernard has a star and gets off his bicycle and comes to Bernard, takes off his hat and bows to him and puts his hat back on. The teacher in the Jewish School may have reprimanded those without stars so she would survive and the man going to work was decent. The family conspired that all in the family would go to the US. At first they were not given permission but later the entire family had permission to leave. The Germans announced that they must report the next day to jail to go to a place where they would be happier to live as Jews. Fortunately their neighbors told them to bring all their valuables over the roof at night for safe keeping.
- 30:00 Bernard's family gave their neighbors all their jewelry, silverware and valuable carpets to keep until they return. They were overwhelmed by the neighbor's kindness but expected it as Jews came from all over the world to Holland as they accept refugees. They gave them their red and white dishes (points behind him). The next day they went to jail. It was '42 when Bernard was 10. The Germans' slow procedure took two years so the Jews were fooled.
- 35:00 Later at the Westerbouk Museum he saw documents and a book from Maastricht that indicated Alexander and Helen were transported by train to Westerbouk, a transit camp. Bernard's family were placed on a regular train guarded by Germans. In the morning his father put on his phylacteries for Morning Prayer and the guard did not question it. Bernard took unpopular stands when he was older against the Vietnam War and got in trouble delivering books. He feels his father was his model influencing him to do this. They arrived in Westerbouk which was in Northern Holland. A German guard smuggled in milk for his sister so he feels that not all Germans were anti-Semitic. Bernard does not feel that all contemporary Germans are Nazis.
- 40:00 The family were placed altogether in a barracks. An older woman entered as she needed something and the children made scary noises so she screamed and ran out. All the guards were German and favored German Jews who spoke German. The cleaning people might have been Dutch. This was the same camp where Anne Frank resided. Mirl had been taken away first and did not know what happened. She was sent to Westerbouk and then to Auschwitz where she was exterminated two weeks later. The Germans destroyed the records but the inmates kept records which they placed under the planks of the barracks and were found after the war.
- 45:00 After Bernard married, he returned to the camp. From Westerbouk the inmates were either sent to a concentration camp, work camp or an internment camp. Internment camp was for citizens of Great Britain, US, Turkey and for Jews who had a visa for Palestine, the allies at war with Germany so they could be exchanged for German POWs.

Bernard's father could not go with them so remained in Westerbourk. The four children and the mother went to Camp Leibenau (?) an internment camp in Germany. It was a Convent so the staff were German nuns who were very nice with Germans as the administrators.

50:00 Bernard's mother was strong and did not care for their residence where she could not take proper care of the children. She went to the Commandant and they were placed in a small apartment with a bed. Then they were transported to Camp Vittel, an Internment Camp in France which was a large area composed of hotels enclosed by barbed wire. The accommodations were lovely. They were given a large apartment with two bedrooms on the third floor with a balcony. They were permitted to receive American Red Cross packages which contained canned goods, chocolate and cigarettes. They were able to use the chocolates and cigarettes the same as German currency which enabled them to purchase items from outside. The British were permitted to accept British Red Cross packages but not the cigarettes unless they could prove that they smoke. Those who did not smoke tried to pass the test but coughed in their attempt. In addition, they had to sign a statement that after liberation they would reimburse the Red Cross for packages received.

55:00 The currency permitted the Jews to bring in flour to make matzo for Passover in the camp. They organized a school which was taught by British nuns. They taught the children English and math. There was little contact with the German administrators. The community organized themselves. The Germans had to determine if the British would honor the Polish Jews' visas for Palestine. They did not so the Poles were to be sent to extermination camps. There was mass suicides by jumping out of the windows. It was strange when a new transport arrived from Westerbourk with his father as he had a job to accompany a blind man. Perhaps the German Commandant liked his father. All the Polish Jews were sent to Poland.

60:00 On the same floor was a young Rabbi who offered to teach the young children Talmud. They attended to take advantage of the offer. The Rabbi told him to leave as he does not let his payas (side curls) grow. Orthodox families did not grow payas in Holland. He refused to teach Bernard until it grows. One day the Rabbi knocked on his door and invited him to study. Another day the Germans disappeared. The adults in Vittel did not work, just organized the POW camp. No one complained of hunger there but the food was limited in Westerbourk. The Germans had run out. There were spies in the camp who reported people for violations and when the Germans left, the French Underground came in and rounded up the informers.

65:00 The collaborators including women (no Germans) had their hair cut off and were put in trucks and taken away and never heard from again. Previously, Bernard did not know who was a spy nor how they were discovered. The gates were open but no one left as

they were conditioned that they would not survive if they left. Bernard never saw any violence or anyone killed in Vittel. The American Army came and talked to them and counted how many Americans and how many British. They realized that the inmates were not ready to live in society. The Americans took them to the village of La Bourbolle and placed in a hotel for orientation on how to live as free people. They were all afraid as did not know what was coming next. The little children were the first to feel free.

70:00 They had no restraint and played games and went on hikes. The adults eventually responded and were thought to be ready to go to the US. They were sent to Marseilles to take a ship that carried wounded American soldiers to the US. They were exposed to English speaking soldiers who had a sense of humor. The children wore knickers and they made fun of them. This was '44 and Bernard was 12 and would arrive in the US a month before his Bar Mitzvah. He was taken into the Captain's cabin and had to swear that he would not reveal the name of the ship until the end of the war. Being taken into the confidence of the US Armed Forces meant a lot to him and made him feel part of the US. It was a symbolic moment.

75:00 They felt like human beings again. The two years of imprisonment took away the humanness. He had been liberated around September '44. They were two months in La Ba Borbolle and arrived in the US on December 25, 1944. The name of the ship was Thomas H. Barry. Their relatives were informed that they would arrive in New York but they landed in Boston. The Red Cross placed them on an overnight train to New York. They saw a horrible view of the US as the rails go in the back of factories. They looked for gold on the streets and saw ugly buildings. When they arrived in New York, they were excited to see their relatives from Maastricht and others from before the war. After Bernard was married, he returned to Maastricht. His father was the first to return to Maastricht and had gone to the neighbor who had received all their valuables that they had transported over their roof.

80:00 He had saved their dishes, carpets and silver. Now, Bernard's daughter has his silver. The dishes were divided when his mother died. Everything was saved. They were lucky. Their neighbors were people with humanity. His family did not go to a concentration camp but to an internment camp so they survived. Upon arrival, Bernard was placed in his grandfather's house in Brooklyn to prepare for his Bar Mitzvah and his parents moved to Orange, New Jersey so they were separated. Usually boys have a year to prepare for Bar Mitzvah but he had a month so he got headaches from the tension. He was enrolled in a Yeshiva in Brooklyn where they decided that since he did not speak fluent English, he must be retarded and he was placed in second grade which was horrible.

85:00 His Bar Mitzvah was held in a synagogue in the Jewish Center where people talked during the Torah reading. He could not hear himself read the Haftorah nor give the

speech he had memorized in Yiddish. His parents asked if he wanted to remain with his grandpa or join them in Orange, New Jersey. He chose Orange where his father was employed by the father's brother. This brother had a mansion in South Orange. There were four Oranges. His father was a liquor salesman. They bought a 2-family home. They were lucky in so many ways. He was placed in 6th grade in public school for one month and then in 8th grade. He was given a tutor who tutored him after school so he could stay in his proper grade. Later his brother joined him in the same public school. It was ironic that he was given the job of teaching a child who was in the Hitler youth. They adopted him and played together.

90:00 He was his best friend and met the family. Bernard switched from the saxophone and took lessons on the clarinet. His music teacher headed the high school band so he was 2nd clarinetist. He was also in the choir and joined the synagogue. The Kol Nidre was chanted three times by the Cantor and Bernard always wanted to play the violin for the second time. In Pennsylvania, the conservative synagogue had an organ and a woman played the violin. He asked her to play the Kol Nidre and she did so. He was elected to the pulpit and the Emeritus Rabbi decided not to retire. Instead he acted as the Senior Rabbi and conducted another service in another auditorium. Bernard was the Rabbi in the main sanctuary. Music is important to him. He mentioned his war experience in his sermons. After he returned to Westerbouk, he left a copy of his experiences there and spoke of his experiences in public schools. Bernard has been interviewed on radio and TV.

95:00 He finds it almost impossible to go to any movie without mention of the war. Schindler's List was positive on the subject. He tries to avoid Holocaust observances and does not conduct them. He accepts what people say that they lost faith in G-d after the Holocaust and Bernard responds that G-d did not put him in any of the camps and had nothing to do with his survival or liberation. He believes in a G-d who gave free speech to human beings so G-d is not responsible for what they do to each other. G-d is a force within the universe that helps make Judaism a decent world to live in. It was not good on a Gaza ship. It is amazing how you have heaven on earth in Israel. So what happens makes his faith in G-d nil. Judaism is important for how people behave. Bernard does not believe in a world to come or in resurrection. He believes his wife is dead and not in heaven. He has his own memories of people he had contact with. He still remembers his wife and it hurts.

100:00 People cannot accept that G-d did not have a hand in the Holocaust. He became a Rabbi to perpetuate what Hitler tried to destroy. One must try to create a better world to live in. He was a rebel and went to Brandeis University where he met his wife. She was two months younger than him but graduated a year ahead of him so he had to keep up to her. He attended the Jewish Conservative Seminary. [Bernard shows: 1) a certificate from La Bourbolle, 2) small cards from Westerbouk showing him and his father in Barracks 43,

3) a list of inmates at Camp Westerbouk including his immediate family and Aunt Mirl who was exterminated at Auschwitz.

105:00 The list was hidden by inmates as the Germans destroyed all records. Listed was Nathan, Martha, Julius, Joseph and Irv, 4) Police Registration Document showing he was born in Essen, Germany and moved to Maastricht near Aachen, and 5) A paper cut with copper that he created. In Hebrew he writes, "Martyrs of my people" and shows barbed wire from the camp, the flames of crematoriums, and a Jewish star. His artistic name is Yadash (?) Spielman.]

110:00