

## **Werner Joachim Preuss**

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### **Abstract**

Werner Joachim Preuss was born December 13, 1921 in Berlin, Germany to Joachim (?) Preuss and Lea Hilda Philipstag (?) Preuss and had a sister who was two years younger. The family had inherited real estate and led a normal life of assimilated Jews until Hitler became powerful and his father lost his job as an attorney and he went to Sachsenhausen. Werner's mother paid to get him out as she had a visa to Shanghai but really wanted to go to Paraguay where they had relatives. Werner had training to go to Palestine so that would have been his preference. The family took a train April 30, 1940 to Genoa and the ship had no room for them. Werner and his father were placed in a camp while the mother and sister were given a room in a private home. They were permitted to leave and the ticket money from the Italian ship was transferred to one for Portugal. They missed it by a day and were flown to Barcelona and Lisbon where they waited for another ship. Werner met his future wife on the ship and left at Montevideo where she was going to reside and he had a cousin there. He learned the furrier business and went to Argentina and learned real estate. Many times they visited Europe and once they tried to live in Israel but conditions were too harsh. Werner tells of Nazis who stole IDs from prisoners in concentration camps so they can live as Jews in Israel. After their children completed college in the US, they refused to return to Argentina so Werner decided to move to Florida where he had a construction business.

### **Summary**

00:00 Werner Joachim Preuss was born December 13, 1921 in Berlin, Germany to Joachim (?) Preuss and Lea Hilda Philipstag (?) Preuss. He had a sister who was two years younger. His father was an attorney and a notary who was born in Deutschkroma (?), West Prussia and had been an officer in World War I in the German Army and then a judge in Sneiderbern (?) near his birthplace in West Prussia. Werner's uncle in Berlin owned a city block of six or eight buildings near Alexanderplatz. There was an old street inside, Lansberger (?) and it was in the middle of Berlin. His uncle said the owner had two daughters so Werner's father married one and got a park as a wedding present. His grandfather owned a city block and was the only son of the great-grandfather who was one of the first Jews in Berlin with a million marks. He bought the city block with a million marks. His father came from a family of six children as he had four brothers and two sisters. Werner's father was the first to attend Gymnasium, the Jewish School and University. He was perfect in Hebrew and Jewish studies and served as a Rabbi when he immigrated to Paraguay. Werner's mother's father was an artist and a member of the Jewish community but did not believe in religion.

- 05:00 All children in Germany were required to attend religious training once a week. Werner's parents wanted him excused so they asked the Kaiser for permission and it was given. Werner's mother was Jewish but assimilated. Werner's grandfather did not like German so spoke French. When Werner's mother was five, she was taught German by a teacher so she could enter school. Werner's great-grandfather came from a small town and were religious. His family lived on a lake so the Mayor said he was like Moses. He had blond hair and was adopted by Jews and said he was Prussian so was given the name, "Preuss." The first woman buried in the Jewish cemetery was Esther Preuss. Hugo Preuss, his grandfather's second cousin, wrote the Weimer constitution as he was Minister of Justice after World War I. Werner's father came to Berlin in 1933 and was on the list of the first judges but was not political. Werner knew his grandparents.
- 10:00 His father's family kept kosher but his father was known as a 3-day Jew as only attended synagogue on the High Holidays. He did not take Werner to synagogue. They had a Christmas tree. The family spoke German. Werner's father and his brother served in the German Army and both reached the highest level for Jews. Another uncle was a dentist. His father lived to 96 and was a talker and knew history. Werner's sister was Esther. His father first immigrated to Paraguay and then to Argentina where we wrote in the Buenos Aires newspaper. Werner's grandfather had a men's store but did not want to buy his building. The father's younger sister had three children who were sent by Kindertransport to England. All were well-off. His father's oldest brother learned to be a tailor and had a tailor shop and was the least wealthy.
- 15:00 On the father's side was the boy who was found on the lake when Napoleon was in Germany. His mother's family goes as far back as Rabbi Meiser (?) in Poland. There were two big stones in the cemetery in Prague – Rabbi Meiser, his father and his second wife. Later there was Rabbi in Sweden who assisted the king. They were in Prague around 1600. His mother was from Posen (?) and the Czech Republic but they were in Germany for a long time. When Werner was five, they went on vacation to Herring's Dorf (?) with another family. They had two apartments on the second floor. He remembers going out in the sun and the streets were still wet from the rain. A movie starlet got splashed on her dress from a bicycle and said, "Dirty Jew" and his father asked the starlet how did she know that he was Jewish. It was the first time that he heard someone talk against the Jews. They went upstairs and his father told his mother and they found out the woman was a starlet. The story was repeated to friends so he still remembers it.
- 20:00 Werner attended school with both Jews and non-Jews (Protestants and Catholics). They were required to study religion weekly. He had both Jewish and Christian friends. He had no problems in primary school. They had a maid, a cook and a Christmas tree. They did not celebrate Chanukah before Hitler's time. Most of the Jewish people in his area of Gruenwald were not orthodox. Many Jews lived there. His high school and gymnasium

were in Gruenwald. After four years at primary school, you go to gymnasium. Problems started after 1933 as some teachers talked against the Jews and his father was fired and lost his attorney license. His parents spoke French and thought to move to France. They visited Paris and saw immigrants living under a bridge so returned home.

25:00 Werner had to leave gymnasium as he played hockey and hit a boy in the eye. His father was in the SS so Werner and his sister were placed in a school in Kaput (?) outside of Berlin where Einstein had a house. When Einstein left, he donated his house to the Jewish community. There were six or seven houses in Kaput. They remained for six months. The grandfather on his mother's side who owned buildings, died at age 64 before Hitler. His only son was the manager and made money. On weekends he drove to Paris or to the French part of Switzerland or Marrano. He was born in Poznan (?) and was younger than his wife. The son saw his wife when she was born and she was sent to Berlin and they married when she was seventeen. In 1927 Werner's grandfather wanted to sell everything and go to Switzerland with a friend but could not get citizenship there. He was afraid that the Communists and Nazis would come to power. His friend did not go to Switzerland so the grandfather did not go. His grandfather died in 1929 in Wiesensee when he was 64. Werner's mother and younger sister inherited the uncle's property which had a high mortgage.

30:00 After the uncle went to Paraguay, his mother sold the property but the Germans got the money. The assets from the house and property were destroyed that were sold to the baker and the remainder of the property was in East Germany after the war. A specialist helped them get a small compensation for the land which had little value. The city block was in East Germany and after it joined with West Germany, there was only one building left. Everything was demolished and the Communist elites got the apartment. They started a lawsuit and the sister was sick so they settled on \$500,000 for the property though the land value was 800 million as it stood between two large avenues. West Germany sold it and made millions but his sister wanted the money quickly. After unification, it came to \$19.99. Alexanderplatz is in East Berlin and after the unification was worth a lot as the government built apartments for the party elite. The house in Gruenwald and two houses behind it were destroyed. The house next door was the nuncio for the man who became pope as he used it when he came home. After the prison camp, Werner's mother tried to get an interview with the pope but did not succeed.

35:00 He gave interviews to those who converted. It was Pope Pius XII during the war. His mother knew the pope but Werner did not. Bombs destroyed the houses. The bakery on Bismarkplatz survived. When Werner was invited to Berlin, his sister came from Buenos Aires. It was the late '80s and they went to the bakery where there was a new owner. Werner wanted to buy his favorite baked goods but he no longer liked it. His sister married Eisenstein who is not Jewish. Werner bought a donut at the bakery and it was

terrible so either his taste or the recipe changed. They lived on Hubertes Alle 6 which was after Hallenzee (?) station near the S-Bahn in Gruenwald.

- 40:00 They received little for their property as had to divide it with others. A lady said, "Schmttzin Yidener" (Dirty Jew). His parents did not speak about politics in the 20s and 30s at home and he was too young to understand. In 1926 anti-Semitism was not normal so mentioned it if it occurred. Everyone was afraid of both the Nazis and the Communists as they would have to flee if either came in power due to the economic situation. In '32 they did not think that Hitler would get voted in but he did along with Hindenberg. His father suffered as he lost his job. When they left Germany for the States, they thought the war was about to end. People were afraid of the Communists so voted for Hitler though some Jews liked the Communists. His father returned from France and went into real estate. Then came the Olympics followed by Kristalnacht in '38. His father was in the Jacketeers (?).
- 45:00 The police came to the house and arrested his father and he spent two months in Sachsenhausen. His mother bought him out as were going to Shanghai but he preferred going to Paraguay to join his brother or go to the US. The Chief of the Czech County asked his father to take over the liquidation of all the Jewish organizations as his father spoke German. They found the trust for Esterbon and had one mark for charity for youth. One day his father walked with a Nazi who told him the Germans entered Norway and spoke of liquidating the people. The Nazi's son was an officer in Norway and told him they were rounding up the Jews in Oslo so Werner's father wanted to leave Germany. Hitler was not elected but was nominated by Hindenburg.
- 50:00 Everyone was shocked as did not expect Hitler to get into power. There were only about 30 or 40 attorneys and his father's license was canceled. His father had his own office and specialized in real estate. He represented all the landowners. They held an auction to see furniture and divided the building into four apartments and they lived in one. Gruenwald was on Alexander Platz. Some people left. An affidavits was not enough. Some people did not want to sign tax returns for only one person. Meanwhile, Werner attended school. After Kristallnacht, they were usually not at home but his father was home when the police came.
- 55:00 Werner was on the subway with a friend and did not sleep at home. The next morning, Werner went with friends to see the synagogue on Kurfenstendam (?) that got burned. Then he went to the men's store whose owner's daughter was in school with his sister. He went to the store with his brother and another friend and saw the broken windows. The owner was not a German citizen and wrote such a sign on the store. When Werner's father went to camp, everyone was afraid. They had to close the store. They immigrated to the US and got a store on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Some people were deported to Poland. Werner went to the dancing club near Alexander Platz and saw people playing cards. They did

not understand what was happening. They did not know what happened at Sachsenhausen. They did not know anything until his father returned from Sachsenhausen.

60:00 His father looked all right upon his return home after six or eight weeks at the camp. His mother paid to get him out. Then his mother bought them tickets to Shanghai. School had closed. His parents were thinking whether they should get a ship to Shanghai or try to get a visa for Paraguay. His mother's brother left for Paraguay in '38 before Kristallnacht. He was newly-married and bought a farm there. They obtained sponsorship but were told they were not young enough or did not have sufficient money. In '40 they got their papers from the Consul. When World War II started, Jews had to get ration cards. Werner bought a lot of marmalade and life was mostly normal. His aunt's husband committed suicide at their apartment so the aunt and two children moved into Werner's apartment. Once the war started, the Jews had to serve labor duty for the farmers. Werner had tried to go to Palestine and spent two months in labor during the winter and transferred to a farm in Berlin to get trained for Palestine or South America.

65:00 The farm was outside Berlin where he slept in the barn with six other boys. He told the farmer that he is not a farmer but did not want to enter the Army and fight and the farmer treated him well. After two weeks of farm training, a restaurant in the village was burned. Those sleeping there walked to the farm. Werner tried to go to HaShoah, the farm where they trained for Palestine. They trained to work on a Kibbutz and feel like farmers. He remained there until they left Germany. The farmer got a call for Werner to take off two days and go to Hamburg to obtain a visa for South America. Winter was very cold on the farm. They cut trees for Germany. Werner was 19 so if he was non-Jewish, he would be drafted into the Army. Werner was with the Jewish work group. Poles worked there, too, and were slaves. He was not a slave as he got paid. On the weekend he took a train to visit his parents. The Jewish community worked for the German government. They had offered their help. The Kaiser had said that Jews are the same as others so they could enter the Army. Hitler came into power and the Jewish community offered their service. Later people worked in factories like Werner's wife did. The Jewish organization might have done this to prevent punishment. After his father lost his profession, they wanted to leave Germany. They could not decide where.

70:00 First, they thought of France but saw the immigrants had a bad situation as sleeping under the bridge. The Jewish people accommodated themselves in Germany by forming Jewish clubs. They thought the situation would be like the Black people in the US whereby the Jews would be second class citizens. They created their own theatre, school, clubs, entertainment, dancing and sports clubs. They were separated but not killed. It was just 100 years since the Jews were emancipated. Jews could not be a General or an Admiral in the Army and could only be an Assistant Professor, not a full Professor. They were 2<sup>nd</sup> class until the Weimar Republic. Werner went to Hamburg for the Paraguay visa as his father signed that he could leave the HaShoah training. There was lots of paperwork and

permits. The aunt and two children who lived with them could have escaped with them but did not leave because another aunt thought the war would end soon and did not want to turn over all her belongings to the Jewish community.

75:00 One aunt survived. People did not believe the seriousness of their situation. Werner and his family left April 30, 1940 and crossed the border to Italy at 5:36 PM. Italy was Fascist but they felt free. Before that moment, people said, "Don't talk." The train was full of others like them. One Jewish man opened the mirror behind the toilet and hid his gold there and could not remove it later. He was afraid of having trouble at Customs. There were other people besides Jews on the train. They arrived in Genoa and the Jewish community took them to a hotel and to the ship the next morning. The Gooseline did not accept their visa as they wanted it confirmed by the Foreign Minister in Paraguay. The ship did not have space for them and left and they had to get more papers.

80:00 They could only afford to rent a room with a family. They tried to get on another ship. He and his father were eating on the square when war was declared. They saw the occupiers walking with an umbrella. The next day German-speaking police arrested them. He went with his father to the police station and his mother and sister went elsewhere. They slept without a mattress in a large room with about 100 to 120 people. They were with some Italian convicts who were arrested and some German Communists. Three Germans were on an American ship when it arrived in Italy and wanted to return to Germany and were arrested. They were all fed and the next day taken to a prison. They saw another Jewish family there, a guy from a famous Austrian restaurant and a black guy from an English colony who was from NY. He was arrested as he held a British passport.

85:00 Werner was unable to use the toilet in front of others so they called a doctor who treated him with hot water. They were in the prison for three weeks. The conditions were poor but the treatment was satisfactory. Some of the prisoners returned to Germany and Werner thought of returning to HaShoah but his father thought him crazy. His sister and mother were confined in a small town. They returned for a few days to their rental and then to the train. His mother and sister got money for food and lived a normal life. People were from Austria, Czech Republic, England, France and Gypsies came later. They were placed in a camp in a convent with about 80 to 100 other people. There were some Jews, English, French and one from Africa. Everyone's name was called except theirs. The name was pronounced, "Greuss" in Italian instead of "Preuss" and they were let in. They received six liras a day for food which they cooked themselves. It was like a sanatorium.

90:00 The Manager was nice and talked to them. They played soccer and the young people were permitted to go to town. They paid the Cabireri (the guards) for permission and could go to the Bordello. There were few survivors after the war. Later the Germans took the

camp over. Most had to report to Auschwitz. There were about 4,000 Gypsies outside the camp. The Austrian wanted to become a butler in the US. Food was satisfactory and the people were not mistreated. They managed themselves. It was not like the camps in Germany. The war progressed and they thought they would be killed when the Germans came. They talked to the Carabinieri about escaping.

95:00 It was easy to go out as there was no barbed wire. They talked about Palestine, the political situation and what to do after the war. Werner was 18 and was with the younger group. Some were 24 and 25 and worked for a railroad and one in a Vienna nightclub. People were afraid that the Germans were coming. The people from Genoa were returned to Germany. The Italians treated them almost like in a hotel but they had to cook for themselves with the money they were given. They were taken to the barber shop so it was not like a concentration camp like in Poland. When the Germans came, the prisoners were deported to Poland. The Monastery was Anyonin. There were Italian, French and Yugoslavian and 20 to 30,000 Gypsies that the Germans took to Lodz. There were religious people there as one Jew taught him and gave him a book to take to South America. Everyone discussed what to do and what was going to happen.

100:00 They had paid for their tickets so his father spoke to the Italians that they wanted to leave. In '38 or '39 there was a law that all Jews who were not Italian must leave. The Italian ship had oversold tickets so they wanted to take the next ship. Italy was at war. His father arranged that the money be refunded to the Spanish ship going to Portugal. Their German passports had expired and they had to get them renewed for a year so they could leave the country and get visas for Spain and Portugal. The paperwork was completed so they left. They met the mother and sister in Rome at Chanukah in December '40. He went to synagogue with his father. There were six or seven Rabbis in front and they called Werner up to the Torah. He had learned Hebrew in HaShoah. They asked for his Hebrew name and he said, "Moshe" so this became his Bar Mitzvah. His time for Bar Mitzvah was when his father was in prison and the Rabbi wanted to charge them a lot of money for learning so they did not celebrate in Germany.

105:00 He was able to read the Torah. The family had a problem getting a flight and worried about being deported to Germany. They obtained tickets and took a small airplane to Barcelona where they spent the night and then went to Portugal. Police and Customs reported that they cannot stay as the ship left the day before. They would be sent back to Germany on the German plane that was waiting for them. His mother refused to get on the airplane and the Jewish community came and they waited in Lisbon until March for the next ship. There he met his future wife 73 years ago. He only had his shoes. They met other immigrants who wanted to go to the US or to Buenos Aires. One had been in HaShoah and was on his way to Palestine. Two private homes in Lisbon held services as they only had a small Jewish population. They held one Polish and one German minyan. They would go to both minyans as they were just a few blocks away and he could obtain

lunch at both. Their luggage was still in Italy as they could not take it on the airplane so just had hand luggage. His mother bought two lounge chairs for the deck. There were 300 people on the ship from Spain, Russia and Jews escaping from Europe. He saw his future wife going up the plank to the ship. She was 17 and he said, "Du" and "Zee" as he was being familiar. She came from Berlin.

110:00 He slept with his father downstairs. There were cabins without toilets. His mother slept upstairs. His future wife was in a cabin with six or seven other women. The ship left and broke down and went to Spain for a day or two and left. It stopped in the Canary Islands, Brazil and Montevideo. Next to their ship in Brazil was a German ship so they did not speak to them as the people were German. Werner had a cousin in Montevideo and a friend who went to school with him from primary school through high school who had been in Montevideo a few years. Though he did not have a visa, he went down and paid the porters to get to customs. He paid him \$50 and gave him his cap and said, "Si, si" as he did not speak Spanish. The cousin indicated that he would wait for him outside. He went to customs with his luggage. His sister and parents continued to Paraguay. First they went to Buenos Aires to get another ship, which was primitive, to Assumption. The family was let out of the convent because his mother obtained a permit to leave the country.

115:00 The Italians wanted them to leave. Money was transferred and it was confirmed that they could go to Paraguay. They had to go to the German consulate in Rome to get a permit for one year which they easily obtained. Then they got a transit visa for Spain and Portugal. The money from the Italian ship was transferred to the Portugal ship. Someone had to pay the airfare from Rome to Barcelona to Lisbon. They could not take the train as it went through France. His wife took a special sealed train for Jews that went through Europe to Portugal. Possibly, the JOINT paid their airfare as they gave all their belongings to the Jewish community or, perhaps, the ship paid the airfare. The Lisbon minyan did not always have ten men as needed for a Jewish orthodox service.

120:00 Now, Reform Jews accept women as part of the minyan. After Hitler came, Werner attended a Jewish school and went to synagogue. It was 95% Jewish with some converts. After '33 things changed as he became interested in Judaism. Werner spoke to his future wife in a familiar way so she might have been shocked. She was wearing a gabardine coat, shoes and white socks and looked younger than 17. All the young people stayed together on the ship. In Montevideo she lived with her mother and he paid to live with his school friend for a month. On Sunday morning he went downtown Montevideo and visited the girl who was surprised that he was there. He looked for a job in the square and saw some Italian Jews playing dominoes. They had a factory and paid him 50 cents or one peso a day. He did not want to go to Paraguay as preferred Palestine so left his family. His cousin was married to a Uruguay woman with a baby and had been a legal immigrant for five years and had an ID card.



125:00 After the war ended, Werner went in '46 to Argentina and got amnesty and papers. He used his passport with "J." He did not know what happened in the concentration camps. He knew his aunt had to leave their apartment and go to Poland. After the war, his father in Paraguay found out that her children were killed. He was the cantor in Paraguay where they had a German newspaper. There were many Nazis in Buenos Aires. In 1950 Werner went to Israel as he experienced anti-Semitism in Buenos Aires. They moved near Gaza before his son was born. They lived near an Army physician, Dr. Furst (?) who had his own office and near an Arab pharmacist. The doctor's wife was blond and younger and had two children.

130:00 They returned to Argentina as life in Israel was hard. The doctor wanted to go to Argentina. Werner's father arranged for him to go to Paraguay which cost \$100 or \$200. Werner spoke to the Jewish Agency in Argentina and they said the doctor will get a permit to come but the doctor never called him. One day Werner was at the Stock Exchange and saw the doctor who said, "Hello" and left. A few years later Werner read in the newspaper that the doctor was arrested in Germany. He had taken ID from a Jewish prisoner in a concentration camp and, after the war, entered the Israel Army. He was too greedy as he had returned to Germany to get restitution as a physician. He was not a doctor, perhaps a nurse at the concentration camp. There were other Germans in Israel who falsified as Jews as took the identities of dead Jews. Werner knew about Eichmann.

135:00 A cousin was killed as a Nazi thought she had information. Werner worked in a Uruguay factory and as a cowboy and saved money. He studied the furrier business and made mink coats and went to Argentina. There he was in the import business and imported to Israel and returned and started the real estate business. Since he worked on commission, he did not need capital and then started construction. He left Argentina in '72 as his children went to college in the US and refused to return. His daughter worked at the UN and came one year to teach in Argentina and returned to NY and married a doctor. Werner moved to Miami Beach and did not know if he would stay as he had come many times on an immigrant visa. His construction business was 120 miles from Coral Gables. At age 50 he traveled each day to work 120 miles and 120 miles back home. Later he got a real estate license and remained. In '61 he went to Germany and then two weeks to US and his wife returned to Buenos Aires. He went to London to meet his father and three cousins whose parents did not survive Auschwitz. They flew from Frankfurt to Berlin. He spent one night in Pinsk and the next day went to East Berlin to the cemetery.

140:00 In the evening they went to a small theatre near Alexander Platz. At night they took a subway to see construction and returned to the hotel. In the morning, his mother asked about their home as the Berlin wall was going up and they would be unable to go to the East. They went to Gruenwald and only saw one of the two stone lions they had at their entrance. Werner wanted to bring home the surviving lion but it was not possible. They

saw old neighbors and went to a restaurant where Jews were not permitted to enter. His father was disgusted as he met an old friend from school and the military who said, "Jews are not German." They had bought unobtainable items for him during the war. Now, Werner believes he was right as the Jews were a minority, not German. They were like immigrants in Berlin who live on waterways. The Jews spoke German and had lived for generations in Germany. Werner became interested in Jewish things when he was reminded that he was Jewish.

145:00 In '66 his dad died in a car accident. Werner has been to Europe seven or eight times. His wife, Jen who is not Jewish, has a home in Berlin. His father wrote about April to December '40 in Italy but it was not published in Paraguay. The Italians were not anti-Semitic and tried to help them. The Italians were helpful to his mother and sister. One Italian came to Buenos Aires and wanted to marry his sister but she refused. The Italians were different from the Germans as they were not against the Jews. Hitler came to Paris and suddenly they were against the Jews. Perhaps the Italians are similar to the Jews as they are both Mediterranean. The French were more anti-Semitic than the Italians.

149:00