

**RG-50.030.1081**

**Oral History: Helmut von Schweitzer, June 18-30, 2020**

## **Summary**

### **Part 1 of 7**

Helmut von Schweitzer, born May 14, 1926 in Gneixendorf (now incorporated into Krems), Austria, into a Roman Catholic family, describes: his family roots and history in Italy, Sweden, Austria, and Bavaria; the origin of his family “von” honorific; his father’s experiences as a soldier in World War I, including his capture and imprisonment by Russia and release in 1918; his mother being quite glamorous and vivacious but dying young, suddenly [in January 1930], when Helmut was about three years-old; being one of four children, the oldest of whom, Gottfried, drowned; his father getting married to a woman named Ursula Roepke [referred to by Helmut as Ulla Mutti]; his family enduring financial difficulty for which they were unprepared during the Great Depression; selling the estate in about 1935, and moving to Germany; [answering a question] his family not concerned about moving to Germany at this time because things were going well in Germany compared to Austria. [2.5 hrs]

### **Part 2 of 7**

Von Schweitzer continues: recounting his childhood in Austria, including his father’s remarriage to Ulla in September 1930; attending high school in Lichtenau, Germany; participating in Roman Catholic rituals; always feeling he was an Austrian in Germany, rather than a German; life on the family farm; his father joining the Nazi Party as a “nominal member” just to fit in with normal life, not out of conviction; most people in the area being Lutheran; there being an avoidance of family discussion of serious matters, particularly with the children; being told that Nazi anti-Semitic excesses were something that had to be endured, and that it was the price paid for Nazi successes, such as defeating communism; joining the Hitler *Jungvolk* [organization for children not old enough for Hitler *Jugend*]; describing *Jungvolk* activities, particularly sports and physical training in light of the impending 1936 Olympics; a military aspect such as marching to *Jungvolk* activities; talk of war occurring in his family, especially once his father was called up in 1936 or 1937 and given the rank of captain; the topic of war being in the air, without a sense of certainty; his parents treating the beginning of war lightly for the children’s benefit; selling the farm and the proceeds going to government securities for the war effort; the children being split up among relatives after the sale of the farm, and Helmut being sent in the summer of 1940 to live with his grandmother in Wiesbaden; attending high school and being a poor student; [answering a question] not witnessing Kristallnacht but recalling a negative reaction among the gentile population of Lichtenau (before his time in Wiesbaden).

### **Part 3 of 7**

Von Schweitzer vividly describes the day in June 1941 when Germany attacked the USSR, but not being upset by the news; moving in with maternal relatives in the Sudetenland from 1941

to July 1944; for the first time noticing Jewish workers, wearing the yellow star, at his uncle's factory. [Interview interrupted due to technical problem.]

#### **Part 4 of 7**

Von Schweitzer discusses his education in the Sudetenland; a room in his home being set aside for wounded soldiers; Helmut being curious about the soldiers' experiences, but the soldiers being prohibited from talking about them; wanting to be called up to the army but being too young; continuing his involvement in *Jungvolk*; [Interview interrupted due to technical problems.]

#### **Part 5 of 7**

Von Schweitzer discusses learning about the defeat at Stalingrad on the radio; traveling to Prague as a Hitler *Jugend* leader; seeing Shaw's messianic version of *Joan of Arc*, prompting negative comparisons to Hitler and thereafter raising his consciousness of such issues; believing in the importance of appearing to support the Nazis to be able to do "something worthwhile"; in summer 1943, volunteering to join the Waffen SS and expecting to be called up quickly, but not receiving his military callup until July 20, 1944 (coincidentally, the date of the failed assassination of Hitler); prior to receiving formal training, being sent to do logistics work in Riga; [answering a question] being unaware of the extent of Nazi assaults on Jews, political enemies, etc., and subsequently finding it inconceivable that even as ruthless as the Nazis could be, they could descend to such depths as the Holocaust; finding his army experience far more inefficient and chaotic than he had been led to believe by propaganda; in around September returning to Westphalia, Germany for his delayed basic training; experiencing barebones training equipment, including lack of live ammunition, as well as food shortages and serious hunger; spending much time hunting for food; being issued a 1914-era rifle; doubting Germany could win the war; mistrusting German public claims and listening to U.S. radio reports; experiencing a British bombing attack on a troop train but little other direct combat; marching to the front line near the Oder River on April 15, 1945; marking time as the war concluded; retreating north, toward Hamburg, in a chaotic situation; surrendering to a U.S. Army soldier but not formally being taken prisoner until they were taken to Hanover; being told that, as Waffen SS, his group would be considered war criminals.

#### **Part 6 of 7**

Von Schweitzer discusses being taken one evening to be interviewed by an American officer; being asked what he thought of Hitler and of what happened to the Jews; being taken to a nearby camp where physical conditions remained poor but social conditions improved drastically, e.g., allowing Helmut to join a book discussion group and a choir; knowing in general terms how badly Jews had been treated, but still unaware of the specifics of the Holocaust; not knowing that Hitler had committed suicide; being transferred to British custody in a camp where physical conditions were much better; being sent by train to Brussels in about August 1945; being told his group would be sent to Great Britain to help with the harvest; nothing

about his prisoner status being communicated by the British; his English having improved, being used as a translator; some Austrians being released but Helmut, not wanting to end up in the Russian zone, deciding to continue using his German citizenship; continuing to work among a small group for a British officer as the camp was demobilized; having access to newspapers and thus learning the extent of the Holocaust; being released in spring 1947 in a “sick transport” to Germany, which was done as a favor for his good work and enabled him to remain in Germany rather than be sent to work in the UK; [answering a question] rather than being defensive about what he was discovering, having his negative “Joan of Arc” feelings about Hitler confirmed; not being exposed to formal news or “reeducation” sessions, but being aware of such sessions at other camps; arriving at the “release camp” in Germany [couldn’t recall name] for about five weeks; traveling by train to Antwerp and then by ship to Tilbury, England [no explanation provided]; and then to a POW camp in Norfolk; working in a bomb disposal group in London and then Greenford and Fulham; having relative freedom outside of camp; these early postwar years being very conciliatory with local UK people; being selected as camp leader (among POWs, under Geneva Conventions); being released in June 1948; being given the opportunity to attend university.

#### **Part 7 of 7**

Von Schweitzer discusses being repatriated to Germany; with the help of a British aunt, settling in the UK; meeting and marrying his first wife, Sheila, and having three children; obtaining a PhD in economics from the London School of Economics; his time as a POW in the UK allowing him to fit very comfortably into UK society after his release; meeting his second wife, Pam (later called Rivka), in 1967, and their conversion to Judaism; in the 1970s, working for ITT in Germany and then taking a job in South Africa; Pam’s interest in Judaism and living among Jews in Johannesburg; working for a Jewish-owned company in South Africa and becoming increasingly involved in the Jewish community, including a local Conservative synagogue; feeling comfortable in this community and going through conversion; taking a tour of Israel; it becoming “almost obvious” that they belonged in the Jewish community; taking the names Yitzhaq and Rivka; taking comfort in the shabbat ritual; his Waffen SS background not being an issue or even asked about, nor volunteered; his family back in Germany receiving news of the conversion amicably; [answering a question] saying conversion resulted in greater religious faith and greater comfort in all of their personal interactions.