

**Time-coded notes of Interview with Bernhard Ebstein  
December 17, 1986**

Born in 1929 in Stuttgart, Germany.

1:00 His family on his father's side, his grandfather and great grandfather, came from Eastern Germany, Schlessien. His grandfather and his family moved to Stuttgart sometime before his father was born - probably before most of his aunts and uncles were born. On his mother's side, the family comes from what is now Poland, but which was before World War I - Germany, a small town near Poznan, called Brus (ph). They moved to Dusseldorf when his mother was a teenager and lived there until she married his father in Stuttgart. Stuttgart was very small when Hitler came to power.

2:00 He doesn't recall Hitler's coming to Power. The first thing he remembers was when he was five or six years old, they began to see signs in the restaurants and movie houses "Juden Verboten." He remembers one summer not being able to go to the public swimming pool because they were Jewish.

3:00 In general, there was an explicit expression in the family that they had to behave in a very special way so they could not be blamed for any kinds of misdeeds. Must behave like angels. This had to do with the prevalent atmosphere of anti-Semitism. He attended a Jewish Day school. His older sister (6 years older) had gone to public school.

4:00 In 1937, when it was time for her to go to high school, she had to go to a boarding school in England because she could not go to a public high school and there was no Jewish high school for her. He remained in the Jewish Day school throughout the time he was in Germany. There was an interruption a few weeks after Kristallnacht, but the rest of the time he went to the Jewish Day school along with his younger sister. His father was a salesman, a manufacturer's representative and travelled throughout Germany selling clothing. He didn't discuss antisemitism he may have encountered at home. Bernie Ebstein doesn't recall any such incidents.

5:00 Up to 1938, life proceeded on a fairly normal course. They had family vacations and he felt he could move around fairly freely. Day-to-day life seemed to be normal--with the knowledge, however, that there was an atmosphere that made Jews undesirable in various ways to the community as a whole.

6:00 He used to see a virulent antisemitic newspaper which was pasted up in the billboards with caricatures of the Jews. But his family and school insulated him from any severe emotional reaction. The awareness was kind of indirect. Sometime in 1936 or '37, they could no longer buy Kosher meat (they kept a Kosher home.)

7:00 They knew they couldn't go to restaurants, movies, swimming pools--they had that kind of knowledge, but it didn't traumatically affect their lives before 1938. There was speculation about leaving and where they would go. His uncle, who had left Germany in 1933 and moved to Belgrade, Yugoslavia with his family, came back to Stuttgart in 1937 and urged everyone in

the family to get out. He found out later that at that time his father had applied for an immigration quota number to come to this country [USA].

8:00 He remembers the trip - his uncle taking all the nieces and nephews to a restaurant to give them a treat. And it was that particular trip which caused his parents to make the decision to leave Germany. His uncle said, even though he was in Yugoslavia, he didn't think Europe was safe for Jews. He said to get out of Europe. He said he had plans at that point to come to this country [USA] from Yugoslavia. His uncle was very far sighted. Bernie has often thought of his uncle and how thankful his part of the family has to be to him for doing that.

9:00 Because if he had done it later, or the decision was made later, who knows if they would have been able to get out. He never found out what impelled his uncle. He just assumed it was his awareness of the political situation. He remembers the Anschluss and seeing the headlines in the paper. They didn't own a radio, so their news came through newspapers and word of mouth.

10:00 He remembers that the Anschluss was something that was being cheered by the authorities, and therefore it was probably a bad thing as far as they were concerned. He doesn't remember and was unaware of Kristallnacht, the expulsion of Polish non-naturalized Jews and Greenspan and Von Roth (ph). He was aware of things like the Anschluss and the Munich Conference because of big headlines in the papers. Wasn't aware of the detail of other actions.

11:00 He didn't think of it in terms that would make him anxious, but there was constant talk of going to America. The last year he went to school in Germany, they started to study English in the Spring of '38. It was definite that they were planning to come to this country; it was talked about a lot.

12:00 At that point, it was a given. It was just a question of when. He became aware of Kristallnacht the following day. When he and his sister left the house to go to school that morning - they always walked, it was a 40-45 minute walk - and walking to school that morning they passed a number of stores with display windows smashed. They commented to each other and conjectured.

13:00 that it had been done by a drunk until they came to a fine food shop on the corner with windows smashed on both sides. They said to each other that this couldn't have been an accident. They didn't connect this with the fact that these were Jewish stores. A block or two before they got to the school - a woman said to them that they should go home - there would be no school today, but they kept going. When they got to the corner to turn to the street where the school was, next to the synagogue, a policeman was standing there.

14:00 And a small hand-operated fire truck, the kind that gets pulled behind the vehicle with a single hose. They could see the round stained glass window of the synagogue was broken and blackened all around. There had been a fire. The policeman told them to go home. There would be no school for them today. They got on the streetcar and went home quickly. They were very scared. That was their first awareness of what had happened. His mother commented that she

knew immediately something had happened because they were both "white as cheese" when they came into the house.

15:00 He doesn't recall anything else on that day. His father was at home. There was a lot of discussion but it didn't involve the kids. The next a.m. a cousin came to his house and she and he were standing at the window looking at the street on the second floor and they saw five men with business suits and hats come walking up the street. An unusual sight and he felt that there was something strange and unusual here. Sure enough, they came into their building. Two stayed on the front and back steps and three came to search the apartment. They were Gestapo and were coming to arrest his father.

16:00 His father had left the house not long before because another cousin had called them up and said her father had just been arrested and it would be a good idea for his father to leave the house. So he left and went to the American Consulate which was in Stuttgart on the pretext of having some business there. The three Gestapo searched the house thoroughly. It took a while. His mother said they weren't going to be there much longer. They had given up the lease and were going to America. The guy in charge said something like that was satisfactory and "let's go."

17:00 And they went and that was the last they saw of them. That was the day when there were Jewish men all over Germany who were arrested and thrown into concentration camps. The uncle whose daughter had called them had a heart condition and he only stayed in jail overnight. Another uncle went to Dachau for four weeks and those were momentous four weeks because they all knew about it, but his grandparents were not to know. They visited the grandparents once a week - on Sunday - a big treat to go to their house and eat there. They had the only radio in the family and they listened to a concert on the radio every Sunday.

18:00 It was impressed on all of them that they had to keep the secret about his uncle in Dachau. He doesn't know how or what efforts were made - but he knows they were made and he got out in four weeks. He eventually came to this country. His father was not arrested. He thinks there was a difference in the way the authorities behaved in different parts of Germany. In Stuttgart, no one was arrested on the streets. In some other cities they were if they were believed to be Jewish. In Stuttgart only stores were broken into or windows smashed.

19:00 They had a cousin in Dusseldorf who lived behind the dry goods store they owned. Not only did they smash the store, but they came into their apartment and smashed the furniture and dishes, but they didn't arrest his uncle. So there was an element of randomness to the way they behaved. After Kristallnacht, there were more efforts made to try to emigrate as soon as possible.

20:00 Their quota number was coming due. Paperwork didn't get completed until March of 1939. The affidavit for the family to come here was not big enough for the whole family. He recalls his father telling them that the American Consul had told him it was only big enough for one, so he suggested that his father come to this country. As soon as he came and got a job, he could send for his family. At least that's the way he heard the story. This was completely ignoring the fact that it would take an affidavit big enough to guarantee the rest of the family

which at that point was his mother, his sister and himself (his older sister was already in England).

21:00 So in the Spring of 1939, his father came to this country. He was sent by the Joint Distribution Committee from New York, where they had family, to St. Louis in hopes it would be easier to find a job in the mid-west. In St. Louis, he did hear about a job in a series of stores owned by a Jewish family in southern Illinois. It was the Jewish Committee of Southern Illinois that supplied the affidavit for the rest of the family to come. It was not enough just to have a job. In October, 1939, he, his mother and his sister were able to leave Germany. It took eight or nine months or six months for arrangements to be made.

22:00 And during that time, he continued to go to school - the Jewish School was closed for 3 or 4 weeks or so before they allowed it to open again - then they went to school and that was the first time they really felt unsafe about walking the streets. They made arrangements always to leave the school in groups of two or three or more kids. There were a number of times when the children from the public school nearby would throw stones at them or call them names from across the street.

23:00 It never got to direct physical confrontation. Some of the older kids rode bicycles to school and one day the air was let out of their tires or they were slashed. His most vivid recollection of that time was day-by-day watching Jewish laborers dismantle the Synagogue brick by brick. He remembers feeling bitter about that already - about the perversity of the Nazis to employ Jewish labor to do this. It was bad enough that they tore down the Synagogue, but they had to rub it in.

24:00 So even as a nine year old, he was aware of that element of sadism. They were also aware of the following year when Jews had to turn in all of their silver and gold - that the day for doing that was Yom Kippur. It was obvious that that was carefully chosen to be that date. In September of '39, when the war broke out, he was still in Germany, but he doesn't recall the outbreak of the war. He recalls knowing about it so that when they left-they left from Holland-he recalls the ship

25:00 Going through the English Channel between English and French destroyers - warships. They knew there was a blockade. They knew they could go because this was a Dutch ship and not a German one. There was an incident in Holland before they left. His mother had an aunt who lived in Amsterdam. She wanted to visit her before they left and arranged to go there a week before the scheduled sailing of the ship. They left Germany on the train - went through Customs there - got to the station on the Holland side and got off of the train.

26:00 There the Customs officials said they were sorry but they could not enter more than 24 hours before the ship's sailing. They would have to go back and there was no appeal of that decision. They got on the next train and went back to the station on the German side where an SS Corporal stood on the platform. They had to change trains there being headed back to

Dusseldorf. The SS Corporal said he wouldn't let them back into Germany. This was late at night. There was no one else around. His mother argued with the Corporal.

27:00 It went on a long time. She was a very mild woman, but she finally got angry and said "So, for this my husband was wounded twice in the World War". It was as if you pushed a button - suddenly, the Corporal saw her as a wife of a hero in the Fatherland and turned to his sister and to him where they had been standing absolutely still and said "Be quiet you two - can't you see your mother's upset?" He offered to buy her a cup of coffee. She said she wouldn't take coffee from him. They got on the next train and went back to Dusseldorf. A week later they did leave.

28:00 They went to Rotterdam - on the SS Rotterdam and came to this country in October of 1939, after Poland had fallen and the second World War had started. His father had a medal from his service as a sergeant in the Army in World War I. He was wounded once and recovered and went back to the front and was wounded a second time in the leg. This shortened his leg by several inches.

29:00 He always limped and wore built up shoe. He was for several years active in active combat. He doubts the authorities paid any attention to his father's service record in terms of deciding whether or not to try to arrest him. He is convinced that had his father been home that morning, he would have been arrested.

30:00 He doesn't recall his father's connecting his experience in the War and serving in the German army as having any direct bearing on the situation they were encountering in the mid-thirties. At least he never discussed it in those terms. Regarding his relations with non-Jewish neighbors, friends and children of his age, there were people who showed compassion and humanity and the opposite too.

31:00 He had had a nursemaid during the first year or two of his life. She remained a loyal family friend. Her father was a shoemaker. He offered to build any valuables they wished to take out with them into the heels of their shoes. This offer was made after his father had left. His mother decided it was not worth taking the chance. There weren't that many valuables. This was around the time Jews had to turn in their valuables.

32:00 There were some people who were friendly. But both his sister and he had experiences with non-Jewish children of their own age who told them they could no longer play with them because they were Jewish. After his father had left they had given up their apartment and lived with an aunt and uncle and cousins. Only one other family lived in the building. They had a boy a few years older than him. He was great to play with.

33:00 He had toy soldiers. One day after school, he said he could no longer play with him because he had just joined the Hitler youth and was not allowed to play with Jews anymore. His younger sister had a similar experience with one of her friends. This boy was just about 12 years old when he said this.

34:00 It was an overnight kind of thing. "Starting now, I can no longer play with you." All the teachers in the Jewish Day School were Jewish - as far as he knew. He knows some who left and came to this country. He remembers one teacher in particular, who, sometime before they left, committed suicide. It was said that he did this because of the situation - he couldn't face it anymore.

35:00 He doesn't know about others - only about two teachers who did - one, the first love of his life and one of his sisters - who came to this country. Looking back at Kristallnacht and its impact on the family. .. to summarize, it brought home the intensity of the situation.

36:00 Until that night, life proceeded somewhat normally. There were indications, but they were taken in stride. In some ways this can explain the attitude that people had - that, well, things were bad, but they had been bad before - they'll get better in the future. The day-to-day activities kept going on. Also, around this time there were restrictions on what kinds of jobs Jews could hold. His father could then no longer represent the non-Jewish firms he had been selling for and for a while he could still represent a Jewish firm and then that also had to be sold or so -

37:00 So, he was out of work. For some time before he left and for some time after he left, and before he and his mother and sister left, they were supported by the Jewish Community in Stuttgart. It all became obvious to them as children after Kristallnacht. The feeling of insecurity, having to be careful, not going on the street alone.

38:00 Before they didn't feel personally threatened as he thinks they did after Kristallnacht. Kristallnacht became a watershed event. From there a number of things became much more obvious. It was perhaps the Nuremburg Laws of '36 that did that.

39:00 It was Kristallnacht, the combination of the physical violence and arrest of people and concentration camps that became a real watershed in terms of the way Jews were treated in Germany. It became really different then. And it must have been for the German population as well because now they had clear indication and permission that it was not only ok to dislike, hate, or have feelings about Jews, but actually to do things. As children they were not physically ever assaulted before then.

40:00 It was after that that they had stones thrown at them - bicycles were vandalized and that sort of thing. So there was that difference in the behavior of German children who knew after that time that they had permission to do more than simply call names or think about it. There was a qualitative real measurable difference. This interview gives him a real feeling of this being worthwhile and these are memories that ought to be preserved and he is glad he remembers enough to do that.

### **Conclusion of Interview.**