

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Jack Frank
December 9, 1986
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PREFACE

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JACK FRANCK

December 9, 1986

01-47 Q. This is an interview with Rabbi Jack Franck, who was born in 1926 in Frankfurt, Germany.

A. Yes now you know how old I am.

Q. I guess the best place to start is with family history You don't have to be that specific but how far back can you trace your family?

A. Well I don't have any accurate records-that's a project my sister has, she now resides in Israel - but I can certainly account for a Great Grandfather who lived in Germany, and my hunch is that my Great-Great Grandfather lived there too, so at least 3 or 4 generations back. On my father's side and on my father's mother's side maybe even longer than that so that for my mother's side I'm not so sure...I mentioned to you earlier that her maiden name was Von Gelder, which sounds to me German, like Smith or Rosenberg A lot of Jews have the name Von Gelder, and my hunch is that those are migrants from Spartan backgrounds somewhere along the line, and Italy perhaps, but I don't know ..I don't have much history since the...

03-12 Q. And as far as the settlement in Germany in the Frankfurt area itself-they were settled in the Frankfurt area?

A. No not really ..they come from an area around Darmstadt, in the... .what's it called Bachstrasse, which is a region that is mountainous, I can't remember the name of the mountain I would have to look at a German map to identify that.

Q. And what brought your parents to Frankfurt?

A. My father found work, there, so he migrated there, got married there, my sister and I were born Eventually the work dissipated itself, because with the rise of the Nazi regime the owners of that business realized that would not be a good future for them so they kind of liquidated, and my father drifted into Jewish communal service and became the religious head of a very small community right at the outskirts of Frankfurt, where he was the teacher of religion...he was the ritual slaughterer for as long as the Nazis permitted him to slaughter. He was the Chazau, or the leader, and religious questions came his way, he was able to answer of course he referred to Rabbinic authority to whom he was responsible.

Q. Could we stop for just a moment because I am going to keep coughing and I'm going to drown you out?

A. All I see on this stupid tape is my face and it's terrible...it's boring...

Q. Well were going to splice it together with some other things...

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0015

2

A. With what?

Q. Other newsreel footage.

05-32 A. Oh, O.K.

Q. So we were saying your father became a functionary of the Jewish community and this was in Frankfurt?

A. No this was in a suburb, called Berghan, known originally as Berghan-Enkheim; now they are separate communities; at one time I guess they were one.

Q. But it was quite close to the...

A. Yes it was close, close enough for me to go to school there every morning, to go to Frankfurt to school as a youngster of 10,11 or 12.

Q. And you went to a Jewish school?

A. Well I started out of course in the regular public school...of course you probably know the German school system...at the age of 10...um...6th grade, somewhere around there, you can go, you declare whether you want to continue the public school and complete that and become an apprentice to a trade, or if you want to go towards a higher education, at which point you have to go to a kind of program that is more college oriented. I opted for a Jewish school that was college oriented, which was the school Sam Saint Raphael, in Frankfurt. Both my sister and I attended that, and I still remember the way I was accepted : I walked into the classroom and had to give the usual greeting in that particular public school, which was "Heil Hitler, Ein Lieben". I said that and I think it was the last time I ever had to say Heil Hitler.

Q. You were 7 or 8 years old when Hitler came to power?

A. 1933..from 1926...you can figure out the math...

Q. And do you recall the time...the January, February, March period when the Nazis first assumed power?

08-03 A. My recollections are of course of a lot of the flags...the swastikas and the white circle appearing...more and more people in uniform being on the street, some of them young people...maybe even as a youngster I could have been a bit jealous that I couldn't join the elite group of people who seemed to get all the privileges, etc. I learned that as a Jew I wasn't going to be very welcome that way.

Q. Did you experience any anti-Semitism in those years?

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0015

3

A. Yes

Q. Do you recall anything in particular?

A. I remember walking down the street many times when there were people my age, some slightly older, some slightly younger, who were members of the Hitler youth, who were behind me, and I would not walk in a straight line knowing full well that they would be throwing stones and I would hope that the stones wouldn't hit me. I recall one time I outran the best athlete in the school...It wasn't because I was particularly agile...it was the adrenaline that drove me that I was able to outrun him.

Q. Did your family think of leaving?

A. Yes...yes...my father had 2 brothers and 1 sister here in the U.S. for a good many years, and they had sent the opportunity to come to America. We had a very low quota number and we were hoping to be smuggled out until the quota number came up...of course things turned out a little differently.

Q. Your father, you mentioned, was in WWI and had won a declaration. Did that have any impact on him as far as wanting to stay or leave...In other words did he consider himself quite German or...

10-23 A. To my father being Jewish, being an orthodox Jew was much more important than being German. I don't remember any such nationalistic pride...no not at all.

Q. In the years that you went to the Raphael Hirsh School, this was also in Frankfurt

A. That was in Frankfurt, yes.

Q. As far as going to and from school was there ever any anti-Semitism ?

A. Occasionally, yes there was harassment...

Q. But nothing as far as a violent or traumatic incident as far as you recall?

A. Uh, no. As a matter of fact it didn't help to tell the parents because they couldn't do much about it because if they complained it would get worse, and that was felt by the children.

Q. Do you recall anything of the events leading up to the Crystal Night, the assassination of Von Rath, and so on?

A. Not really. There were a lot of assemblies in school where you would then sing the national German songs etc. etc. and they felt uncomfortable; even if you wanted to be part of the crowd you knew you weren't part of the crowd and so that was uncomfortable...to hear Hitler speak on

the radio was difficult to assimilate because of the manner in which he spoke. It may have been quite wonderful for the German people, but certainly, as far as I was concerned it had a kind of grating sound on my ears. He was constantly shouting...it was a high pitch. In retrospect it was not a pleasant experience to me at all.

Q. And do you recall him speaking about the, Jews...how his speech...

A. You would hear statements made by him that were of course slanderous against the Jews, and you became very aware that this was the kind of regime that you had a fear...and the fear was that they could take your life.

12-57 Q. As far as Crystal night, what do you recall?

A. If I remember correctly Crystal night was on a Thursday night. The morning of that day the local policeman, sheriff, whatever he was called, came and told my father that he was to be placed under what was called "protective arrest." We had no idea what that all was about and the ones that were home were...I suppose there was no school that day because um, my father was taken and teachers were taken so my mother and my sister and I were in the home. Towards evening we heard rocks being thrown against the synagogue...we lived in the building that belonged to the community that you might want to call a Parish building for lack of a better term, and the synagogue was across the yard and we heard the...crowds and crowds of people men and women- stomping outside and throwing rocks, breaking windows, breaking the locks. Eventually we heard axes breaking the furniture and a whole bunch of noises that probably reflected destructive types of activities. There were some people that stomped into the house and into the kitchen while we were huddled on the second floor, and asked if we had any weapons or any jewelry and maybe even silver, and my mother answered those things. My sister and I didn't say anything. I kind of feared that this was the end and I probably recited the Shmah a million times out loud...eventually out of emotional exhaustion I fell asleep while they were breaking up the synagogue piece by piece next door. Then of course waking up in the morning we came outside and in the yard were strewn all of the Torah scrolls, all spread out and I had felt badly because perhaps I could have saved a Torah scroll that was in the schoolroom right downstairs from us. Who knows had I done this what might have happened to the family had it been discovered but nevertheless that was my thinking. And then we left Bergham and went to Frankfurt...took a train to Anspach where my grandparents were.

Q. And did you look in the synagogue?

A. No I was scared.

Q. Was the synagogue set on fire?

A. No they couldn't set it on fire because it was for villagers and therefore they couldn't fire it. That's why they systematically chopped it up.

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0015

5

Q. Did you recognize any of the people that were doing this, any of the people that came to you while you were huddled under the chair?

A. I don't think that any of the villagers came to the house. I may have recognized some voices but we know that villagers were involved.

16-48 Q. Was there anyone that tried to help you that night or the following day, any non-Jewish neighbors who came to help you?

A. I wish my parents were alive. They might be able to answer that better. To my recollection I don't believe so, but that doesn't mean it wasn't so.

Q. And then you left the suburb?

A Yes.

Q. And you went to...?

A. We went to my Grandparents, my father's parents, who I mentioned lived in Anspach. My Grandfather had the same kind of position my father had. There the synagogue was attached to the home and there everything was cleaned out and taken in a heap to a very large garden and burned. So all the books were taken away, all the Torah scrolls, all the furnishings...it was more or less a bare room.

Q. And that also they did not set that on fire?

A. No they were not allowed to. The villagers, there were no villagers involved in the activities and they said you cannot set it on fire because you would set us on fire and we cannot permit you to do that. Neither were they powerful enough to be able to drive those who came in as outsiders to have this anti-Jewish action.

Q. Subsequent to Crystal Night, did you go to school eventually

A. Yes yes. I don't know how much after, but when we heard that school was back in session. My sister and I lived in the orphanage and stayed there until we left for England Sept, 1939.

Q. And in the post Crystal Night time was there an increase or change in anti-Semitism?

A. Oh I know I was more scared because of the experience, but whether there were any incidents that I personally experienced, I don't have a memory of that Kind of vague... I probably blocked a lot of that period...it's hard.

19-18 Q. Your family you said had a low quota over to the U.S. Why didn't they get out before?

A. It wasn't our turn yet.

Q. So you had to wait your turn?

A. You have to wait your turn. We probably would have gotten out before had we remained in Germany because it was so low and it was "soon, soon, soon" and so we didn't make any move. The moves were made because my mother became uneasy when there was a lot of discussion, around Sept., prior to Sept. 1, 1939 when first Hitler gets on the radio and then Chamberlain got on the radio, "there's not going to be more, there's not going to be more," and my mother said in typical feminine fashion if they're talking about peace then they mean war so let's get out of here and since we had the opportunity through friends, to have a through visa to England, which we didn't want to take advantage of because we didn't want our relatives in America to have to deal with the finances; we decided the last minute to go...indeed it was the last civilian plane out of Germany prior to Hitler's invasion of Poland.

Q. So this was in the morning of Sept. 1, 1939?

A. 3 a.m. I'm sorry, it was supposed to be a 3 a.m. Lufthansa but instead it was a 3:15 KLM Royal Dutch Air Force. We arrived in Amsterdam at 6 in the morning, over the loudspeaker it said, "we don't know if you can continue your flight to Brighton, Hitler has just invaded Poland."

Q. Going back to your father. He was taken into custody on Crystal Night?

A. Yes.

21-p32 Q. What happened then?

A. Well eventually he was shipped to Buchenwald and somehow it got through to our family that people who were arrested were taken to a place called a concentration camp. And perhaps we might have even gotten a postcard from him or there were a couple of postcards...I don't remember what time period this happened but... he was there for 4 weeks...and the reason that he was able to get out is very interesting. I mentioned that my father was a soldier on the front line in WWI. When Hitler came to power, since he was also in WWI, he wanted to reward all of these staunch German soldiers who fought on the front lines during that particular war. Therefore he gave them a ribbon to wear as a sign of honor to sew on their suits and in order to make it legitimate he issued a certificate with a signature. Well my father, being that he followed orders, he put that ribbon on every suit and wherever he was, he had that certificate with him. So when it came to the time when Buchenwald became overcrowded with Jews - at that time they did not yet know what the final solution would be, thank God-but they needed some orderly method of getting rid of this overcrowded condition, and they decided that the first group of people to be free was the soldiers who had fought in WWI and had a certificate to prove it. So he came out. We were staying with our grandparents ...it must have been before we went back to school. I suppose I didn't want to believe it was my father. His beard was shaven, and even though not all of his hair had been cut...it had one hair cut but not the second, the one that bald

them completely...and I couldn't believe it was my father. I thought it was a Nazi spy sent into our home, until Friday night he sat down at the dinner table and as his habit he leaned over like this covering the fat part of the face, at which point I began to recognize that indeed it was he. It was kind of a scary memory.

24-06 Q. Did he ever speak of his experiences?

A. No. I heard from others about the way he defended, many times, members of his congregation at the expense of being beaten. He did the same thing for a second cousin who has the same name really as my father and who now resides in Israel. Who is not well anymore. But who had been a political prisoner because he said something derogatory about the Nazis, from 1933 or 1934 on, and there was some contact there. But he never spoke about his concentration camp experience.

Q. How long did it take for him to get back or at least to part with his old self or his old...

A. Well let's see...memory here is very vague because we were at one place basically and they were elsewhere. I don't even know what my father did from the time he was in the concentration camps to the time he left for Germany, simply we were in school, especially during the week. Maybe we got together weekends. I know that there was a plan for Bar Mitzvah of course, my Bar Mitzvah was coming up, and he had to go back to the congregation and bear it because all the people there knew it was my Bar Mitzvah and even walked out to celebrate at the orphanage...but I don't recall all of the things that he did.

Q. And so your Bar Mitzvah was held...?

A. In the orphanage in Frankfurt.

Q. And do you recall, as far as the outside world, the impact of what was going on outside, as far as your Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Anything about it...or was it just because it was in a Jewish institution it was celebrated? It was just a fairly normal Bar Mitzvah?

26-35 A. Well I think I regretted not being back in the old synagogue where I grew up, which was much prettier than the one in the orphanage. I think I missed all of that. I have the feeling that the ceremony would have been much more lavish with many more people participating. My grandparents were already in this country at that time and so that part of the family did not come. There were other parts from my mother's family that would have come. There were lots and lots of changes. I'm sure even, to be materialistic for a moment, that the presents I received would have been of a different character than had there not been a Nazi period being around.

Q. Once you left, and when you went to England it was your mother, father, sister and yourself?

A. And my Aunt.

Q. And an Aunt?

A. My father's oldest sister.

Q. How long did you remain in England?

A. For exactly half a year-6 months.

Q. And then your relatives were able to...?

A. No. Then our quota number caught up with us.

Q. And you came to Chicago?

A. Yes.

Q. The other relatives who were left in Germany...what happened to them?

28-28 A. There were some relatives of my natural mother who ended up here. Some ended up in South America. I have a cousin there in Buenos Aires. And the rest I don't know. There were family members I mentioned who came to Israel. There were, on my father's side, many who came to the U.S. prior to this period. There is an Aunt of mine who remained behind with her whole family, and our hunch is that they perished in the concentration camps, because after that we lost all trace of them. So that's the closest relative, I believe that we lost. My Stepmother's family...her parents died before this and her one brother went to Australia and the other ended up in New York.

Q. And as far as trying to summarize what Crystal Night meant to your family, your immediate family...the impact of Crystal Night?

A. Well my own.. I can only speak for myself. I can't speak for my parents who are no longer alive, nor can I speak for my sister who is not here. For me it meant that whatever anger and security there might have been growing up in the house and living in a close knit family and having a feeling of belonging ..that was all gone and it was a question of how soon do we leave. I remember maybe a few days after my Bar Mitzvah, some people in the orphanage came to me- the youngsters ran their own services- and said would I be willing to read the Torah 6-8 weeks later, so they could give me enough time to prepare and I said I would be more than willing but I'm not sure I will be here; it was that particular weak beam...how did I know...I didn't know but we knew it was no longer a place to stay. It was a question of time How soon can we get out.

31-00 Q. And in terms of looking back at the Holocaust in general, is there a way to describe where Crystal Night fits into your point of view? When you think about that in terms of the general European Holocaust?

A. It perhaps was the very first public, almost unified expression of the German people that they were willing to go along with Hitler's plan which was against the Jews in this instant. Whatever other plans he had I'm sure there were other manifestations of that feeling.

Q. But you have the very distinct impression that despite the fact that there were those who held back, or did not participate enthusiastically, that Crystal night was a nationwide mobilization of hate?

A. At least enough that those who wanted to counter it weren't strong enough to do anything about it. That is, there was no safe place in Germany.

Q. One last question. Something we were speaking about before you mentioned that you returned to Germany?

32-25 A. Yes

Q. And to the site of your home...the synagogue wasn't there. Could you describe your feelings at all?

A. On one hand it was sad because part of my childhood was no longer in existence; in some other way perhaps I was happy that it wasn't there anymore...in the sense of...they don't deserve to have a synagogue here...than to have any Jewish life after what was done without too much objection. So those were the kinds of feelings. It was sad to be in a place where I had enjoyed childhood and all the mischievousness of children and their playing...their good times and bad times because that's just no there anymore. I don't know what would have happened if I had lived in a nice free country and then to go back 40 years later to where I grew up...what those feelings would be because I have no way to compare them.

Q. Yes, well I thank you very much.

A. Well I hope I've been helpful.

Q. Yes you have, thank you.