

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Hans Herzberg
April 7, 1991
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PREFACE

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HANS HERZBERG

April 7, 1991

Q. Please tell me about your background; your childhood years in Germany.

A. I lived in the city Hanover.

Q. What year were you born?

A. 1919. I lived a comfortable life. My father was a physician - a general practitioner. I would say I had quite a normal childhood - I had one younger brother. School was a little different; I was the only Jew in the class throughout most of my school years. I felt somewhat different from the others even though I fit in quite well. There were no major difficulties, but in the background it was always the one Jewish kid in the class, but I had good friends among the German students.

Q. Did you visit their homes?

A. Some real good friends came to our home, and I visited their homes and so forth. There were never any problems until the early 1930's when the Nazi system became stronger. Less of my schoolmates would associate with me. After 1933, there were only a few who would still come visit us. But as a child I never suffered directly.

Q. That's the truth?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you tell me about the Jewish life in Hanover?

A. There was a conservative synagogue in Hanover, where I had my Bar mitzvah. Our friends were all quite similar, maybe too much so.

Q. Why?

A. Well, the Jewishness kind of disappeared out of everyday life.

Q. What do you remember in your own life of the Jewishness?

A. I remember my Bar mitzvah, in 1932. It was the last time my whole family was together.

Q. How large a gathering was that?

A. Small by today's standards - it was in my home. Less than ten people. I also remember going to the synagogue that was later burned down.

Q. How many families attended this Synagogue?

A. In the city of Hanover there were less than 5,000 Jews. One percent of the population, so compared to cities like Frankfurt and Berlin this percentage was very small.

Q. How did things change?

A. Things changed dramatically in approximately 1935-36. First of all, I could no longer go to school - I had only one more year until matriculation, but I could not stay. One thing that had tremendous impact was that my father lost his practice. He was permitted to treat Jews, but when he lost his practice to non-Jews that was the end. He took it very hard, and things just went down as far as our family is concerned.

Q. And so, how was your mother able to cope with this?

A. Mother was very strong. A strength we had never recognized. At this point I became the head of the household.

Q. How old were you?

A. Well, by 1936 I was 17. I had to do things that normally at 17 I would not have done. In 1938 I went to school in Berlin. After that, in early October of that year, I took a job in Dortmund in a bell factory welding steel bells. In late November of the same year I was arrested.

Q. What was the reason for the arrest?

A. Well, the Gestapo stopped me on the street, they said are you Jewish? I said yes, and I was arrested. After that I was transported by train to Sachsenhausen. After the train left, it stopped once in Hann to pick up some more Jews. I would say there were 300 on the train. Well, I don't know - the shades were down and none of us really knew what was going on.

Q. These were passenger cars?

Q. Were you able to have any contact with your family?

A. This was my greatest worry: what was happening with my family. I figured whatever happens, but I couldn't stand not knowing what happened back home. The whole time I was in the Kanzert (??) that was my uppermost concern.

Q. I kanzert (??) a special word?

A. Well, the concentration camp in Germany was known as Kanzert (??) which is kz, the slang for concentration camp.

Q. What happened while you were there?

A. Oh God, you really want me to get into that, this discussion could be very lengthy.

Q. I think that it is important.

A. Of course. The first day was an absolute nightmare. We had to stand at attention in front of an electric fence for 10-12 hours. People were beaten. People were encouraged to run into the fence and electrocute themselves, which some did. I guess the thought of my family kept me from doing these things. I was determined to see my family. Then we were put to work. We had to carry sand in our jackets to sites of construction, and we did other physical labor.

3:74 The sanitary conditions in Sachsenhausen were fair, I think when I talk to other people who were in different camps. We slept on straw. In the barracks there were 50-60 other men. The main goal was to stay healthy because we knew anyone reported sick would never be seen again. We did not know, but I think it was quite obvious what happened to them. Must be healthy, also must not stand out. They always pick on the guy who was very tall or very short or had red hair or whatever. Some days were better than others. On the way to work they made us sing.

Q. What kind of songs?

A. German marching songs. They were familiar from our days in youth organizations. As we marched through populated areas from camp to the work site, we had to sing so the people knew how happy the prisoners were. I think it actually helped our spirits. Then of course we were fed - very meagerly. There was boiled meat once a week. Most of the ones that stayed healthy survived--most were released 4,5,6-8 weeks later. And so this was not the beginning of the real extermination, yet.

Q. How long for you?

A. 5 weeks

Q. Did they ever indicate how long it would be?

A. Never. We never knew if we would ever get out. If we would be shot. We had no idea until one morning when my name was called I was told I was getting out.

Q. What happened then?

A. The first thing is that I found out that my mother had sent a small amount of money to the camp so that I could take a train home. I looked like an absolute mess. I went to Berlin and then on to Hanover. By the way, in Berlin we had a very touching experience; the people came to the station and waited with food and money and offers of housing.

Q. Who were these people?

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A. Germans. Non-Jews waiting for the prisoners. This was quite a contrast from what I had just experienced - it was very touching. It sticks out in my memory that these people did exist, there were people who did care.

Q. Did you get home?

5:06 A. Yes, I did get home. My father had been in prison in Hanover; he was very sick and they finally sent him home. My brother had been sent to Holland on a children s transport. And here was my mother who had been so strong. We still had our house at that time...