

**Time-coded notes for Interview with Herbert Oppenheimer  
December 18, 1983**

00:00:00 Mr. Oppenheimer was born on January 4, 1926 in Berlin, Germany. He lived with foster parents from the time he was 4 months old until he was 11. He did not know until he was 9 that he was Jewish. He had to go to a Jewish orphanage when he was 11 and was there until 1940.

00:01:00 Then he went to learn a trade and boarded with people. The orphanage had 100 children and they were all Jewish boys. Most children were not real orphans, they had one parent, or their parents were in concentration camps.

00:02:00 The first time he heard he was Jewish was when he was contacted by the school system. The school system had that information about everybody.

00:03:00 He had to leave his foster parents on April 21, 1939. They were Seventh Day Adventists and he had thought he was their natural born child.

00:04:00 He had known his mother as an aunt and her parents were actually his grandparents but he didn't know it. He met his brothers as his cousins. He was in an orphanage until he was 14 and then he had to learn a trade.

00:05:00 While still with his foster parents he had to join Hitler youth, and they went out and had lots of swimming and exercise. He had to leave after 3 months when it was realized he was Jewish. While in the orphanage he visited his foster parents every weekend and his real mother.

00:07:00 The orphanage was run by the Jewish community center and all the teachers were Jewish.

00:08:00 Things were getting bad in Germany in 1938 at the time he had to leave for the orphanage.

00:09:00 Young Jewish people were only able to socialize together in the Jewish CC. There was no star yet.

00:10:00 At 14 he lived with a Jewish family while learning a trade. In 1941 the Gestapo came to pick up the family and the apartment was sealed up and he was left.

00:11:00 His foster parents came and brought him extra food because Jews were rationed.

00:12:00 He worked different shifts. He worked for a company making typewriters. Generally, Jews were not allowed to work in the daytime because then the Aryans would have to mix with them.

00:13:00 He was changed to the day shift and made foreman and he didn't have to wear a star. He could only travel on public transportation to and from work.

00:14:00 His ID card showed that information. Finding out he was Jewish was a shock but his foster parents really loved him.

00:15:00 His image of them even went up when he found out about his history.

00:16:00 His foster parents explained everything. They told him they would come to see him every Sabbath. In the beginning he had a hard time and ran away 3 times.

00:17:00 The Director of the orphanage was a great person. He really helped and made him feel important.

00:18:00 The men knew he was Jewish when he was a foreman but since all was production, and every piece counts, he could help them with production and they used to get food for him.

00:19:00 There were 60 million people in Germany. They couldn't all be bad. Berlin was a cosmopolitan city and people recognized difference. He was a foreman until Aug. of 1942. Then he was picked up.

00:20:00 His real mother had been picked up and had escaped. The police came looking for him. He was coming from visiting his foster parents, with no star and he was picked up at his apt.

00:21:00 He was taken to the Old Age home which was being converted to sort of a detention center.

00:22:00 The SS used it as a place to store the victims of Aktions. The practice of the Nazis would be to surround a building and just grab whoever was there.

00:23:00 At that time people were not aware of concentration camps. Everyone thought that they would be safe but lots emigrated.

00:26:00 When he was arrested he went to the detention center and questioned about his mother, and he didn't know anything.

00:28:00 One time he was walking in the street with the star on and with his foster parents. A Nazi stopped and yelled at them, why are you walking with this filth and his foster mother faced the guy down. She said, "Who are you to tell me that I can't walk with my son I raised from 4 weeks old?" And the guy backed down. He loved them, very much.

00:29:00 He brought his foster mother here to US for 6 months for her to see that everything was fine in their life.

00:30:00 He was put in Gestapo Headquarters and questioned some more, but he knew nothing. After 4 weeks he went to Camp Ruellhide (ph).

00:31:00 They were working on the railroad, with other regular prisoners. Four weeks there.

00:32:00 Suddenly he was back to Old Age Center and then after 2 weeks they sent him to Auschwitz. He and another man came together on a regular train.

00:33:00 The man was Professor Wolfer (ph) who had written a famous book on mathematics. The professor was married to a Gentile who refused to divorce him. He arrived in Auschwitz in January of 43 and they were just processed, not part of a group selection.

00:34:00 The professor was killed the next day for stealing a piece of bread. He was very hungry and couldn't take the shock of being there.

00:36:00 He was killed by the guards because stealing food was a serious infraction. Younger people could adjust better.

00:38:00 When he came he knew about Auschwitz from the people he met in the various jails he had been in.

00:40:00 He was mentally prepared. In Auschwitz, to survive, you had to watch every little step, don't give them a chance to look at you.

00:41:00 He used to think of a German song, about May comes after December, made him hope for a better outcome.

00:42:00 One time he was in the hospital very sick with stomach problems and the doctor told him, "You better get out of here, they are going to clean this place out and send people to the gas chambers."

00:44:00 He felt Auschwitz was too big and he needed to get away from it so when they asked for volunteers to go to a new camp, he went.

00:45:00 He was in line, asked his age and occupation and he said he was 19, (a lie) and that he was a mechanic when all he knew was a little of that but he got to go. So he went to the start of a new, small camp that was working on anti-aircraft guns.

00:46:00 He went with half dozen friends who stuck together and helped each other. In the beginning, they worked all day and then had to work building the camp.

00:47:00 Conditions were much better than Auschwitz because they needed you, you weren't excess baggage. The camp grew to 3,000 by the end of the time. in Jan. of '45 they went to Mauthausen.

00:48:00 He stayed hopeful, singing helped him. He observed that conditions of life change, sometimes for the better, if you have a good winter, you are able to do a little better.

00:52:00 He believes we were put on this earth to survive. At Mauthausen, he worked in the mountain building Messerschmitt. There were 3,000 people on a shift probably. There was a camp on top of the mountain and others around.

00:53:00 He worked 12 hours a day but he was lucky in that he got his old job of being a grinder. Having a skill helped. He was liberated on May 5, 1945 by the Third American Army.

00:54:00 It was the greatest moment in their lives but it was sad, because people died from eating too rich food.

00:55:00 The Americans didn't stay and couldn't take them to Germany so Russians came in and then a terrible event took place.

00:56:00 The Russians went into the women's camp and raped every woman. It was terrible to hear and see the agony and screams.

00:57:00 The Russians took them on a march in the opposite direction of where they wanted to go.

00:59:00 As they were marching they met Hungarians going the other direction, and the Russians shot them, and so he and friends decided to get away that night when the Russians were drunk. He eventually got to Germany, to Frankfurt where he met his wife and then immigrated to the U.S.