

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Ralph Rehbock
March 6, 1986
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PREFACE

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RALPH REHBOCK

March 6, 1986

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-CONTENTS-

Q. Where were you born?

24:26 A. I was born July 11, 1934, in Ghotia (ph) Germany in the providence of Turingen to Ruth and Hans Rehbock.

Q. What do you remember about Germany?

A. Not much first hand. We left in 1938, I was four years old. Up till then was typical of a normal childhood. I refreshed what I've been told when I went back to visit.

Q. You went to England after Germany. What do you remember about there?

A. England was only a stop off point before America. Just time before getting on a boat. The early years in Europe I've only talked about with my parents.

Q. You were the son of German Jews in the U.S. - How did you feel and when did your parents start talking to you about their experience?

25:13 A. There was never anything hidden, but not a lot dead. I always knew I had been born in Germany and many family members were lost. I never really asked for details until later on. I was specifically told by my parents that now we were going to be Americans. After arriving here we went to Chicago and I was sent to cousins while my parents were working so I could learn English. My parents stopped speaking German as soon as they got off the boat. It was as if the memories were so bitter they wanted to break off any remembrance of the past. The memories were never forgotten but not initially talked about.

Q. Did you feel any different about yourself in school?

A. In the 40s here in Chicago there were other immigrant children. There were 2 other boys whose parents had come from Germany in the

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0060

2

thirties. We always prided ourselves that we were always the best students in the class. It was something I thought about - that maybe because we all had to start over again or because Jewish children in Germany couldn't go to school we were better students. We were always accepted, not singled out because we were Jewish (there were other Jewish kids in the school) and none of us had accents. I never felt different at home or school. I guess I brought some of what was good from the old world.

27:55 Q. Were you ever ashamed your parents having an accent?

A. I never felt ashamed.....

TAPE 2

A. It never bothered me that they had an accent. Everyone always felt welcomed at my house. Because my parents worked long hours the children that came to the house saw only my Grandmother. A lot of the social life of the family was centered around the cousins. I went there everyday for lunch hour and after school went home. Then there was Hebrew school and Boy Scouts which my father was involved in. So, any differences never stopped me from doing anything.

2:30 Q. Did you have non-Jewish friends?

A. Yes, one of my friends was Japanese-American. Other friends were through the Boy Scouts. Most of my best friends were Jewish now that I think about it because I saw them in Hebrew school, Boy Scouts and Sunday School.

Q. How did you feel when you heard what was going on in Germany and when the survivors started telling their stories?

A. As a child I felt detached. I felt I had been there and my parents had, but I had gotten out and my family was in tact the way I knew it. Only later did I realize that I was one of those survivors. I didn't relate to the displaced persons from the camp.

4:94 Q. When did you first relate your experiences in Europe to yourself?

A. Probably not in any detailed way until the Holocaust film was on TV. Even then it was through the minds of my children and not through my experiences. The next morning my son asked some questions that I couldn't answer. They asked my parents the questions and I found out all that had happened and I could relate to what I had gone through to what had happened in Germany. This was just in the last few years.

Q. Did you ever go back to Germany?

A. Last summer my wife and I went to the town in which I was born. We had mixed feelings about what we'd find and how we'd feel. My mother was not supportive of my wanting to go back. But she wrote letters to the non-Jewish people who helped members of my family and after she heard back and then she really got into what the experience would be like. I tried to get some physical descriptions of what to possibly expect of the town. She drew me a map of where my relatives and buildings should be. I took that with me and called Frankfurt to talk with the daughter of the people my mother

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0060

3

wrote to. They picked us up and we talked about their experiences during the war. Her father had hidden some people in the house and she said how she feared every night that her father might be caught. We went to Ghota (ph) the next day. I tried to think back to what it was like when I was a child and had some strange feelings. The town had not been bombed and things were as my mother described them. We had pictures of the places there and as we took pictures it seemed to be the same scene all over again. As we went through the town and found all my mother had described we were reliving the scenes from my childhood. There were some East German soldiers walking down the street and I remembered stories my mother had told me about having to salute the soldiers in the 30s and I had the feeling that this was what it was like. That was my first emotional tying together of being a survivor.

12:64 I heard about my mother when she was a little girl and we got caught up in what happened in the town after we had left in '38. We were in the courtyard of my grandfather's house in which I had played as a child. I recognized it and we took notice of what my mother had said about it. There were signs of life all around and I looked up and saw a clock and a bell. I had never heard about them in the stories. We took a picture of them. I had kept asking our guide if things would have been there when I was there. I was caught up in the details. We eventually got back to West Germany and got a phone call from my mother I said, "Mother you never told us about the clock and the bell." I heard her voice crack and I realized I had told her about something she had never told me about.

15:49 Q. Did you have any encounters with Germans that said I remember your family but I could not do anything to help them?

A. While there our contacts were with the family that had close contacts with the family. We saw a woman who remembered much about the family and details about the past in the 20s and 30s. She reflected on my aunt who had been in the concentration camp. But we never talked to her or anyone about what they did or could have done. Except in each case they talked about what Mr. Grohl (ph) had done because it was so positive and in jeopardy of his own life. Total strangers that we talked to (they needed to be old enough to remember) turned up a lady and she remembered my grandfather and how he helped out people in the town. This gave us a warm feeling because this was how we remembered my grandfather. Everyone there had only nice things to say. We didn't get political.

There was an awareness of the today in Germany. The husband of the woman who took us around worked in East Germany and could not associate with us because we were Westerners.

18:42 Q. What would you say to the people in the future to prevent this happening again?

A. My deep feeling is that we cannot forget and cannot allow our children to not understand fully what happened - not just to the Jews of Germany but to the Jews of Europe - and everyone involved. We also need to remember the things that happened after the war to those that survived it. We need to teach Jew and non-Jew that these were real experiences. There needs to be education as to how it happened. This cannot be allowed to be forgotten - ever.

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0060

4

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