

Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center
Ernest Kohlmann
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- Ernest Kohlmann:** ...Paulina Kohlmann nee Marx, M-a-r-x.
- Elliot Lefkowitz:** Nee Marx?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. Actually, I think on her birth certificate it says it wasn't Frieda[?], that wasn't a proper German name. Her name was Fredericka after the Kaiser who died, you know.
- Elliot Lefkowitz:** Frederick the 2nd, yes. What about grandparents? Were there grandparents that you were close to? Were they alive?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Not really. I had an uncle who was fairly close, who served in the First World War. He's one of my exhibits, if you know what I mean.
- Elliot Lefkowitz:** Yes.
- Ernest Kohlmann:** And then father of mother. And he was about the closest.
- Elliot Lefkowitz:** His name?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** What?
- Elliot Lefkowitz:** What was his name?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Eugene.
- Elliot Lefkowitz:** Eugene Marx.
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Dr. Eugene Marx. He was a doctor, who practiced in the rural districts of the Black Forest.
- Elliot Lefkowitz:** How far back can you trace your family's history in Germany?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Good question. In the case of my father, there's a book about the district he came from, and that goes back to 1628 or something. In the case of my mother, the family came from the Rhineland mainly but goes back to [00:02:09]. And it's back into the same date, 1600 and something. As I told somebody many years ago, more German than that you can't get.

Elliot Lefkovitz: They considered themselves Germans first and then Jewish? Or Jewish and German? Or how did they see their identity?

Ernest Kohlmann: How do you mean then or now?

Elliot Lefkovitz: Then.

Ernest Kohlmann: Then?

Elliot Lefkovitz: Yes.

Ernest Kohlmann: Oh, essentially German Jew. Yes, no question about that.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And religiously, how observant were they?

Ernest Kohlmann: They were -- how should I say -- Jewish by feeling an inclination. Father was one of the Jews who kept the holidays, three holidays a year. Mother was a different kettle of fish. She was to attend the synagogue every Friday night, you know, [00:03:29]. And she was the leading light in Weisel and Cologne of the [00:03:36], which is not, which is a mitzvah, as you probably know. And you have to be committed to do that.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Very committed.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yeah. Washing and dealing with the dead.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Taharah, yes.

Ernest Kohlmann: But that's a traditional which she, I think, inherited from her mother, my grandmother, who I never knew.

Elliot Lefkovitz: In both Weisel and Cologne?

Ernest Kohlmann: What?

Elliot Lefkovitz: In both Weisel and Cologne?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. Yes. Yes. But I was mainly conscious of it in these.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So you belonged then to a synagogue?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: You were members of a synagogue?

Ernest Kohlmann: Mm-hmm.

- Elliot Lefkovitz:** What kind of work did your father do?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** He had a business wholesale, carpets, curtains and that kind of thing.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Did he travel? Or did he have a store?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yeah, he traveled, you know --
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Traveled?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** --he had a depot and traveled. It was essentially not a business plan[?]. The leading light in our firm, if you can call it that, was my mother, who had the brains.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** So she had business sense?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. She was an accountant with the biggest store in Weisel, during the First World War I'm talking about. Who were distance -- we were *mishpokhe*. You know what I mean?
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Yes.
- Ernest Kohlmann:** They're in the --
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Yes.
- Ernest Kohlmann:** You can trace the names in the *schattenbaum*[?]. You know what I mean? But she, no question about that, she was --
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Was your father in the First World War? Did he fight in the First World War?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** No, he did not. My father, for reasons which I've never been able to ascertain, emigrated to the Union of South Africa some considerable time before the First World War. During the war, he was interned by the British in a camp in [00:06:05]. I have confirmation of that from the International Red Cross where I've done a bit of research.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** But why he went to South Africa, you've never found out?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Never found out. Never. So it's become the major mystery of the family, you know, of me. I probably exhausted every avenue, including passenger lists of ships going to South Africa.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** And then after the war, he came back to Germany?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes, after the First World War.

Elliot Lefkowitz: After the first war?

Ernest Kohlmann: Right. His father died, I think, in 1916. And he wanted to see his mother, who died in 1928. It's funny how we remember some things. I have a good memory for some things, not in others.

Elliot Lefkowitz: As far as your -- did you have any kind of religious education?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes, I supposed in a sense. I went to -- I don't know anything about the ... there's a leaflet about the Yavneh School in Cologne, which was the only, what we call in Britain, grammar school, where Jews were allowed to participate. On moving to Cologne at the age of ten, I think it was, I was entered in an exam for the school. I was shaking. I never thought of myself as an academic and was more than surprised that they took me. I was [00:08:10] of the selection.

Elliot Lefkowitz: So this was a Jewish gimnasium[?]?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Jewish gimnasium?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkowitz: In Cologne?

Ernest Kohlmann: In Cologne.

Elliot Lefkowitz: And why did your parents move to Cologne?

Ernest Kohlmann: I think they moved there because in Weisel, which was a small town, everybody knew they were Jewish. Moving to Cologne, it mitigated this. You understand?

Elliot Lefkowitz: Yes, the Nazis had come to power in '33, and they moved --

Ernest Kohlmann: '33, yes. I'll wait to be asked, otherwise I could carry on.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Sure. In Weisel, did you have Jewish and non-Jewish friends? Or did you have, did your parents just associate with other Jews? Or with a wider circle?

Ernest Kohlmann: No, I think wider.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Wider circle?

Ernest Kohlmann: Wider circle. My father was a well-traveled individual. And he wasn't parochial in his attitude, if you know what I mean. Mother had interest in life, her business and her family. Which came first, I wouldn't like to say.

Elliot Lefkowitz: [Chuckles]

Ernest Kohlmann: [Chuckles]

Elliot Lefkowitz: And the family, her two children?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Her two children?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. Yes, just two children.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Politically, were your parents Social Democrats? Were they political in any sense?

Ernest Kohlmann: I don't know, to be honest. At the time -- I'm talking now the 1930s -- you might say 1933, I became politically educated, matured. I knew what it was about. I saw the boycott in Weisel of Jewish businesses. On the 20-something of April, 1933, I could show you, I could paint you a picture of it, chapter and verse. After that, the conversation amongst adults, our parents not accepted[?], was Nazism and the chance of getting out of Germany. You know, the Social Democrat business[?], that sort of didn't exist.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Did they think of going to Palestine? Were they at all Zionistically inclined?

Ernest Kohlmann: No. I could tell you a long story about that. But, no, no, it didn't apply to my parents.

Elliot Lefkowitz: So when you say that they were interested in getting out, it was to the United States, to England, or anywhere?

Ernest Kohlmann: Anywhere.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Anywhere?

Ernest Kohlmann: Anywhere. Anywhere. But that was in the later '30s, not in the beginning. Nobody could possibly foresee what was going to happen.

Elliot Lefkowitz: The Nuremburg Laws --

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkowitz: --in the fall of '35.

Ernest Kohlmann: '35.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Was there ever any talk about that? Any discussion about that? Defining who was a Jew?

Ernest Kohlmann: Only in the sense that a particular uncle of mine, the one I've already mentioned, he was widowed very early. His non-Jewish wife died of scarlet fever. Nobody dies of scarlet fever today. [Chuckles] And he had an affair -- I shouldn't call it that -- with a non-Jewish woman. That, of course, under the Nazi law was *reschensunder*[?]. Despoilation of German blood and all that bullshit. [Chuckles] And being a nasty little boy, I told my mother, you know, I saw him come out of the business of this woman, which worried my mother no end. You know what I mean?

Elliot Lefkowitz: Yes.

Ernest Kohlmann: In the [00:13:04] not part of it.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Was he punished in any way?

Ernest Kohlmann: No, never. Only in the very beginning, but I don't know what it was about because we were still living in Weisel. It must have been 1934, end of '33, '34. And the Nazis got hold of him pretty early. Although he was an ex-serviceman [00:13:36]. And he appeared one day in our flat with his hair, head shaved, which of course frightened me a little. I asked mother what it was about. And she said he had been put into a camp. I suspect it was Dachau. And he had been released strange enough because of pressure put upon the Nazis indirectly by his former patients. He was a very beloved doctor. You know what I mean? That was right at the beginning. I mean, it wouldn't have [00:14:25]. It wouldn't have matter. And she said I was not to discuss the matter with anybody.

Elliot Lefkowitz: But he was freed?

Ernest Kohlmann: He was freed. And he was then told in no uncertain terms to disappear. Of course, the green, the *grunnkrester*, which was Holland, it was quite close to Weisel.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Which he did?

- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. The next thing I knew about him was we got a letter from Manila, the Philippines. I still remember the stamp. You know what I mean? [00:15:05] memory I have for some things. And the next time we heard from him, he was in Shanghai.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** So he survived?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Do you remember anything about the 1936 Olympics?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** 1936 was, of course, the Olympic Games. I was always quite interested in sport. And by that time -- how should I say -- allegiances and identifications had changed. And the enemies of Germany, who won, like Jesse Owens is a classic case, were my heroes. You follow? Not Germany's. Which would have been the case had anti-Semitism in Germany never existed.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Yes. So you were very happy with Jesse Owens' victory?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Very happy. Very happy. There was also a Jewish woman -- I remember her name -- Helene Meier in athletics, I think. And pressure was put upon her to appear as a herring[?]. I kick myself for saying that word now because I vowed to myself I would never use it. You follow? I should've said straight away as non-Jewish.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** What about Joe Lewis and Max Schmelling, the boxing, did you follow that at all?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Oh, yes. Yes. What was his name Bahr, Max Bahr? And what was his name?
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Joe Lewis?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Joe Lewis. Yes. Yes. Sometimes I find not that I've forgotten, but it takes a little bit for the, as we say in England, for the penny to drop.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** [Chuckles] In school, were, among your class, were people, were students leaving? Were friends able to get out say in '35, '36, '37? Or...
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Not to any large extent. The big change came in 1939 when even the blindest Jew in Germany realized that things weren't going the way they thought they would.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** So I guess that brings us to Kristallnacht.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: What are your memories of Kristallnacht?

Ernest Kohlmann: My memories are vivid. On the morning of Kristallnacht, my mother called me. We had a large flat, quite comfortable flat in [00:18:36]. And she said, "Come and have a look." We lived in the Warrenstrasse[?]. The street where the synagogue was about four or five doors down from the synagogue. And this is where [00:18:56]. And I looked out with mother standing next to me, and I could see smoke issuing from the synagogue. Not flames, smoke. And I won't say things that I didn't see or do. It's a matter of principle. Opposite was a sort of a park. And there was -- how can I say -- a group of people. I wouldn't even consider to describe them as a mob because they didn't behave like a mob. They stood there with their gaping mouths in consternation, I would say, as much as -- they didn't cheer or anything. It'd be much nicer to say that, you know, they didn't. Mother was frightened. Father wasn't at home. And during that moment, the bell rang. Everybody was, of course, in high tension, you know, it might the Gestapo.

Elliot Lefkovitz: This would be November 10th?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. To smash up the place. It wasn't. It was one of two ladies, who lived on the floor higher. One was called Kurster and the other one was called Zollner. Remembering that after all these years. Not Jewish. Protestant, I assume. There was a conversation between the younger of the two. I think Frau Zollner and mother, which I didn't hear. And shortly after which, my mother went away, came back with a little box about this big, which I assume contained jewelry or money or something, which she gave to my sister[?] and Frau Zollner. And said to Frau Zollner, "Look after my boy." And my mother handed me over to Frau Zollner like you would pass a loaf[?], something that you value. Do you follow? If you could describe, there was no emotional context there. I didn't cry. Mother didn't cry. And she said, "Go with Frau Zollner," which I did. [00:22:04] one staircase higher. The door was open to two wide big doors, white, painted white. I got into a hall. And one of the ladies -- I don't know if it was the younger or the older one -- took me into a bedroom, you know, big bedrooms. And the bedrooms were furnished in the old-fashioned teak quarter or oak quarter. I think it must have been teak. It was reddish, tall, nearly up to the ceiling.

Elliot Lefkovitz: You had never --

Ernest Kohlmann: Huh?

Elliot Lefkovitz: You had never been in their apartment before?

Ernest Kohlmann: Never. The first time I was ever there. And when I entered the bedroom, led by one of the ladies, the door of one of the cupboards was open, big doors, high doors. And as I looked, I saw there were cushions in the bottom of this cupboard. Wardrobe would be a better description. And she said to me, "Dear Ernest, you have to go into this cupboard" or wardrobe, "until we say you can come out. I'll leave the door open a little bit so that you can get air. But under no circumstances must you make any noise." And that's how I spent that particular day, shaking and mortally afraid. I won't say I was a hero. I was never a hero in that sense.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And how old were you at that time?

Ernest Kohlmann: I was, at that time, 11.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Eleven?

Ernest Kohlmann: I knew all the in's and out's of it. I knew the consequences of being found out in all this thing, what would happen. And towards evening, mother came upstairs and said I could come down. Everything had quieted down a bit. I didn't want to go downstairs. I was afraid. In the end, mother persuaded me to come. And later that evening, it was dark then, our chauffer -- we had a chauffer -- Herr Haas, H-a-a-s, brought us [00:25:03]. A true, loyal servant. And he said to mother, "Don't be frightened. I have taken care of your husband. He is living with my mother." In other words, he put his life on the line for my father.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And his relation to your father was what, friend of your father's?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yeah, he was a friend of the family.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Friend of family?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. He took me motor racing and all this kind of thing. You know what I mean?

Elliot Lefkovitz: Just for the transcribing, the two women who took you in, how was their, who lived upstairs, the spelling, how would you spell their name?

Ernest Kohlmann: Kurster, K-u -- you know...

Elliot Lefkovitz: With an umlaut, yeah.

Ernest Kohlmann: --s-t-e-r. And would be with a zed --

Elliot Lefkovitz: Z, zed.

Ernest Kohlmann: Z-o -- with the two dots.

Elliot Lefkovitz: The two dots.

Ernest Kohlmann: --l-l --

Elliot Lefkovitz: Two L's.

Ernest Kohlmann: -n-e-r.

Elliot Lefkovitz: N-e-r.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And they lived together, they --

Ernest Kohlmann: They were mother and daughter.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Mother and daughter.

Ernest Kohlmann: Which was which, I can't tell you that.

Elliot Lefkovitz: When you came downstairs, had the living place been ransacked? Was there any damage? So they did not come in?

Ernest Kohlmann: Nothing. They didn't come in. Nothing. Nothing happened. There was -- I looked out of the window to see what, the whole thing had calmed down quite a lot. And there was of course, we still had the telephone for phoning and all what's happening. This kind of stuff. And there was an atmosphere fear pervading the place, if you now what I mean, if I can describe it that way.

Elliot Lefkovitz: What about your sister?

Ernest Kohlmann: Strangely enough, I have no recollection of her in that context at all. Where she was or what she did, I can't tell you. You'd have to ask for yourself. I've never discussed it with her. Do you understand? Such things are personal experiences you should keep to yourself unless a person like you starts sticking[?] --

Elliot Lefkovitz: Did your father then, did your father come home or was he imprisoned?

Ernest Kohlmann: No, no, he was never imprisoned. He came home a few days, about a week or so later.

Elliot Lefkovitz: He was hidden by the friend?

Ernest Kohlmann: By the chauffeur.

Elliot Lefkovitz: By the chauffeur.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yeah, and his mother. He owed him his life, no question about that.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Because he would have been arrested and imprisoned?

Ernest Kohlmann: No question about it.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So then the family really, the idea was to try to get out?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. Because father had his South African history, as it were, actually applied. Finally, they said, yes, they would give him a Visa, but not his family. His family consisted at that time of my mother and Margaret, who lives here. I was already in England. And father wouldn't go without his family. He scarified his life for his family. There's no other way of putting it. I didn't know about this until much later.

Elliot Lefkovitz: But you were on the kinder transport?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And how, do you have any -- how did that come about? Were your parents in contact with...?

Ernest Kohlmann: Well, after the Kristallnacht, Dr. Kliponski[?], who was the vector of Yavneh School.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Dr. Kipon --

Ernest Kohlmann: Kliponski.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Kliponski.

Ernest Kohlmann: There's a thing [00:30:05]. I have a lot of documentation.

Elliot Lefkovitz: I'm sorry. So --

Ernest Kohlmann: It's all right.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So Dr. Kliponski?

- Ernest Kohlmann:** He organized the, you might say, the transfer of some of the school people. Obviously, not everybody. But I was lucky. I was in the first transport. I was, by that time, sexta[?], quinta[?], kraftah[?]. Kraftah is the third from the bottom.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Third from the bottom, on the list or third from the bottom of what?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** The school academic year. Because sexta[?] is the basic, quinta[?] is next form up, kraftah[?] and four --
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** So the third --
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Goes up to the [00:31:05]. and then obviously you took the [00:31:08] --
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** And you go to hopefully go to university.
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Go to university. [Chuckles] But that never --
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** You were in the third --
- Ernest Kohlmann:** That was cut short.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** --the third form of the gimnasium.
- Ernest Kohlmann:** That's right.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Do you remember your parents telling you that they were going to send you on the kinder transport? Do you remember them speaking to you about it, telling you?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes, I have a form, copy of it. I think the original is a bit dirty. Full [00:31:49] size, which gives chapter and verse about the transfer of the school, which was the original idea, to England. Do you understand?
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** So it was a class?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** It was a complete class.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** A complete class.
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. And with all the in's and out's of it. And my parents -- I've got it somewhere. If you haven't got it, I'll send it to you. They had to abdicate any rights whatsoever, medical, educational. Although it was put in clear German that the education of their children would continue in the same manner as hereof to. You understand? In other words, they were going to have an education, an academic education. When I was in the kraftah, you

know, the sexta, quinta, kraftah, taught things like geography and so on, we did, we had English, Hebrew, Latin, and beginnings of French or Spanish.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And this would've been --

Ernest Kohlmann: It gives you some idea of the quality --

Elliot Lefkovitz: Quality. This would've been the second form or the first?

Ernest Kohlmann: The third.

Elliot Lefkovitz: The first and third form?

Ernest Kohlmann: The third form.

Elliot Lefkovitz: The third form. By the way, was Yavneh co-ed or boys only?

Ernest Kohlmann: It had -- part of it was called a *litzeum* [?], which is the equivalent to a gymnasium. Do you know what I mean? I still have not here but, I think you have it somewhere, my [00:33:58], my leaving report. Nothing terribly to be proud of, but it could've been a lot worse, if you know what I mean. That was something that never bothered me [00:34:17].

Elliot Lefkovitz: So the entire class then was on the kinder transport?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Do you remember your parting from your parents, when you say good-bye?

Ernest Kohlmann: No.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Where did the kinder transport leave from?

Ernest Kohlmann: I have a copy of a telegram, which was sent to a friend's family. I never saw the one to our family. It said quite clearly, very short, "Meeting at the school, 12:30. Good-byes at 4:35. Departure from Cologne Hauptbanif [?], 5:00." Shortly after 5:00, I have a photographic picture in my mind of the big clock at Cologne Hauptbanif. And going into the train, the window -- still remember it -- it had the leather strap to lower it. Had the door partly opened. And the last person talked to me and shook hands with me was a gentleman by the name of Dr. Stein, S-t-e-i-n, who was the Hebrew teacher, religious teacher, for our particular class.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And your --

Ernest Kohlmann: He didn't survive the Holocaust.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And your parents, did your parents come to the train station?

Ernest Kohlmann: No, they were not allowed for fear of some kind of hysterical manifestation.

Elliot Lefkovitz: What were you allowed to take with you? What did you take with you on the kinder transport?

Ernest Kohlmann: A lot. Clothing in particular was made. We had, my family engaged a seamstress, who made for me pajamas and this kind of stuff. Every single item I'm talking about, books, socks, handkerchief, had to have a name in it. Ernest Kohlmann. You understand? Sewn in, painted in. I still have the odd article I come across. But I mean, obviously over the years, I've tried to get rid of it. I have a school atlas --

Elliot Lefkovitz: Yes.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes, I have still got a school atlas of the Nazi era, of course, actually with all the [00:37:32] and the racial distribution of this rubbish. And right at the back is written in my mother's print hand Ernie M. Kohlmann. One of the few personal ties to my beloved mother.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And the seamstress who sewed this in, did you family, was she the maid, was she the family maid?

Ernest Kohlmann: I don't know. I think she was specially engaged for that purpose.

Elliot Lefkovitz: For that purpose.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. And things like eider downs and a certain amount of furniture was requested, cupboards and things, because the less said about the Jewish community in Britain the better.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Did your family have a maid, by the way, in Cologne?

Ernest Kohlmann: Oh, yes. Yes. At that time, only Jewish. But before that, we had, when I was small, we had a kinder maid, which was like a poor man's governess, if I can put it that way. She was actually the daughter of the rabbi, you know, sort of supervised homework and that kind of thing. And of course, people in the kitchen and [00:39:05] and this kind of thing.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So there was a cook?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: There was a cook?

Ernest Kohlmann: It was a normal middle-class household. You know what I mean?

Elliot Lefkovitz: Yes.

Ernest Kohlmann: I was never put to such menial tasks as cleaning shoes. You know what I mean? In fact, when I came to Britain, I had a bit of a, what we call, a cold douche in these matters.

Elliot Lefkovitz: A cold shower.

Ernest Kohlmann: A cold shower. I was told if I wanted to eat I'd have to shell peas and wash potatoes. And if I had a hole in my socks, I had to darn them, which I did rather badly by pulling them together. I was soon enlightened as to how one darned socks. I learned a lot the hard way.

Elliot Lefkovitz: What do you remember about the journey to England?

Ernest Kohlmann: A lot. We were, us, boys, in a compartment. Everybody got cheerful at the thought of getting out Germany, which was tempered by the fear of what was going to happen at the border. Nothing happened.

Elliot Lefkovitz: This was the Dutch border?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes, with Germany. The moment we came over the border from Germany to Holland, I vividly remember as though a big stone had been lifted from my shoulders. I know I was only a child, but I was perfectly aware of the implications of what was happening to me. I cannot tell you the feeling of relief. And the train stopped in different places. And there were the good Dutch women standing there with tables and lemonade and cakes and sandwiches. I think they all thought we were starving to death. You know what I mean? Their hospitality was beyond praise, which I've never forgotten.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And the train ended at?

Ernest Kohlmann: Hook of Holland.

Elliot Lefkovitz: The Hook of Holland?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. I remember getting out of the train. The night was black. It was raining. Strangest things you remember. I remember, there's a German word, *fitzner*['?], that's a gathering of pane water, and lamps standing in

them or near them. And the reflection of the lamp in the water. Do you understand? I thought it was kind of picturesque, but it had a sort of macabre feeling about it.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Do you recall the date that you arrive in England?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. 19th of January 1939.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Nineteenth of January '39. And the --

Ernest Kohlmann: I came, I landed in Britain, you know.

Elliot Lefkovitz: I'm sorry. Nineteenth of January '39, of course. And the trip took, how long did the trip take?

Ernest Kohlmann: Overnight. And on the good ship, the SS Prague of the -- a [00:43:22] company. [00:43:24] company. It was a [00:43:27]. And many, many years later, somebody wrote about it. Had the facts completely wrong. I'm utterly amazed that people of academic integrity can prostitute themselves -- is the only way I can say -- by supplying information. There's no relationship to what -- you know what I mean -- what this was about. And I still have thing still here somewhere. You know, in the other file is the ticket. I've still got the original ticket, which you can find in the [00:44:13], which are essential. And this man, who clothed himself in the title of Rabbi, made himself, what should be called the Moesha Vishtish[?], you know, a self-appointed individual, a leader or whatever it is, about the park[?], which I knew wasn't true. That made some of these [00:44:55]. And so what did I do as a reasonably intelligent person? I rang up the [00:45:06] registry of shipping in London, who keep a register of ships, when they were built, what they did, when they were sunk or whatever. And I've got all the details, which I won't go into now, as to what happened to that ship right from the beginning to the end, including our small part in it.

And then we got to England. I remember this rattling sound. And I thought, [chuckles] I thought the ship was falling to bits. But what it was, it was coaling. In those days --

Elliot Lefkovitz: Coal?

Ernest Kohlmann: ...coals. The coals were put on board that ship. You know what I mean? For fuel. Which I only discovered a little bit later. And then we were led before some medical part, a doctor, I assume. Listened to our chest --

Elliot Lefkovitz: Sorry. Now I have to change this.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. It's taking so long.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Not at all. No, not at all.

[End of tape 1, side 1/begin tape 1, side 2]

Elliot Lefkovitz: ...and just -- okay. And this doctor, now this was in Liverpool, this was in London? This was in -- no. You didn't --

Ernest Kohlmann: In Harwich.

Elliot Lefkovitz: At Harwich.

Ernest Kohlmann: We landed at Harwich. We were then led, of course, some railway lines onto this train, London or Northeastern Way, painted green. Inside were pictures of railway destinations. You know what I mean? It was propaganda obviously, you know. And I mean, obviously, *lagessenstadt*[?] was put aboard, off we went, and approached London from the east, you know, east end. It was a foggy day. London, at that time, [chuckles] -- what can I say -- a branch of hell. At that time, heating was by coal. Each house had two chimneys. You could imagine the atmosphere with the fog. It was at a certain hellish view about it. You know, if somebody were to describe hell, you would describe that, as it got closer to London. Finally, you got to Liverpool Street Station where we disembarked. I don't remember a lot about the actually disembarkation. I think we were put on a bus and driven to, what we called, the hostel. It was actually a private house that had been adapted or commandeered.

Elliot Lefkovitz: How many were with you at that time? How many of your classmates were with you?

Ernest Kohlmann: Nearly all.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So how, about how many would that have been?

Ernest Kohlmann: We were in this, One Minster Road was the address, in W2. There were seven of us in one room. All I can say, a camaraderie existed. Some of us obviously came [00:49:48] comfortable parents. You know, we were not short of the old reichsmark. Others had a Polish refugee background. But it was firmly decided by us that any [00:50:12] or goodies that came to the room were going to be equally distributed to rich and poor alike. Democracy existed [00:50:27]. Because some of the boys were obviously depressed.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So there were, in this hostel, there were only seven? There were only seven of you?

Ernest Kohlmann: In this room.

Elliot Lefkovitz: In this room? And in other rooms there were others?

Ernest Kohlmann: Others.

Elliot Lefkovitz: I would just, before we continue with England, I just want to go back for a moment to Germany because Kristallnacht, November 9th and 10th, the kinder transport -- you arrived in England on January 19th. So there was some time in between.

Ernest Kohlmann: To organize it.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Right. What do you remember about what happened after, right after Kristallnacht? Did you continue with school, for example?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So school continued?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes, as far as I remember.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Do you remember a change in the atmosphere of the home? I mean, were your parents even more fearful at that...?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. Yes. Yes, no question about it. Obviously, they tried to shield the children, my sister and myself, from it. But it's a bit silly thing to say at the moment. I was politically [00:52:02] person. You understand? I knew what it was about. I knew what the system was about. I knew what the consequences were and the fears that went with it. I never discussed with our parents ever. I didn't want to make their life more difficult.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Was it ever discussed in school why the Jews, why are they doing this?

Ernest Kohlmann: Never. Difficult. I mean, I've learned a lot since then [00:52:49]. I've read quite a bit. And I have to keep separate what my own experience is and what other people have written. But the acceptance of anti-Semitism amongst Jews in Germany was widespread, understood and taking the historic perspective not really dealt with.

Elliot Lefkovitz: It was part of life?

Ernest Kohlmann: That's it.

- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Did you experience -- was there a particular incident that you, an anti-Semitic incident that affected, impacted you on the street or...?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. Some, there was a procession going in Cologne, I suppose. And being curious, you know, I had to look . And of course, everybody saying Heil Hitler with Nazi flags. And being Jewish, I knew we weren't allowed through there. Sort of a thug, you know, in Hitler Youth uniform said, "[00:54:17] raising your hand." I said, "I'm Jewish." He hit me. And I thought he was going to beat me up. But my legs were younger than his and faster than his. So I beat a haste to retreat. Needless to say, many years later, many, many years later, the circumstances weren't exactly the same, but the sentiment behind it was. I hit the person as hard as I could. The only time I've ever hit anybody in cold blood. [Laughs] And I tell you something, giving the same situation, I would do it today.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** This subsequent incident was in England?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. Yes.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** And at that point, you retaliated?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. Yeah, I thought about it logically. And I thought -- I was probably 23 or 24, and I tried to enlighten him. It was no good. So then I weighed up the odds. And I thought, well, I was thinking of my life and my parents. And I thought I can't let this go whatever the consequences. And that's how this happened. There were a lot of English rivals around, you know. People in this. And as in so many instances, Nazis are basically cowards. They only do this sort of thing if they're in the majority. And this person, much to my surprise, turned and ran ... all the drivers, of course, [claps]. You know, good old Kohlmann. And needless to say there was not the slightest hint of anti-Semitism there since that day.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** And where did that -- was that in London, the incident?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. Yes.
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** In London?
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Yes. Yes. There was another -- actually, I don't want to interfere in your sequence of your --
- Elliot Lefkovitz:** Yes. We'll --
- Ernest Kohlmann:** Well, after we were in the hostel. Actually, it continues, we were hungry. They didn't give us enough to eat. Our treatment was a bit, I always think like a dog or a puppy or whatever, that's given to people at Christmas. It's

a novelty. You know? Favorably disposed. After time, they realize it's got to be looked after. It costs money, and all this kind of thing. And they become a bloody nuisance. Simple as that. The result of course that the children were neglected, in a sense. Such things as love, compassion didn't exist. You -- difficult for me to explain this to you. But I wasn't personally aware of that. It's only later when you realize. Do you follow? Then they were going to teach us English. We went to the synagogue in Clickerwood[?] Lane. And we had instructions, two or three weeks, not enough to master the English language.

Elliot Lefkowitz: And this was London? This was still London?

Ernest Kohlmann: So one day, they said, "Finish now with the school. You'll go to the normal English school," which was what we used to call slum school. Slum school is the school in built in 1870 when compulsory education for everybody, and they built this places like prisons. And --

Elliot Lefkowitz: Dickensian.

Ernest Kohlmann: Huh?

Elliot Lefkowitz: Dickensian.

Ernest Kohlmann: Terrible. Painted dark brown at 1870. It was like a penal institution. And so one fine morning, they said, "You're going off to school." English primary school. It was primary or secondary, I'm not too sure about that. And we marched in two German style, two by two, you know, along the pavement and so on. And I still remember the word, Netherwood.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Neverwood.

Ernest Kohlmann: Neverwood.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Netherwood.

Ernest Kohlmann: N-e-t-h-e-r.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Netherwood. [Chuckles]

Ernest Kohlmann: That's the fault of a stupid memory. As we entered Netherwood Road, you know, high houses, working class, we saw on one wall SS signs. You know what I mean? You know the flashes. Of course, we were frightened. And one thing we knew, if we were attacked, we could defend ourselves. You follow? England was the land of liberty where you didn't have to allow yourself to be downtrodden and kicked and sworn at. Nothing happened that day. The following day, we didn't take a chance.

We went to school armed to the teeth, as far as 12-year-olds can arm themselves with knives and forks and sticks and well hidden. And thought if we are being set upon by the bloody Nazis, we are going to take, we are going to make good account of ourselves. You know what I mean? It was terrible, anti-climaxed. Not a bird, not a cat, not a dog took any notice of us. You understand? That was just one episode.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So then you remained -- how long then did you remain in school?

Ernest Kohlmann: We remained in school, I would say, the 27th of August 1938.

Elliot Lefkovitz: '39?

Ernest Kohlmann: '39. Yes, you are right. We were told at school -- we already had our gas mask boxes and everything -- that in future [01:02:32], we should come to school with underwear packed and the necessities of life, whatever they were, shoes, because the odds were that one day we wouldn't go back to the hostel [01:02:56]. We were led that day to West Hampstead Station. And we were given a number, like a parcel, and a paper bag, [chuckles] which amongst other things contained a tin of condensed milk. I remember Libby's Condensed Milk, biscuits, and chocolate and [01:03:31]. Ever being a prudent person, I made a little hole in the tin, and I sucked out of the little hole, it must have been for months. A little box of condensed milk. You know? A stupid aside, if I may say so.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And where were you taken?

Ernest Kohlmann: What?

Elliot Lefkovitz: Where did you --

Ernest Kohlmann: We were taken to Bedford where we were distributed like cattle, you know, along a road. Some people had registered to take evacuees, you know understand, from London. Not everybody. But as you were led up these different roads, people stood, of course, to watch the spectacle. And some took pity on us. And they said, "Oh, I'll take a boy or two boys." Although they hadn't committed themselves, the result was obvious. They were not prepared for us. The bed I slept in had been slept in by somebody else. I could tell you a lot of stories about that. But the worst part of that was the Jewish business. We were, by that time, reasonably brainstorm into Orthodox Jewish practices. You understand?

Elliot Lefkovitz: While you were in the hostel?

Ernest Kohlmann: Now, while we were in the hostel, this happened. So one day when we were transferred from an Orthodox Jewish milieu into a Christian

atmosphere, you could imagine that was a trauma, what was today called a trauma. But we didn't see it that way. We were just wired. I was. I can only speak for myself, yeah. Of the awful[?], the Almighty. Because on the following morning, I had bacon for breakfast. Now it seems comical today. I can assure you it was far from that. So what did I do? Wrapped the bacon in my handkerchief. And for a considerable amount of time, not being able to eat kosher, I was hungry. Until one day, common sense descended upon me, and I realized Almighty God didn't want me to starve, which was the beginning of throwing out the Jewish baby with the bathwater, if I can use a metaphor.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Do you recall the name of the people who took you in?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Who were they?

Ernest Kohlmann: One was called Peck. One was called Jones. The other one escapes me.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So how long were you with each family?

Ernest Kohlmann: Varied. Weeks. Two, three weeks. It might have been a month.

Elliot Lefkovitz: In Bedford?

Ernest Kohlmann: And then they had a person[?] called a [01:07:18] officer, who supervised the accommodation on behalf of the government for the evacuees. Do you understand? The Refugee Committee belatedly sent somebody along, you understand, to keep an eye on things. I still remember the name in charge was called Mr. Harris. Mr. Harris had an unfortunate habit of rattling small change in his pockets, you know, money. If you went to him and said, "Mr. Harris, my shoes have got holes in them, and they let in water. Have you got money to repair them?" "Sorry boys, short of money. You will have to try and manage as best you can." And you managed. I won't tell you how, but we managed.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Did you correspond with your parents during this time?

Ernest Kohlmann: No. [01:08:41] for a short time, there was a facility by the International Red Cross whereby you could buy 25 words once in a blue moon, and you got a reply. What can you write? "I'm doing all right." You know, "I'm alive and kicking," and that's it. And then after 1941, when the deportation started, that was the end. Silence. Just silence. You understand? The silence of the dead, although one didn't know it.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Do you remember when war broke out?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. Third of September 1939. I was in the living room of the people called Neal.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Neal?

Ernest Kohlmann: Mm-hmm. Listening to the radio. Heard Mr. Chamberlain. You know, he sent an ultimatum to the Germany government. And unless they replied by, what it was, 12:00, state of war [01:10:02]. In one sense, it was a relief. Things could only get better by Germany being defeated. And then, of course, the whole, everything changed, one's attitude. You had to go before -- when you were 16. I was only 13. Before tribunal who decided whether you were a dangerous enemy, you know, where they could let you go. You know what I mean? I still remember going to Cambridge where this was a magistrates court[?]. And the stupid cow sitting there, you know, looking down upon me. Then she say, "Oh, yes, you're still at school, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." "Are you any good at school?" Which is a leading question if ever there was one. I said, "Fairly. You know, I'm fairly good." "Only fairly good?" The way I'm telling you that, I remember it [01:11:22].

Elliot Lefkovitz: But she let you return --

Ernest Kohlmann: She let me off. Yes. And much to my surprise, I got my fare back from the tribunal for Bedford through Cambridge, two shillings and six pence, which I was more than grateful for. [Chuckles]

Elliot Lefkovitz: How were you accepted by the English children in the school?

Ernest Kohlmann: Well, at first, we were the bloody Germans. No question of Jews or anything, you know. A German is a German is a German. The only good German is a dead German. If he was Jewish or not, that was academic. And if you are brought up in a German school, especially a [01:12:20] school, you learn to defend yourself. You are not a wimp. And they soon learned, the English boys, that we were not a pushover.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And so you had classmates from Yavneh in your class?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So --

Ernest Kohlmann: Needless to say, it didn't make us very popular because, as you can imagine, to be taught in an English working-class school at the lowest level you can possibly imagine is a different kettle of fish from being educated at a highly academic school. So the difference was enormous.

The result of course that we were held up as examples of how you should do things, you know, learn and so on. And as against, they were native English, you know, nuance[?]. That was, you know, all these were byproducts of that situation.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Was Bedford bombed during the blitz?

Ernest Kohlmann: It was bombed a little bit, not a lot. Of course there was the morning if the trains came over and so on and so forth. I was always interested in planes and things. And I volunteered [chuckles] -- it seems a bit silly today -- to become a roof spotter. In other words, I volunteered to go to the top of the school, sit on a chimney or something, and see whether there were any German planes coming over. Do you understand? I had the bell. And if I saw anything suspicious, I was to ring this bell, and they would go to the shelter, which started my interest in flying. You know what I mean? I was never afraid of anything.

And funnily enough, I think a week after I appeared at the tribunal because they suspected me of, you know, an enemy alien, there's a photo of me somewhere in a cadet uniform. I joined the air training... a mystery until this day. They never inquired, you know, where I was born. You know, how did I come to have a German name, Ernest Kohlmann? You understand? They seemed to accept me like any native. And a week after I went to tribunal, of course, I was in uniform, I was flying in -- I still remember the model. They have it in [01:15:39]. What's -- OTC, Operational Training Unit, where pilots were being prepared for action. I tried to -- I could go on with that.

Elliot Lefkovitz: But you remained in school during the war?

Ernest Kohlmann: No. When I was 14, one day -- what was his name? Cole, his name was. No, no, Cole was the teacher. The Inspector of Schools for the London County Council was Hayes. Mr. Hayes asked for me. He said, "Kohlmann, you're quite gifted in drawing," which I was. Probably still am. I think the Almighty God has bestowed it upon me. He said, "I'm going to try and get you a free place at an art school." I waited and I waited and I waited. And after quiet a considerable amount of time, he came and asked for me. And he said, "I've got some bad news for you." I said, "Oh, yes." He said, "I got you a free place, but the Refugee Committee wouldn't pay a small amount for your upkeep," which is unbelievable. These were Jews comfortably settled in Britain to whom this would've been peanuts. You understand? And you can imagine that I'm bitter about this until this day. But [01:17:45] with a complex, I don't. But the bitterness has remained. So then the committee said, "Well, there's only one thing to do. You have to find a job." So I found a job,

you know, which is the nearest thing to an art school is an *unstrasse*[], as a painter and a decorator. You understand?

Elliot Lefkovitz: And this would've been 1940?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes, 1940. Being German, I was always very keen to do well, to learn everything I could about the job and the training. And then later on, somebody took some notice of it and then I had a letter from the [01:18:43] somewhere, from the local education committee. It said, "You've been recommended by your employer as a diligent, intelligent boy[]. And we will pay for you to go to a technical school one day a week," which I gratefully accepted. My employer, a God-fearing Methodist, paid my wages and my fare to London because by that time the bombing... and I did, in that short time, what other boys took four or five years to do. [01:19:39] of the technical examination of fairly high standard. The failure rate, which wouldn't be tolerated today, at least 50 percent. And so, you know, I learned a skill to earn my living with. You follow? They also compromised heraldry, you know, coats of arms and architecture. You know, I still remember the four columns or classical columns. And I did my homework in the evening at the kitchen table. And I took ever with my flying activities. But that was it.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So you were also flying? Were a cadet?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: You worked at the -- you were flying? And you were painting? And you were going to the technical school?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yeah.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And was there a specific skill that you learned there or just...?

Ernest Kohlmann: No. I would say a lot of it was, to use a Yiddish word *chutzpah*, it was unmitigated cheek[]. And later on, you know, the Americans came over in 1942, I think it was. And although we'd been flying with the Royal Air Force, friendly with two of us ... and we made friends with an officer of the United States Air Force. Wing of the pass[], which I still have. And we flew regularly, nearly every week, and liberators, B17s [01:22:00]. And later on, managed to get onto a course for air gunners. And I still have this, difficult [01:22:12] to see it.

Elliot Lefkovitz: But the flying was not in combat?

Ernest Kohlmann: Huh?

Elliot Lefkovitz: The flying was not in combat?

Ernest Kohlmann: No.

Elliot Lefkovitz: It was not in combat?

Ernest Kohlmann: No, no, no.

Elliot Lefkovitz: It was --

Ernest Kohlmann: That, we had problems with that. Once we were qualified air gunners, it was much easier, of course. And only towards the end of the war was the, you know ... but then there was really not a combat situation in Germany. The Air Force was finished. Although I remember night flying with the Royal Air Force, and was in the [01:22:52]. And it was piloted in the front, me in the back. And he said, they had the message that there were intruders about. They were called intruders. These were individual German bombers or night fighters, who passed over, to make this shift. And he said, "If you see somebody like that." He says, "Open fire."

Elliot Lefkovitz: But this was still in England? This was in England?

Ernest Kohlmann: In England, yes. Oh, yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: You mentioned, now after 1941, as far as your family in Cologne, silence.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Do you remember thinking about what was happening to them? OR were you more, at that point...?

Ernest Kohlmann: Well, I'll be honest with you, I didn't think anything about it. I realized something terrible must have happened. Remembering what my experience of the Nazis were, the [01:24:15]. And you might say by 1943, yes, not later, I had come to the conclusion that I wouldn't see them again. In fact, to go back to the day that I left Cologne, I had the strongest feeling that I wouldn't see them again.

Elliot Lefkovitz: On the...

Ernest Kohlmann: It's difficult for me to convey it to you. I just knew. You understand?

Elliot Lefkovitz: Intuition.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. It wasn't as though it was a new feeling that appeared in me. It was just something that my common sense told me was possible. So by the

time I heard of their deaths at the end of 1945, about six years in between, it was not news. It was something that I accepted. The only advantage about it was, if I compare it to the death of my wife 18 months ago after 66 years of marriage. The grief and the sense of loss is still with me to this day and will remain with me until I die. That wasn't the situation with my parents. It was entirely different. And then when I stopped flying and [01:26:39], I got a job.

Elliot Lefkowitz: So when the war ended --

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkowitz: --in May '45 --

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkowitz: --where were you? Were you in, were you still in Bedford?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes, I was still flying.

Elliot Lefkowitz: And still in the technical school one day a week or...?

Ernest Kohlmann: I can't remember whether I was there or not. I took sitting [01:27:03], you know, examination because I thought to myself if I have technical exam behind me I can get a teacher's certificate and become a teacher. An academic education didn't enter it, that came much later.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Did you remain friendly with the boys that you came with from Yavneh?

Ernest Kohlmann: I can't say yes. We were acquainted. Everybody --

Elliot Lefkowitz: Scattered?

Ernest Kohlmann: --scattered. Each one had a different fate. One became a big contractor. Another one was so ashamed of his origin and everything that he married a non-Jewish woman. That wasn't the point. But in the home he had three children. Until he died, he never told her his origins that he was a Jewish refugee. You know what I mean? And it's only be chance that it slipped out and he was buried in a Jewish cemetery. And I met his children, two of them, afterwards. Nothing. There was no human connection there. You know what I mean? And that, of course, varied from boy to boy...

Elliot Lefkowitz: After the war, did you return to Germany to look for your family?

Ernest Kohlmann: No. At the end of the war, one day, at the end of 1945, I still have the telegram from an uncle of mine in Buenos Aires, somehow or another got

to know that Margaret, [01:29:29] mother, was lying in the hospital in [01:29:35], which is north Germany. At death's door with typhus. Subsequently, she wrote me a letter in pencil, which I still have. I read the letter once. And I only had the courage to read through the second time because I wanted to share the letter with my wife, as she became later on. I met her in Germany. She was employed in the same unit that I was. Do you understand?

Elliot Lefkowitz: The same -- Air Force, the same...

Ernest Kohlmann: The third in the United States that was then.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Oh, yes.

Ernest Kohlmann: At the station in Munich. And funnily enough, at the barracks, you know, they were individual houses where former camp of the German Secret Service and somebody called Galen, who was the big [01:31:02]. And we took the place over. It's back in German hands now. [Chuckles]

Elliot Lefkowitz: But the letter that you mentioned, what did the letter say?

Ernest Kohlmann: The letter gave chapter and verse about the fate of the family, exactly how it happened up to the time of the selection where my mother was torn away from Ruthie's mother, Margaret and what happened afterwards.

Elliot Lefkowitz: And that was...?

Ernest Kohlmann: It was such a graphic letter. You could smell the -- it's difficult to describe it. I mean, I'm not such an emotional person but even I couldn't bring myself to read it a second time.

Elliot Lefkowitz: And where did the separation take place?

Ernest Kohlmann: In Riga.

Elliot Lefkowitz: In Riga? And what about your father?

Ernest Kohlmann: What?

Elliot Lefkowitz: What about your father?

Ernest Kohlmann: My?

Elliot Lefkowitz: Your father?

Ernest Kohlmann: I don't know, as in so many cases. He evaporated. He was in Riga together with the family for a time. And then he just vanished out of the picture. You understand? Obviously, once I knew she was alive then I was ... I had officer status with the United States Army. And I beg, borrowed and stole every bloody thing I could get hold of, you know, in the way of clothing and coffee and you name it. And I sent it there. It probably saved her life.

Elliot Lefkovitz: To Schlessta[?] Holstein?

Ernest Kohlmann: No. Then she was in Zimon[?], where Ruthie was born. Ruthie's father married my sister in Germany. And I was, of course, a stranger. But I provided for them as best I could. You know, I probably saved their lives.

Elliot Lefkovitz: As far as your wife, where did you meet your wife?

Ernest Kohlmann: I met my wife working in the -- what's it called -- research. It was actually an espionage security outfit. What we did was not considered fashionable today anymore: reading people's letters, listening to telephone conversations, all this kind of thing. Any -- how should I say -- incriminating evidence was passed onto the counter-intelligence corp[?].

Elliot Lefkovitz: And this, and this was working with the Americas?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: At that time, the Army Air Corp?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. Yes. And we got to know each other, of course. And....

[End of tape 1, side 2/begin tape 2, side 1]

Ernest Kohlmann: ...my father-in-law's passport, which was you couldn't do anything without a passport. So they got up from their lunch table dressed in [01:35:24] and went over the border to the Sudetenland. And they were there for a time until the Germans, you know, started their mischief. And they fled from the Sudetenland to Czechoslovakia. And they were in Czechoslovakia when the Germans marched in. I think it was March the 15th, 1939. And the children, you know, my brother-in-law and my wife, they appealed to the [01:36:08] Embassy. And I think there was a woman there from the Quaker movement, who arranged for them to fly to Britain because they couldn't go through Germany because they were afraid that they were going to take them hostage. You understand? To get their father. Anyway, she came and she arrived in Corton[?] Airport on the 25th of February 1939, which was her birthday. That's why I remember the day. They had some [01:36:53] to see her but it wasn't a very happy situation.

And as with most of us, you know, she got a job as a nanny or something. And we were mercilessly exploited. And her parents were less than helpful, [01:37:18], what we call a British understatement.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Her parents got out?

Ernest Kohlmann: They got out because she was desperately ill, and they got an emergency Visa. Anyway, cut a long story short, she volunteered for the ATS, which was the women's alien section in all these difficulties. There's a funny sequel to it. She was there three years from being a nursing orderly to being on predictors and things on the gun side. Because one of the officers discovered she had a brain. So she was much more useful as a person who predicted where the planes, you know, and the guns... and while she was in the army, they teach everything. And she was given the books and the opportunity to get her matriculation. Well, she passed. She, I think, for mathematics, she paid privately. So, as I say, and we got married in May 1947.

Elliot Lefkovitz: May 1947.

Ernest Kohlmann: And I was [01:39:04]. I was barely 21.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And what occupation did you pursue?

Ernest Kohlmann: Well, I never wanted to be employed by anybody. Now if you had been told what to do, it wasn't me. So I did what I had been told to do. I started a small businesses, painting, decorating, doing decorate art but only high-class work. Very skilled sort of thing that doesn't happen much today because it'd be far too expensive, you know, church and stately homes and this kind of thing. It was extremely hard. We made a good -- she, Eva, she designed knitting patterns. It was a difficult time. And then the question arose: how are we going to go on as a family? Eva got her first MB, which is, you know, for medicine. But at that time, they only took men because they had numerous clauses[?] for women. So we said together and, you know, discussed this matter. And I said, "The decision as to what your career is going to be. It's got to be yours, not mine. It's your life." I said, "You have a choice." I said, "You can either go to medical," which would've accepted her. "Become a doctor. Or you can have children." I says, "It won't[?] be possible to have both." But I said, "You're the one who has to decide." So she thought about it and she said, "So many of our people have been murdered. I feel I must have children to replace some who had been lost." And that's what she did. And obviously, there's much in between, goods and bad, as in any marriage, ups and downs.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And how many children?

Ernest Kohlmann: Two.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Two children?

Ernest Kohlmann: About the children, I subscribe to the idea of they have to find their own way in life. That was in the view of my wife. She says they must have the best education that we can provide for them. [01:42:24]. She had her way. They both went to very expensive, top class, what we call in Britain, party[?] schools. My daughter eventually did medicine, went to Haberdasher School founded in 1640. Tim went to St. Paul School, founded at the time when St. Paul's School was where St. Paul's Church is now. Since the time of Samuel Peach the [01:43:11], he went to that school. But difficult to get into and the cost enormous. I would not be able to afford it today, you know. It's prohibitive.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So what did they, as far as careers, what did they pursue?

Ernest Kohlmann: Well, Patricia did medicine, became a psychiatrist. And unfortunately, really needs the service of a psychiatrist herself.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And her name again, your daughter's name?

Ernest Kohlmann: Patricia.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Patricia. And Tim?

Ernest Kohlmann: Tim went to St. Paul's, didn't do very well academically so we sent him to another school for a year. And he sailed through it. You know, maybe it was the wrong subjects he took. And got a place leading law in Glasgow. We didn't know that Glasgow, it was Scottish law, which is different from English law. But you have to do English law as well. But anyway, was three years, four years, did an Honor's degree. Did two parts. One he got a first-class pass and the other one was the second, upper second. So we were quite pleased with that. And then he wanted to go to a Hebrew university [01:44:47]. Went off to Israel. And we used to phone of course regularly. And then one day he phoned and he said, "I've decided to stay here." We had no further restriction over him. So I said, "Would you like to come home and we'll talk about it." And we had seen enough about war[?]. Anyway. So Eve said, "You know that you have to go into the army if you become a citizen in Israel." He said, "I know." He said, "[01:45:34] medical." [Chuckles] Off he went to Lebanon in the infantry. Didn't learn a word of Hebrew. And he learned it. The army teaches people every thing; any army will do that. And finished his ... was a good soldier. In charge of the machine gun in his platoon. Never slept in the bed for 18 months. And when he finished his training, they said, "You

have a choice. You can either become a tankist[?]," that's a tank man, "Or you can become a paratrooper." He said a nice red beret and nice boots. And he thought perhaps jumping out of an airplane wasn't such a good idea. He became a tankist. And then during that time, he met a girl from Philadelphia. I wouldn't say it was a marriage made in heaven, but they were married. And she, as we knew she would, she got him back here. An American middle-class family, not actually an academic [01:47:17].

Elliot Lefkovitz: So you had a sister and a son living in the United States?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Did you and your wife think of coming here?

Ernest Kohlmann: We did. Actually there was one other thing, which I missed out. I'll quickly tell that and then carry on. When my children were doing their matriculation equivalent, I sat on my bottom watching television. I saw a local newspaper. It said, "Evening classes," that you can do whatever, become, you know, and do A levels and O levels. Perhaps not a bad idea. So I left it. And the next year, it was the same advertisement. Somehow or another, Almighty God, if there is such a person, said to me, "Kohlmann, if you don't get off your backside and enroll, you will never do it ever." So does Kohlmann do it. He gets off his backside and he enrolls for evening classes for A levels and O levels. It took me altogether seven years evening classes to pass...

Elliot Lefkovitz: And the degree?

Ernest Kohlmann: What?

Elliot Lefkovitz: The degree?

Ernest Kohlmann: My wife said, "Now you could go to university. The government will pay you a grant." I said, "Have you thought about the economics of it?" I said, "I support two children at expensive schools. And I support you in a style to which you've become accustomed." I said, "You think a government grant will cover that?" So I never became an academic. I never went to university because it was impossible economically. I didn't by that time feel the need of it. And I've always read quite a bit. And by now, in subjects that I'm interested I can hold my own.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Did you ever go back to Germany? Did you ever revisit or visit Cologne?

Ernest Kohlmann: We went, we used to go on holiday sometimes touring to Austria, even down to Yugoslavia and not the other way to Denmark and so on. And then in 1988, 50 years after the end of the war, the German towns had the

idea of inviting survivors to shake hands. Each one was allowed one companion, wife, mistress, whatever. And I said to Eve, "We'll go." You know, she wasn't keen on it. I said, "They're paying everything. Free holiday." So we went. We were the only ones who went by car, you know, on the ferry and it was quite enjoyable. People were very nice and friendly. And after the week or so was over, they took us around here and there. We spoke to one -- Eve spoke to one class. I spoke to another. And [recorder turned off and then back on] ... and as I said, the children then left home obviously, you know, at university. Well, they used to come back and then go and then come. And then eventually, they came and they went and they didn't come back.

Elliot Lefkovitz: But in Cologne, you and your wife both spoke in schools?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And what reception did you get? What were the German young people...?

Ernest Kohlmann: At that time --

Elliot Lefkovitz: This was in the late '80s?

Ernest Kohlmann: Difficult to say. We're talking mainly to students and so not to grown up audiences. That came much later when I asked to do so.

Elliot Lefkovitz: In England?

Ernest Kohlmann: No, in Germany.

Elliot Lefkovitz: In Germany?

Ernest Kohlmann: I'll be quick with this. I spoke [01:52:57], an hour and a half in German without a note.

Elliot Lefkovitz: In gimnasium?

Ernest Kohlmann: In big halls, in the civic center.

Elliot Lefkovitz: So to adult audience, to...?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes, to adults, to students and to schoolchildren.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And what message, is there a message that you try to convey?

Ernest Kohlmann: No. No message. I was simply painting a picture of what had happened.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And the message comes out of that?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. If you have, if you speak about personal experience that's quite a different [01:53:47] from getting a book and reading it. You understand? You have to project yourself, which is what I've done. I've become, in some sections in Germany, a big fish in a small pond, if you know what I mean. I never compromise when I speak. You understand? Once or twice I've been very emotional about it. I've tried to control that. This year now, I've done research on the disgusting, disgraceful behavior of the German government and the Kaiser and the High Command in regard to Jews and the German Army in the First World War. A neglected subject. Now it's fashionable. People, you know, talk about it. And when I spoke about it first that people were shocked, but they realized more. I've been invited to go again for November the 21st to the 25th. They booked a hotel for me.

Elliot Lefkovitz: In Cologne?

Ernest Kohlmann: No, Weisel.

Elliot Lefkovitz: In Weisel?

Ernest Kohlmann: And there's going to be an academic from the University of Theiseburg[?], who specialized in the Holocaust matters.

Elliot Lefkovitz: And you will relate your experiences?

Ernest Kohlmann: I don't know what I'm, what my job is going to be. You understand? One thing I'm certain of I know as much about the subject as the academic. This time I'll pay my fare because [01:55:57] poverty and so on. Next time. But I have been further invited by the German Historical Museum in Berlin to speak about the attitude of Britain towards Germany after the Second World War. They chose three people. One was Lord [01:56:25] Burton, you know, the cousin. One was a lady who was instrumental of fashioning the kinder transport. And her name escapes me for the moment. And the third person unfortunately is me.

Elliot Lefkovitz: [Chuckles]

Ernest Kohlmann: I don't know why, but they did. That'll probably be my swan song. And that's about the end of the story.

Elliot Lefkovitz: Have you spoken also in England? Have you ever...?

Ernest Kohlmann: No.

Elliot Lefkowitz: No? It's been -- now it's Germany? It's been Germany?

Ernest Kohlmann: I feel there are people who can do that here. There are not many people who can speak in fluent German of the experience they had in the country that you are speaking on.

Elliot Lefkowitz: And the story begins in Cologne. And do you carry it through the kinder - - you carry it through your stay in England? Generally speaking, do you stop there in 1945?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. You might say after 1935, '45, I resumed a normal life. If you can call it normal. [Laughs]

Elliot Lefkowitz: [Chuckles]

Ernest Kohlmann: That's it.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Is there anything that you can think of that we have not spoken about that you feel is important, as far as Holocaust and kinder transport?

Ernest Kohlmann: Yeah, I think the only thing we haven't spoken about is the memory of my parents, of the Hitler time, of a certain salient factors.

Elliot Lefkowitz: I know what you mean.

Ernest Kohlmann: Which come back now. It's a bit like indigestion. You understand? It comes back. And it comes back in a nasty, vivid way. That's all. But I suppress that. And if I'm being honest, I do get depressed occasionally. I'm not very pleased about it. I take myself in hand. But it's a handicap I shall live with to the end of my days. That's it.

Elliot Lefkowitz: As so many survivors do.

Ernest Kohlmann: Yes. Yes. It's like that saying some people achieve greatness, others have it thrust upon them. In my case, it's the misfortune that was, that I experienced and was thrust upon me. Cannot escape it. I know that now. And I live with it. That's it.

Elliot Lefkowitz: Thank you. Thank you so much. That's really very, very good.

[End of interview]