

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Herbert Prauer
December 18, 1986
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PREFACE

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HERBERT PRAUER

December 18, 1986

Q: This is Herbert Prauer, born 1908 in Landensud (ph) in Schliessen (ph). Our focus is Kristallnacht. Can you please give background of your family, the number of people in your family, occupation, how long you had been in the town, that sort of thing.

01:01:37

A: Well, as you said I come from Landensud-Silesia, which is in the eastern part of Germany, and of course during the settlement of the World War II, this part of Germany was separated from the old Germany and was given to Poland in addition to other parts of Germany. We were very close to the Czech border, and this is a very important point because when it came time when we wanted to--HAD to--sell our factory, nobody wanted to buy it because everyone was afraid that in as much as Germany-- Mr. Hitler--concluded or wanted to conclude a pact and occupy a part of Czechoslovakia, nobody was interested in taking over a plant that was maybe fifty (fifteen?) miles away from the Czechoslovakian border. My family has been in this hometown of Landensud since about 1848. My great grandfather and great grandmother had a store in the town and then they had three sons and one of them did not go into the business but opened up a shoe factory after he came back from the French-German war of 1870-1871. In 1876 he started a shoe factory together with another gentleman by the name of Rosenstein (ph). The company was for the next sixty years named Rosenstein and Preerower (ph). I guess I have been introduced as Prauer. This was a name I changed to after I came to the States and everyone seemed to have trouble pronouncing and spelling my name, so I shortened it a bit without the intention of trying to hide anything, whether it was that I came from Germany, or that my name could be of Jewish origin. Preerow (ph) is a town in Moravia, I think it was the capital, so it stands to reason that our original family name has something to do with Preerow. I traced it back until about 1600. There was a religious man there who wrote several treatises, but whether he was a relation of ours I could not say, in between there was a big gap.

01:05:22

Q: This town of Landersud was how large?

A: It was an industrial town, and it had about 15,000 population.

Q: And the Jewish community?

A: I have a book, it is called...in which there is an article from our cantor, our preacher, who dug into the background and discovered that Jews must have lived in that town at the time it was founded as a town which goes back to about 1360. The Duke of Bolko was the founder of the town and had territories that belonged to him and so he had other districts too. And there were people laws passed, in those days and this cantor concluded that there must have been Jews living there, but then everything went blank, there were no historical documents available at all, not only because we were Jews but in general. But then after the 30 Year War, it seems that Jews have come back, they got special privileges, as it was called in those days.

1:07:30

Q: As you were growing up, do you recall the numbers?

A: This cantor put in this book, and it shows that documents were available starting in about 1800. It started out with about 25 families, then it grew up to about 200 Jewish population. That was towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was never a big congregation. In 1858 they were able to erect a synagogue of which I have a picture, but before they also had a small place where they could pray. In 1860 they built a parsonage for meeting room and prayer rooms during the wintertime because even a synagogue in those days had no heating facilities. In the winter either we froze or we went in the parsonage, which was right next to the synagogue. I brought a picture of that along to show you what has been destroyed, but my picture is still a full picture, in good order. Tops, as far as population is concerned, reached about 225 people. We never were many young people in the congregation, we didn't have school, we had to get private lessons from the preacher, but there were only 2 or 3 in my age group.

1:10:00

Q: So you went to public school growing up?

A: Oh yes, sure, there was no Hebrew school of any kind.

Q: Did you experience any anti-Semitism at all in public school?

A: Well, I started out in elementary school in 1915. First I had private lessons. Then in 1915, the beginning of the first world war, things were not normal, and the regular elementary school was confiscated by the military and made into a hospital. We were transferred to a girls' school, and so I grew up among girls for three years, and then we came into the high school, which in Germany is different from here, it starts at 9 or 10 years old, and it goes until you are at least 18 or 19 years old. By the time I was in the high school, the war was in the process of being finished. I joined the high school in April 1918, and in November 1918 the war stopped. After that there was a lot of confusion in Germany, political and revolutionary upheavals. And there were sometimes remarks made against the Jews. Not by the children, but by the teachers who in those days were all right wing and still couldn't get over the defeat they had suffered.

1:12:21

Q: Did you have non-Jewish friends?

A: Yes, or I would have been practically alone. Maybe there were 10-15 young people between the ages of nine or ten. My family consisted of my father who was the son of the founder of the factory and my mother. The funny thing is that my mother was the sister of my uncle's wife, in other words two brothers married two sisters. My mother and her family lived in Prague which in those days was Bohemia. My grandfather on my mother's side was a lawyer in Prague. He was also President of B'Nai B'rith for the whole district of Bohemia, and he was an enthusiastic

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0057

3

mountaineer, although he was physically very small. It was amazing that he could travel into the mountains, and he had to do it on his two feet.

1:14:02

Q: Do you remember when the Nazis came to power in 1933?

A: Yes, sure. I just want to add that I had a younger sister and an older brother. But neither one was going to go into the factory, and I was dead set against doing anything but. Since I was a kid I stuck my nose in to the factory. On the other side, my uncle became partner in the shoe factory, and he had two sons, and one of them wanted to go into the factory.

1:14:47

Q: So when Hitler came to power you were in the shoe factory?

A: Yes, I graduated in 1927 and I went out of town to learn the trade, which was not so easy, because no other shoe manufacturer would want competition in his own factory because it was secret, in those days. Here in America it is more open. I got in the factory at the end of 1929.

Q: So you were working in the factory in 1933 when the Nazis came to power?

A: Yeah, unfortunately in between my father passed away suddenly. He was only 57 years old and he had a stroke about six months after the Nazis came to power. I always contend that he could have lived longer--it went right away to his physical condition, he just couldn't take it.

1:16:08

Q: Was there a boycott in the beginning?

A: No, not for us, manufacturers, we were not molested in any way.

Q: Was there any thought of leaving Germany when the Nazis came to power?

1:16:27

A: There were certain members of our family who were affected very shortly after, maybe three months afterwards. My oldest cousin was a musician and he was working at the opera house in Berlin as the person below the conductor who was training the musicians and making the try outs. He got canned right away because the Germans who were in charge of advertising and cultural affairs. My brother, a graduate of Frankfurt University, worked for an economic magazine called the Freuksvilt (ph), and he was thrown out. He went with the bank of a friend, but then the bank was Aryanzed, as well. I hope I don't have to explain what that means.

1:18:22

Q: But even though there were losses of jobs, there wasn't the thought at that time of getting out of Germany?

A: No, not really, mostly because the Nazis had one man in the administration, Yalma (ph) Schacht (ph), the minister for economics. He told Hitler and his gang, "If I take this job, I don't want any interference, and I will do the right thing." He did not touch the Jews at all. There were boycotts of retail stores but not of factories, so we were pretty well unmolested.

1:19:32

Q: And Eli (ph) stood until 1936, I believe.

A: Well, then we had all sort of smaller administrators, it really started seriously when they came up with the Nuremberg Laws, I think that was 1935. That was when we saw things get rough and tough. As I mentioned before, although we started looking for someone to take over, we had very little luck. There were hundreds of factories that came on the market that wanted to be taken over and sold. On the other hand, there were not enough gentiles that had money and experience to take over factories successfully. We did have some interested parties, but it did not work out. One developed a serious illness which led to his death. Then we had to find a way to get out of it because beginning in 1938 (I married in 1936 a German Jewish girl) we undertook to come to America, just on a visitors' visa, to try and convince our relative here who was a well-to-do man, vice president of Bendicks Aviation Corporation, that he should give us visas, not only for myself and my wife but also for my brother and my mother.

1:22:00

Q: And your sister?

A: My sister was in China at the time. She got acquainted with a Chinese medical student in Europe, and she went with him. His father was a university professor. Then they came back again, he was to complete his studies. So she was there in 1938 when the worst happened, but she was all set to go back to China. She was a librarian in Berlin, but her job was also terminated.

1:22:52

Q: So in the spring of 1938 you and your wife came to this country just as visitors.

A: Just as visitors, for 2 weeks. I got the affidavits for myself, we got them promised to us, and he came through with that promise. But he refused to give anymore. He claimed he had other obligations to other family members, but his is one of those things, not everybody was willing to help.

Q: As 1938 went on with the Anschluss and the Evian conference and all, did you feel things get worse?

A: We felt it already in 1938. My cousin, who was also in the factory, came in the same time I came. He was still single, so he decided to call it quits. He went to Australia in 1936 where his brother, a musician, had gone too, so he had no great trouble finding a job there, and he got settled. He later brought his parents over, too, to Australia.

1:24:26

Q: Do you remember the buildup of the events leading to Kristallnacht?

A: Yeah, sure. The affidavits that were promised to us didn't come until July of that year, and that put us behind the eight ball. My uncle was of the same opinion and we made every effort, we advertised, we asked the real estate brokers to help us, but nothing gelled, until about October 1938. One time I was caught before the Gestapo who came special from the district town Leipzig to interview, and they made us understand that the time had come for us to get out. And that was just shortly before the night of November occurred. We got into contact with one factory which was a Czech factory which in the meantime had become part of greater Germany. They had a factory on the border between Czechoslovakia and Germany, and the Managers of that branch factory were already Nazis and the Nazi party insisted that our factory should be taken over by somebody who can handle it. These boys were very businesslike and we had no problems with them. They made a deal with us which didn't mean anything in terms of money because after you got money, it was taken over on so called legal grounds, a flight tax, that was twenty percent of what you had, and after Von Rath's death and Kristallnacht, they insisted that the Jews have to pay fifty (fifteen??) percent more, a special Jews' tax, and that money went down the drain.

1:27:56

Q: So that happened before Kristallnacht?

A: Yes, that was just before.

Q: So then what happened on the night and on the day following Kristallnacht?

A: Then we got the news that it happened, I guess it was a Monday. In the evening, I remember taking a walk with my wife and I said, "I think something is going to happen now." There is even a doubt in many people's mind that the man who shot Von Rath was not the same type of fellow like in 1933 when the Nazis set the parliament on fire and blamed it on a Dutch man. That day either he was drugged or hypnotized to do such an ugly act. Besides Mr. Von Rath wasn't even a Nazi party member, he was a German national, but had nothing to do with the Nazi party. To shoot him did not make any sense.

1:29:24 Q: So you felt that something was going to happen and it did happen?

A: In the night it happened, I got a call. It was already morning hours, about four or four thirty. It was the president of our congregation who called. I was also on the board as treasurer. He said I should come right away to the synagogue, the synagogue was on fire. One could see the sky was on fire. So I got dressed quickly, it took me only five minutes to run to the synagogue, and when I got close I could see that there was no hope, on the inside everything was up in flames. It is something I cannot forget. However, there was nothing I could do. The cantor was living next door, of course he was there, and he salvaged one of the Torah scrolls. There maybe have been two or three more that have been salvaged by Germans, but it was all confiscated of course. And

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0057

6

to think that when I came out of the concentration camp one day, the official who was in charge of the whole district called us in (he was not Nazi, nor was the mayor of our town, in fact, he was married to a Jewish woman, but it never came officially out) and said, "Here are your Torah scrolls, I just want you to see that they are here, but they will be sent to Breslow (ph) the capital of Silesia, they will be sent away." And so he had to sign, if I remember right, to say they were still there.

1:31:50

Q: Shortly after that you were taken to a concentration camp?

A: There was nothing anybody could do, there were maybe 200 people standing around, but they could not recognize me, although it was still dawn, so I ran back home. I woke up uncle and my mother and my wife. Shortly after, I got a call from my mother-in-law, she lived in Glogaw (ph). Her husband, a doctor, had already been arrested, so she called us to tell us that he had been arrested and that we should try to get out. The line was already bugged, and finally was cut off, so we didn't even get the full story. But I wouldn't have dared to go into the street and hide someplace or run away into the mountains because then they could have killed you. So we didn't take long, we were eating breakfast and discussing what could be done with my uncle, and one policeman came (in a small town of course they don't have many) and asked us if we would be good enough to go by ourselves to the court building which also was the jail. So my uncle and I went in the street, and people saw us walking, and they knew what was happening because not only was the synagogue burning, but also all of the store windows had been completely destroyed. Glass was lying in the street all over. In the afternoon of that tenth of November, my wife and other younger women were asked to clean up the mess. The Jewish women had to do that, which was a terrible degradation, but they were not molested, nor were we. We were brought to the jail and signed in there. I was in a single cell which was a terrible experience--being all alone. But later they gave me permission to join the others in a bigger room, just during the day time hours, but we were held there for three days. The people that were over sixty-five or seventy were let go. Most of our people were older, young people we didn't have at all anymore. They had emigrated or moved to larger towns.

1:35:52

Q: And then you were sent to the camp?

A: Yes. So all the ones that were in the middle ages, they put us on a bus and they took us first to a couple of smaller towns still on the way and then we came to the district town of Lipshnitz (ph). It was about late afternoon, and we were led in to the jail yard where we found many other Jews from other parts of the district so called lower Silesia (ph).

Q: I'd like to pick up about Krithon-Kristallnacht itself. When you were awakened in the early morning and you came to the synagogue and you saw it burning and you saw the people around, what did you think had happened? Did you think that it was government instigated?

1:10 A. We had that feeling right away, everybody, that this was government instigated. You didn't see any Nazis in uniform then, they were all in civilian clothes. Kristallnacht to many of us is a misnomer, because crystal, at least in German, means something luxurious, something beautiful. To call broken glass beautiful is to distort the actual facts of the whole story. If only glass had been broken it would not have been of any importance. But we all knew, felt, and learned that this moment in history marked the beginning of the end of the Jews in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Therefore we were apprehensive about calling it "Crystal night". There were many times in history when the Jews were persecuted, in practically every country at one time or another. But in nowhere ever were the Jews affected in such quantities than when the synagogues were destroyed in one night in all of Germany, part of Austria and Czechoslovakia. In one night everything was destroyed. With the destruction came the annihilation of all Jewish organizational life. Everybody was left to themselves, to try to save themselves by any means possible. They first tried emigration, but the tragedy was that the doors were locked. Even the U.S. couldn't-didn't do anything more than their regular immigration policies permitted them to do. There was a quota in the U.S. of 50,000 Germans per year. Once that quota was filled they closed until July 1st, which was the beginning of a new administrative year. If they would have said we'll take the quota from the following year and give out these quota numbers as fast as we can. It happened to us because we were called to the consulate on May 1, 1939 to be interviewed and the papers were examined. We were approved, but the consulate told us, "I cannot give you a visa now because we have no quota numbers." We were afraid that something would happen again, so we asked him if we could go someplace else. He said yes. I said we can get a visa for Palestine because my parents-in-law were already legally there and they got us a visitor's visa for two weeks. He promised us that we would get the visa at the same time in Jerusalem at the consulate as in Berlin at the Consulate General. We packed our few things and took off for Palestine. My brother had left to go to Shanghai with his wife at the beginning of May. It was easier to go to Shanghai, it was an open city, so to speak, international city, and they probably let about 10,000 Jews without any problems. My mother was still in Germany. I didn't want to leave her alone, but we were promised by a friend who had emigrated from Prague to London that she try to get my mother a visa. So we felt safe enough to take off too. My mother got a visa to London about two weeks before the start of World War II, which was September 1, 1939.

Q. Last time we ended by the men of the town and the surrounding towns had been rounded up and taken to Liegnitz (ph). What happened after that?

A. We were herded into the jails in the courtyard in Liepsitz (ph). Of course, we didn't know what was happening. After a few hours we were loaded into busses and taken to the railroad station. There was a long train waiting, we were loaded on. In each car was a policeman, who could observe. Nobody moved, we were very disciplined, frightened. They had no problem with us. One hardly dared to go to the washroom. The train went all through the night at a slow pace. We didn't know where we were going, nobody told us a thing. At about 4:00 AM, the train stopped. We heard Kommandos who opened the doors. Everybody rushed out instinctively, in fact I jumped out. They turned out to be the SS guards and were already waiting for us. Those who couldn't get out fast enough, older people, were just yanked out. We were lined up and had to run in the rain to a huge gate. As we got close enough we saw the sign on top of the gate that

said "Concentrations camp Sachsenhausen." So we knew where we had landed. They chased us into the yard and made us stand for at least 6 hrs. Without anything to eat or anything. It was cold. Then a commandant came to scare us to no end. I still remember they asked everybody- "What is your profession?" And one man was stupid enough to say "I am a manufacturer." So the commandant said to one of his subordinates, "Make a note of it- this man will be cremated."

The poor fellow dropped to the floor, lost consciousness. Somebody next to him wanted to help him, but he said: "leave him lying." You can imagine how you'd feel after such an incident. Finally we were sent to a barrack and undressed. They kept the suit and coat and hat, whatever it was. We kept our worn underwear. Then they gave us some old army uniforms, probably from WWI. We had to get shoes someplace else. We were told to go to a certain barrack and wait outside. The barracks had a capacity of about 250 inmates, so almost by nighttime we got a carload of hay, which we put on the floor and slept on. We had to lie there like sardines, one head this way, the other that way. And so we slept, and that went on until I was released again. We got some coffee in the morning and dry bread. Then each barrack leader, who were mostly criminals that had been kept there for years, they were asked to furnish the camp director with a certain amount of people to work on the outside. They asked who wanted to volunteer, and I volunteered because I was one of the younger people and I figured that the older people would not be able to stand the pressure. It was a horrible experience of course. You felt like the Jews felt probably in Egypt. We were marched out every morning. There was a huge sand plateau, sand dunes, that they wanted leveled. So they gave us trucks on rails to load with sand and push the trucks further out where it had to be leveled. We had to not only push it but run with it full of sand. There were always guards around, and if we didn't go fast enough for them they would make us understand how it should be done. We stayed until evening. We could take ourselves a piece of bread and some cold cuts, so to speak. We called it Sitterwurst (ph)- shaking sausage. It was November and windy, we had no head gear at all. Our hair was shorn off. The sand blew into our faces and into our jackets. And so our little sandwiches in our pockets were full of sand by the time we got to eat them. In the evening we got another hot meal, mostly it was whalefish (?) meat, which was not bad, but it was always the same. I was very lucky that I met my brother. He was arrested in Berlin. Sachsenhausen or Oranienburg is only about 35 miles northwest of Berlin. He was about 2 barracks away from me, by coincidence we bumped into each other. After two weeks every night there was a roll call, 10,000 Jews lined up in the courtyard. On loudspeakers they would call out the names of people who be released the following day. About two weeks after I got in I heard the name of my brother called. That gave me immediate hope that something was being done to free us, because we were just in the process of selling our factory, turning it over would be a better word to say. Turning it over to the managers of this shoe factory. They needed us to make the legal arrangements, sign contracts, and also help them explain everything, taking inventory. The following day my brother was released, and so I thought somebody was working on our case. Two days later my name was called. You can imagine what that means. We were all released together, it was always a large group of people. Those who could prove they already had emigration papers were released fairly promptly, maybe even passage. In those days they were still anxious to see the Jews leave.

Q. What did they say to you on your release?

A. I don't remember. There were always a group of us, it took some time. I have a concentration camp dismissal certificate. It was written on it: he has been in this concentration camp from such-and-such a date to such-and-such a date, and immediately upon his return to his home town he has to report to the local police.

Q. And you wanted to get out by that time?

A. I told you we had tried to make arrangements already a year before. But we couldn't leave without turning the factory over to somebody else.

Q. And then you finally managed, in May, to get a visa for Palestine.

A. Yeah, we had to leave our home, give it up, turn everything over. We travelled to Berlin where we still had a few relatives. We stayed in private pension that was just for Jews. We had our meals and could do whatever we pleased. But then rumor spread again in April that they would make a new roundup. Upon hearing that, my aunt, who was living in Berlin, knew a Bohemian tailor who agreed to harbor me. So I took my pajamas and toothbrush and went there by streetcar. They were wonderful. They had a very small apartment, they let me sleep on the floor in the kitchen. They gave me breakfast and lunch. I think I stayed two nights there until the all-clear came again from somewhere. These were the type of people about whom there is now being something done and written. I don't know whether you have seen it, a rabbi in California is working on Avenue of the Righteous. There is quite a bit of material stored in Israel. They should be treated just like one of our own martyrs, because some gave their lives. They didn't mind helping us at all.

Q. You went to Palestine for several weeks?

A. Yeah, we left a week later and arrived in Palestine about June 1. But when we went to the American Consulate in Jerusalem, they told us they were much further behind and only get very few German quota numbers here, so you might have to wait three or four months. We thought we would never see that day come, but of course it did come, but in the meantime war had broken out. We had made arrangements to take a boat from England to America, had bought the tickets. We bought tickets to go back to Italy, from Italy by rail to France and England- but all that went down the drain because now there's a war on. We can only have special boats going and you have to pay in war currency, like dollars. So the last money we had went to get the passage. We couldn't go through Switzerland and France to England. So we took a boat from Italy to America that was still running. But everything was special, so we had to pay again in dollars and that was just about all we had left. When we arrived in America we had \$180 in our pocket and that took care of us until we arrived in the U.S.

Q. Once in Chicago you eventually became a member of the congregation Ezra-Haplnieml (ph). You were the president for a while of that congregation. There is a plaque of the congregation with an inscription that you wanted to read.

A. Well, I didn't become president until 1963. Some of the Jewish refugees that came here, the earlier ones in 1935, 1936, got together, not all of them of course, there isn't even any record of how many German or Central European Jews came to Chicago. There weren't that many, a few thousand I would imagine. They formed immediately a sports club. Later it became a religious organization, and finally around 1946 they were registered as a 35s(?), a religious organization, with full non-profit privileges. The precept under which this organization was formed on the North side as well as on the South side. It was formed with the intention of memorializing this: our fate and what we had experienced. So there is a plaque in the synagogue, it says: "This temple has been dedicated in memory of our loved ones who sacrificed their lives for the sanctification of God's name, El Kiddush Hashema (ph)." We have made several movements because of the demographic changes in the Chicago population. We started out with a small synagogue on Ordeen (ph) and Clark Street, from there we moved up to Hollywood and Winthrop. Now we are at 2620 West Tewey (ph) in West Rogers Park. Since 1973 or so we merged with our sister congregation from the South side because they didn't see any future in the area where they were. So they came to us, and today we are still a very viable congregation by the name of Congregation Ezra Habonim (ph). In our constitution we have an article in particular: "The 9th of November 1938 shall be dedicated to the memory of the destruction of the synagogues in Europe and the brutal racial and religious persecution suffered by the Jews. Each 9th of November a memorial service shall be held in our synagogue and there shall be no other activities within our congregation or its affiliated organizations which are not in consonance with this Yartzeit date." "Of course speaking about Kristallnacht in 1987, almost 50 years after it happened, may appear to many to be digging up ancient history. Our attention has become focused on more recent events, ominous events like atomic bombs and nuclear explosions, which have eclipsed the memory of the years when the hurricane of the Hitler terror struck the world with fear. So we're deeply indebted to men like you Dr. Elliot Lefkowitz, who are still trying to capture facts and memories before they fade into darkness." "To describe the emotions which overcame us during the tragic moments of Kristallnacht, the moments, the hours, days and nights, of total helplessness, frustration, terror and fear, is an almost impossible task. I do remember that when seeing our house of worship go up in flames, the feeling overcame me that we would not have a chance to still get out of Germany, but that we were trapped, and to this day I still have nightmares. The real tragedy of our situation is that we had nowhere to go. Thousands upon thousands of Jews were left stranded in Germany, in Austria, in Czechoslovakia, and never had a chance to escape the outburst of barbarism, that soon after the outbreak of WWII engulfed all of Europe. I don't think that any books or speeches or films, or even television documentaries, no matter how true they are, we ever be able to express fully the traumatic experience that we went through, and can mirror the pain, the anguish of those who did survive, and of the millions who died a tragic death." I want to quote a speech by the president of the German Bundesrepublik, Richard von Weichsecher (ph), who spoke for about two hours at the parliament during the remembrance of the armistice day in 1985, which was 45 years after it happened. I don't think any of our own people could have said it any better than he did: "Today we mourn all the dead in the last war and the tyranny (?). In particular, we commemorate the 6 million Jews who were murdered in German concentration camps. Hardly any country has in its history always remained free from blame for war or violence. The genocide of the Jews, however, is unparalleled in human history. This is a historic fact, which can never be modified or made

USHMM Archives RG-50.031*0057

11

undone. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanities is prone to new risks of infection. The Jewish people remembers, and will always remember, the experience of million-fold death is part of the very being of every Jew in the world. Not only because people cannot forget such atrocities, but also because remembrance is part of the Jewish faith.