

Summary of Oral History Interview with Felix Brown May 1989

Felix Brown was born in Vienna, Austria. His father then was a young apprentice in a Vienna law office. His mother was a World War One refugee from a Yiddish-speaking region in Eastern Europe. His parents lived with his grandparents until he was three years old, when his brother was born. His grandfather was a retired civil engineer in the Austrian railway system. The family had lived in Austria for many generations.

His parents were a very cultural family. They occasionally attended temple services, and he was quite aware that they were Jewish. Every Friday, he and his grandfather went to the section of the city where the Yiddish-speaking people loved to buy Kosher meat. When he was in first grade in school, he had a very nice male teacher who later turned out to have been a secret Nazi. Every week, the Jewish children were released for a couple of hours for religious instruction in a temple. In second grade, after the Anschluss in March 1938, the Jewish children were expelled and had to go to a Jewish school, where the teachers mostly were Jewish University professors who had lost their jobs.

At that time, Jews did not have to wear a yellow star but somehow they were recognized and exposed to many indignities and insults. His father did not want to leave Austria because he felt, like many others, that things would get better again. He still remembers Kristallnacht in November 1938. After the Anschluss, one of the top Nazi leaders had given a talk in Vienna and promised that Vienna would soon be Judenrein (free of Jews). At that time, there was only talk of isolating the Jews and not so much of killing them, although some were killed. He tells the story of running into a non-Jewish boy who previously had been a good friend but had become a member of the Hitler Youth and told him: "I could kill you and nothing would happen to me." His reply was: "You are right."

After the Munich agreement, many Sudeten Germans came to live in Vienna. They were entitled to take over apartments of Jews including all the furniture, and his parents moved back to his grandparents, who still had their apartment. Soon his father lost his license to practice law, and the family lived from selling and borrowing.

Then, the British Government offered to take children under 16 to be placed in private homes. Felix and his brother were sent with a group of other children. He warmly remembers the Dutch people who gave food to the children when their train crossed into Holland. He and his brother were taken in by a minister in far Northern Scotland just before the war started. He was then nine years old. His stay was very pleasant, and he went to a small school for about 1 1/2 years, when he and his brother received affidavits from his mother's sister who lived in New York.

His parents managed to get out to Holland and came to the United States in December 1939. His grandfather had died, and his grandmother and a cousin were sent to Theresienstadt. Later they were killed in another concentration camp. One uncle was killed in Dachau but a few relatives managed to escape.

His family lived in the Bronx where he went to high school. His father could not work as a lawyer. For a while, he earned some money by cleaning toilets, but he studied and became an accountant. It was easier for him than for his parents, but he does not say anything about his own training.

The Austrian Government likes to call Austria the first victim of Hitler, but the Nazis were welcomed by the people. He talks about the 1955 treaty when the Allies left Austria and established a new Government. One clause of the treaty states that the Austrian Government assumes full responsibility for all that happened in Austria during the war. As a result, no restriction could be obtained from Germany, and the Austrian Government did very little. Eventually, his parents received a small pension.

His father changed his name from Braun to Brown. The name Felix was all right, but his brother's name was changed from Heinz to Harold. His father kept the children well-informed and made them read the main Nazi newspapers so that they would be aware of what had gone on in Vienna.