

## **Summary of Oral History Interview with Ernst Freudenheim October 1989**

Ernst Freudenheim was born in Berlin, Germany in 1904 and never encountered antisemitism personally until Hitler came to power. He lived in an “integrated” apartment house, where the personal physician of the German Emperor and a leading Zionist also lived. When he met Jewish refugees from Russian-occupied Poland, he realized the need for a Jewish homeland and became a Zionist. He attended a public high school, and one of his classmates was the driver of the car in which Minister Rathenau was assassinated in 1923.

In the 1920's, Germany, particularly Berlin, was the cultural center of Europe, but the country was not ready for democracy. This also was the period of inflation when money lost all its value. Inflation was quite demoralizing, and nobody respected money. He attended university first in Freiburg and then in Berlin. Before Hitler, the Jewish community was quite well-off, but once Hitler came to power, Jews gradually lost their sources of income and had to manage on their savings. Even in 1933, people did not believe what would happen, but Hindenburg was a weak president, and Chancellor Von Papen believed that he could control Hitler.

Ernst went into his parent's business that imported rubber. He got married in Berlin and shows a photograph of his daughter whom he sent to school in Paris in 1937, when she was eight years old. In 1942, he received word that she had been taken away by the Nazis, and she perished in Auschwitz.

He became a member of the Trustees of the Jewish Community of Berlin. One of his activities was to establish a school for sports teachers. He was also able to get young men out of jail on the condition that they would leave Germany within twenty-four hours. His business had been confiscated, and he had to live on his savings. In 1936, he visited Palestine for three months and reported on his visit to a large Jewish group closely monitored by the Nazis. He planned to immigrate to Palestine and set up a rubber factory. His non-Zionist relatives were supposed to provide financial support but withheld it when the Arab Riots began in 1936. Then, he felt he could do more for Zionism by going to the United States. He left Germany without any money but had resources hidden abroad. On the way to San Francisco, he stopped in Buffalo where he got a job in an upstairs jewelry store, but after three months he opened his own firm. At that time, Buffalo was the second-most important jewelry center in the country, and he also started to deal in precious stones. His wife, two sons, and a young Jewish nurse followed him to Buffalo some months later.

He saved many people, particularly children, by giving or arranging affidavits that made it possible to enter the United States. His family adopted three children, two brothers and their sister, and he shows a photograph of them with his own two sons. Except for a sister in San Francisco, he has no other close living relatives. His wife's family refused his offer to bring them out because they did not want to become a burden to him. They perished during the war. He always emphasized that those lucky enough to escape from Germany should help those who were still trapped there.