

Summary of an Interview with Rudolf Schmerl (HHP)

Born in August , 1930 outside Berlin. His father was an optomologist. There were five in the family.They moved to Berlin in 1935. At this time Hitler was firmly in power. His father was the son and grandson of Berliners. His mother was born in Mexico, daughter of a Russian jew born in Vilna in 1866. The place of birth of her mother and her grandfather played a significant part in the immigration that occurred for the family in the '30's.

Schmerl is really a first name . in the family tradition, there were once two brothers, Schmerl and Simon. Children of Schmerl took Schmerl as a last name and children of Simon took Simon. This happened when Gentiles came and said that the jews had to have a naming system similar to their own.

Mother's father had immigrated from Russia because he could not attend a university since he was a jew. He was a linguist, and spoke six languages. He wound up in Mexico working for an export-import company because of being a linguist. He married in Cleveland , Ohio at the home of relatives who were involved with the Republican machine in 1894. He died 1 1/2 years after Rudolf's mother was born. The story is that he fell off a train.

Rudolf's grandmother and two children returned to Berlin where the insurance money was squandered by her brothers. Rudolf's mother's brother was working to support the family by age 13. His mother was working as a typist and a secretary. At age 19 his mother got a job at the state department. She was very good at reading handwriting, and she was the only one who could read the Kaiser's handwriting.

His father met his mother when he was six and she was four. At that time, there were no segregated schools.(1902) Jews were actually moving up.Then WWI broke out and Rudolf's father was drafted. He was a peaceful man. His uncle volunteered, they were both 18.They were on the front for four years.

After this , his father went to medical school in Berlin.His uncle went in to the Judiciary which was very unusual for a jew. Father had to learn English.

1920'2 - A physician is his own employer. Only Jewish doctor and Jewish optomologist in small town. His father was very Jewish looking, certainly not Germanic. Everything was okay until Hitler became Chancellor of the Bund in January, 1933. For a while, nothing legally happened but people were different.

He was identified as a jew when he was a child of about 4 or 5. He got beaten up by Germanic children. He played with no Christian children, and there were no Jewish children. It was just as dangerous for non-jews to associate with jews. Well intentioned Gentiles were cautious. This poison spread very rapidly.

The older well-intentioned Germans became foolhardy in trying to defy the Nazis..

He cannot remember that much about the incident except running away from them and being terrified. He was called a Jewish "pig".

His mother and father were talking about knowing Jewish history. They were not religious at all but wanted Rudolf to know Jewish history so that he would not think things were directed against him personally. This did not mean much to him. His parents were frightened , so he was terrified . His parents had friends who helped them get back to Berlin where rudolf spent his last two years in Germany. They had friends, gentiles as well as Jewish, who helped them to get out of Germany.

Went to school in Berlin in 1935-36. He was 5 or 6. Sister went to some school in Berlin - a Jewish school. His sister and he do not talk about Germany. She nor he would never go back to Germany.

This is not because of racism. He has German friends but is uncomfortable with large groups of Germans. He has no way of knowing what Germans his age were doing or thinking and he does not want to know. His first wife was German, his children are half German. He lives in America. He met his wife in America.

In school, his sister was discriminated against. She lost all friends because of being Jewish.

Did parents talk about leaving Germany?

Doesn't know when they started to think about it. You don't just leave. You have to have a place to go to. It was a question of survival. The Prime Minister of Canada did not want to accept any

more refugees. The secretary of state in America was not interested in accepting jews. There were all kinds of complications.

The Germans, because they were jews, defined them as stateless. other countries defined them as Germans or nationals from their country of birth. If people had the foresight to pick the western hemisphere as their place of birth their would be little problems. A man could also bring his wife and children. An uncle of Rudolf who was a naturalized German, enlisted in the army , with a German passport, entered the United States with his wife and children as a mexican, although he had left Mexico at the age of three. If his mother had abandoned her mother, husband , and children , she could have come in the same way.

What mattered to Germans was race.

Because of an error in code names for his mother's place of birth, rudolf and his family were detained on Ellis Island for one week while papers were sent back to Prague for correction.

went back to Berlin in 1935. Remembers mother coming to school to take him out because there was a big nazi parade and it would be dangerous for children to come home alone. He remembers signs saying, "No Jews Wanted", etc. People looked at them with hostility.

Why father left Berlin? His father was a doctor and he was no longer allowed to practice on Germans.He could treat jews but there were not really any jews treat. There was no intercourse with Germans.There was no difference in their lies about jews as with blacks in this country.

They survived a while longer in Berlin because his father was a researcher who was well published in German and he was a veteran of World War I. The Germans got to Jewish veterans last, partly out of respect to the President of the Weimar republic, who was a great World War I general.

His father came to america in 1938, and was offered a job at John Hopkins University provided that he took it immediately. He did not take the job because of his family back in Germany. In 1934, his brother had gone to Palestine. Later in 1938, Rudolf, his mother, her mother, and his sister illegally boarded a train. If papers had been checked they would not have gotten out.They got to a small town in Czechoslovakia, where they were the only Jewish family. He

was the only jew in school and he was beaten every day and smeared with horse shit. He tried to defend himself, but it was the wrong thing to do. The teachers just looked the other way . After two weeks , his mother took him out of school.

August 31, 1938 - the night before troops marched after Hitler-Chamberlain conference . Mother got word that the troops would be coming in. They and the other Jewish family(Ginsberg) used a wheel barrow to haul their suitcases to the train station. They had enough money to go to Prague. Had trouble with getting visas.

He overheard his parents talking about leaving Berlin. His father was not a Zionist at that time. He remembers his father saying, "The last thing this world needs is another state and another army". He was proud of Israel later, but not the army. England did not attract him. Had relatives in the U.S. Mother's cousin, who had converted to Christianity and married a Lutheran Minister, lived in Princeton. His father got a job at Union hospital in New York.

His father had left Berlin a year before they did. Some Germans were helpful - not everyone was a Nazi. Those people took great risks to help them. Germans went to concentration camps also. Some older people didn't have the energy to keep going. They stayed and were killed. He remembers getting on the train and being beaten. They were always with their suitcases an many things were left behind. It was important to take money and jewelry, remembers fear and anger.

In Prague there were no Germans. Czechs were better to be around. Mother must have been in touch with father. Even after they arrived in U.S. he saw his father about once a month. Economic reasons.

Reaction to hatred of jews - parents tried to give them a background and make them proud - teach them that not all Germans were bad. Up the street lived a man named Albert Einstein. His grandmother told them that he was admired and respected all over the world except in Germany and that he was Jewish. That was her way of saying not to be ashamed of what you are.

Got measles on the ship to america and a severe storm delayed the trip. Then, they spent a week on Ellis Island. That was his first and only time behind barbed wire. They were put with other jews. That was not to his liking. Their clothes were different and he could not understand them. What he liked best - American milk. No

one could read or write english so their was a difficulty in choosing the right bathroom. He remembers Ellis island well. It was not too pleasant.

After this, his family was together and they lived in Harlem. They got beaten up for other reasons. Was an enemy in U.S. until they became citizens - when America declared war on Hitler. All people from Germany living in U.S. were automatically enemy aliens and had to register. Grandmother never became an American citizen and had to register forever. His father was a citizen earlier because he had arrived first. They left New York in 1941 and went to Louisiana, his father worked in New Orleans. He learned that racism there was just like in Germany. He feels that racism is a serious mental illness (deadly). His father finally got a real job as a researcher, and they moved to Toledo, where Rudolf finished both High School and College.

Most of his friends in college, including his best friend to this day, were black. In Toledo, they had 2 YMCA's, one for blacks and one for whites. Blacks were not welcome in the white Y and were not comfortable. He went with blacks. When he left for college, his opinions were firm and he hardly changed any of them.

Relatives in Germany - At least a dozen killed in concentration camps, mostly from mother's side of the family. His other grandmother was on a ship that was not accepted by the U.S. or Cuba. She went back and died.

Rudolf says that there are lessons in this , it should be forgotten by all countries not just jews. Jews in particular should be more aware and sensitive - no more racism. We are all human.