

This is a recording for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. An interview with Mr. Fritz Schonbach by Margaret Garrett on July 23, 1996, in Arlington, Virginia. tape number three, side A. Mr. Schonbach, you were talking about how you felt about being in the labor unit.

Well, I think I was not alone in feeling somewhat reconciled with the fact that we were not allowed to join a fighting unit. Because we knew that at that particular point where we worked, we were quite essential. And I think what I was talking about was the break of gauge which was a place within the Commonwealth of Australia at the border of two states, where the railroad gauge changed from small to large or vice versa and where goods had to be trans-shipped from one railroad truck to another in order to help the troops up north, well, in New Guinea or wherever it was, later on, the American troops, who had a lot of supplies in our area.

So by transshipping-- by doing this manual work and rather heavy work, incidentally, and some of it done in a very hot climate. And only the youngest and strongest could do that. By doing that, we felt that we were helping the Allied cause sufficiently to make us a valuable part of the war effort. And I thought that was quite-- I think that applied to many of us in that particular unit.

You asked me about some of the people that I described earlier on our voyage to Australia and the fact that I was together in a group with some German political refugees. As I said, they were a good group to be with, because to them, to be deprived of freedom was not a new experience. They had been in German jails, some of them. And they felt that this was just one more thing that happened to them.

And what I also feel is that somehow in some of the descriptions of our subsequent life in internment, they weren't really given enough credit. The mere fact that the entire population of those internment camps was not 100% Jewish. I don't know what the percentage was, but it might have been 80%, 85%, or 90%. But there was a strong residue of people who were just German and politically, feeling sufficiently strongly about the Nazis to have left their own country and gone into become immigrants.

First, actually, most of them went to Czechoslovakia. And of course, when the Germans took over Czechoslovakia, they got a chance to go to Britain and ended up in-- a lot of them ended up in London. But I think it needs to be emphasized that they were genuine political refugees, who were genuine anti-Nazis and who ended up in the internment camp.

Their position became gradually more, let's say, tenuous because some of the Communists didn't quite know how to deal with the situation. Of course, we were allies of the Soviets at the time, especially after the Germans started invading the Soviet Union. But there was some-- there was a little bit of, let's say, a little bit of-- they kept to themselves. And later on, of course, their situation. A lot of them ended up in East Germany, and some went back to Austria. But I think it needs to be said.

There also, incidentally, were some Catholic clerics in our group. That was another thing. We had people who were Catholics and who simply were anti-Nazi. That was another part of the internal populace. So I think the whole population was more varied than is given credit by some of the people who have later written about it from a purely Jewish point of view. Of course, admittedly, the great majority of the camp population was Jewish.

Can we move on to the end of the war and you're leaving the army group?

Yes, well, we were, I said, employed in various capacities at the break of gauge. The Americans particularly, but also the Australian Army, had large deposits of what you call material in Melbourne, where we were stationed. And a lot of that had to be stacked, loaded, unloaded. There was a lot of movement of material going on. And whatever had to be done was done by those auxiliary troops, which we were part of.

So when the end of the war came, it was rather interesting. Our captain, Captain [? Broadner, ?] who was this Maori, was replaced eventually by an Australian major, who had been a taxi driver in civilian life and who led a rather pleasant life as major in charge of this group of people. No danger of being transferred to any active duty.

And when the war ended, there was really no end to the movement of goods and supplies. And we were simply considered essential, where our commander made it quite-- made a point of considering us essential to stay on. And we stayed on. We were kept on as troops for quite a long time before we were allowed to become civilians. And I believe that I was in the army for a year past the end of the war.

And that was another very depressing time. I mean, we felt enough is enough. I spent, what, almost two years in internment and four years in the army in a not very stimulating capacity. In all my time in the army, I was never promoted. I was always a private, which is almost a record. But you know, that's the way it was.

Were others in your unit promoted?

Yes, yes. Our captain, our first captain made a point of promoting people who were unable to do physical work. He said why waste? He gave them-- he made them into non-commissioned officers. Later on, he promoted some others who were very good workers, but some people were promoted. There was a strict limit as to what you could be promoted to. Nobody ever attained officer status. The highest we ever got was non-commissioned officer-- sergeant, corporal, and that was all.

As I said, the non-commissioned officers consisted of people who were older and not able to do the work and some young ones who are very good workers. But people, yes, they were promoted. I was not promoted. I don't know. I probably was too much of a rebellious spirit or whatever. A couple of times I was court martialled for going AWOL, Absent Without Leave, and once for insulting a non-commissioned officer. As I said, I was a rebellious spirit. I was not really cut out to be commanding troops or anything like that.

Finally, in, well, when did the war end? 1946, I think, I was discharged from the army. And I was allowed to receive the benefits of the equivalent of the GI Bill of Rights here, which was called Commonwealth Reconstruction and Training Scheme, which simply meant that people were to be rehabilitated, to be-- how can I say-- prepared to take their part in civilian life. And if you could prove that you had certain aspirations or certain previous, I'd say, talents, you were allowed to study. And I was able, after some struggle and some help from friends in Australia, I was able to enroll in art school.

Now how did you make friends in Australia?

Well, let's see, well, one of the-- I don't know. Actually, the person most-- well, let's see, with the artists, I was friendly with artists in my group, in my unit. And on one occasion, I left Sydney on a trip, on leave, and I went to Sydney. And in Sydney, I made the acquaintance of a couple of Australian painters, who were interested in us, who saw these young artists, who were in the army and who would come out eventually and become artists.

So I made the acquaintance of those. And well, then, I had a girlfriend in Melbourne, and her father was in Sydney. There were a number of things that happened that sort of made another friend of mine who was a sergeant in an Australian unit and who was a musician, I made friends with. I can't remember the individuals. But eventually, of course, all of us got integrated somehow into Australian society while we were still in the army.

So when I came to Sydney, I, after a while, I decided I wanted to study. And I had some-- I made the acquaintance of a very prominent Australian painter at the time, who apparently helped me with that. And after six months or so, I enrolled in a Sydney technical college, together with a friend of mine, who was a painter. He wasn't a cartoonist. He was a real painter, bonafide painter.

And the two of us joined this art school, together with another couple of veterans, Australian veterans, young men, who also had obtained permission to join, to enroll in school at government expense. So, as I said, it was the equivalent of the GI Bill.

And then we studied for three years in Sydney. I transferred to Sydney. I lived in Sydney at the time. I never wanted to see Melbourne for quite a while, because I had seen nothing that interested me very much in Melbourne, and I loved Sydney. Sydney was just a beautiful place. It reminded me of the Mediterranean and of Europe, somehow. So I felt at

home in Sydney, and I lived there. And I met my wife in my second year in school or third year, I think.

She is Australian?

She's Sydian, yes. Yes, from Sydney. And shortly after, I finished school. I got my diploma. I left for Europe with her.

And you went to Europe to live?

No, no, no. My parents had managed to go from Italy to Argentina, and they were getting very impatient. And even I wanted to see them again after all that time. So they were very unhappy when I enrolled in this three-year course. I mean, that was a terrible disappointment to them. But I said I owed it to my career. And it was part of my struggle for emancipation, and I never regret it, of course.

So I had to put them off for another three years, and by that time, I really felt they had deserved it. The reason we went to Europe was simply because I had learned so much about Italian painting, which was a major part of my studies, and I wanted to see those paintings in the flesh. So we decided we'd hitchhike through Europe. No sweat. No problem.

Well, as it turned out, we were hungry most of the time. We had practically no money and I don't want to go into the details but we did hitchhike. We did. We had to because we couldn't afford any transportation. And we did see a lot of the Italian paintings. But that's another story. In any case, we finally ended up in London, where I had a cousin who put us up for a while. And my wife took a job. I tried to work for local magazines and papers as a cartoonist I was completely unsuccessful. Never paid a penny.

And eventually, my father said enough is enough, and he sent us tickets on a ship to come to Argentina. And in the beginning of-- what was it, gosh-- in the beginning of-- no at the end of 1950, we boarded a ship for Buenos Aires. Arrived in Buenos Aires in 1951 and lived in Buenos Aires until 1959.

And then you came to the States?

We had two children in Argentina. But I never made a decent living there. It was always touch and go with help from my parents. And the country was simply not livable, as far as I was concerned. It had several revolutions. And finally decided I'd try the States. I had an aunt in New York, who chewed me out. She said you idiot. You should have come here years ago. What are you doing in that impossible country?

So I stayed with her in Long Island and eventually ended up in Washington. Found a job and got my green card. My wife was still in Argentina with two children, and she joined me eventually. And the rest, that was, she came here in 1960. So that's 36 years ago.

Is there anything else that I should have asked you or anything else?

I don't know where the emphasis is. The emphasis is clearly on the war and the Holocaust. And well, my family. All the part of the family on my father's side, almost all the family perished in the Holocaust. Poland, anybody in Poland, just didn't survive. One brother of my father's went to Romania after the First World War. He survived with his wife and two daughters, and one of his daughters was here, what, three years ago. She's my age. And it was a wonderful thing to have her here.

And then her granddaughter also came here. And she'll probably end up in the States. She just finished her doctorate there. She's a physician. So that part of the family was saved. Romania was probably nowhere near as bad as Hungary and Poland and Russia. It was not taken over, well, Hungary wasn't either, but it was not taken over by the Germans. It had a heavily fascist government. But some-- a large number of the Jews saved themselves. They did kill a lot of Jews but some of them. And my uncle was one of them, and so that part. But my father had other relatives, of course, in Poland who never moved and they all died.

My mother's family, which was also quite large, her mother who lived with us died and some of her brothers and sisters,

the older ones. It was sort of divided. It was mixed. But her sister, one sister who was close to her, ended up in the United States. She was the one that got me to stay with her when I left Argentina. And another one ended up in Switzerland, and they were relatively-- they saved themselves. So it was a mixed thing.

I recently rediscovered or reestablished connections with two of my cousins, which is quite wonderful-- one cousin who lives in Florida and another one who lives in Canada. So the family is still somewhat together. As far as the name Schonbach is concerned, that's gone, because none of the people of that name survived. And our two sons are not likely to have any children.

It's only our daughter who has a child. She's Canadian and married a Canadian. She still goes under the name of Schonbach professionally, but her daughter is a Richards-- Canadian, Canadian born. So there it is. That's the family. That's as far as the family is concerned. I still have little remnants left over.

Is there anything else that you'd like to say.

Not really, no. If you have any questions, fine but, but I think that's about all.

OK, well, thank you very much for telling us your of story.

I hope It's not too jumbled.

No, I think it's not too jumbled. It was very important and interesting. Thank you.

Yeah, I'm glad to do it. And I don't know how-- how do you-- I mean, what criteria do you use for interviewing people?

We'll talk about that in a minute.

OK.

This concludes the interview with Mr. Fritz Schonbach for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on July 23, 1996.