

Hermann Kosak

Tape 1 Side A

June 18, 1997

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Abstract

Hermann Kosak was born in 1924 in Vienna, Austria. His first four years he lived with his grandparents and then moved in with his stepfather, mother and sister. He attended kindergarten for a year until it closed. Some children picked on him because he was Jewish. His family received monthly payments as his father was often unemployed and his mother did not work. Nevertheless, he was not hungry and the family enjoyed picnics with relatives on the weekends. Life changed after 1934 when the Nazis came and the stepfather and sister went to Holland a few months before Kristallnacht. Hermann and his mother tried to follow but were turned back at the border. The day after Kristallnacht, the Nazis forced Herman to move charred logs all day without food or water. Herman, alone at age 13, tried several times to cross into Holland. He is followed by the Gestapo and put into handcuffs by the Dutch. Finally his mother meets him and together they go over the Siegfried Line into a river though neither can swim.

In part two Hermann Kosak describes crossing illegally into Belgium with his mother to rejoin his stepfather and his sister. Life in Belgium was more pleasant than life in Austria. While awaiting a visa for the US, Hermann enters trade school. When Brussels was occupied by the Germans, he and his sister hid out until liberation. He worked on a farm, helped the underground, held various jobs and was helped by others. Hermann's mother was placed on a transport in January 1944 and never returned. Hermann wrote a detailed diary during the War so that information is not repeated in this interview. After the war, Hermann worked as a commercial artist and continued to try to get a visa to the US and finally succeeded in 1947. He got a job as an art school at a high school for eight months until he was drafted and sent to Tokyo as an MP. After discharge he designed ties until called back into service for the Korean War. Afterwards he worked for Boeing Aircraft as a commercial artist where he met his future wife. Hermann believes that after Hitler, people should no longer murder others for their different race or religion.

Summary

00:00 Hermann Kosak was born in 1924 in Vienna, Austria. He lived with his grandparents for four years. Then he lived with his parents. They would walk to synagogue. He went to a kindergarten where the children called him, "Jew." He played in the courtyard of his apartment house.

- 05:00 The family moved to a smaller apartment with a bedroom, living room and kitchen. Hermann was a happy child. He missed his grandfather when he moved home but his grandparents came to visit. His grandfather was orthodox. At age five or six, his grandfather taught him to read Hebrew. His mother and his stepfather were religious as they kept kosher. He attended another kindergarten for a year until it closed. The students differed in their behavior towards him. Some did not care that he was Jewish. Some were nice. Many students tried to hurt him. Some bigger children picked on the smaller children and on Hermann because he was Jewish. Later, there were more bad experiences. There were other Jewish children in his school. He attended regular school from 8 to 1 and Hebrew School from 2 to 3 or 4 PM.
- 10:00 One afternoon a week he had gymnastics, leaving little time for play. He had a few Jewish friends that he played with. The Jewish butcher across the street had children. They played in the courtyard and in parks. His sister, Marta, was born in 1928 (?). Hermann usually played with the boy next door. They both liked to collect things. They used pins and cardboard for their collections. On weekends and birthdays the family visited friends and relatives. There was no telephone, radio or TV. They went to the movies about twice a year. They often visited the stepfather's family on the weekends. His stepfather's brother, Simon, had four children, two were boys. One was Hermann's age and one a year or two younger. The family went on picnics on summer weekends with that family.
- 15:00 They took a streetcar to the woods. His stepfather's occupation was shoe designer but he could not keep a job. Hermann's mother did not work. They received monthly payments. Life was hard but he did not realize it as he never went hungry. He had chocolate and rolls for breakfast. They had a big dinner for lunch and a sandwich for supper. In the 30s life became more difficult because of the Nazi movement and the political situation. Hermann became more aware of the situation in 1934 because of the socialist uprising but he did not know the reason for it.
- 20:00 For two or three days, Hermann heard machine gun shooting. The socialists were in control of the Armed Forces. A few months later, the Nazi movement became stronger. He heard Hitler news briefs. Jews were harassed and he was physically attacked. Garbage and spit were thrown at him. Jews were the only ones who suffered. There were no Blacks but there were some foreigners. The Austrian Empire included Czechoslovakia. Hermann walked to school by himself. He had to constantly watch to see which children were coming from behind. The teachers were strict in discipline. There was a ten minute recess. He had one good friend, Wilman Klement (?) until Junior High. Wilman was bigger, taller and stronger and was a fist fighter whereby he proved that he was serious and capable. Unfortunately, he lived in the opposite direction to school than Hermann.

- 25:00 Hermann was in a Jewish Boy Scout group of eight boys. They wore uniforms and went on long hikes. It was social and fun as he met other boys. He studied for his Bar Mitzvah which took place in 1937. By then the children became more brazen in the streets. Some teachers were nice and some were not. He had different teachers for each subject.
- 30:00 They found out the Nazis made special distinctions. No teacher ever hit him. The idea of Austria being part of Germany was raised and the Hitler Jungfrau youth movement started. **Tape 1, Side B.** After the Anschluss, there were more and more Nazis on the street. When police met, they greeted each other with the Hitler salute. Suddenly, the Germans arrived. They did not know how it happened as newspapers did not report it. The German troops entered with Nazi flags.
- 35:00 Vienna was in hysteria. Hermann was 13 and was stunned. He had just had his Bar Mitzvah. There was dancing in the streets. German soldiers were kissed, just like liberation. Hitler came to Vienna. The Jews were given three days to leave their stores. His family did not own a store but he could not go to school any longer as Jews were not permitted. Then the Nazis opened a school for the Jews. The Jews could not work for the government or teach at a university. Their friends and an uncle who had businesses were affected as they lost their businesses. They were kept on as workers as the Nazis did not know how to run the businesses.
- 40:00 Nina went to the US before World War I so a brother and her sisters joined her. The July before Kristallnacht, Hermann's stepfather and sister went to Holland where there was a married sister. Hermann and his mother were supposed to follow but the countries closed their borders. He and his mother arrived at the border of Holland and were not permitted in. They left Austria in the middle of the night. The Nazis had crashed into their home with rifles pointed at him and his mother. They asked for money and took their documents. His mother became angry and kicked them and went to Gestapo headquarters. Hermann and his mother took the train headed for Holland. They got out of Germany but could not cross to Holland. He told his mother to go to the Jewish community in Frankfurt.
- 45:00 They would not give them money so they returned to Vienna. His mother's oldest brother was getting ready to go to Paris by obtaining visas. They stayed with him. His mother tried to get money and find a friend to stay with when her brother left. Hermann went to the railway station to learn about tickets and saw Nazis near the Danube. He ran back to his uncle's studio on the top floor of a building and saw the synagogue was burning and fire engines came. It was Kristallnacht. The next morning he saw SA brown shirts who took him to a synagogue. There were 20 Jews there. The Nazis had him carry out charred lumber that was left when they were burning down the synagogue. He worked all day without food and water. He saw other men working there. Children had

been thrown from apartment houses and people were thrown into the Danube. He worked until night and went home.

- 50:00 His uncle Victor got the visa for France so was leaving. He had a friend on Burkstrasse to take in his mother. Hermann thought he could walk silently at night in his rubber shoes and had a map to try to cross the border. He would find his stepfather and sister who went to Brussels from Amsterdam. His goal would be to live in Belgium for three months without being arrested. He thought he would see if he could cross and then return for his mother. He rode the train for 12 hours to Aachen and had a slice of bread. He returned to the same hotel that he had stayed in before but there were no rooms available. He could not find a room anywhere. He saw an elderly receptionist and had tears in his eyes and was told that he was wasting his time. Hermann returned to the train station and got a ticket to the nearest station where he found a bench and slept there. Two Gestapos entered in grey rubber raincoats and grey hats. He showed them his ticket and they said to go inside the waiting room where he sat in a chair. One Gestapo left and one remained. Hermann tried to sleep. He thought he would go to the hotel but the Gestapo followed him. Then he walked downtown and walked around the block twice and the Gestapo followed him. Finally Hermann ran into a streetcar and returned to the hotel.
- 55:00 He asked the receptionist if she knew a Jewish family that he could contact and was told that a Jewish man had a factory and he was given coffee and bread. The Jewish man was still running the factory but no longer owned it. He had an apartment in front of the factory. His son was in a concentration camp. The factory man made Hermann swear that he would not cross over if followed. Hermann tried to cross over to Haarlem, Holland. Hermann had a little money and left it at the hotel. Hermann crossed the border where they took all his money except for seven marks. They checked him to see if he was smuggling diamonds. He had to promise not to return. Hermann left on the first train. He walked around the woodsy area and was in Haarlem. The Siegfried Line had barbed wire but he got through. Hermann got to Maastricht, Holland, a large city. Belgium, Holland and Germany intersect at one point and all three have guards. Hermann was arrested by the Dutch who took him off the train and told him that he cannot go back.
- 60:00 He gave them his father's and sister's address in Amsterdam and called them and said he is going back. He was placed in hand cuffs and chains on the back of a bicycle which he sat on sideways to return to the German border. People starred at him. He held on to the guard's belt. He did not speak to the guard. It was a dark night. They removed his chains and handcuffs and told him to walk down the dark road. Hermann was very upset. He had not eaten all day. He saw a flashlight and a German voice said, "Halt, who goes there?" He was taken to a heated shack and sat down. He showed his passport and was given food and told they would take him to Brussels by motorbike. He was so happy. It was midnight and the guard would borrow his friends' motorbike.

- 65:00 The guard rang his friend's doorbell who said, "How dare you help a Jew and risk your career; did you lose your mind?" The guard said he was sorry but could only take Hermann to the streetcar to Aachen. Once again Hermann tried but did not succeed. He always got caught on a train but not when walking. Therefore, he decided to walk around Maastricht on the West side to get to Brussels and walk to the next track to get the train. Suddenly, his mother arrived and he was so happy to see her. He had to take care of her and he was embarrassed. He asked people to help his mother as she was so tired. He left some money with his mother and knew how to get to the German border.
- 70:00 He got searched and walked around the woods on the left side to Belgium. It was daylight and he saw the Belgium border guards and dogs. He placed his mother behind a tree out-of-sight and walked to the fence. He saw steel mesh with metal points. They had one suitcase between them. Fifteen or twenty feet on the other side was a river and neither knew how to swim. There was traffic on the road. On the right was a strong railway. He went to the bridge and helped his mother climb. She was 42 years old. They climbed over the fence to the river. The water was high but they walked through it. It came up to his neck and he was taller than his mother and holding the suitcase up high.
- 72:00

Hermann Kosak

Tape 2 Side A

June 18, 1997

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Summary

- 00:00 Hermann Kosak crosses the river with his mother and they take off their wet coats which they ring out. They follow the railway to Brussels. They realize that it is Sunday morning as the people are dressed up for church. His mother insists they shake hands with a friendly couple. The couple told them they were going in the wrong direction and they thanked them and changed their direction. They still felt a bit moist but stopped shivering and ate a chocolate bar they had brought. They believed they should go north, not south and studied the map and go north. They came to a highway and then to the city of Maastricht and are relieved that they are going in the correct direction. They get off the highway and follow the railroad tracks and arrive in a village before nightfall. They brush themselves off and go and sit in the railroad station. There is a student sitting in the station and a clerk behind the counter who they give German money and request two tickets. The clerk talks in French on the phone and gives them the tickets and change. Perhaps he wanted to be assured that it was all right to take German money. Next they

get worried as in Austria if you start off on a local train, you must continue on the local. Here they started on the local and then switched to an express train.

- 05:00 The conductor came by and punched their tickets so it must have been all right. The train was packed. They arrived in Brussels to see a city full of light and everyone laughing and happy; it was a contrast to Austria. Christmas was coming and the city was decorated. Hermann noticed a large clock that indicated 8:08 on December 8, 1938. The city was beautiful. He knew he was walking in the wrong direction but was afraid of asking. He went to a taxi stand where the driver spoke French and drove them. They rented an apartment next to the railway. They waited for a visa to immigrate to the US where his mother's family lived and his stepfather had a sister in New York City. He and his sister enrolled in a public school but they did not speak French so just sat in class. He presumed that he would be leaving soon for the US so he did not study French but learned Flemish.
- 10:00 His parents wanted him to learn a trade but since he could not speak the language he could not attend college. He enrolled in a trade school sponsored by the Jewish community where German/Jewish refugee engineers taught the youngsters to be electricians, locksmiths and auto mechanics. The 45 to 50 students spoke German. The curriculum was the same for everyone the first year which included advanced math, filing, working with iron and machine work. They specialized in the second year in electrical or motor repair. On May 10th, Germany attacked Belgium. Life was wonderful outside of school as Belgium was a rich country compared to Austria and there was an abundance of food and goods. Every hausfrau had a fur coat. There was no stealing so you did not lock your front door. Three chocolates cost a penny so you could not buy just one. There was no anti-Semitism though the Belgians might have objected to so many immigrants. Religious life was private. The family kept the Sabbath. They lit Friday night candles and said the blessing. They did not work on Saturday so just read. On High Holidays they went to synagogue. They were not part of the Jewish community as only had a relationship with the immigrant community. They had immigrant friends from Vienna. They all wanted to get out and mostly go to North America though some wanted to go to South America.
- 15:00 Few succeeded in getting out and a few got to France and Spain. The borders were closed so it was hard to get out. Many Austrian Jews wanted to get out. The American Consul was brusque and visas were restricted to the quota of about 365 a year. The family was stateless as they lost their citizenship when they came to Austria on a stateless passport. They applied for identity cards when they arrived in Brussels. Both the resident and the landlord had to report the new address when you resided at a place for three days so everyone knew your location. They were Germans in Austria so when the Germans invaded Belgium on May 9, 1938, they were interned as enemy agents. That is when Hermann started his diary of a detailed account of the War. After Belgium was

invaded, Hermann stayed with his family and then he left. He enrolled in drawing instruction as his cousin was an artist and they found out that art school is free and they had nothing to do as school was closed. Hermann's cousin could not speak French and called him Harry as he did not like the name, "Hermann," as it is German.

20:00 Now, Hermann had to speak French and his professor corrected him to use the Belgium pronunciation. Neither Hermann nor his sister looked Jewish. He was 16 in 1940 and tall, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches but young-looking until he grew a beard. He was in the dangerous age as Germans arrested both Jews and non-Jews of military age. It was easier to hide as a girl as boys were circumcised. He was very alert and lived in a state of anxiety and fear so developed a sixth sense. He could walk down a street at night and know when an officer was there. Perhaps his earlier experiences and his genes helped him to be alert. He had to be self-reliant as he did not have an older brother or sister and his stepfather showed no interest in him. There was no bonding between them. Hermann had to look out for his sister. He was a little estranged from his mother.

25:00 Early in life Hermann had to make decisions for himself but he felt free as he did not have to answer to anyone. At home he had to tell his mother where he was going, ask permission to see his friends and had to be in bed by 8 PM. He read detective stories and had a great imagination and fantasy life. As a young child, Hermann had an invisible friend and talked to animals. He wrote in his diary that when circumstances got tighter in Brussels, he got a false identity card and left his family. One day his uncle, Aunt Rose and the baby were arrested by the Gestapo. It was July 1943 and Hermann and his sister hid in a false ceiling. Now it is celebrated as Belgium's Independence Day. The Germans were particularly vicious on other people's holidays when they went out in mass. Hermann and his sister were afraid that their Aunt Rose would report them if she was interrogated. Hermann and his sister lived a block away from her. His mother thought it was a good idea to leave so Hermann and his sister went to friends. Margaret at 12 was four years younger than him. She had sandy hair and blue eyes. Hermann had a serious problem as helping a Jew was suicidal.

30:00 Hermann has undying gratitude and admiration for all the people who helped the Jews. The cruelty of the Germans and uncivilized behavior was frightening. It was astonishing that those who smiled at the Germans lived a good life with increased rations and income and could travel to Europe. A high percentage of people were actively involved in helping those in distress. It was suicidal that Mr. Fuchs who had a daughter and a brother and his family had Hermann over for dinner. Hermann would meet people who helped him. One day he was walking down the street and a young woman came and tore off the yellow star. Hermann established himself in a room in Brussels and got jobs to support himself with a false identity. Then he tried to get out of the country. Hermann thought the rural area would be safer than Brussels.

- 35:00 He went to stay with his sister in the country. Hermann stayed three weeks with Charles Henry and then he went to work on a farm. He believes there is free choice in life and believes in divine interference. His life was saved as he went to his family. Hermann received an order to report to a concentration camp. His stepfather had given him a terrible upbringing but saved his life. His stepfather was strong, a wrestler and people were scared of him. He was able to get the relocation order changed which is very unusual. **Tape 2, Side 2** Hermann experiences coincidences. He worked three weeks carrying a suitcase for a Colonel who had lost a log. Every time they got on a train, Hermann left the suitcase at the opposite end of where he sat. He said he was Jewish but was permitted to work on a farm. So then the Colonel obtained another boy to carry his suitcase. The underground was blowing down bridges between Germany and Paris. There was an underground of those who were formerly in the Belgium Army. There was dynamite in the suitcase that he carried from Brussels via train to the mountains. One day the Colonel got killed because the boy carrying the suitcase was detained in Brussels and people did not know what happened so went ahead without him. The boy got on the train and when it crossed the bridge, it exploded and both the boy and the Colonel got killed.
- 40:00 It was lucky that Hermann was on the farm by that time. He found out that the Germans were raiding the village looking for men to work in the German factories and farms and picking up Jews. On Hermann's return to Brussels, he stopped at a Trappist Monastery for two weeks on a retreat. Through a Catholic girl friend, he had been exposed to instruction so knew Catholic prayers and holidays. Then he went to Brussels but did not know what had happened to the Colonel. As he was leaving the Monastery, Father Sipen gave him 50 Franks which allowed him to buy a ticket to return to Brussels. He could not find work on the farm as it was too dangerous for them to hire a teenager. He still had his room in Brussels as he had continued to pay rent and had friends there. In the Underground, one could not know more than two people. He knew the Colonel and two people by sight but not their names.
- 45:00 The average survival time in the Underground was six weeks but he did not know where else to go besides Brussels. He returned in August. It was three weeks before liberation that General Patton broke through. The Germans were defeated and evacuated Belgium. There were truckfuls of furniture and soldiers leaving and they were still looking for Jews and young people until the very last day. They left September 1st on garbage trucks. All vehicles including bicycles were gone. The Germans were shooting at people. The Allies arrived two days later. Some buildings were occupied. Hermann's diary ends when they are liberated in September 1944. After trying to secure visas for three years, Hermann and his sister succeeded in getting to the US. During those years, Hermann worked as a freelance commercial artist. He was almost a skeleton. The family in the US sent affidavits that had to be renewed yearly swearing they would pay for their trip.

Many immigrants, tiring of this wait, returned to Vienna. 43 of Hermann's 50 relatives were deported and did not return.

- 50:00 In January 1944 Hermann's mother was on a transport of 3,000 women from Brussels and only 29 returned. One survivor reported that Hermann's mother had done bricklaying in Auschwitz. The Russians started the death march of prisoners to Germany and they perished. No one wanted to hire Hermann as though he would soon be leaving. He got a job in an advertising agency as a friend made an exception for him. Hermann lived in a rooming house. Next door lived a crying lady with a 2 or 3-year-old. She was upset as the American consul had given the baby a passport but none to her and she would not send the baby alone. Also, she would probably get kicked off the waiting list. Hermann read in the newspaper that they were looking for collaborators and marketers who had disappeared. The next day Hermann got a visa. There was a rumor that if you went to the American Consul with money, you would get a visa. An appointment was required to meet with the American Consul. One could go at 8AM and wait until 5 PM and never get an appointment although you see the clerks drinking cokes and playing cards.
- 55:00 The American Consul was in Antwerp so you needed to go by train from Brussels. Hermann graduated from the Royal Academy in Brussels, had both girl friends and boyfriends but decided to leave as his only relative in the city was his sister. He arrived at the Embassy at noon when the Secretary was out for lunch and asked the guard when he could see the Consul. The guard replied that you need an appointment. Hermann replied that if he was not permitted an appointment, he would announce it to all the people passing by the Embassy. He was permitted in for the first time and offered a cigar by the Consul. Hermann was given the opportunity to explain that since 1938 he wanted to immigrate and he has his documents and now it is 1947. The Consul said that his papers are in order and would issue a visa to him but not to his sister. Hermann replied that he will tell this to President Harry Truman. The Consul replied that Hermann should go home and he would see what he could do to obtain the two visas.
- 60:00 In one week the two visas arrived by Special Delivery. He spoke to his aunts about complaining for the length of time to get a visa and they said that he did not have sufficient proof so he did nothing further. In November, at age 23, he went to New York and stayed with his uncle. He did not know much English but wanted to be an art teacher. Mt. Vernon High School hired him and told him to demonstrate what to do when he did not have sufficient vocabulary to explain. He worked there for eight months until he received a letter from the President informing him that he was drafted. Hermann thought it would be a good experience as he knew French and German and knew how to get around Europe, especially Belgium and Austria. He was assigned to be an MP in GHQ in Japan. There he felt respected and looked up by the Japanese people instead of being looked down as an immigrant. He felt good when they had to cut off the electricity in a building on his say so. It was a healing experience for him as it restored his self-

confidence. He was discharged after 18 months which was six months early because he signed up for four years in the reserves. When he got out, he was worried as he felt old without a high school certificate and needed employment. It was 1949 and he was 25 years old but he spoke English by then.

65:00 He made a friend in Tokyo who was a survivor of a concentration camp and adopted him and brought him to Kansas City so visited him before returning to New York. Hermann got a job designing ties at 83 cents a tie. It was piece work so he had to work hard to make \$25 a week. The owner controlled what you made as could say a design was not approved. Hermann had to belong to a union. He called people in Kansas City and thought he could find a job there. His aunts and uncles in New York were working so only saw them on weekends and he had nothing in common with them. He became healthy and gained weight after he left the service. He went to Kansas City where he found a job in a woman's shoe store in Huntsville where Mrs. Truman shopped. He was an eligible bachelor at 26 and one of the few male salesmen there. He had fun working there.

70:00 The Korean War began and he was given 24 hours to report back to service. Hermann applied for citizenship. When he got discharged, Hermann got a job as a commercial artist for Boeing Aircraft in Battlecreek, Michigan. He worked there from age 26 to 28 and met his wife there. Hermann had to take blueprints and make a 3-D drawing indicating where to place the bolts in the aircraft. He was impressed that despite what happened during Hitler, humanity learned little as people still murdered and persecuted because of different skin color or beliefs. Life must be changed. Inventions are meaningless as you just push buttons. The almighty dollar and who is who is not important. People got side-tracked. Life must be made better, not just faster and more electric. Man should benefit from their work.

74:00