

William Hess

Tape 1 Side A

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Abstract

William Hess was born William Verna on August 8, 1921 in Stuttgart, Germany. He was an only child and lived a pleasant life there. Despite the Nuremberg laws, he was permitted to continue his schooling as his father served during World War I. Nevertheless, they lost the service of their maid. William experienced little anti-Semitism in Germany but knew that Hitler made anti-Semitic speeches and had newspaper articles written against the Jews. His father's business suffered little from the boycotting but he sold it in 1938. Anti-Semitism was more severe in the outlying towns than in Stuttgart. William studied English for two years before immigrating to Danville, Illinois with his uncle's assistance in 1937. He had difficulty adjusting to the US so had an English tutor. Additionally, he had difficulty living on his wages of \$12.50 as \$9 went toward room and board and he also had to cover tutoring and transportation expenses. Kristallnacht and his father's internment in Dachau influenced his parents to leave Germany in 1939 for Danville.

Summary

00:00 William Hess was born William Verna on August 8, 1921 in Stuttgart, Germany. He lived there until he moved to the United States in 1937. The Jewish population was 4,000 which corresponded to the amount of Jews (1%) in Germany. The population of Stuttgart was 430,000. Relations between Jews and non-Jews were good and Jews had non-Jews as friends. There was no Jewish area but the Jews usually lived in the better areas which were spread around. Though there were no Jews in his apartment house, there were Jews on the block. His father's genealogy history went back to the 1700s when his ancestors lived in the village of Wurttemberg. In 1492 the Jews were driven out of Stuttgart so no Jews lived there. The Duke needed Jewish money for his excessive living. He hired Joseph Oppenheimer to raise money so he could match Louis IV mansion. After the ruler died in 1740, Joseph was still living. Williams' ancestors lived in principalities scattered around Germany where Jews were permitted and they left when opportunities arose. William's mother's family lived in Turin (?) in Central Germany in 1700.

05:00. William's father, Wilhelm was in the wholesale textile business which was started by his grandfather, taken over by him and his brother, closed in 1930 for the depression and later reopened. William's mother, Elsa Simpson, did not work as it was rare for a Jewish woman to work outside the house, unless necessary, before World War I. William is an only child. His family observed the High Holidays. They did not hold Seders at home but attended their aunt's and occasionally had a Chanukah celebration. His father

frequently traveled Monday to Friday and came home for a shabbos dinner cooked by William's mother. William had religious education and was Bar Mitzvah. In Germany religious education was part of the school curriculum. Twice a week the teacher spoke about the bible, both the Old and the New Testament. Starting in second grade, William was excused for an hour and Wednesday afternoon, the free afternoon, to attend the Jewish School next to the main synagogue. There he studied bible and Hebrew which could be opted out. The religious school was graded on his report card but one would not fail their grade if they failed religion. There was a main synagogue and a small orthodox one for Eastern European immigrants. The main synagogue had two rabbis and cantors who gave religious instruction. William went on Saturday afternoon for instruction and attended a one hour children's service. He was given a choice of saying a broche (prayer) or a parsha (section for the week) for his Bar Mitzvah. Since he was lazy, he chose to say the broche which was shorter. They invited the family and some non-Jewish friends for a family dinner and he received gifts.

10:00 After four years of elementary school, William took a test and, if passed, would go to a higher school known as a gymnasium. In William's time, it was humanism study for physicians or lawyers. In his 5th year he went to Gymnasium and after four years went to a higher school for Commerce as he was expected to enter business. He got specialized training in English, French including business letters, accounting, history and other academic subjects. At 16 years old, after a year in Gymnasium, he left Germany. He had 1 or 2 friends and they got together with other children, some were non-Jews, and played catch, hide-and-go-seek and rode their scooters around the neighborhood and downtown. For his Bar Mitzvah he got the bicycle that he desired. His mother thought it was bad for his heart as he had to go up steep streets but it was good for him, even now. He would go on excursions with friends to a man-made lake and they would ride canoes or kayaks and paddle around. After the Nazis came in power, a Jewish veteran organized a sports group where William went swimming and did field sports. The organization was called "RJF."

15:00 It was called the RJF, German Federation of Veterans. The only anti-Semitism that William experienced was to be called "dirty Jew" or told, "go to Palestine." He was 12 when Hitler came into power. His life did not change much and he continued his schooling. Some non-Jews came to dinner the week before he emigrated. His life was pleasant. In second or third grade, around 1930, his teacher instructed the students how to draw a face with the hair, nose, and eyebrows and a child said that it looked like Hitler. The teacher did not think so. William asked his parents who Hitler is and was told that he is an anti-Semitic politician. That was the first time that William heard about Hitler. There was a world-wide depression in 1929 with lots of problems. Germany had emergency decrees that the Weimer constitution put out after World War I. One stated that the Chancellor could rule by decree. Parliament would rule "no conscience" and hold elections. Germany had 35 parties but only about six counted. Instead of voting for

individuals, they voted by list based on the strength of the party. The Social Democrats were No. 2 and came up rapidly. In 1930 there were two or three elections with lots of propaganda. William heard speeches and read articles in newspapers and realized it was the Nazi party which was dangerous. In 1930 the Social Democrats were No. 1. They had a militia marching down the street.

- 20:00 William took a walk with his father and saw the Social Democrats marching on one street and the Nazis marching on another street. When William's father saw this, he decided to go home as felt that they would fight when they met at the intersection. In 1931 the Nazis became No. 1 and the Social Democrats No. 2. The results came in the evening at 8 PM regarding the strength of each party. His father got upset when the Nazis took over. They had unemployment equal to the US with 6 million unemployed of 60 million population in Germany. They had half the population of the US and half the amount of unemployed. The citizens wanted jobs and the Nazis promised them jobs. The Nazis announced that they would close Jewish stores and do away with Soviet unions. The Nazis took advantage that the citizens felt that Germany was badly treated in World War I followed by a depression. William's family was alarmed but there was no precedent to look at so thought that anti-Semitism would increase but did not imagine what actually happened. Garleiter (?) and Streicher (?) filled the newspaper, the Sturmer (?) with insults and denigration of the Jews. It would say that Jews are their misfortune on the headline and make a caricature of Jews showing they are fat with big noses and unsavory looks. His family did not hear the propaganda which took place at beer halls and large meeting halls.
- 25:00 Hitler spoke and there was spontaneous applause. The speeches were geared to the lower class and the unemployed. Book burnings were announced. There was no TV and most of the population did not have a radio. His family got one in 1932. Hitler installed propaganda apparatus. Newspapers were required to carry certain news items including the book burning and they were checked for attitude. They reported that the books were burned because they hurt the German people's spirit. When William was 13 in 1935 the Nuremberg laws were enacted. It affected William's family as a non-Jewish female under age 45 could not work in a Jewish household with males. When their finances improved, William's family hired a maid. Maids were from blue collar backgrounds in small towns and served in the city to learn how to run a household. They could not get a husband until they had this experience. Their maid was an orphan and they gave her sufficient time off and good wages so when the decree was issued, she cried. These decrees reduced their status as a German citizen as the Jews no longer felt like full citizens.
- 30:00 Jews who served in World War I complained to President Hindenburg and he announced that children of veterans can continue their schooling. Since William's father was in the War, William continued his education. The President's law was terminated in 1938 so Jewish education stopped. All Germans were required to serve one or two years in the

service so his father volunteered for one year. He was trained in cavalry in Ludwigsburg and would be available in case of war. The War broke out August 2, 1914 and his father was mobilized until the end of the War in November 1918. He was awarded a medal for bravery and loyalty by the King. His father served in logistics on the eastern front in Russia and later in France. The boycott was on Saturday, April 1, 1933. His father's business was on the 4th floor of an office building. He went to work and at night saw stores were boycotted. Two floors below was Mr. Kaufman, a lawyer. Two SS were placed at his door who told people not to enter. When Mr. Kaufman reported to the authorities that he was not Jewish, they apologized.

- 35:00 William's family listened to the Olympics on the radio. They were interested in a young athlete from their neighborhood, Margaret Lambert, who was a champion high jumper. She trained for the Olympics and at the last minute was disqualified. There is a letter at the Holocaust Museum indicating that Lambert was not of Olympic quality so was not approved. A Hungarian half-Jew won the medal in 1936 with the same height as Lambert's high jump. She qualified as she was from a foreign country. **Tape 1, Side B.** The Nuremberg laws made a great change as it abrogated citizens' rights for Jews. In 1933 Jews were displaced from official positions such as Judges or fired from government positions and from opera and artist positions. Jewish music such as Gustav Mahler and Romberg, was no longer played. Large businesses were synchronized by putting in Aryan business managers and removing Jewish managers. William's uncle worked in a municipal savings bank and was furloughed and then fired and never found employment again. Another uncle was a doctor and depended on patients in the state operated health insurance programs for employees. Starting in 1933 or 1934 Jewish doctors could no longer handle these patients unless they were World War I veterans. The uncle served so was permitted to keep these patients.
- 40:00 A few of William's father's customers would no longer buy from him as they would be threatened by the Nazis. In May 1938 his father sold the business. Local municipalities acted on their own regarding their attitude toward Jews. The family could go to one pool but not to the main pool. They could attend certain movies and eat at those restaurants which did not have a "no Jews here" sign in the window. Some restaurants would place a note "no Jews served" in a cup which they handed a Jewish-looking customer. There was less anti-Semitism in Stuttgart than in the surrounding towns. Jews could not go to the opera but William was not affected as normally did not attend. He had more Jewish friends by that time. A neighbor from a small town related how he was beaten up when people refused to pay him and he had to sign their release. When he protested, the Nazis told him to tell the doctor that he fell down the steps. His aunt had to take a detour to go to the grocery so children would not trip her.
- 45:00 Some anti-Semitism depended upon where you lived. In 1933 the chief of police in Berlin had rowdies beat up the Jews as they came out of their synagogue on Rosh

Hashanah. After school ended in June, it was customary to have a school excursion where they hiked and had a picnic. Hitler youth at the picnic pushed three Jewish children into a shack and set it on fire but the children were not hurt. That was the most serious action he heard of. He did not discuss it with his parents. They listened to foreign stations on their radio including Moscow, Luxembourg and France. They could pick it up but were not supposed to listen to them. He was not cautious and when his parents were not at home, he turned on Moscow and heard the Communist National Anthem. If anyone heard it, he would have been in trouble. His father was pessimistic as he did not know what was going to happen next. The defense business did well as brought money into circulation but there were some shortages. Rearmament caused shortage of currency.

50:00 The mark was soft. His father had some good connections. A vendor who was a carpenter manufacturer in Nuremberg, was a loyal friend and his parents welcomed him in their house. He helped get their rings and watches out of Germany by giving them to friends in Switzerland. After the war, William's family sent them packages. His parents told him to keep his mouth shut and watch what you say so you do not get arrested. William had friends who were required to join the Hitler Youth who still spoke to him and complained about Hitler. If one was non-compliant they would be sent to a concentration camp such as Dachau which was not a death camp at that time. After 1937 or 1938 you could be beaten up or killed. His father felt that since he was a veteran of World War I and old, he could remain but since William was only 13 and has a future, he must leave. The mother's uncle helped and said that when he is 16 he could go to the US as he would be old enough to work. His parents did not think of leaving Germany and his uncle was not willing to send more affidavits. By 1938 it became clear to leave so his father sold his business.

55:00 After the Austrian occupation his father applied for a visa to the US but they were hard to acquire as the US only gave out half of the amount legally permitted. His father made preparations to leave and was among the last to leave in July 1939 just before War broke out. William had left two years earlier in 1937. William had to obtain many different papers to emigrate and he had to get them himself. He resented traipsing from office to office. He required a birth certificate, a passport, a visa, and a document that his father was not in debt. He could only take out \$10 or \$15 and clothes so he shopped for permitted items that he could take. He left Hamburg on the American ship, "Manhattan." His parents accompanied him to the ship which sailed on July 31, 1937 and arrived in New York on August 5, 1937, 60 years ago. He got seasick on the journey. William was not greatly concerned to leave Germany. He had traveled around Germany by himself. He was told that he would be taken care of and have paid employment. He looked forward to it and was not worried. When he arrived in Danville, Illinois, he saw strangers and was shown to his room. The language and customs were different and the experience

hit him. In New York he had a wonder time as people took care of him. The reality in Illinois was that he was totally on his own. In addition, he worried about his parents, especially after Kristallnacht.

- 60:00 He had to prepare the way for his parents. He worked on his uncle to get their affidavit. William realized that his parents would not have any money. When he left Germany, he did not have a feeling of relief as he had a good life in Germany but he knew that things would not get better. His feelings were mixed. Arriving in New York in the 30s was exciting. There were lots of things to see and do. Relatives took him to the beach and to the movies; it was wonderful. The reception in Illinois was serious. No one had ever been away from their small town. People asked how he liked it in America and expected him to respond positively. People were friendly towards him. He did not experience any anti-Semitism in New York or Illinois. He knew the mid-west was a stronghold for the Ku Klux Klan especially that they marched in nearby Indiana. He also heard of Father Cox but never heard him talk nor experienced the Klan. People asked him about Hitler and he told them. They were surprised about life under a dictatorship including that one could not buy magazines, listen to the radio and that some people did not own a radio. They asked him why they did not shoot the Nazis. William explained that he would need a lawyer to defend him if he shot a Nazi and that was not possible. This was incomprehensible to them. William tried to support himself on \$12.50 a week. Three cents a week was taken off for Social Security.
- 65:00 An older male immigrant was helped by William's mother's uncle in New York. He had a son in college. William had studied English for two years in Germany in preparation of coming to the US. He spoke with an accent so his employer hired a female teacher to help rid him of his accent. She used the English lesson to teach him American history and literature and he had to pay her \$1 per lesson. It cost him \$9 a week for room and board and he had to pay for transportation which left him with about seven cents a week. His parents sent him eight dollars a month. He felt that his parents would need the money when they came to the US but he could not save much. He walked to save money and went to the early show. His correspondence to his parents was subject to censorship. He typed a weekly letter and his parents responded with stamps but they could not mention some subjects. William heard of Kristallnacht. Before the event, both his parents wrote but afterwards, he only received a letter from his mother explaining that his father was on a trip. Later his father wrote. He surmised that his father was in a concentration camp. He later found out that his father was picked up on November 10th, the day after Kristallnacht and taken to Dachau for five weeks. It was standard procedure to pick up people, put them on a truck, take them to the local police station and then to Dachau.
- 70:00 His father was given a prison uniform and no food at first and fed poorly later. They stood for roll call three times or more a day. His father came down with bronchitis which

never left him. There was a 16-year-old and his father in his barracks. The Nazis made the son beat his father for their amusement. When the prisoners took a shower, the hot water was shut and later it was turned on full force. The prisoners had to run double time on the parade ground so some died. To be released, you had to sign that you would leave the country. His mother wrote to the uncle that she needs an affidavit and received it which saved their lives. His father had to pay the cost of his transportation to and from Dachau. They immigrated to Belgium where they stayed a week with relatives, then to Paris to stay with other relatives. Then they got a Dutch ship from Belem (?), France to New York and from there to Danville.