

JACOB WIENER
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Interviewer: Esther Toporek Finder

[Follow up interview-USHMM interviews: video on June 30, 1994 and audio Feb 1, 1996. He also did an interview with Survivors of the Shoah on Oct. 17, 1996.]

Post-Holocaust interview

Tape 1 Side A

His name is Jacob Gerd Wiener but his last name at birth was Cwieniecki. He changed his name as part of the naturalization in 1951 because his wife did not like the name and people could not pronounce it. His brother already changed the name to Wiener. He learned the war was over from the newspaper and he heard it from people who were there. Early in the war he had been in touch with relatives in Germany and he saw changes going from worse to worse. He was told that various people "went on vacation." That really meant that they were sent to concentration camp. Then he heard nothing at all: letters came back censored or they were just returned to him. Every year he wrote something [a little article] for himself hoping that the war would end. He was in the US and the American media did not write too much about the Holocaust and what they did write was not on the main page but rather somewhere inside. Only on Kristallnacht was there a front page story. He was registered as clergy during the war and he was studying at the Yeshiva. He tried to join the war, even as an air raid warden. He was told he could not join the war effort because he was an enemy alien, even though he was Jewish. He even needed permission to travel interstate. He finished the Yeshiva and got his ordination. In 1945-46 American Jews tried to send packages to Jews in Europe. [During the war] he tried to find out what happened to people from his home town. He found some people [from Germany] in New York and met people at demonstrations and gatherings. Those people had not been in the concentration camps. In 1943 he tried to become a US citizen but he needed first papers and then he had to wait 5 years before he could be a citizen. In 1943 he had to appear before a board in Baltimore and his citizenship appeal was rejected. At that time the war situation was bad and only people who could go to war were being made citizens. Then he applied again in 1950 [or earlier] to the FBI to do translations and they wanted to send him to Germany. He did not want to go to Germany but he was able to get his second papers in

1951. Then he became a citizen and changed his name. He was married by then. He married in 1948. His wife was born in Nuremberg and moved to Furth. Her father was a merchant. After Kristallnacht people tried to leave Germany. In 1939 she came out with a kinder transport and went to England. Her parents also got out because they had some family in England. He tried to come out with a transport to England, but the program stopped.

There was a big crowd in Madison Square Garden. There were always requests of people to come to the US but there was a quota on immigration from Germany. Those people who got certificates sometimes had to wait 2 years. His parents had papers to go to the US in the 1920's but his mother did not want to go because she had all her family in Germany. He does not recall what was going on at Madison Square Garden. Many people spoke about what was happening in Germany and they wanted to influence the American government to do something about events in Germany. There was a man at the Yeshiva, Michael Tress, who would go regularly to discuss with cabinet ministers and to plead for Jews. The US was interested in winning the war and the argument was that the Americans would not bomb the trains to the concentration camps. Only one person was at all successful to get some Jews to Oswego and that was Ruth Gruber. One of his family members went to Oswego.

Kristallnacht made a difference and the US Ambassador to Berlin was recalled.

When he came to Montreal in 1939, people over here could not believe things were as bad as the refugees said. His family left Germany with only \$4.00 and still people did not believe things were so bad for the Jews. Everything done by the Nazi was done secretly and many people did not know during the war and it only slowly came out after the war. Some of it is still only coming out now 50-60 years after the war. He felt that the defendants at the Nuremberg Trials were either so brainwashed or so crazy that they answered that they were only following orders. They did not have their own mind. They had power and authority and they intimidated the whole population.

He followed the vote on the partition of Palestine. He watched events in Palestine since 1936 and saw people who tried to emigrate illegally. He was surprised that Russia voted for it. The Jewish community here was very interested in what was going to happen. Many Jews had already gone

to Palestine and did not feel safe there and were worried about the Arab states. The Jewish community in Palestine offered any person, whatever nationality, to stay in Israel and live in peace but the Arabs were told to leave by other Arabs. Refugee camps were formed and they still exist.

Many of his family went to Palestine. In 1933 there was a “*Hachshara*” group that was preparing young people for life in Palestine. He was a member of the group but his mother thought things will change and that making major life changes would be hard. He wanted to go and was learning Hebrew at that time. But when the partition vote happened he was already in the US and his father was in Canada, he did not make an effort to go to Palestine.

The Jewish people were always against war. He remembers one instance during the 6 Day War in 1967 and he attended a convention in Montreal. There was a meeting there and there was a vote regarding whether Israel might win and then they spoke about what might be done to secure peace. Someone suggested that a wall be built between the Israelis and the Arabs. That was the mentality of the time. There was euphoria with the 6 Day War. The Jewish people did not see what they could have done at that time to avoid the trouble we have now, especially with the West Bank. That area used to be called Transjordan. There were always troubles, even when the Israelis had Arafat [note: should be Nasser] surrounded and the Israelis let him go. Others would not have let Jewish prisoners go. This is just the Jewish mentality, to let prisoners go. That was the 1956 war in the Suez canal. He remembers Prime Minister Golda Meir saying to Sadat that they both have grandchildren and neither of them want their grandchildren to go through war. You can bring people if you learn from the past and look to the future.

He followed the Eichmann trial. He was surprised that Eichmann was found. He does not believe that Eichmann should have been executed though he executed thousands of others. Until the last minute he denied his responsibility and claimed that he was only following orders. He was among those at the Wanssee Conference and participated in the decision to have the “Final Solution.”

Even though it is Jewish tradition that states that G-d is the final judge and that justice will come eventually, justice did come eventually. Hitler did not achieve what he wanted so G-d was the final judge. At this trial it was a human court and it was human justice.

Tape 1 Side B

He never felt any animosity towards anyone who was different in religion or race. In Germany he had a Negro classmate who was the child from a former German colony in East Africa. He tried to understand other people's views. He used to work in the department of social services in New York and he worked with lots of different people of different cultures and races. He remembers the march in Selma and the Jewish boy who was killed. He knew the boy's father, who had a wig making business. There were Jewish people who had sympathy for what happened to other people. Jews tried to help and have what is called "*lev*" [Hebrew for heart]. We do not have to leave our religion to help others with their beliefs. The African boy had no problems during the Weimar Republic. After Hitler came to power things changed. There was an organization in Germany for Germans in the foreign countries and German nationals elsewhere were encouraged to join the organization.

After WWII, in Germany this is called the war of destruction, there were many more wars all over the world. The 1960s there was a youth rebellion. In his department the commissioner tried to speak but protestors interrupted him. That was a problem in peace because people were not listening or respecting each other. This was what Freud called civil disobedience; they wanted to show their own force, selfishness and pride by saying that they knew more than others. They did not want to work together. He did not understand the anti-war movement at the time. There should not be a war if there is no purpose to it and the government had no purpose so it was understandable that people were against it.

He tells children that growing up in a country where you don't know what is happening to you, that there are laws being made against the Jews, then you have to know what you want to do. If you want to be a Jew then you have to know what it means to be a Jew. When he talks about what

it meant to grow up in Germany he says that we cannot know all the answers but we need to have a point of view and we need to have a faith. We don't always know what will happen. He tells children that they have to know about themselves and to get an education because you need education to help you make decisions to know what to do and where to go and how to live with other people.

In his writings he talks about 2 kinds of people: if G-d lets this kind of thing happen, then where is G-d? The other type of person can only believe in G-d. If a person doesn't at least have 1 goal / motive then he will get lost. Many people committed suicide during and after the war and from the Jewish point of view it is a sin. We cannot take life away, only G-d can do that, so suicide is a sin. He has some favorite works. There were many miracles in his life. He wanted to share part of one of his poems:

“Land of future
Our future
Everything we bring to you.
Seeking refuge we are coming
That is all we have in view
To be treated in your country
Duties, rights, like you, the same
Not despised, disdained, detested
That's our honest aim
Continent of mankind's future
World of sun and hope
Far off war and scenes of height
On the western semi-globe
G-d bless you
From a land of terror we were forced to flee
G-d bless you American
You the land of the free.”

In answer to the people who asked, why this happened to them?

“What was our guilt? We were born a Jew.
We are weak and helpless and only a few.
We pray to you, G-d, to our very last breath,
With “Shema” for you, we accept our death.

[See file for the poem in its entirety]

It is sometimes difficult for survivors to talk to their children. It is often difficult to talk to the children but it is easier to talk to the grandchildren. He found this out in 3 respects: 1-when he was working with child abuse he found that children who were abused did not want to talk to their parents because they did not want to feel ashamed, but the grandchildren were more removed. 2-he had relatives in Russia and then some of the grandchildren wanted to know about communism. The children did not ask about communism but the grandchildren did. 3-he worked with AAA and the children did not talk to their alcoholic parents because they did not want to picture them as alcoholics, but the grandchildren wanted to hear about this. This is also true of the Holocaust experience: the grandchildren are more free. Now his wife writes for their grandchildren, though she did not write for her children.

He moved to DC in 1988. He had a job working for Montgomery County. The Museum was just forming and he spoke to them but they were not organized yet. He did not want a job there, he just wanted to see what could be done. He became a regular volunteer when the Museum opened up. He was involved in the Volunteer Advisory Board for a while and you have to step down after 2 years service. After that he did not want to return. He is doing 3 things at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: he is a visitor representative working giving information and passes; he works with Fannie Mae leading groups around on tours and then talking the students and answering their questions; he is a member of the speaker's bureau and works for John Minnick and he has done some guest speaking. He speaks for 20-30 minutes and then answers questions. Sometimes people stay and ask more questions. He also is doing research on Kristallnacht and has learned more recently about that event.

He tries to listen to others and not always to talk. By listening he can learn what other people mean to say. There are always more questions than answers. It says in the Talmud that if you don't ask questions then you don't learn. He encourages questions. He tells people that you cannot live as one person and you must have other people in order to live and we must all work together. We must all know that we are not the final judge and we will be judged eventually.

He works in the information section and he sometimes speaks to Germans who don't speak English. One time he spoke to a woman who was a history student and another person who worked in the German Embassy in Tunis. When he was in Germany they called him from Tunis to apologize to him that they could not go to see him. Another time he met a woman who said she was depressed: she had been living near the French border and there had been a plebescite and the people voted to align themselves with Hitler. She said they had always been friends with Jews and after joining Germany her husband was asked why he still had contact with the Jews. After she came back from going through the Museum she said to him that she did not want to remember all that because it brought bad memories back to her.

When he talks to students they want to hear more and sometimes people call him back. He does not know how much impact he has. He does get some feedback from the comment cards but he cannot point to any special instance where he had direct impact. He thinks it is better to work with kids after age 15, even though the Museum says age 11 is old enough.

It took a long time for people to get an interest in the Holocaust. Some people still don't want to buy German goods. After time goes by people can look back more objectively. In Germany people wrote their family trees but this only happened recently in the US with Alex Haley's book Roots. It is unfortunate that in Maryland it is not compulsory to teach the Holocaust. There are other states where this is mandatory education. It is important that people talk about it and the second generation should know about it.

Tape 2 Side A

He has told the USHMM that there are certain things that they do that he does not think are correct. People who had the experience should be used to do some research in certain areas. The USHMM is more interested in certain facts. They would hear about the emotions from people and people cannot be neutral about their emotions. He is concerned that the Museum prefers people who are studying from books and the books have biases: each book has a point of view. Of course, a survivor also has biases but his personal bias is what he actually learned from his Holocaust experiences. He says that if you send someone to visit concentration camps who has book knowledge, he may not know the proper questions to ask. Survivors may not want to go back to the camp and have a second experience there. At least one survivor should go with the scholars and talk about his emotions. Feelings should not be excluded.

Also, he when he meets groups he tells people what he feels about things, especially if he has strong feelings. For example he has strong feelings about people who come out of the camps and say they don't believe in G-d anymore. He was once asked about Kristallnacht and he could not talk about what he really felt. There are certain times / instances that make different impressions on a person. He cannot always talk and not everyone may like what he says. He hopes there won't be anti-Semitism any more. He remembers it from very early when he was in school. He did not experience much anti-Semitism after the war. There is always some subtle anti-Semitism, especially when Jews are successful. Jews were considered enemy aliens during the war and he does not know if that was anti-Semitism. That might have been anti-refugee sentiment. He could not get a job at the very beginning [when he arrived] but he does not know if that was anti-Semitism or anti-foreign sentiment. Now we are more accepting and it is easier for Jews coming in.

He believes that the skinheads could develop into another Nazi movement because they are adamant about hating people. He already saw this in his own past. In Germany now they try to outlaw anti-Semitism but that cannot be outlawed since you cannot know what is in a person's heart. Sometimes you can see the teachers don't like Jews, especially when you go to non-Jewish schools. He likes to confront people about this and ask them why they feel that way. He would like to see more Jews religious but he knows each person has a choice. Every one has a point of view.

When he came here he found his place in an educational field. He has had different jobs. He has worked to help bring girls over from Hungary and Sweden to the US on student visas. He made an institution in 1956 for retarded and emotionally disturbed children. He has also written some things. He could have done more but these are things he is proud of. He is now writing a book which he hopes to finish. He is lazy and has other things to do. He is doing too many things. The book is an autobiography but is historical. He sees himself as an historian and he wants it to be part of a textbook. What you hear most is about people who talk about the concentration camp.

What people don't know about is how Nazis came to power in Germany and what it means to grow up in Germany. He was not in the camps and he knows it was a horrible experience, but he feels every person has to see miracles happen. Without the miracles in his life he would not be here. He believes in prayer and in hope. He cannot make others believe but he hopes other people will learn from him. The miracles that happened to him: many of the miracles happened to him in Canada. He wanted to stay in Montreal but the Canadian government wanted them to move to another province. He met someone who was able to help his family stay in Montreal. Another miracle was that he wanted to come to the US. One day he read a newspaper and found some people he had gone to school with in Germany who now lived in Baltimore. He contacted them and got an affidavit. Another miracle was that he needed permission to come to the US and he had no money. He got help from HIAS. He thought he was only going to stay in Baltimore long enough to be ordained, etc, etc, etc. He sees them all as miracles. He has written stories about the miracles of Hanukkah and Purim.

He will never be able to tell everything. If you have hatred in your heart you will only hurt yourself and others. Also, you have to have your own opinion of how you want to live and if you feel comfortable in it, then do it. If you are Jewish you should know what it means to be a Jew and teach your children. He hopes the Holocaust Museum will make it possible for people to learn and experience what other people experienced.

End of interview.