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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 1, 2001
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audiotaped interview with Kurt Roberg, conducted by Gail Schwartz on March 1, 2009 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

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KURT ROBERG
March 16, 2001

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg**, conducted by **Gail Schwartz** on March 16th, 2001 at the Holocaust Museum. This is tape number one, side **A.** Please give us your full name.

Answer: I am **Kurt w** for **Walter Roberg, r-o-b-e-r-g**, and I l – am a resident – I'm a citizen of the **United States** and a resident of **Tenafly, New Jersey**.

Q: And where were you born, and when were you born?

A: I was born in **Germany** in a town called **Celle**, which is the German pronunciation, spelled **c-e-** double **l-e**, near **Hannover** in northern **Germany**, on May 16th, 1924.

Q: Now let's talk a little bit about your family. How far back can you trace the generations in this area of **Germany**.

A: Well, that's a very interesting question and I will illustrate it by, well, telling you what happened to me. I – I went to a German school, as a matter of fact I was the only – during **Hitler** time already, from 1934 to 1938 to **Kristallnacht,** I was the only Jewish student in a s – s – student body of about 280 in a high school that was a **[indecipherable]** gymnasium. One of the assignments we had – now thas – this was about 1936, and **Germany** of course was very, a-as we would say, a – a roots – you know, tracing your roots. They were interested in genealogy. So one of our assignments in social studies was

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to trace our ancestry. How was I gonna trace my ancestry? My – I – ma – my mother contacted her sister, a maiden sister who lived with my – in my mother's home village, and contacted my father's maiden sister, who lived in my father's home village, and they both yeah, tried to do – trace our history. And **Martha**, which was the **Roberg** side of the family, got as far as great-grandfather, didn't get very far. And Aunt **Babette**(ph) of the **Marx** family, my mother's family near – in a village called **Byetahl**(ph) near **Heidelberg** was much more successful. She first traced the history back to 1871, which was written up in the local – what do we call it in German? **Standes amt,** the local village registry. Prior to that, all births and deaths were, even of the Jewish community were inter – entered in the church registry of the Catholic church. So she went to the priest and he, as a favor, for 10 mark or so, wrote out our whole genealogy and we were able to trace the f – **Marx** family back to 1741. So I drew up a family tree based on this information. This took about oh, a couple of months to get that all written out by hand, turning the pages in the book and it became a matter of fascination for the priest himself. And I drew a – a family tree, and I turned it in and it turned out that **Roberg**, the only Jew in the class, could trace his ancestry in **Germany** back further than my 29 Christian stu – fellow students. And my teacher, who was very s-supportive, and nya – he was not a Nazi by any means, he made a point of it, to – yeah, tell the class that **Roberg** could trace his ancestry back further than any of the German boys. So it's a longwinded answer to your very brief question.

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Q: But a very interesting answer. Tell me your father's name and his occupation.

A: My father's name was **Victor** and he was a merchant, a m – well, by – by trade in dry goods, soft goods. We owned a little store, he had learned a trade at age 14, he served an apprenticeship, he learned a business and then he was a – a journeyman, a salesman and then a traveling salesman for a Jewish firm. There – he was – Jews at that time were employed by other Jews. It was unusual, I guess, to be employed by a Gentile firm. And –

Q: What was the name of the firm he worked for?

A: In **Celle**, it was **Gebrüder Freidberg**. That's **Freidberg** Brothers, **f-r-e-i-d-b-e-r-g, Freidberg** Brothers and they owned a department store in **Celle** and he came there, I guess, about 1904 or thereabouts, and he worked there through the war. My father was very nearsighted and was unfit for military duty, so – and – and right after World War I, he went into his own business across the street from **Freidberg's,** set up a cint – competition, and ma – then the inflation came, and he **strubbled** – struggled, he wasn't a particularly successful businessman, but – and it was a – it was a struggle.

Q: Did your mother work?

A: Yes, my mother. My parents got married in 1921 and my mother, of course, came into the business. She had some sort of a dowry, which in those days was expected. I think it was a marriage that was arranged. I'm not sure, but I think it was through the newspaper, which was the customary way, rather than shotgun. And so that was the then modern

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way. There was the – a newspaper, Jewish paper called **Jüdische Familienblatt**, the Jewish Family paper, and there were marriage proposals or whatever and as we have today in some of the better **United States** papers, started from **"The Village Voice"** on.

Q: What was her name?

A: My mother's name was **Selma**, but she was called **Frieda**. That's another story, but I won't go into that now, and her maiden name was **Marx, m-a-r-x.**

Q: Did you have any siblings?

A: Yes, I have a – an older brother, **Harry**. He was **Hans, Hans Werner**, and I was called **Walter.** And he was called **Hans** and I was called **Kurt**.

Q: And ha – what's the difference in age?

A: He's two and a half years older. He was then, and still is.

Q: Did you have a large extended family in the town? Aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins?

A: On my mother's side there was a large family. She was one of six surviving siblings, but none in the same town. They lived all over me – **Germany**, but they were all in close – in close touch with each other, there were weekly letters to everybody, and – including Grandma in – in **Byetahl**(ph). And so it was a very special – my – on my mother's side was a close knit family. On my father's side less so, he and his – my father and his brother were not on particularly good terms, and the maiden aunt, sister, which he was a

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– a family of three siblings, she lived in her parents' house in a little village called **Lemförde, l-e-m-f-o-umlaut-r-d-e** near **Osnabrück** in northern **Germany**.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the town itself.

A: Sure.

Q: How many Jewish families tell a – out of a total population?

A: Ah, it's a good question. We were a small Jewish congregation, but rather distinct. **Celle**, as you may or may not know, is of historic significance in that it was a m – the seat of a duke, **Herzog,** the Duke of **Brunswick-Lüneburg – Brunswick-Lüneburg,** and so it was a white collar community. Our synagogue in **Celle** was built in 1741 and is today the on – the only surviving synagogue in northern **Germany** that was – well, it was vandalized of course, but that survived, it was not burned or destroyed. It was destroyed from the inside, but the building remains. It was during my time, had of course gone past its peak, people had started moving away after World War I. Some families moved to **Hannover**, which was 40 kilometers. 25 miles away was the nearest large city, some moved to **Berlin**. The remaining active members in the community were about a dozen families. There were some Jewish people who were not active, they didn't attend services. They, I guess were Jews by religion only, or th-they – the Germans so nicely put it, Jewish citizens of a Hebrew faith or persuasion. And that was by – by choice, they really didn't want to be identified with the Jewish community per se, and that was their choice. Give you an illustration, for – we only had services in our synagogue three times

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a year, on the high holidays, rush – you know, Passover and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Well, Simchas Torah was observed, and you know, but we had trouble getting a minyan together, of course, and we were, by German standards Conservative, not Orthodox, but the synagogue of course was built, like m-m-most German synagogues with the women in – in the upper, on the balcony, whatever you call it, and the men downstairs and only men counted for – yeah, for minyan. However, if you were 12 years old and you were gonna be Bar Mitzvahed the following year, you could already be counted as a minyan man. So it was that kind of a thing, or if things got very tough and we were nine, as a last resort they would say – we would send one of the boys, sometimes me, over to one of the non-observing Jews, one of them was **Solomon – Solomon** and say – ask **Solomon** if he'll come to minyan, you know, and then reluctantly and grumpily would come and di – um, sit in for minyan.

Q: How many Jewish families were there in town? How many Jewish families were in town?

A: Observing or otherwise, maybe 12 or 14. I really haven't counted them, I can – but I have – I have the records at home, I mean, I can make that available if you're interested.

Q: So, your family was observant? How would you describe your family?

A: Well, we were traditionally observant. My mother came from a observant family, meaning my grandmother kept **milchig** and **fleishig** separate. My father came from an Orthodox – well, an observant family. My father's family, it's a family of butchers,

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kosher butchers, but I guess the scene at the turn of the 20th century was really the – I'm sure I'm not telling you anything new, you know, the German Jewish community had been, well, had the opportunity for the first time to assimil – well, to try and assimilate or at least to practice by choice, and the tendency was away from – from religious observations and to assimilate, to try and assimilate. So there were many Jews who felt primarily as Germans of Jewish faith. And I guess we were – my father ate **treyf** occasionally, because when he traveled he couldn't observe all th – so as a – as a boy, as a young man already, he stopped eating kosher as he did at home, and my mother the same way when she got out into daily life, modified, and it was called new kosher, **neu-**kosher. New kosher meaning you would eat milk and meat mixed but no pork, and –

Q: Mm-hm. Did you observe the Sabbath, Shabbat?

A: We were aware of Shabbat, but we were allowed to ride our bicycles, while on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, we were not. So Shabbat was – it was a work day for us, we couldn't afford to keep the store closed and I guess that sort of set the pattern.

Q: Were your parents Zionists?\

A: We were sympathetic – well, Zionism for us started in 1933 or '34. We – the community, our congregation was too small to have a rabbi, but we did have a cantor who was a retired schoolteacher and had a pension and he was the cantor and also our, well, Hebrew teacher and he would officiate at all services, of course. And that was – but you know, we – we didn't – we didn't have a – a rabbi, per se.

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Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: German, what else? I mean, well, again, as you probably know, German Jews tried to ma – be very low key, be as un-Jewish in appearance, not that we were ashamed or – you know, of being Jews, we were conscious Jews, but we were Jews in religious observance, not, you know, it was not an ethnic group other than by designation by the Germans. I mean, we were – we were aware of being Jews, and we wanted to be Jews, but I guess we had no choice anyway, so –

Q: Did you feel very German as a young child?

A: N-No, that's a tough – I wa – we never really thought about it. We knew we – we – we knew we were nem – you know, German, we knew we were Jews, and of course, well, consciously, wh-when **Hitler** came to power, it was in 1933, I was nine years old, I remember distinctly when I came to school. I started school in 1930. Before that I went a year to kindergarten, I was four years old. And we were taught from small child on not to make any, as it was known as **rishiss**(ph). Are you familiar with the – with the term **rishiss**(ph)?

Q: No, could you explain it?

A: Yes. **Rishass**(ph) I think is a Hebrew word. It – it is to draw attention to – yeah, don't make wave, don't make **rishiss**(ph) means don't – you know, don't draw attention to your Jewishness. If – so if you did anything that would be disturbing to the Christian community, if you flaunted your Jewishness, you would say that makes **rishiss**(ph).

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Rishass(ph) is, I think – I don't know what it is in Hebrew, but I – anyway. So we were – we were taught not to make waves, to conform, not to draw attention to ourselves by being obnoxious or obviously Jewish. Do the things that were ascribed by the Gentile community as being typically Jewish.

Q: Such as?

A: Be loud, be boisterous and you know, I mean, if you would see somebody with – with – with – with – with payos, obviously they're – and that – that was a Jewish trait. Or to walk straight, to be – Jews were thought of as being non-athletic. My mother was very proud that we excelled in sports, my brother and I, and it was part of our – well, that we belonged, we were as good as they were. And well, it was odd that even my brother and I, during you know, **Hitler** times in high school, were allowed to participate in sporting events which in many other cities, Jews were no longer allowed to participate. And I remember **Harry**, my brother, **Hans** got a gold oak leaf and – with some event we – we had – from – from our school we had the sports event and I got a bronze even – oak leaf. Now, I must also tell you that on crystal – the night – yeah, Crystal Night, or the day – the morning after Crystal Night, when we found out, you know, what had happened in town, our apartment was not searched or destroyed or what, but we expected that maybe the Gestapo or city police would come and search the house. And we got rid of – my mother got rid of anything that would be intimidating, like foreign currency wi – my mother had a few British pounds, Palestinian pounds th – that her sister had brought back

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from **Palestine** in 1934, and the oak leaves that **Harry** and I had earned, because if they would come in and say – see that we had oak leaves, maybe the feeling was, what are you trying to prove, you Jew bastards? You know. So she got rid of it, not to antagonize the police should they come, and should they find this and question it.

Q: So you were athletic.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you enjoy the athletics? Is it something you enjoyed doing?

A: Of course I did, to this day.

Q: What sports did you take part in?

A: Well, I – swimming, but I was best in gymnastics, you know, which was the high bar, parallel bars, rings, that sort of thing, and I always got an **A**. I got an **A** in the fall, and – and a **B** plus in the summer because we are – field and track, I didn't care for that too much.

Q: How would you describe yourself? Were you a very independent young child?

A: No. I wasn't in – I mean, I was lucky that I had a playmate, my brother **Harry** and I, we had German friends in the neighborhood, a group, really sort of next door neighbors. But after 1933 – well, '34, they started pulling back and also we did not want them to be embarrassed by associating with us because it – you know, some – a third party might – might say the – you know, there was one, his name was **Willie Wrobleski**(ph), I f – and they were very poor working family. The father was unemployed during the depression, I

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remember, but they were really decent people and we played with them. We had a shack in the back where they had like a little stable in the back where the boys **[indecipherable]** there were four of us that really sort of stuck together. But then my mother thought that maybe they would feel uncomfortable associating – having their kid associate with us, so we eased back and –

Q: What did that mean to you as a young child? Were you aware of the ramifications of that, of what it meant?

A: Oh yes, of course we were aware. We were aware of the sensitivities, you know, of other people, of – now, I must say that **Celle** was considered, not only by us who lived in **Celle,** but ba – of course we were aware of what happened in other communities where kids were beaten up on the way to school, and – and all that –

Q: How – how were you aware of that?

A: You heard, you know, you – you – y-you heard from other Jewish families o – in – in **Hessen**, in he – yeah, where – where a lot of Jewish families lived in the country and where there was a lot of anti-Semitism, either for business reason or just to go and beat up a Jew. Were – the kids were intimidated on the way to school, they were called Jew – Jew bastard, **Jude itsich**(ph), you know –

Q: What does that mean to an eight year old or nine year old Jewish child?

A: Well, it probably – it means the same thing, we are going through that right now, here in our society with the bullying. It was bullying, okay? You pick on a Jew kid, and Jew

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kids were – reputedly couldn't take care of themselves, they – you know **[indecipherable]** that – gang up on a Jew and beat him up. Why? Because just like in **America** today, kids gang up on others, on weak, you know, it's – it had nothing particularly to do with who we were, but what we were.

Q: Because you were so athletic, did you feel as threatened?

A: No, I never felt threatened. I remember I was still in elementary school, so I was probably either eight or ni – must have been nine years old, my last year in elementary school. So that would have made it 1933, and **Hitler** was already in power. It was after the **Macht Übernahme**, which you kn – power grab. Somebody from not my class but another class, called me **Jude itsich**(ph), which was a Jew – Jew bastard, whatever, during recess in the schoolyard. And we weren't allowed to fight in the schoolyard or in school, that – it's not like – was not like **America**, it was like in **Germany** where we still had corporal punishment. If children misbehaved they were caned in front of the entire class. Pretty humiliating experience. So kids toed the line. But if you m – had a fight to fight, you fought it outside the school. So he want – he says, you want to fight, I'll – I'll – I said, I'll fight. I'll meet you in the park after school.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg**. This is tape number one, side **B** and you were talking about this altercation with this young man in your class.

A: You can call it altercation, I call it a challenge of a fight. So after school I went home, or w-went to my – our store, and in the park, which was the – you know, in the – is the – the French park. This guy was waiting with – of course, the word had spread, he's going to fight with **Roberg**, the Jew, whatever they had spread. And everybody was around, I took off my – my backpack, we had a **Tornister** it was called, a backpack. Took off my – my jacket and got into a fight. I'd never fought in my life, but I knew what to do, I was interested in **Schmeling** and **Sharkey** and **Joe Louis**, I think was around already. So I knew about fighting. And we started squaring off and he landed some punches and I landed a lucky Sunday punch and bloodied his nose. So I was the first – first one to draw blood. Just then somebody hollered **jute**(ph)**, jute**(ph)**,** which does not mean Jew, but – although it's close to it. A teacher approached too late, now we weren't allowed to fight even – even in the park. And he came right to it, he says, what is this fighting, why are you fighting? I said, well he c – he called me **juditsich**(ph) and challenged me to a fight, I am fighting. So the teacher addressed the other boy and says, now that's not nice. You shouldn't say a thing like that. Now I want you to stop fighting and you both go home and that's the end of it. And that's how it was settled. So I came out the victor. The word apparently spread and I never had any problems after that.

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

Q: What was your relationship with your parents? Di – were you very close to them, were you dependent upon them?

A: I was very close to my mother. My father was a rather – well, distant figure. He was on the road all week. He was a quiet man, introspective. And so we – and nearsighted, so he was limited in anything we did. Sunday – well, the routine, Sundays we would go for the traditional Sunday afternoon **Spaziergang** in the woods, whatever. Sometimes we would go on a boat ride on the river. But after 19 – let's say, well, after the **Nuremberg** laws of 1935, which was the first really restrictive, official restrictive, then I think that stopped. We could have gone – I mean, we went walking, but we no longer would go, let's say, using this excursion boat, which one of our neighbors – we lived right on the river, a-and they were a family of fishermen who also owned a little excursion steamer motorboat. So we no longer went. That was part of not raising any awareness and we really – and apparently we did it successfully in our town, because there was no open anti-Semitism that I was aware of. Others in town complained about anti-Semitism, only – you know, somebody would say something, was either as a matter of competition or neighbors who didn't like the n – the Jews next to them for one reason or another. But there really was very little and it – we used to almost brag about it, you know, to other Jewish families, that we had no **richiss**(ph) – there was no anti-Semitism – open anti-Semitism in our town Nobody was ever beaten up, intimidated or you know, I mean – and you could – anything could – could happen. Like a **Hitler** youth would see a Jewish

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man coming down the street and bump into him, you know, why don't you watch where you're going, or you know, walk in the gutter, or you know, make anti-Semitic remark and of course you couldn't do anything about it. But that never happened. It happened in other cities that we know. Whether it would, you know, intimidate or even challenge you or we didn't have any of that.

Q: Le-Let's talk now about 1933 and **Hitler** coming into power. What was your first knowledge of him, your first awareness as a child, of **Hitler**.

A: Well, I was really aware of parties because in school some kids – this was – this goes back I would think to 1931 – '32. Kids I think everywhere, take sides. You have a favorite – well, sports idol and you have a political party of your choice. So kids would ask you, so what are you? And I wa – I would say, I'm **SPD – SPD** riz – there was this Social Democratic party. What are you? I'm **NSDRP,** it's a Nazi party, meaning they were what their parents were, right? I mean it – not hard to figure. The kids – children don't have opinions, they have the opinions of their parents. So that was reflected. So I went **SPD** and I remember we had a – what do we call it, **Jahrmakt**, a – a – a fair, a country fa-fi-fair, twice a year, in the spring and in the fall. And you go there and you – you know, and you – you had the stands and I bought a – as a matter of identification, the symbol of s – the **SPD** was three arrows. So I bought – I spent five cents and bought a pin so that I could have an identity. And I came home with that, and my mother says, what do you have? I said, aren't we **SPD**? And my mother said yes, but I think it's better if you

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don't wear that, because you can be something and you don't have to advertise it, because if somebody who sees and doesn't like it, you may get into an argument or a fight and you know the Nazis of course – well, the Nazi kids, they would stick together and the **SPD** kids would stick together. So these were little clubs. So I was aware of political things. I remember well in the – in the paper that there were street fights in **Hamburg** which was, of course, **Hamburg** was largely red, predominantly communist, because was a harbor city and of course everybody read about you know, the – what happened – what went on in **Munich** and in **Berlin** where the Nazis would ride around in trucks, have a demonstration and the communists would come and break it up and vice-a-versa. And they would let – and the **SA**, these storm – the **SR** then was the predominant power, the brown shirts and brown pants. The **SS** was not yet very predominant then. So **SR** would go around and these were bruisers. They were people who liked to fight. They were, you know, bouncers, they were bru – they would go out – they joined the party so they could get into a good fight just like people here go out on Saturday night, hey, let's go to a bar where we can have some action. Same mentality. So I was aware of that as a child, but there was a – you know, of course, a sobering effect from the home to say don't get involved and we have to, as Jews, be – lay low and you know, don't make waves.

Q: And when were you aware of **Hitler** himself for the first time?

A: Oh, before – before 1933 already. I mean, I was seven, eight years old, I knew **Hitler** was in the limelight and I remember very distinctly the – about the **putsch**, the

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Reichstagsbrand, the torching of the **Reichstag** right after he was elected and acor – of – of course the power grab on January 30th, 1933, everybody was aware of that.

Q: Were you very frightened? Was this something you talked over with your parents? Was he a frightening figure to you at that point?

A: No, no he wasn't. He was far away, he was in **Berlin,** that was – what I do remember is – I mean, parents were careful – not my parents, I think most parents at the time, not to discuss anything upsetting in front of the children. So there were no political discussions, but we knew that in the Jewish – within the Jewish community – I mean, we had friends, Jewish friends and the families would get together, usually on Saturday night. There were – well, about four or five or six families that sort of were the nucleus and there were card games, **Skat** and you need four players. So there were four families that got together and it alternated at somebody's house, and that was the highlight of the social life was the card games and the women would sit and talk and the mother would entertain, I mean, with food and coffee and cake and all that and the men played cards and smoked cigars and –

Q: A-And if you were around, they wouldn't talk in front of you all.

A: Yes, they did, but we children, we were allowed to say hello and you know, then off to bed, and that's the way it was, you know. And that – I mean, I don't know any – any other way and of course my brother and I – yeah, that – that was – that was about 8:30 – nine o'clock and it was time to go to bed anyway.

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

Q: For a young boy to see people in uniforms, what does – what did that mean to you? Was it a frightening sight or did you think it looked wonderful, with these boots and these uniforms?

A: N – it was neither frightening – it wasn't intimidating. Well, if you saw a Nazi in the boots, you knew that he was a Nazi, and he was strutting it, but I was never, never afraid of them, because then we didn't have any reason to be afraid. I do, of course, remember distinctly April 1st, 1933 was the day of – oh, what was it? What do we – what do you – what do we call that? A boycott.

Q: I was going to say, did you mean the boycott?

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: Was a boycott and we had a store, storefront and there were two **SA** Stormtroopers to the left and right of the entrance, standing, you know, like this, la – not at attention, but at – wi-wi – we'd say in our army, at parade rest, okay? And if somebody would wa – even if they wo – just walked by, **kauft nicht bei Juden.** Don't buy from the Jews. And I think they had also, with white paint drawn a swastika on our – on our store windows. I came from – I went to school as every other day, and I came home at one o'clock, I mean was – school was only til one o'clock, from eight in the morning til one, and I was then in third grade. I came to the store, cause that's where my mother was, we already – we no longer had a maid. Before that we had, you know, when we were smaller we – we had a

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maid and the maid was al – I think already gone by then. And I walked in – of course they looked at me and they knew where I belonged. And then a woman came in to buy – well, a woman came in, a customer, but a woman that we hadn't seen before. And in a town of 30,000, your customers were repeat customers, people who came in to buy from us. And she said, this is terrible, what is going on. I really don't want to buy anything, but I just had to come in – into your store, she told my mother, to – you know, because I – this is – this is a terrible thing what they are doing. Was a demonstration of – you know, of solidarity. And she didn't buy anything, which was all right. And she stayed in the store a few minutes and then she went out again. So there were people like that. There was no business that day, but we kept the store open, of course, and after that. But it was a struggle, you know, the business was getting less and less.

Q: Tell me again, as a nine year old, you see these two people standing there in front of your father's store. Do you have any recollection what your thoughts were, your feelings were when you saw this, and the s – the white paint?

A: Well, I – no, I b – I knew they were there, they were – they happened to – there were three Jewish stores on that street, a shoe store sort of diagonally across the street and another one, a soft goods store as – as we had up on the corner. And they were – they were standing there, I knew all the Jewish stores, there were six – seven Jewish businesses in town, and they were standing in front – i-in front of all of them and it didn't

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– I had no – I wasn't frightened, I wasn't – they were there and I made no more of it, I knew why they were there. Okay.

Q: And you accepted it?

A: Yeah, oh yeah.

Q: And had you heard about any – the book burning? Did your parents talk about or had they heard about book burning?

A: The book burnings were later. That was, I would think about 1936 or thereabouts.

Q: There were some earlier.

A: There were some earlier? Not in our town, no.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: No, there were no demonstrations of that kind or – as I say, it was pretty low level of open anti-Semitism.

Q: Did you – before kri – we'll get to **Kristallnacht** in a moment, but before that, did you talk about what was happening with your other contemporary friends, children your age? Did – was that something you would talk about when you were together?

A: There were only about – well, there were four Jewish families who had children our age. But the me – s – there was really only one family, the one down the block, the **Wolf** family, with whom we were friendly, our parents played cards together, and they had three children. The boy was a year younger than I, the girl was a year younger than **Harry** and a third, she was two years younger than I, so they were all about our age, and

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they were sort of our only playmates after ’33 or ’34. There was another family, **Shule**(ph) who had a boy and a girl, but we didn’t socialize with them. Well, again, it was part of the – well, Jewish – German Jewish society. The man had a – he was a rag dealer. Well, he – he had the local recycling center. He dealt in – what do we call that? You got five minutes. Used, you know, iron, metals and rags and all that and I’m sure – I’m – he made a living, but it wasn’t on the same level as our – you know, our parents, who were tradesmen and had a – you know, business owned – store owners. So there was a social level that you didn’t really – they were decent people and we respect them and we were in, of course, in Hebrew school together. We had Hebrew school, and I’ll tell you about that. It was part of our social structure. But the – the s-social intercourse, you know, I mean we – we never played with those kids. They also lived further away and we just – we just didn’t, because our parents didn’t get together. But you saw each other during the high holidays in shul and of course we saw the kids during Hebrew school.

Q: Tell me about the Hebrew school.

A: Well, th – our teacher, **Hal Lotheim** was his name, **l-o-t-h-e-i-m**. He was a retired schoolteacher, on had – so he had a pension. And I don’t know what the congregation paid him for being the cantor and – but he had free room and board in the apartment in – above a – in – at the synagogue. And the building, the congregation’s building were two houses adjoining and the main building was the entrance to the synagogue and right adjacent to that in the f – facing the street was the ca – the one room classroom, and there

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was a little storage room behind that. And we went to Hebrew school Sunday mornings and Wednesday afternoon. Why Wednesday afternoon? Wednesday was **Hitler** youth day. All German children who belonged to the **Hitler** youth, and there was, of course, a lot of pressure that everybody should join and almost had to join, whether they liked it or not, you had to belong. And if you didn't, the parents were pressurized because **Hitler** wanted the youth. He didn't much care about the parents, but there was a lot of pressure, and I know because there were many – were people who really were not Nazis and disagreed with the whole thing, and pressure was put on them for the boys to join the **Hitler** youth, or the **Jungvolk,** which is the children from six to 10. You had to be 10 to go into the **Hitler** youth, the **hiyot**(ph) **HJ, Hitler** youth. Bel – below that, you were the **Jungvolk,** that is the young – the young people. They – and they then had meeting – no, I'm sorry, I guess you had to be 14 for the **Hitler** youth and up to 14 was the **Jungvolk**. So all my classmates, or most of my classmates then would go on Wednesday afternoon, they had to put on their you – **Hitler** uniform. When you attended, you had to appear in uniform. And of course, we didn't have a uniform. I would have liked to have a uniform. That was because we played war games. You played – well, we played cops and robbers, or you played cowboy and Indians, or you – you know? Or you played soldiers, you know. The bad guys were the French and the good guys were the German soldiers. So these were the war games you played. I guess all little boys do that. And so – well, but I had no regrets that I didn't have a uniform per se. As a matter of fact, the corduroy short

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pants and the belt with a belt buckle and all that, which some boys would wear even when – you know, their uniform pants, even when they weren't in uniform, with the shirt and all that. We made su – my mother made sure that we never wore anything that would imply that we wanted to, or that we belonged and you know – of course, somebody would say hey, what are you doing with those pants, you know. You are not entitled to wear these pants. But well, today I guess it's **Nike's**. Nothing has changed.

Q: Tell me about your Bar Mitzvah, did you have one?

A: Yes, I had a Bar Mitzvah, my brother had a Bar Mitzvah and you prepared for oh, a year, year and a half, whatever and **Hal Lotheim** taught us and w-well, it became my bam – ma-ma – my brother's Bar Mitzvah in 1935.

Q: Was there any problem having it?

A: No, what should be the problem? I mean, we had the service, we had some relatives come from out of town and we got a minyan together and everybody was very happy that there was another minyan man now. So Bar Mitzvahs were looked forward to in the community as a – it was – my Bar Mitzvah was May – on May 1st, 1937. And our – we had a nice dinner at home after that, and I said the table prayer, you know, **tish kabaid**(ph) afterwards and made Kiddush, and of course, in – in synagogue, I – I read the Torah and you know, it was very traditional.

Q: Were you proud of being a Jew?

A: Yes, I mean I – well, proud.

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Q: Or were you ang –

A: **[indecipherable]**

Q: – or – or were you angry that you were a Jew because you had these problems?

A: No, we weren't proud to be Jews. We were – we were content to be Jews. I think we were – proud, I think is the wrong thing. We – I think – no, you're born into being a Jew, you have no choice, but we didn't repudiate it as some did. I mean, obviously, you know, people who didn't want to be identified as Jews, or who converted to Christianity obviously – and you could do that. There was one family, a woman with two daughters, I don't know where the husband was, whether he died or whatever, and she thought it would be easier for her and her daughters and they converted. They converted to Christianity. Turned out of course that subsequently didn't do them any good anyway, right? But that was not unusual, I mean that – this was part of the assimilation mentality and attempt to become equal. I mean, look – i-i-if – if you look – you know, in history, you know, there – there were many people who converted and still remained Jews – you know, I mean, in the eyes of the world.

End of Tape One, Side B

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg**. This is tape number two, side **A.** And were you aware of **Hitler's** march into **Vienna**?

A: Yes. I'm a history buff and I – since I grew up in **Celle** with history, which wa – it's really also the cradle of the present British monarchy, so the – the house of **Hanover** originated in **Celle**. And at an early a – in school from, I guess about six or seven years, we learned about the history of **Celle** and then the district and then the province and so I – I've been interested. I grew up with history and been interested in history, and of course I was aware of the annexation of **Austria**, the so-called being invited in, and **Hitler's** triumphant march and that v – you know, **Vienna**. Of course, **Hitler** coming from **Austria** and many Germans didn't accept him because he was not a German, he was an Austrian. He tried very hard to be German, but we Germans knew that he wasn't German.

Q: Seeing pictures of him coming into **Austria**, again, to a young child, is that frightening?

A: No, wasn't frightening, it was a – you know, w-we – we saw it in the newsreels, there was no other exposure – in the newsreels and we knew it was propaganda and it was – as a matter of fact, well, din – one was – **Hitler** was everywhere. Of course it was – there was – by then, every classroom had a picture of **Hitler** hanging in the front, that was ordained. There wa – yeah, there was th-th-the – that came from – from the top. So there

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was a – there was a systematic indoctrination of the **fuehrer** being – he wasn't referred to as **Hitler** any more, he was **der fuehrer**, and he –

Q: Did you – did you have to salute the picture?

A: No, not only I didn't have to, I wasn't allowed to. Jews were not allowed to give the Nazi salute. They were – as a matter of fact, if there was a – an assembly in the – in the schoolyard, for instance, then everybody, you know, had to **sieg heil**, Jews were not allowed to. That was a – they – it was a privilege to give the – the – so Jews were not permitted to, that would have been sacrilegious. That's how they made the – the – you know, **Hitler** salute. Nor did I want to. So when the national anthem was sung, I had to attend. I stood there, I didn't sing the **Horst-Wessel-Lied**, you know. And the only thing that I remember is if they would sing, there were – there were certain – there were certain songs that, you know boys – and that was a form of intimidation, of course. Like, guys would – would pass by on their bicycle and they'd see a Jew and they'd sing a song, **Wenn das Judenblut vom Messer spritzt.** When the Jews blood will – will squirt from the knife, okay, that was – etcetera. They would, you know, intimid – form of intimidation, of teasing, of intimidating, okay? But there was never any – any physical intimidation, okay, but **[indecipherable]**. Young people, primarily boys, they feel their oats and they are together, that's what they do, right? They let it out in one form another. And there was – there were the Jews, the minority that you could let it out on if you

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wanted to without, you know, without any reprimand. **Au contraire**, it was a mitzvah for them, you know?

Q: Would you come home and talk this over with your parents?

A: I don't remember, but if – if something hap – if something happened that shouldn't happen, I wou – I would tell my mother, yes. Oh, of course, and she was good counselor and had a good head, and you know –

Q: What kinds of things would she advise you to do?

A: Well, usually to keep cool, but I really can't think of any – any incident other than the fight that I had, to you know – there was – we didn't give our parents any reason. We were – we were cautious, we were careful, we didn't make waves, we were, by and well – you know, well liked, well respected in the neighborhood, where are – all our neighbors were decent. Those that were – that we knew were Nazis, we – we didn't tangle. W-We – we went out of their way, you know, we didn't – you didn't make eye contact with them, you didn't give them any reason to – you know, we didn't give them the opportunity to be nasty to us. You went out of their way.

Q: So you felt safe? You felt safe in your neighborhood?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: When you saw a swastika, did that elicit any feelings inside of you?

A: Yeah, I didn't like it. I mean th – I – well, I was more w – of course you grow up with it and you see it and the swastikas everywhere, it was just another – it sort of made your

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heart go a little faster, but you got used to it. When I later had to return to **Germany** from **Holland –** you know, I went to **Holland** after, and then I came back, that really hit me like a sledgehammer, that I was back under the heel of the Nazi regime.

Q: We'll – we'll get to that, we'll get to that. So you were s – you were able to stay in school until **Kristallnacht**?

A: Yes. My brother left school, he was 14 in 1936 and my mother's brother lived in **Holland**, he had become a Dutch citizen. He left **Germany** right after World War I, he was in procurement in – in grains. And as you know, ger – **Holland** was neutral during World War I, and he had built up some very good relations with Dutch grain suppliers for the army. He was in **Berlin,** in procurement. And he had learned the grain trade, grain business, as a young man. And as soon as the war was over, he left **Germany**, he went to **Holland**, never ret – well, he returned to visit his mother, etcetera, but he established his business and residence in **Holland,** became a Dutch citizen and he ended up saving the family. In 1936 he took my brother to **Holland.** My uncle was not married, bachelor, but he was also the – well, he – there were five sisters and one brother, so he was the matriarch – patriarch. Sorry, patriarch. My grandmother, his mother, died in 1931, and that was the last time he was in **Germany**. Yeah, but **[indecipherable]** of course he would come before that, come and visit, but he didn't think well of **Germany**, but he also was interesting. The things that we told him later about what – what was going on in **Germany**, you know, the **Hitler** – the me – the mentality of what was going on, what

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Hitler did with the Jews. He was assimilated, I mean, he did not we – observe the high holidays, but he was not a practicing Jew, per se. He thought that we were really overemphasizing, that we were panicky, just like the rest of the world did not really believe that this was happening, and they – me -- said me – ma, he says, **Jüdische groil**(ph) propaganda, if you understand that. That's Jewish prop – you know, he – he didn't think that this was happening, that people panicked or saw things too Jewish. And unfortunately he found out after the invasion of **Holland** that it was real.

Q: Wa-Was it hard for you to say goodbye to your brother?

A: It wasn't hard, it was a fact of life. **Harry** left. I mean, he went, you know, to go to school in **Holland** and learn – when we – he went to a trade school, learned a trade. Now at this time, 1936, to go back to what you asked about Zionism, we did have classes twice a week on Wednesdays. I sort of got away from that, but the **Hitler** youth – on Wednesday afternoon we had Hebrew school, and in 1933, lot – **Lotheim** and – sorry, **Lotheim** and – Mr. and Mrs. **Lotheim** went to **Palestine** and came back as ardent Zionists. They were impressed with what was being done there and from there on he really said, well we have to – we have to support **Palestine**, Zionism is our solution. And we listened. Of course, we all subscribed to a Jewish paper out of **Berlin** called "**Jüdische Rundschau**," which is Jewish – well, was a Jewish weekly. And they had a children's section and it was Zionist oriented and told the Jewish community that they had to **A**, support **Palestine** and **B,** prepare for leaving **Germany**, that it was prudent to

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learn to – a trade – for young people to learn a trade for **HaSharat**(ph) rather than what was the trend before, an academic life. Jews in **Germany,** by and large wanted to get away being shopkeepers and the trend was to go into academic life, doctors, lawyers, whatever. And that's – we were the first ones to go to a school of higher education in my family. My br – both my brother and I went to the – you know, gymnasium. And of course that was interrupted by **Hitler,** so **Harry** went to **Holland** to learn a trade and we had no plans of where to go or what to do. My father was very reluctant to – he was 50, born in 1884, so he was hesitant to go to a country. Knew some English, learned French in school, but that was it. Where do you go, what do you do? He wasn't too successful in **Germany,** how successful would he be in a foreign country? And so that was – you asked me did I find it hard to say goodbye? Well, I was on my own now, my playmate was gone, you know, my confidant. **Harry** and I were very close as, you know, boys. But I adjusted to that and I knew it was a necessity and I lived with it, I accepted it.

Q: Okay, let's move forward to **Kristallnacht**. How did that begin for you?

A: Well, let me – let precede that. In the summer of '38, I was 14. I went to visit my aunt in **Byetahl**(ph), my mother's home village, as I did every summer for the big vacation, four weeks vacation.

Q: Her name? Your aunt's name?

A: My aunt's name was **Babette**(ph). And Aunt **Babette** was single. She was – well, physically handicapped. She had an ac – bad accident as a child and had – one leg was

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shorter than the other, so she wasn't married, she stayed home with her mother. When Grandma died in 1931, she of course continued to live in the f – family house that had been there since 1830. And this was my last – well, visit with her. During that time, in August, of course, you know that every year the Nazis in August had the **Nuremberger(ph) Parteitag**, the party convention. And usually out of that came new laws, new dogmas, new tightening. And again that was very significant, that things were tightening up and in August, mel – we had already closed our store in 1937. It n-no longer paid. We moved – it so happened that our landlord, the owner of our house, it was a three family house, we lived on the – they lived on the ground floor, the first floor was a retired lawyer, he was a person that was working at the – the law – the supreme – there were three Supreme Courts in **Germany**, one of them was in **Celle**. And he was – he had worked for the Supreme Court as a judge, but he was forced to resign in 1933, and I'll give you that story separately. They lived on the second floor and we lived on the third floor. The **Zusskinds**(ph) had given up their store about in 1928 or thereabouts and moved some of the inventory into one of their rooms made a – yeah, and they permitted us to do the same. So, whatever inventory we had left, my father thought we could sell. We moved into what was the living room and that became the office and the business and some of his customers that were loyal to him and hi – prices were right, so rather than selling the inventory at, you know, 10 cents on the dollar as we had to do with the rest of it, we maintained that. So we no longer had a store since 1937. And in August '38, my

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mother, when things were tightening up further, decided to take a trip to **Hamburg** and get three waiting numbers from the American consulate, because as you know there was a waiting list and the list was about two years waiting. She said let – le – I – I want to get the quota numbers in case we need them. And she also picked up three more for one of the families that we were closest with, the **Solomon** – the young **Solomons**. There was an old family, the parents and the son; this was the son and his wife. And we – well, then came November, of course, and we were all aware of the incident in **Paris**. What was his name?

Q: **Heinrich Grynszpan**?

A: **Grynszpan. Hersh – Herschel –**

Q: **Herschel.**

A: – **Herschel Grynszpan.** It so happens that **Herschel Grynszpan** was from **Hannover**, and I can tell you a story about that too, if you want to make a note, let me put that down. So we knew – and when he shot them, we knew there was going to be trouble. And of course, the ninth of November was always a v – a day observed in **Germany** because it was when, in 1923, the first **putsch** and the whatever, so this was always a solemn, commemorative day of the Nazi party, and that coincided. And so we were keenly aware of what was happening, but of course, we didn't know what. Now, on – the ninth of November came and of course everybody kept a low profile, we didn't go out, whatever. Seven o'clock in the morning our doorbell rang. We were upstairs, the

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front door was locked and so we looked out the window, who is it? Somebody from the **Wolf** family who had the store down the street from where our store was. We lived not near the store, we lived somewhere else. And, how are you? We are all right, why do you ask? Don't you know? Nothing happened here? No, what happened? So they came up and told us that they still had their store and they lived above the store in the – in the house, that the store was smashed, the store across the street, the shoe store, was sm – and they also lived there. We were the only ones who had a separate – you know, residence because we rented the house and we rented the store. And they owned the buildings so lived above them. That – th – you know, they had totally smashed the store, that the goods were lying all over the street. They went up into the attic and opened the – there was a door because the attics were used also in the olden days – these were half timbered houses from the 17th century – to bring merchandise. So they opened the attic door and said, if they – if they come up here to get us, we'll jump. Well, they didn't find them in the attic, they were just out to destroy the store. And so we knew what was going on in town. And my father was home, and I was home and my mother. So what to do? So Mother said – my mother was really running the family, my father was a very passive – and at that point, you know, subdued individual. And –

Q: Was he subdued because of what –

A: Ah, the **[indecipherable]**

Q: – of conditions changing?

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A: Yes, conditions. Business was bad. You – I mean, you felt very inadequate. And – and really, you know, was a matter of we didn't want to emigrate, what am I gonna do? I can't see, you know, I can't hear, at least I have – I know my clientele, I have my following. But we really didn't know what was gonna – you know, the – the Jewish community said, this can't last, it has to get better, it can't get worse. What else can they do? But they – you know, it progressed.

Q: Did your parents have to take the middle names of **Israel** and **Sarah?**

A: Not yet. That came la – that came – yeah, I think that was in 1938 as a matter of fact, when the – yes, I think that was – that came out of the **Nuremberger**(ph) laws of 1938. I think there was one of the keys where my mother said, oh, it's another notch, you know, of tightening – tightening up and of intimidation. Yes, we did – she became **Sarah** and we all became **Kurt Walter Israel –** I became isra – **Kurt Walter Israel,** my father **Victor Israel**, yes.

Q: Did that bother you?

A: Well, it was another significant thing because it was significant for us because **Roberg** was not considered a Jewish name. It was never **Rosenberg** or anything like that. So **Roberg** was a German name. So it – yes, signified that we were Jews, even, you know, wherever you went. So Mother went to **Hamburg** and got waiting numbers. So now it is nov – I'm sorry, it's November and she s – you know, we decided –

Q: This is the morning.

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A: This is the morning, yes.

Q: This is the morning after Crystal --

A: And we just – we decide eight o'clock. Now, I lived across – across from our school. Our garden backyard and the schoolyard were back to back. There was a little creek about two yards across or less, in between. And – but my mother could look into my classroom. It was maybe a hundred yards, or 120 yards across. And when we recited class – in class, you know, vocabulary or whatever with the windows open, she could hear us recite. Okay, what's that **[indecipherable]**. So she said, I think you should – better go to school. Go like any other day. If there is a problem, we had a whistle, with which we were also summoned home if we were out in the street, I'll blow the whistle three times. So I went to sc – class, and I must say my teacher, my homeroom teacher, **Studienrat Klem**(ph) was a fabulous guy who really supported me all the way. He was not a Nazi, I mean he was anything but. I must say the entire schoolyo – teachers' body, with one or two exceptions, were fabulous to me and very supportive. So he came into class and of course in those days, you know, ba – when the teacher came into class everybody had to stand up and **heil Hitler**, you know, they were – and he – he would just go, sit down. He had to raise his hand, but it was like sit down, you know. He would never say **heil Hitler**, i-it was – so he saw me and he called me – and of course when I came into class, my classmates already looked at me like, what do you – what are you doing here? And I knew what had gone on at least, yeah, from the **Wolfs**. And of course there were students

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who came by train. They weren't local, they – they came from surrounding villages and walking through town from the railroad station, they saw that the five remaining Jewish stores were smashed, and the word goes like wildfire. So everybody in class knew and they looked at me, but nobody said anything. And he – the – **Klem**(ph) called me up and said, do you know what is going on in town? I said yes, I heard. He says, do you want to stay in school? I said yes, I'd like to stay in school, school like any other day. He says okay, any time you want to go home, you can go. So I went, and the intermission was at 10 o'clock and I looked over to our house and everything was quiet. I could see our kitchen and bedroom windows from the schoolyard. And I went back into class and then at about a quarter to 11 or so, I heard my mother blow the whistle. So I asked **Studienrat Klem**(ph), I – may I go home? Yes, of course. And yeah, I did this very unobtrusive, I left my books there. I just went out of the classroom like I went to the toilet, but I didn't come back. I didn't want to make waves, you know, picking up my books and – and going out. I left my books and I just – like I went to the bathroom, but I went home.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: This is tape number two, side **B**. You were talking about how you left school after your mother blew the whistle.

A: She certainly did. So I – I went home and my mother told me that the Gestapo was there – well, yeah, every town had a – th-the police, the city police, they was – they also

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had a couple of Gestapo agents who were whatever, that they – that part of the police were there and took my father into protective custody, that was the term, **schutzhaft**, protective custody. And they were at the police station and – and they asked her, don't you have a son? And my mother says, my son is in school, where he should be. Oh. Okay. That was that. They didn't ask any further. And of course there were no phones, nobody – we di – yes, we did have a telephone, but we didn't dare use the phone because we knew it was listened to or whatever. So one of our – the girl – the family under us, **Rusterveld**, where the f – man was, you know, forced into retirement, he had a daughter, she was a couple of years older than I, **Alsa**(ph) and she ran errands for us. And they were violently anti-Nazi. She said, I don't want you to go out, I'll do some shopping for you and you're not gonna stay in your apartment, you come and stay with us. And we did. And then the word, you know, from other Jewish family, we – we – my – I think we found out from the – through the grapevine that the men were leaving the police station and that they were being sent to **Hamburg**. And then the word came down that from **Hamburg** they were sent to **Berlin**. And fr – in ber – from **Berlin** to concentration camp **Oranienburg,** which was near **Berlin.** So we already were breathing a sigh of relief be – that they didn't go to **Dachau. Dachau**, near **Munich** had the worst reputation, that **Dachau** was – was torture. The others were really just sort of like considered better grade detention facilities, whatever, as far as we knew.

Q: How did you, as a 14 year old know about **Dachau**?

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A: Well you – you heard that people were put into concentration camps and – **katset**(ph), as it was referred to, for any infraction. Jews, I mean who – Jews who had sex with – with Gentile – with the Christian women, off into the concentration camp. For whatever – whatever reason, if you broke any of the laws, and that was the **Nuremberger**(ph) laws, where th-there was no, you know, wha-whatever. Cohabitation or – and we knew they were concentration camps, everybody knew. Everybody knew they were concentration camps, and what went on in them, and men – occasionally you heard of people – well, that's –

Q: What – what was your mother's emotional state of mind when your father was first taken away, and yours?

A: Well, when – we felt helpless, frustrated. We thought that's the end, you know, we – we didn't know. They said it's – well, only protective custody, but then they went to – we didn't know. You really – and you don't – you don't think, you don't anticipate, you don't know. You really don't know. I mean, you heard of people who came back, who were released from concentration camps and you also heard from people where the families had been notified they had a heart attack and was called – yeah, in German, heart attack is called **herz schlag**. And the – that – that used to – used to be called a **schlag aufs herz**, which you know, play on words. I-Instead of a **herz schlag** you had a – okay. So –

Q: Wer – were you frightened when your father was taken away?

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A: I wasn't there.

Q: No, but when you came home and heard?

A: When I – well, I was shocked. I mean, I was, you know, I was – yes, I mean it was complete upheaval of you know, you felt absolutely helpless. I guess – you know, you – you feel like no – I tell you, the only – the only thing I can compare it with is, have you ever been in a – either a hurricane or an earthquake, where you feel absolutely helpless? Okay, you – there's nothing you can do to try and save yourself or whatever. It's that kind of a feeling, that it's beyond your control. But we also – I mean, my mother was a very rational individual and I think she kept her cool, and you know, maybe also for my consideration she didn't go to pieces and she – well, she didn't – wouldn't serve any purpose, she wasn't that kind of an individual. Some people function best under pressure, as I do and which is a blessing. You know, other people react negatively. Well, we didn't. And well then, of course, what – can you do anything? We couldn't do anything other than setting things in motion to get me out of the country. The only solution, of course, was **Holland**. And no telephone calls, you would write. Everything was by mail, you know. So my uncle agreed to take me in and started things rolling. Of course it wasn't that easy in **Holland** either. **Holland** didn't want any Jews. Even **Holland** didn't – only if – you know, mm – so it took six weeks until I could get out from my –

Q: Di-Di-Did you go to school during that time? Did you go to school after your father was taken away?

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A: **[indecipherable]** No, I didn't, no. The – November 10th was my last day in school. After that there was no – no more school for me or anybody else. I mean, it was a miracle that I went to a non-Jewish school. See, the law by then had already changed, that wherever there were Jewish schools, that the Jews were no longer allowed to go to Christian schools, but there was nothing in **Celle** and I was the only Jew. Now the **Wolf** children, **Herbert** was already – he was goi – he was, I think in **Hamburg** or somewhere, they had put him into a Jewish school in **Hamburg**. So their children were already out of their local schools. I was really the only Jew in the German school system there.

Q: You were talking about six weeks to get to be able to go to **Holland.**

A: No, my father – my father – this is, I think, significant. On December 17th, my father came back. We didn't know, we had no word that I know of, until he walked in. I don't know, I don't remember whether he phoned or whatever. I doubt it. We weren't a telephone oriented and we couldn't trust the telephone. My father was released on December 16th from **Oranienburg** together with **Hans Solomon**, who was this – the younger man, the family that we were friendly with. Of course, all the German – th-the Jews from **Celle** were sent to the same camp, **Oranienburg**. And I think **Lotheim** had already been released a week earlier, but I couldn't be sure, because he was – he was in his 70's. **Hans** and my father came out, as I say, on the 16th. They were just discharged and **Hans** was a – in his early 30's then, he was very inventive, he's a sharp guy. And my father, you know, was nearly blind, so they took the old – the hat that – that they were

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getting in – giving – all their clothes had been disinfected and just rolled in a ball, they were crumpled and smelled from this disinfectant, I can smell it today. And they – he went to the railroad station and took his hat and went begging, you know, with a blind man, you know, here's a blind man, please give the blind – and they got enough money together from Germans to go from **Oranienburg** to **Berlin**, and **Hans's** sister-in-law lived in **Berlin.** They went to the sister-in-law, her husband had of course also been taken but she was at home, and he bought enough money for the railroad fair for the two of them to come back to **Celle**. And then they walked in and I remember my father coming in, his – well, he didn't have much hair, but the head was completely shaved and this horrible smell of the disinfectant. And his body smelled from – you know, the only food that they got was – apparently the Germans took whale blubber and cooked that into a stew and that's what they got to eat, that and some potatoes. And most people couldn't eat it. **Hans** ate it, and whoever didn't want to, couldn't stomach this stuff. It smelled fa – and my father e-exuded this smell of whale blubber oil type. I mean, incred – I – I – I can smell it just thinking about it. And **Hans** was the only guy in the whole **Oranienburg** camp who gained weight, because he ate everybody el – what everybody else could – he was that kind of a guy. And then my father sat down and he cried. I had never seen my father cry, and he related the tortures that they had gone through. They had to stand at attention, now this was December, to stand at attention for six hours and if somebody dropped they weren't allowed to help them. And just, you know, the bunks, that was

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where they slept over there, wer – where they – and how they were well, humiliated and somebody broke an infraction, everybody – everybody out to witness how they were put **aufbuch**(ph) that was – it was a – a wooden whatever, gadget, where they were strung up, I guess, spread eagle and whipped 25 lashes in front of everybody. Or 50, whatever – whatever the leader of – you know, and people were dropping and collapsing and watching that. And I guess luckily my father couldn't see too much. He wa – he – they had taken his glasses away from him, he was like a blind man. He didn't see it, but he heard it, of course. And he would – he would tal – and he never talked about anything, but he was talking about it, and who could listen to that? And he'd break down and cry. And I left then, a week later, on the twe – December 24th, I left for **Holland**. Now here's again a little well, incidence of the spirit that we had. When you left **Germany** of course, you weren't allowed to take any valuables with you, anything that was called **der wiesen**(ph)**, de wiesen**(ph) is what the Germans – what you consider either cash or anything that is of international value that can be translated into money afterwards. And of course, jewelry was already – I think there was also in August '38 that Jews had to turn in all their gold, they weren't allowed to have any jewelry other than their wedding rings. And well, what do you do with that? Yeah, how di – ho-how – do you keep your diamonds, do you keep, if you have any, you know, decision. And then if the house was searched and the – they find anything, you'd be – everything would taken, you – they could do whatever they wanted to. You were – you had broken an existing law, whatever.

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So – but I think my mother kept her – her diamond ring or whatever. Bril – brilliant ring, that was. And some family jewels that we didn't turn in, had it – had been in the family for a couple of generations, we refused to turn in. See, you took the chances on that, you defied – you defied the orders and you tried to hide it or get it out, or whatever.

Q: During the six weeks from the time that your father came home to until you left, did he gain his strength back?

A: Well, he – no, he didn't. I mean, he was only home a week. Yeah, I saw him only for a week because he came back on December 16th and I left on the 24th. But now I had to – I had a stamp collection, which was a – you know, I collected stamps. Uncle **Wilhelm** from **Holland** was in international business, he would send me stamps, I collected, I had a – I had a German album. I had a nice collection.

Q: Your – your uncle's name was what?

A: **Wil – Wilhelm Marx. Wilhelm** in Dutch. So I – so that I would not have to open my suitcase at the Dutch border, you could have it examined locally, you would ta – you could take it to the finance **amt,** the – the – the tax hall, or whatever, tax inspector and they also were responsible for customs, and have it inspected and sealed there, and that seal then, you could take it acro – so my mother didn't want me to have to unpack my stuff, open it up at two o'clock in the morning when I was at the Dutch border. So I put my suitcase on my bicycle, took my bicycle over there and I went by myself. My mother did not go with me. I went by myself, 14 years old. We grew up, we had to be

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independent, we had to be self sufficient and we learned – I mean, we had no childhood, we were – we were young adults. I mean, we were – there was no time for childhood. So, they looked at the stuff, everything, your – all the clothes that you took out, nothing could be new, everything had to be washed so that you couldn't resell it in a foreign country. Everything had to have a monogram and – or initials in – in it, either sewn on or embroidered. Everything had to be identified as being your personal whatever. I took my stamp albums with me, and this a – one agent looked at it and he says, stamps? I don't think you can take stamps. I knew that you couldn't take stamps, this was – because stamps was a wonderful way of transferring value out and selling it in the – you know, and turn it into money. I knew that. I said, what do you mean, I can't? And then the o – another agent came. He says, oh come on, he says, that's a – that's a student collection, let him take the stamps. And inside – of course I didn't move a muscle, you know, but inside I know, boy I got here – I got one past them. I – and of course, I took my s – my stamps and I came to the border at one o'clock in the morning and –

Q: Y-You said goodbye – so you didn't go back home? Did you –

A: Oh no, no – oh yes, I went back home and then I'm – this was a couple of days before.

Q: Yeah.

A: And then with the – with the suitcase with the seal on it and the rucksack with the stuff and – you know.

Q: What was it like to say goodbye to your parents?

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

A: Well, I really don't remember. Tearful, I suppose. And my parents took me to the train station. I don't even remember if my father went along, because he wasn't good for anything, he was just **[indecipherable]**. I – I think only my mother went with me. I think I said goodbye to my father at home and my mother took me to the train station, and I got on the train to **Rotterdam** and at the border, the, you know, came, **pass**(ph) **kontrolle,** you know, **koffer auf machen**. And I said ma – it had the – the suitcase has already been inspected and sealed. They looked at the seal, okay, can put it back up, and that was it, and inside I was laughing. And – well, then as I rolled through the Dutch countryside, it looked awfully good, seeing the cows and you know, the – came – arrived in **Rotterdam**. Of course, my uncle met me at the train station and it was a whole new life. So now I was safe in **Holland** and my mother, in the meantime – now, my father had been released from **Oranienburg**. He had to sign a waiver that – yeah, he had to sign a paper. Germans were great at that, I'm sure you know that, that he was not mistreated in any way and that he would leave **Germany** within 90 days. At that point, of course, they only wanted to get rid of the Germans – oh, of the Jews, and you could even at that point still take your furniture with you, anything that was personal belongings, so my – my mother had to do everything, she did everything, arranged for a – in **Bremen,** which was the other port, besides **Hamburg**, to have a – well, today we would call it a container, was a **liftbahn**(ph). There was a huge box, room size was built and your furniture were put into it and everything was packed, so she prepared for that. And by March, March 15th they

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had to leave because my father's 90 days were up, and my uncle managed to get them into **Holland** because we had the American visa applications, he could prove to the Dutch government that we were only in transit and that he would – he had to guarantee of course, that he – he would vou – that we wouldn't be a financial burden to the Dutch government. The Dutch did a lot, more than most, but – they took children, but a-adults? Nobody wanted the Jews. So in – you know, in transit we could stay then, and we – my parents rented a room to live in and we ate at my uncles, and it was a – I went to s – of course started going to school in **Holland**, went to a trade school and learned a trade and on – then the American visa came up and my parents ni – the decision, the family decision was to take – we had three numbers that my mother had gotten for my father, my mother and me. **Harry** was already in **Holland**. But the decision was made, since he was the older one, he had already completed school, he was already, you know, an apprentice at a electri – electrician's job, to take him along to **America** because my father was unfit to work, he was emotionally, physically broken, he really never regained his health. The American consulate was very kind and looked the other way and – and I mean, they could be tough too, you know. As a matter of fact, the – when they were called – we were called to the American consulate for the examination, had to be a physical examination interview before you got your American visa stamped into your passport. And we went already a couple of weeks before and we listened in the – in the anteroom as people were reading the eye chart. First line, **A, E, F, G, K**. Line two, etcetera, and we wrote it down

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and my father memorized it. And came time for him to examine, sat there and he started reciting it. I'm sure, yeah, the examiner looked at his glasses, he must have known, yeah. Now, read this line again, my father – yeah, and he would point at the bottom line, and you know. Anyway, he passed and they left with my brother.

Q: Wa – why didn't your mother get four visas? Why did she just get three?

A: Because she was thinking **Harry** is safe in **Holland**, you know? That's why. But we could have – the American consul in – in **Rotterdam** said to my mother, why don't you take your s – take **Kurt** with you also? Said well, we want him to finish school here, and Uncle **Wilhelm**, who was in an international business, he was in contact with people all over the world, he was a grain merchant and he was convinced that **Holland** would remain neutral. I mean, don't forget, in the meantime the war had started, the **Sitzkrieg** as it was called. I don't know, you familiar with that term? The sitting war, where French and Germans were staring at each other across their fortification, the **Maginot** line and the **Siegfried** line.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And, I mean, the war had started in August '39.

Q: Right.

A: And so we were aware of what was going on, you know, but my uncle was convinced that – that **Holland** would remain neutral, that the Germans would need **Rotterdam** as a window to the world, just as they did during World War I and so he convinced my

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mother to let me stay in **Holland** and finish school. And it made business sense, you come to **America**, I was still of school age, my father couldn't work, who is gonna support us, right?

Q: What were your thoughts about that?

A: Didn't matter. My thought – I mean, whatever the – whatever the decision was, children weren't asked in those days and I was – I was happy to stay with my uncle and finish school and all. I thought it was best for me to finish school rather than starting to – you know, and I studied English, I was learning English, and to go to **America** as prepared as I could be rather than coming in there having no trade, not knowing your language, etcetera. So it was – was a rational decision and we were – we were convinced that **Holland** would stay neutral. So anyway – so there was the story. So they left on April 5th, 1940. While they were at sea, on April 10th,1940, **Germany** invaded **Norway** and overran **Denmark**, and my mother was in panic.

End of Tape Two, Side B

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg**. This is tape number three, side **A.** And your parents and brother are on the boat?

A: Yes, it is April 5th, 1940, they – my parents have – and **Harry** have left for **America** and I guess it's April 10th now and they have found out about the invasion of – by **Germany** of **Norway** and **Denmark** and my mother is panicked and up in arms and of course she wrote a letter on board which was posted in **New York,** air mail, via **Lisbon** to americ – to – to **Holland** and reached us, I guess, just before the invasion of the **Netherlands** by the Germans. And of course on May 10th, 1940, six o'clock in the morning, we woke up and I heard planes, and having lived in **Celle,** where we had two air bases nearby, I knew by sound all the German planes, and I woke up and I heard and I said to my uncle, Uncle **Wilhelm**, I said, those sound like **Ju-52**. That's the **Junkers 52** transport plane that was used for parachute jumps. He says, you're crazy. Ah, I was right, and he wasn't. For once he was not right. And well, the invasion came. The Dutch, who thought that if they inundated the – you know, th-the – the land and they could stop the Germans, but the Germans came by parachute. They – we lived in **Rotterdam**, they came down and – and the Dutch Marines held the **Maas** bridges for three days, didn't surrender them to the Germans, and I as a German citizen, having a German passport, which incidentally was on the – in the – at the American consulate in **Rotterdam**, we – I was –

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the Dutch police came, since I was registered as a German citizen living with my uncle in **Holland**. The fact that you are Jewish, well, didn't mean anything to the Dutch. You were German or you were Dutch or you were whatever. And politically it didn't make any difference. I mean, the individual policeman could have been sympathetic and knew what a – that the German Jews were not – you know, in – were not sympathetic to the German government, but there were also a lot of other Germans living in **Holland** who might have been, and there was a fifth column in **Holland**, wa – a Nazi party run by **Mussert.** And the **Mussert** Nazis in **Holland** were a force and the – so we were interned and my uncle, of course, you can imagine how he felt. He had convinced my mother to let me stay and, you know, go to school in **Holland**, and I was being interned, and now we didn't know what was gonna happen. So they took us to all the other – I knew some of the German refugees, Jewish refugees in **Holland** and we were all taken to a large meeting hall, which was right next to the police headquarters and we were kept there. They brought in mattresses, they put them down on the big dance floor in the dance hall and that was our temporary lodgings. And we were there for four days and then on May 14th at noon – we were kept informed of what was happening, now there was – already there were rumors that the Dutch – the – that the Germans had poisoned the water. This was all – the fifth column spread these rumors to force the Dutch to surrender, and there were all sorts of rumors spreading and anyway, th – by one o'clock the Germans start – 1:30 the Germans started bombing **Rotterdam**. Now **Rotterdam** had been declared an

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open city as of noon on Tuesday because the Dutch were ready to surrender and they didn't want the t-town – it's not a military target to – to be bombed, but the Germans bombed it anyway, claiming that the order came too late and they couldn't stop the bombers that were on the way, like they had no radio, or whatever. And they bombed **Rotterdam** and of course as soon as the bombs started falling and our building was bombed too, the man standing next to me was hit by a shrapnel. I had learned in **Germany** – as part of our preparation for the war, when I was still going to school, we had air raid drills. Oh, there was a systematic preparation of the German population for war. That if there's an air raid and you're in a building, stand in a doorway. That's what I did, and that's what saved me. So –

Q: So you were in this big dance hall when this bombing started?

A: We were – yes, right. But of course the Dutch guards who were assigned to guard us, they said look, you know, we're being bombed, run, save yourselves. They let us go. They knew it was over, and you know, there was no sense in keeping us. So I ran home.

Q: Were you with your uncle at the time?

A: No, no, my uncle – I was – I was the – he was a Dutch citizen, he wasn't touched. I as a 15 year old was interned by the Dutch. He was a Dutch citizen, he wasn't touched. So he didn't know what happened to me and he tried to find out and they said well, we are safe and we are being well fed, which we were, and – but we were retained. And they

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couldn't put us in jail, they didn't have enough jail space. So they interned us in this dance hall. So I ran home and –

Q: Did you have any communication with him while you were in – interned?

A: No, nothing, there's no communication. There are no telephone call. You are interned, you're out of – that's it. And –

Q: How did you – how did you manage that emotionally, being on your own without him, witho –

A: I managed, I managed, there's – there wasn't – there wasn't a problem, I – I was self sufficient. You – when you grew up in Nazi **Germany**, at age 14 I was self sufficient, certainly at age 15, yeah, just was a year later. So I had no – I had no problems with that. I – I could fend for myself. And I ran home. I went into our house, I had the keys. And my uncle's car wasn't there and a couple of his personal things were gone, so I knew that he had left. I took my bicycle, took a few things into my rucksack and took my stamp collection that I had saved once, put them the back on my bike and took off with the bike and out of the city. Now, we only had – we had relatives who lived in a suburb called **Hillerhausberg**(ph), and I decided to go there, but to go there I had to well, go through a railroad – go through a railroad underpass and of course the road was jammed with cars, but I was on a bicycle, there were a few other people on bicycles, you know, **Holland** is a – bicycle is a means of transportation and there weren't that many cars in 1940. But I got through this traffic jam with my bicycle faster than the cars and I went to

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Hillerhausberg(ph) and when I got there I saw my uncle's car standing in front of the house that I was visiting, of course he was very happy to see me. He didn't know what had hap – what would happen to me, whether I was alive, or whatever. And so we had a happy reunion. Then that night and then the following night we saw **Rotterdam** burn. The Germans had thrown a lot of incendiary bombs and **Rotterdam** went up in smoke, the old **Rotterdam.** And then eventually, after I guess about four or five days after the fires were out we returned back to our address on **Mauritsweg**, and we found that the city was well, burned, the center of the city. And our house was the second house left standing. Next to us – these are very much like the brownstones in **New York**. They are one room wide and foos – three stories high, but they're with a stoop. And our house was standing. Our neighbor's next to us was standing and that was the m – consul of **Monaco** lived there and the flag was still flying. And I came into our house, nothing was touched. There was no pilfering, there was no looting, not a window was broken. It was, yeah, really everything was untouched. Well, we moved back in, but now the – the Germans of course came – came in that very afternoon. I saw Germans everywhere and we really felt we were – well, we were occupied.

Q: What was it like for you to see the Germans again?

A: Terrible. It was really, I mean like – like a 10 ton weight was put on you. Before I had felt free, that freedom I felt when I left the German border behind me, this, you know, breathing free, and no – now I don't have to watch any more what I am saying, I don't

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have to be on my guard constantly. You don't have to look over your shoulder or try and anticipate what the people around you do, how they act and react and all that. All that was gone, and – but at least I knew what to expect and what to do. Now the Germans, at that point they came in and they really tried to befriend, or have the Dutch befriend them. They were – they did not act as occupiers or so, at least their, well, **PR** relations, as we would say today, they – they really tried to win the Dutch over to them by, you know, propaganda articles, radio broadcasts. Of course everything was taken over, we are not here, we – we – this was a tactical move, we had to do that to prevent the British from invading you. And we are, you know, you – or you are Aryan just as we are, and try to, you know, take that tack to win the Dutch over. But in the meantime, of course, the Dutch knew what the Germans were like, most Dutch. And that were there to grab the food and they were exba – sending all the produce – **Holland** was known for cream and cheese and butter and all the, you know, good things in life that – that was being sent to **Germany**, and of course that was the case. So –

Q: Speaking about Aryan, did you – was your coloring very dark? What did you look like, physically?

A: My – no, I – as – as they used to say in **America**, I could pass. I didn't look Jewish. There's a little anecdote I can tell you that happened in 1936 while I was still in – in **Germany**, and **Harry,** my brother was still in class. Of course the edict had come down, the instructions that race theory had to be taught in school. And that – our biology teacher

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ha – also happened to be my brother's homeroom teacher. So one day i-in class, says well, today we will talk about the Aryan race. We know of course that the characteristics of the Aryan race are a long – you know, oval face, high forehead, blue eyes, straight nose, blon – blonde hair. And he looked around the classroom and he said, like **Roberg**, for instance. And he did that very deliberately, to make a point. I don't know on – how many got the point that he made in the class, but he did it because he felt good about it. It turned out – I found out after – I visited this teacher, Dr. **Riegerberg**(ph) after the war when I came back to **Germany**, and I visited with him, and I found out then that he had a Jewish grandmother that some of his colleagues knew about, but nobody would tell. And they protected him until 1944 when the director of the school thought it was best if he would take early retirement, just to protect him. So those were the games people played, okay, and that was – so you asked me whether I looked Jewish, that's my answer.

Q: Okay, we're back in **Rotterdam.**

A: We're back in **Rotterdam**. My uncle sold his car. I taught him how to ride a bike, he hadn't ridden a bike since he was a boy. And we – well, we pared down. His business, of course, was gone. He was a well-to-do man, but you know, there was no more international grain trade. And my – I had no papers at this point. My passport had been at the American consulate, which went up in flames with the rest of the city. So first I had to get a new German passport, and that took about three months. By –

Q: Were you ever in fear for your life during any of this time? Direct fear of your life?

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A: From the Germans, no. During the bombing, mm, I ran pretty fast. But not really. I can't say that I was ever afraid because – I think because I was prepared, I was – you know, as a child I think the air raid drills, that's something to – really that has served me well throughout my life is I believe in preparation because I learned nearly in life that preparation and knowing what your alternatives are, making several choices, having a plan **A, B** and **C** is good planning and gets you set, you know, for various eventualities. So maybe I can, you know, look at that as a positive thing that came out of this. Anyway, by about July, August, the Germans were, of course, pre-preparing for the invasion of **Great Britain**. And whatever was afloat, they requisitioned. They were requisitioning every barge, every boat, every whatever. But is also showed to us and the Dutch that they really hadn't prepared – I think the war went so well for them, both in **France** and **Belgium** and in **Holland**, you know, they wiped out the allies and came to – to the **North Sea** and the channel, and really weren't prepared to invade – to invade **England** when the time was right. Had they prepared a – an invasion fleet to follow up on the ground victory, **England** would have been mincemeat. So then they – the – well, the Battle of **Britain** and the air war started and we followed that, of course, from **Holland** and we would listen to **BBC**. The mul – the Dutch channel, the **Orange** channel broadcast every night at nine o'clock and all Dutch would listen to that. And of course you risked whatever, your freedom, your life, if the Germans found out that you listened to – to –

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and they could arrest you, arrest you, but you took the chance and you did it discreetly, and –

Q: Were you permitted to have a radio?

A: At that point in **Holland**, yes, they couldn't control it. In **Germany**, of course, Jews weren't allowed to have radios any more since 1936, I think. But yes, you were allowed to have radio because the – also they, at that point still wanted to look like the good Germans so they didn't come out with the edicts of no radios, or no this or that. Of course, it was known that – that you weren't allowed to listen to the enemy, but who cared?

Q: To – to back up a little bit, do you remember your 16th birthday in May 1940?

A: That's a good question. I remember my 16th birthday, yes, and we celebrated it in **Hillerhausberg**(ph) and my uncle was – and I was exceedingly glad to be able to celebrate it. I don't know how we celebrated it, but I guess we found a little cake. You know, the Dutch are very good at finding sweets somewhere, so I'm sure that we did it the right way. I don't remember the details, but yes, yeah, it's – it's interesting for you to note that it was right there in the thick of it, while **Rotterdam** burned. By about August then, when the invasion plans of the Germans became more prominent, all German born Jews were ordered to leave the coastal zone of, I think 25 kilometers. So I had to move from **Rotterdam** and an aunt and uncle of mine, who were the parents of a cousin, ma – that's my uncle's older sister and her husband, they had also come to **Holland** because

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her daughter lived in **Holland**. And we then had to move out of the **Rotterdam** area, further inland and we went to **How-da**, which to Americans in pronounced **Gouda**, where the cheese comes from. And I con – we rented a small apartment in a farmhouse and Aunt **Lena** kept house for her husband and me and I went to trade school. I resigned from the **Rotterdam** trade school that I went to and went to the trade school, continued in trade school in **Gouda**.

Q: Stu – studying what?

A: Oh, I was studying auto mechanics. But in order to become an auto mechanic the first year we had to work on bicycles, the second year on motorcycles and the third year on automobiles. So I was up to working on an old **Nash** engine. And while we were there, my uncle, in the meantime or – yeah, I – I had to get a new passport which eventually I – I got from the Germans, of course, you know, with the new photo and a big **J** stamped into it again, **J** for Jew.

Q: Was the name **Israel** in it?

A: Oh yes. **Kurt – Kurt Walter Israel.** I still have the passport, so I can check that. And well, went to school and we heard from **America**. Of course, **America** heard from us via **Portugal.** I still have the card, the first card that we sent to **America**, a postcard. You were only allowed to send postcards, no letters, because it was easier for the Germans to censor them. Read a postcard easier than opening up a letter and closing it again. Where we –

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Q: What – what kind of things did you say on the postcard?

A: Very interesting that you – I have the postcard. We wrote it, of course, in Dutch, even though my parents didn't understand Dutch, but **Harry** was there to translate it, and I wouldn't have written in German for all the tea in **China**.

Q: Why not?

A: Because we hated the Germans. I felt like a – like a Dutch person, I wanted to have nothing to do with – with Germans and I sort of denied that I – you know, that I certainly would not let them know, or give them the satisfaction or make it easy for them to read my mail. So this was – this is the only way we could get back. But there was that, you know, resentment – well, resentment, you're gonna make it as tough for them as possible.

Q: Were you still speaking in German though, to your uncle?

A: No, we spoke Dutch only. Oh no, we – we – at that point we wouldn't have spoken German for anything, either in public or even in private. With my uncle and aunt, I mean, Aunt **Lena** of course, I had to speak German because they didn't understand any Dutch. But I was fluent in Dutch and of course, you know, in school. So – no, but we wouldn't have spoken German for anything, so my corresponding was in – but I wrote everything in – well, we had a – a code. This interesting point that you make. This is something that we had already developed while living in **Germany**. When – when we wrote from **Germany**, let's say to **Holland** or to relatives, we would write it in such a way that they understood what we were talking about but nobody else could. For instance, in **Celle**, the

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– the captain of the volunteer fire brigade, his name was **Schnell**, which happens to be quick, okay? **Schnell**. So I wrote on this postcard, we are well. Our old neighbor Herr **Schnell** had plenty of work for at least a week. So they knew how to interpret that, the censor didn't. So this is how we got the information across without, you know – anyway, it worked for us and I think all families had that. Or we would – we would refer to family members who were already somewhere else, you know. If – if we had a relative, let's say, in **Switzerland**, we would say Uncle **S-Simon**, you know, we were able to get in touch with Uncle **Simon** and send him something. Meaning we were able to send something to **Switzerland,** okay? So that's how we disguised information. I think that was pretty common. You just had to adapt to conditions, and you did. And it became actually, a sport to try to outwit the Germans. That was our mentality and it was also, that's what kept us going. Chronologically now I want to move on to – my uncle, of course, was trying desperately at that point to try and get me to **America**. Don't forget, **America** was still neutral. Then he found out in oh, about in October, November must have been, sometime in the fall of 1940 that someone in **Holland** tried to organize a children's transport to save or to reunite children who were left behind in **Holland** with parents who were already in **America**. I only found out about 10 years ago when I was in – in **Amsterdam** at the war museum and archives, who this woman was. And that was Mrs. **Wijsmuller**. She was – and my uncle found out about it because her husband was a shipping magnate. He – he owned steamships. And my uncle was, you know, dealt with

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steamship companies, being in the grain business. And Mrs. vice – **Mefrau Wijsmuller**, they were not Jewish, of course, had very good relations with the Germans, German officers, in particular.

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: – volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg**, this is tape number three, side **B.** And you were talking about **Frau Wijsmuller**.

A: **Mefrau Wijsmuller,** spelled **w-i-j-s-m-u-l-l-e-r. Mefrau Wijsmuller** had very good relationships with German officers and other than with the Nazis and the – a lot of the military were not necessarily – the professional military were not necessarily in agreement with what the Nazi party did, or the **SS** did. So there was la – she had – she had good connections all the way to the top in **Holland**, and in **Germany**. And she was apparently able to persuade the Germans to let her do humanitarian things, taking – you know, reuniting children after the war who were in **Holland** and **Belgium** with the parents who were in southern **France**, etcetera. She would make a trip with six or eight children and take them to be reunited. On the way she would – she – she would also take medicines with her and medical supplies and she was really quite a force, and obviously very persuasive and would tha – now, there was an – there was an incident at the border too, that I understand she arranged fo – where she bribed the border guards with a couple of bottles of whiskey, etcetera. Here, have a good time, let me bring these children across,

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you know. And she was – she was really very good at what she did. So she tried to get this – this experimental group going and I think she also enlisted or tried to enlist the Red Cross and in **America** the **HIAS**, etcetera. She pushed all buttons, and was able to then arrange for an experimental group. There were two groups, one that I was on, which was the first group. We left **Amsterdam** on January 31, 1941. I had gotten my – oh, I'm sorry, I'm – cancel that. I got my American visa in **Amsterdam** on January 31, 1941. Now that I had the visa, I was eligible for **Mefrau Wijsmuller's** group of other youngsters who were also getting their American visas during February, and on March first, we left **Amsterdam**. But, under the German rules we had to go back to **Berlin** because all trans – all officially sanctioned tr-transports out of greater **Germany** and occupied lands, originated in **Berlin**.

Q: Was it – was it hard for you leave **Holland**?

A: It was hard for me to leave **Holland** because even though we were occupied, I was still among friends and now, I mean the feeling when we were on the train and we came back across the German border, I mean, there was still a border between **Holland** and **Germany**, but the border didn't mean anything, but now everything was – and now we were traveling as a group of young Jews and well, we knew how to behave. We were all German Jewish – German, yeah, refugees. The oldest was 17, I was 15 and the youngest girl was 11.

Q: Y-You were 16, I think.

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A: I was 16. So we – we went back into **Germany** and we were told that we would get –

Q: What was that like to go in – to go back?

A: Very oppressive. Of course, we only spoke Dutch. We did not acknowledge that we could speak German, even though we had German passports. We could have been, you know, b-bor – come as children to **Holland**, we did not acknowledge **Germany** in any way. And among ourselves we spoke Dutch so that not everybody could understand what we were saying. We arrived in **Berlin** and we were taken under the wing – well, we arrived actually in two groups. There was our group of, I think eight, and then four more came, or five more came a few days later. The plan was that we would stay one week in **Berlin**. There was a transport from **Berlin** once a week, from **Berlin** to **Lisbon.** Now, I had received – oh, my uncle had received from my mother in **America**, a transatlantic cable stating that passage had been booked – passage booked for **Kurt**, American a – export company, 210 dollars paid, reservation booked from lis – **Lisbon, New York**, leaving March 15th. And I had that telegram – cable. I had nothing else. I had no ticket or anything, just the acknowledgement. When we got to **Berlin** and we were lodged by the – by the Jewish congregation in **Berlin** at a place which was home – old age home. **Altersheim**. Located at **Grosse Hamburger Strasse,** number 19. It was a home for the aged and was also a school and th – the building – behind the building, behind the school building there was a gymnasi – a gym and that gym had been converted into a makeshift hall where there were about 80 – anywhere between 80 and 120 cots. A curtain was

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drawn in the middle for men on the – on one side, women on the other. There was one potbelly stove in the center for what passed as heat. It was all, you know, improvised, but it worked and the people that were there knew they were gonna be there only a short time, but it was a transient location. We ate there where they had kitchen, we ate three meals a day there and the Jewish community took care of that.

Q: So you had direct contact with these **Berlin** Jews?

A: Well, that was – that was arranged by the committee. The committee in – in **Amsterdam** that had arranged for us to, you know, and was in communication with **Berlin**. And there was also a group in **Lisbon**, the Jewish community, and I think the **HIAS** was sort of the overriding Jewish organization that coordinated that.

Q: But my question was you ha – you were able to talk directly with these **Berlin** Jews, could you –

A: Well, there was one man –

Q: – have conversation with them?

A: – thi – well, not at large. There was a man who was assigned to us. He was – he was the contact, so we didn't just – you know, he was the contact, and we also in the group, the oldest person – oh, there were two, there was one woman, **Judith**, she was 17, and there was a fellow with whom I became very friendly, **Jerry Cohen**(ph) was 17. They were the – the senior people and they sort of, you know, took everybody's passport so that – there had to be an organization. They were in charge. Anyway, the first day, of

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course, within 24 hours, within **Germany**, certainly within **Europe**, when you move, you know, you have to register. When you leave **Holland**, whe-when I left **Gouda**, I had to go to the city hall and say, I'm leaving, I'm going to **Berlin**, I will be in **Berlin**, okay? And then when I – when we got to **Berlin** we had to say, we are now in **Berlin**, we come from **Gouda**, etcetera, records, you know, transfer every – and everything with stamps and so we had to go to the city police in **Berlin** and s-state that we were there for one week, we were staying at **Grosse Hamburger Strasse** and we were going – after one week we would go – you know, continue on to **Lisbon**, we were in transit. Fine, got permission to stay for seven days, no problem. But after seven days we did not have our transit visas for **Spain**. We needed transit visas for – well, **France** wasn't a problem, that was an occupied country. It's – the Germans were in charge, but **Spain** and **Portugal** were. And our passports were taken to – were taken to the Spanish consulate and they said oh, we will be glad to give you the visa, as soon as you have the Portuguese visa. What's the sense of giving you a Spanish, you don't even have the Portuguese? And unless we can be assured that you have the Portuguese so that you don't get stuck in **Spain**, we will give it to you. Went to the Portuguese. Of course we will give you Portuguese visa, as soon as you have the Spanish visa. What's the sense of giving you a Portuguese, you don't even have the Spanish? Get the Spanish and you will get the Portuguese, okay? Catch 22. We went back to the Spaniards and told them. And oh no, they're wrong, they – we will give you the – it went back and forth. This took, of course,

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more than a week so after seven days we had to go back to the **Berlin** police to get an extension of our permit to stay. Now they got nasty, and they hollered at us in German. You're eating the bread that the German workers are entitled to. The implication was that if we didn't work, we wouldn't eat. Now we also had heard and we knew that once you were assigned as a labor force, if they put you into a factory, you were – became war essential. You could take your American visa and whatever, okay? You would never get your exit permit. So they gave us another one week extension. Now within that week we still did not have the papers. Now they said well, the – **Berlin** is not responsible for these papers, the American visa was issued in **Holland**. The – these people came from **Holland**, they should have gotten their Portuguese and Spanish transit visas in **Holland**, not in **Berlin**. So they took our passports and sent them back to **Amsterdam.** Now we were without identification. We got, I guess, a temporary, you know, bu – I – I.D. card, whatever from the – from the – **Berlin.** Now we did not dare to, you know, go out or whatever. If we – if we would be caught without that – you know, you have to – you have to expl – well, we did go out, but only – things were very controlled in **Berlin** already at that time. The British would fly over and bomb occasionally. It was not – but they would come across, so there were air raids at night. The food was rationed, of course. And Jews had special ration coupons. Everything was by coupons and the Jewish coupons were stamped with a red **J.** Jews were only allowed to buy after four p.m. There was nothing left by four p.m. You go into a bakery, you took whatever – if they had anything left you

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took what, you know, didn't say well, I want a rye bread, you took whatever they had, right. Those were the conditions. Anyway, the Jewish congregation – and I'm going to try and find out how they did that, had a – had a gimmick. They protected us from being assigned to the workforce, and it worked as follows. We were assigned as a workforce in **Berlin Wannsee.** Now, I don't know whether you know what **Wannsee. Wannsee** was there was a large estate which was – course had been Jewish, that was confiscated and had been made as a **R** and **R** retreat for the **SS.** They were still in the process of fixing that up and the Jewish congregation apparently had somehow managed to arrange that they will supply **X** number of workers every day. Let's say 50 workers for doing ground keeping etcetera. So now we were assigned twice a week to go out and work in **Wannsee.** The Gestapo out there didn't care who came. Now we were – we were briefed, we were told, you will see people in striped suits that are guarded by soldiers with guns. Don't even look at them, make no eye contact with anyone. Don't talk to anyone. Don't talk among each other other than necessary, even the people that you know. Do your work, keep your head down, mind your own business, don't make waves, okay? So, with those instructions we took the **S-Bahn,** the subway, the elevated out to **Wannsee** and we went to work, raking, cleaning up, whatever they told us to do. And now we had to go back after two weeks to the city police. What are you doing, you have been here – are you – what – we are working for Gestapo **Wannsee.** That's all they had to hear. We got our stamp. You can stay. We had the extension. And that's how they rotated people who

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were about to leave to protect them from being entered into the labor force. And I'm going to try and find out in **Berlin** when I am there this spring if they know how they managed to do that. In the meantime, political things march on. Things in the **Balkan** weren't going too well. We were watching, of course the political or the – how the war developed. So far, for **Germany** everything went right. **Italy** started to invade **Albany, Albany** couldn't be invaded.

Q: **Albania?**

A: Alb – right, **Albania**. What did I say, alba – **Albania. Albany** is upstate **New York. Albania**. And the Germans had to go and help them out and then the invasion of **Greece** as a follow up. They parachute jumped to **Crete.** By this time it was April and we said oh well, if the war expands, maybe we'll never get out. And we still didn't have our papers. They were still haggling in **Amsterdam** and **Berlin**. We still didn't have our passports.

Q: And you're still working at **Wannsee.**

A: We're still working **Wannsee**.

Q: Which is the site of the future **Wannsee** Conference.

A: Right. Now it was – finally, by the end of April we said well, we are getting our papers, and we did get our papers finally, and now we were preparing, we were told the trip takes five days. You will leave on – maybe in two or three weeks you will be able to get on the train. And I was telling them my, you know, my visa – my visa expired May 31st. I didn't have all that much time left. My American visa was issued January 31st. It

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expired May 31st. By that time I had to be on the boat. So time was getting short for me, the other kids had maybe a week or two more, but not a lot. One day – well – how much time do you – how much time do you have left? So one day, it was, I guess end of April or so, and I was walking past a **Woolworth** and there wa – it is – was a **Woolworth,** there was a **Woolworth** in **Berlin,** and it was like 9:30 in the morning. And I saw that they had a big ad in the window, **Thermosflaschen**(ph), **Thermos** bottles. They had a special. So – but **Thermos** bottles in **Germany** weren't that easy to come by during the war. So my God, it's 9:30, I walked into this store. I would – and they were pretty cheap too, like four **mark** or something like that. I said yes, I would like some **Thermos** bottles, yes. I need 13. 13 **Thermos** bottles? Yes. He says, why do you need 13? I said, we're going on an excursion from school and you know, we – we all going and I need – of course I said this in perfect German. Are you sh – are you Aryan? **Sind sie arisch**? I said yes. He says, may I see your **Ausweis**? I said, I don't have an **Ausweis**, I have a passport. Let me see your passport. I said my passport is at the – at the German embassy. Are you sure you're Aryan? I said look, I am **Auslandsdeutsche.** Now I don't know whether you know what that it. **Auslandsdeutsche** they – in **Germany** they had a very special standing because they were the Germans, the Aryan, the good Germans, Aryan Germans who lived in the foreign countries, and **Hitler** – the system really sort of depended on them that if and when they moved in that they would support the German cause. So the **Auslandsdeutsche** was a status. I said, I am **Auslandsdeutsche** from **Holland**. I said,

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

I've lived in **Holland** most of my life. My parents were German, but I lived in **Holland** and in **Holland** we don't know from Aryan or non-Aryan. I don't know what that means. Yeah, I don't think you're German. I'm sorry, I can't sell you now. Now this is called **chutzpah.** I said well, if you don't want to sell me now, at least will you save me 13 bottles so that when I come back at four ocl – he said, you have to come back after four o'clock – when I come back after four o'clock that I – that I can still get these? I really don't know why you don't want to sell me those now. Come back at four o'clock. And I did. And she was not waiting with the police. She was decent. She sold me 13 bottles. Now, be – all my co-travelers were very happy because now we were prepared for our trip through **France** and **Spain** and **Portugal.** We at least could have hocked something. When I came to **America** and I told my mother that story, she almost died. How can you be so stupid? Well, that's – I took the chance and I had to try and get out of it as best I could, and you have to – you lived, or you survived or you didn't survive by your wits. And that's – that was the point of growing up under these conditions. Anyway, we had our Thermos bottles, we were ready to go and we were preparing, and on May 11th, **Rudolf Hess** decided to fly to **England**. **Rudolf Hess** of course was **Stellvertreter des Führers**, and we thought this is the end, we're no – never going to get out. Well luckily, the Germans played it down, they didn't make a big deal of it, it was in the paper one day and he was out of his mind, it was – well, whatever. He tried to – however they explained it and the newspapers will tell you how. And it did not change the foreign policy toward

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America, which was still neutral. And on May 19th, we left **Berlin**. We were sealed into a railroad car, third class. This was a regular, you know, railroad car.

Q: Y-You just passed your 17th birthday?

A: Yes. The doors were sealed, do not open the windows. Of course, we weren't going to get out, but they were afraid that maybe somebody would add – would – would climb in. And we were shunted, we were attached to a train that went to **Paris**. Of course in **Paris** you arrive at **Gare du Nord**, and for the Spanish border you leave from **Gare Austerlitz**. How do you get from one to the other? Well, we were shunted by whatever, like freight. It took us about seven hours to get from one railroad station to the other, and then we were eventually attached to the train that went to the f – Spanish border.

Q: D-Did you have an adult accompanying you all this time?

A: No. No, we were – we were – we were 13 adults ranging from age 18 to age 12.

Q: Did the older children take care of the younger children?

A: Yeah, the older – yeah, the two – the two – you know, **Judith** and **Jerry** who were by this time, I guess 18, whatever. And no, there was – there was nobody. We knew what to do.

Q: Wer-Were the younger children in good spirits?

A: Yes, they were – well, the younger one – she had an older brother too, he was sixt – 17 also, and you know, there were – there were no problems. There were no problems that respect. And we arrived at the Spanish border, the name, ba-ba-ba-ba – **Ondai**(ph).

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In **Ondai**(ph). And in those days – when you do it now, you – you know, the – the different – **Spain** has different rail gauge than the rest of **Europe**. In those days that was solved by getting out on the French side, you walked across a bridge and then you were in **Spain** and you boarded the Spanish train and that's what we did.

End of Tape Three, Side B

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg**. This is tape number four, side **A**, and you've just come over to the Spanish border.

A: Well, now we were in **Spain** and while we knew, of course, that **Spain, Franco's Spain** was very sympathetic to the Germans, at least we had the feeling that we were not under direct German control any more. The people who had organized our trip had arranged for us to be overnight in **San Sebastián** and we stayed at the finest five star hotel, the **Marie Louise**, I think it is called, where we spent a glorious night and then went on by train, and as we were riding through the Spanish countryside, we really saw an appalling sight. **Spain** had just come out of the civil war which lasted what, four years, five years? And the people were devastated. We had hoarded bread for our trip because we had to take along food for five days. We were locked into a – into a car and we knew there was no food in – in **Spain**, so this was our third day. And suddenly we had really poor people coming along the railroad car and as we were standing at this station, or if we were on a siding somewhere, begging, begging for bread and offering us oranges. I hadn't seen an orange since I left **Holland**. In **Holland** we had oranges, but **Germany** had no oranges. So we traded bread for oranges. And then while the train then made its way slowly to the Spanish border, to the – to the Spanish-Portuguese border, and there we had to change again into a Portuguese train, which was –

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A: Yeah, I just wanted to ask about how cohesive the group was, these are young teenagers. Were – were you a unified group, did you feel intensely close to each other? The feeling among the group of children that you were with.

A: Yes, we were. There were – there were some kids that felt closer, a couple of the – well, girls especially, sort of kept to themselves. I guess some of the guys were, I don't know, they weren't coming on to them by today's standards, but there – you know, they didn't want any involvement. Of course, the leaders wouldn't tolerate any an – romantic, let's say, involvement, there was none of that. But m – m – well, to each his own, and –

Q: Wha-What did you all do inside this car for – for five days? What did you talk about?

A: I really don't remember. Our conversations were very guarded. When a – whatever – whatever, even in **Spain**, you never knew who was listening.

Q: No, I meant, in the sealed car.

A: In the sealed car I don't know what we did, whether we played games, I don't really recall, but we – maybe we played checkers or something like that, but the – there wasn't a lot of reading, there wasn't a – a – I really – you looked outside, you looked out the window and you ate whatever you had at various intervals. Now, while I was in – in **Berlin** still, Uncle **Wilhelm** had sent me a – packages, food packages. When he found out that I was going to be there more than a week he – in **Holland** you could still get things, in **Germany** you couldn't, so I got a couple of food packages with chocolate, which of course I shared with my fellow – you know, travelers. And a couple of little

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Gouda cheeses. And I really saved a bar of chocolate and a cheese as a iron ration, I called it, you know, when things really get tough that – that I had something. We didn't know where our next meal was coming from, so I always had that in reserve. And – a matter of fact, I brought a cheese to **America**. And – but I don't remember in particular how we kept busy. But, you know, just looking outside, I don't know whether I did any – I did – I did a lot of drawing then but I didn't – oh, by the way, I had – I had brought you a couple of pictures, talking about drawing, I almost forgot, they are put into the record, you can have th – I – this is what I – we are going back to May of 1940 in **Rotterdam** and there was the view of **Rotterdam** from the roof of my house, and this too.

Q: And what is – could you describe that?

A: Yes. Here we have a view, this is a pen and ink drawing, since I – we had no cameras. A pen and ink drawing of our view from **Mauritsweg** toward the city hall, and we see in the background the **oude kerk**, the old church steeple. The old church was heavily damaged during the fire and so was the city hall. And next to the city hall is – is the tower, very modern with the carillon on it, which the Dutch are known for. And that was the new stock exchange. That remained untouched, but everything around it was burned, burned out and devastated. The other picture is the street – sa – there was the – the trees in the background, was the zoo. And th – this street here there is a trolley with the tender going through there. The streets, once they were cleared the trolleys would run again, but they were going through rubble and devastation. Everything up to the house on which I

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was – where I was on the roof, everything was burned out, bombed out and devastated. So this is a pencil drawing which I now didn't complete, but I did sign it.

Q: You made these actual drawings at the time?

A: I m – I made these drawings at the time, yes. This is –

Q: And why did you do that?

A: Because I wanted – I wanted to record what – what I – you know, what – what we had seen. I was always very conscious of, you know, historic events, this was certainly historic event. I had no camera and so – and I was into – into drawing, so I – I drew it and well, this pen and ink, I haven't done very many pen and ink, but that's all I had available then, and I think it's a very respectable little drawing. So I'll leave these with the records.

Q: Okay, now we're back in **Spain.**

A: Okay, back in **Spain.** Well, actually we're – we're crossing over into po – into **Portugal,** the Portuguese trains were new, aluminum, and very American looking. They were, in fact, modern American railroad equipment and we really saw it as the preview of coming attractions. We arrived in **Lisbon** and we were put up by the Jewish community there m – or the organization that was sponsoring our trip, assumably the **HIAS**. We were put up in a **pensionne** and we had a very interesting experience. About the day after we arrived, a man came to our **pensionne** and said, I am from the free Dutch government in **London**. And he showed us a – an **I.D.** And you have come from **Berlin**? Yes. And you were in **Holland** before? Yes. And of course we were very eager to tell our story and also

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give the allies – don't forget there was, you know, the Dutch – the queen had escaped to – and the – you know, the royal house was in **London**. There was a Dutch force – air force, and you know, whatever, armed forces and we were very eager to help the allies. So he says well, I would like to interview you. I will come back tomorrow and I'd like you to – you know, to tell me whatever you can. And we were most eager to tell him. So we met the following day, it was about six o'clock at night. I and two other boys, **Jerry Cohen**(ph), who was fluent in Dutch and one other boy. And first we went to a restaurant, caf – café on the main square in **Lisbon** and he ordered coffee for us, and oh, we were glad to have real coffee after that bilge water we – we got in **Germany**. And then he said, don't turn around but I don't think we can talk here because there is an – an foreign agent sitting at another table, watching us. We better leave here. And of course we were not aware of – you know, we hadn't seen any of the movies that – that showed that friend and foe met in **Lisbon**. And he says, I think we better go to my apartment, where we can talk freely. And we went, and he took us up some back alleys in the back where the – if you've ever been in – in **Lisbon**, you have a – seven hills just like in **Rome,** and cobblestone narrow streets and he led us to his apartment. All I can say is thank heaven he was legitimate. What we found out later, he could have been a German agent who posed as a free Dutch agent. Well, we spilled our guts. We told him what the Germans had done in **Holland**. We told him where the fortifications were in **Berlin** in the – in the zoo area, **Tiergarten** and th-th-they had built high rise bunkers they call them,

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solid concrete. And where the anti-aircraft guns were agains – you know, when the British came o – flying over, we spilled our guts and felt very good about it, that we could finally do something. What we didn't realize was that there were just as many German agents there as there were English and Dutch and whatever else. So he could have – very easily it could have been the last of us, that we would have disappeared, never to be seen again. Luckily, that didn't happen. Well, so now it was –

Q: Ho-How did you know so much about the locations of places in **Berlin** and so forth?

A: It was a –

Q: Military.

A: Well, tha-tha – that's militar – this was apparent to anybody who lived in **Berlin**. You know, the **Tiergarten**, which is the – the zoo or the park area, they had built bunkers there because they were – because it was – they were protected by the trees and were, you know, camouflaged, natural camouflage. And well, we just told them what we knew about what they were doing in – in **Holland**, that they had tried to, you know, build a fleet which – etcetera, etcetera. And – and well, there was that and then as time got near I went, of course, speaking for my ow – my own interests, I went to the American export lines and told them that I was here. I had my cable showing that my mother had paid. I had missed the March 15th, I had not taken advantage of the payment. You have a payment, and I'm here now and I've got to leave. I knew that the next ship was leaving on March 30th. The **Excambion**, one of their lines. And yes, I said, well I have to be on

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that ship, and – okay, don't worry, I se – so starting on the 27th, I went to the office eight o'clock in the morning and I said I would like to see the passenger list. Don't worry, you'll be on the – I said, I want to see the passenger list. Well, we don't have it yet. So I sat there all day and waited and – and I had no other place to go. And on the 29th, it was getting a little closer, don't worry, you'll be on the ship, and you know – anyway, they – they gave me a song and a dance, and let me see the – I said, you can see it but you can't have it. It was my only receipt. And this went until the 30th, and then on the 30th, said, well, the ship isn't sailing until tomorrow, which was May 31st. I say, you're sure it's sai – yes, i – tomorrow. Well anyway, they gave me their – you know, delayed me again. They never came across with the passenger list. And I talked to the guy from the Jewish committee and he said, you'll be on the list, don't worry, you'll be – you'll make it. Then, on the – he said, yet – look, tomorrow morning you go to the pier – and I had to borrow money because we were only allowed 10 mark out of **Germany**, which was soon gone. I borrowed money from one of my fellow travelers and that – luckily the fares in **Portugal** were very cheap, so I got to the pier and I was standing there waiting. I got there about two o'clock in the afternoon with all the other refugees and we were – I was standing in the sun. Here it was the end of May and I was wearing my winter clothes that I had left **Holland** with in March. Not good. And well, this guy finally – our guy showed up about four, 4:30, climbs up on a crate and starts calling out names of refugees. The Americans were going up the gangplank, you know, like Americans do, and the refugees were

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standing in the sun. And this guy starts reading names and reading names and well, the third class –

Q: The-These are like American tourists, you're saying, or – or American visitors?

A: Well **[indecipherable]** no tourists.

Q: American visitors, or –

A: American visitors or people who were returning home from – from **America**, you know? And the refugees were standing, waiting for this guy to call their names. So finally like the third last name, **Roberg, Kurt.** Well, by this time it was six o'clock. I flew up that gangplank and I was on my way, so I thought. So, wait til about 10 o'clock, this boat was – it was supposed to leave at six. The boat was still in port, so I went to bed, and – my bunk and next morning I got up at seven o'clock, I went to see the sun rise over the ocean, I got up, we're still in **Portugal.** They're still loading cork. The **Excambion** was a combination freight and passengers. There were 180 passengers and n – thank heaven, one class. Da – did not have first and second or third class. So there were no **übermenschen** and **untermenschen**, which was nice. But hey, I'm on board, it's an American ship, I'm on American territory, right, American grounds, under the American flag. I wasn't worried. So we finally left about nine o'clock. They weighed anchor and off we went, stopped in **Bermuda** for six hours and well, 10 days later we arrived in the good old **U.S.A.**, so I guess the customs people got on board out in the bay, Customs and – customs and immigration. So the last two hours as the ship steams in, they are

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processing everybody. So li – look at my passport, ah, sit over here. A couple of other people sat over there, most people could go again. And then finally he calls me back. **Kurt Roberg**? Yeah. Why are you trying to enter this country with an expired visa? I said, my visa was good when I came aboard ship. My visa expired at midnight. I was aboard ship at six p.m. According to the ship's log, this vessel sailed on June first. Your visa expired May 31st. You can't come in. What do you mean I can't come in? I didn't say that, but I – we were taught to be humble, even in **America**. So, well, we docked in **Hoboken**, as was customary in those days. American export line docked in **Hoboken,** not in **New York.** And of course my mother knew – oh, I had – I had borrowed three dollars from a German speaking steward on board, to send a telegram from aboard ship to my mother that I was coming. She hadn't heard from me since I was in **Berlin.** I didn't write because every week we were supposed to leave and I was going to be there before the letters, right? So I didn't write. I wrote to my uncle, and he wrote to my mother and that's how she got word about what was happening with me, but I didn't write, and well, she went crazy – I mean, she understood, but why didn't you write? Anyway, so she was down on the pier and I was up on board. All the passengers were leaving the ship except me and one other woman, we stayed on board. Do you think they would have let my mother up, or me down? No, not in **America**. We waved, she cried. I guess I was teary-eyed. And I remember I s – I called to my mother, Mother, are you wearing lipstick? She says, yes, in **America** we – in **America** we wear lipstick. Because in **Europe** women –

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hussies wore lipstick. My mother wearing lipstick, can you believe that? I said, before you know it you probably will – will paint your nails red, too. So those were the little – and that – that sort of stuck in my mind. Now anyway, my mother was told that I could not come down. We hollered up and down, you know, across the – and they told me that I'd have to go to **Ellis Island** for a hearing, just a formality. And my mother, of course, went the next day just for this formality and there was a hearing before a judge, and he looked at my papers and decided that well, they couldn't let me in. Now they – the visa was definitely expired. As a matter of fact, there was something wrong with the visa. The visa was issued on January 31st, it should have only gone to May 30th. They gave you an extra day, why? Oh, this will have to go to **Washington,** the State Department will have to handle that. And so it happened that **Kurt Roberg** stayed on **Ellis Island** for four weeks while they debated in **Washington** whether they could take a risk, the risk of letting me in, or whether they would send me back. And I guess lawyers came cheap in those days. American export lines had their lawyers working on it, because they would have had to pay another 210 dollars to take me back to **Lisbon** and obviously lawyers were paid a lot less than that in those days. So after four weeks they finally re – relented and – and they said, you can stay.

Q: Did you have any physical contact with your mother during those four weeks?

A: Physical only in that she would come – my mother worked, and – but on weekends she could come to **Ellis Island**, or anybody else during visitors' hours and in the great

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hall that you may have gone to, I know it very well, when it wasn't as tidy as it looks now and I became an expert Ping-Pong player there. Did crafts and a lot of drawing and reading papers and spending time, and I'm an expert on **Ellis Island**.

Q: What was it like to be close to your mother again, physically close?

A: Well, it was wonderful. It was – it was great. It was wonderful.

Q: Did your father come out to **Ellis Island**?

A: I think he came – yeah, one – he was not well, also relations between my parents had gotten, you know, worse. And my mother worked in **New Rochelle**, he lived on the room in **Washington Heights.** My brother had a job in **Bridgeport, Connecticut.** We were all over the map.

Q: During those four weeks, did you ever really fear that you might be sent back?

A: Definitely. And I was very close to being sent back. Oh they – State Department gave no quarter, they went by the book. They absolutely went by the book, they couldn't care less about – there was no human consideration, the fact that if I would be sent back that I'd end up in the – you know, would be sent back all the way to **Germany** and end up in the – wherever, right? In a pile of ashes. Oh, there was no – was no consideration whatsoever of that, as far as I know. Now, my question to you, ca – i – how would I research something like that? Is there a file on me in the State Department that is in existence to this day? And can I reach that under the whatever act?

Q: Freedom of Information Act?

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A: Freedom of Information Act.

Q: You'll have to check that out, I can't answer that. What – you were so young, how did you keep your emotional stability during those four weeks thinking you might be sent back? What – what gave you your inner strength to do that?

A: Well, by taking things one day at a time and as long as I was here I felt I had a chance of staying here. I was – you know, I was hoping and I mean they were telling me that – you know, they have various Jewish organizations were working on it and they were doing what they could. But if they wouldn't have, if it would have been up to State, they would have sent me back. I have no doubt about that today, knowing what we know today. At the time, of course, we didn't know what the inner workings of – of mentality was at the State Department.

Q: So with all this uncertainty, putting your foot down on American soil was not a joyous occasion?

A: Oh, it was a – it was a joyous occasion, I mean, well I – I thought it was sort of symbolic that I only saw the back of the Statue of Liberty. You know, she turned her back on me, but I see humor in almost anything. But wha-what was also interesting was that we were in the same complex with the Germans, the **Bund** Germans and Italians who were considered enemy aliens. Well, wha – wa – wa – at least these were – the **Bund** Germans – **America** was still at peace with **Germany**, but they were – they were activists who were interned on **Ellis Island**. They walked – we walked from 11 to 12 and

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they walked from 10 to 11. And we were separated by a – a fence, you know, by whatever, a metal fence. But they were, and we were – we were treated like – well, counted like prisoners when we walked from the – from the sleeping facilities to the dining hall, there was a guard clicking, counting. They – we had bunk beds, men only, you know, in a huge – they were prison conditions, but I mean, it was – it was better than in **Berlin**, you know, and the food was better, and I mean, we knew that – you know, there were no abuses or whatever. But we were – we lived a regimented life, you know. One hour a day –

End of Tape Four, Side A

Beginning Tape Four, Side B

Q: – volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg**. This is tape number four, side **B.** We were talking about the conditions in **Ellis Island**.

A: It was a detention center and you know, it was – as I say, the food was good, we were kept occupied. The various Jewish organizations came in to, you know, give us material for crafts, leatherwork, which I did. Drawing, you know, things you wanted to do. So, it was nice, but we had to stay in the great hall, that was our living room. That's where everybody hung out, not by choice. And at the gong of the bell you'd go into the dining room and at the gong of the bell you'd go into the sleeping quarters. And I – you know, it was a regimented life, but well, look what we came from and what we – what we found here. It was heaven, you know. And so it was – it was all right. Wasn't very – July –

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June, July '41 was a very hot summer so we were – were – there was no air conditioner, of course, but at least out on the water, surrounded by water was cooler than anywhere else. My mother would come on Sundays to visit and oh, the subway is so hot and I had no idea what that meant. The subway is no **[indecipherable]** you know, they had fans. Had to take the **IRT** all the way down from – well, she would come from **168th Street**.

Q: What was your last day there like?

A: Well, the last – I guess they had an – we had another hearing. My – when I could pack up, that was great. Now, was – was a – I guess it was a week, that was a Tuesday, so my – my uncle, m – one of my mother's other sisters who had spent the – well, a year and a half in **London** during the blitz, they came over here in 1940 and had an apartment in **Washington Heights** and I stayed – I stayed with them, because we didn't – my mother wasn't – had a job in **New Rochelle** as a sleep in ma – the housekeeper. And he picked me up. He picked me up and I came into – I – into the subway, down –

Q: When you left **Ellis Island**, then you were truly free from all of this government regulations, was that a special experience, just to walk out onto a sidewalk, knowing that you don't have any more restrictions?

A: Yes, yes, I think I – well, we – we – we got off the ferry boat at the – at – at the battery and it was a – it was a – well, it was a great new world, I really don't think that I spent so much on, y-you know, trying to analyze my feelings other than being overwhelmed by, you know, the physicality of **New York**, and of course **New York**, the

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downtown then was the center of business and here was the – you know, the courthouse and – well, 17 **Battery Place** was a very tall building then, and I don't know how much you know, but I'm very familiar with that, I spent a lot of time later in that part of **New York.** So it was, you know, **Bowling – Bowling Green.** We walked bif – **Bowling Green** to the subway and we took the **IRT** and of course, well –

Q: Ho-How was your English then? Did you know any English?

A: I had – I had learned some English in **Holland**. My English – I could speak some English. My problem was in understanding it because I would, at that point, translate it into Dutch. So by the time I had translated it, the other person speaking to me was three sentences further. You know, I mean, this is the – you know a language when you start thinking in it. And so that was really m – that – that took couple of months. But I – I remember the first impression of **New York** is that th – I – I s – seeing black people really dressed up gaudily, you know. Big lips with lipstick and you know, make-up, and you know the – I mean, people in **Europe** didn't do that. My God, is this really ex – an exotic country. And d – you know, all the – the noise and then well, then we got into the subway, and of course I had seen movies, American movies in **Holland,** you know, we – we saw American movies, lot of cowboy movies and – you know, of **New York**, you knew what the skyline was like and – and **Broadway, 42nd Street** was **Broadway,** right? So we came – we – we – my uncle and aunt lived on **171st Street,** so we took the train to **168th Street**, **Medical Center**, right? Took the elevator up, I was impressed, my God, I –

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we had fun, I took the elevator up. And come out and here all these low buildings, except for **Medical Center**, I see – the first sign I see is **Broadway.** This is **Broadway**? Where are all the tall buildings? You know, the only – the first thing I saw, there was in **Washington Heights,** and I don't know how well you remember that, was a **Johnny Walker** – a huge advertising sign with **Johnny Walker** walking, it was a – it was an animated sign. I said, oh, they have this – this great sign, but where the tall buildings? If this is **Broadway**, I couldn't – I thought all of **Broadway** was that way. So that was my really first impression of **Broadway**, and its disappointment. But I caught up.

Q: And – and then what happened?

A: Well, then I – I settled in with my uncle and aunt. I had to get a job, so first I had to get a Social Security card. In **America** you need a Social Security card. To get a Social Security card and work full time you have to be 18, otherwise you have to go to school. I was done with school. I couldn't afford to go to school any more.

Q: Financially, you mean.

A: Financially, right. So I went to – and on advice of my cousin, my relatives they had – they were already in **America** for three years, my cousin. They came here in 1937 from **Palestine.** You – you have to tell them you're 18. So suddenly I was a year older, I was 18 and I got a Social Security card, and –

Q: You didn't have to show any papers showing your age?

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A: In **America**? What papers? No. They took my word for it. I li – I learned to lie in **America**. In **Germany** you didn't dare lie, everything was on record. And I got a job, my cousin who was a salesman, got me a job within a week. I had to work. I worked – got me a job in a place called **Jersey City. Jersey City, New Jersey**, a job for 12 dollars a week. I didn't know that they were paying – yeah, the minimum wage law had just been passed, which was 35 cents an hour, 40 hours, 14 dollars. They were paying me 12. You know, I was a greenhorn just off the boat and in order to get the job as an upholsterer, I had to buy a hammer, a magnetic hammer, which you put into your m – you – you've never – obviously you have never done any upholstery work. You have a box of blue tacks. You dip your magnetic hammer into it, it picks up nails. You swallow – you put them into your mouth, you don't swallow them, and then you feed the hammer one at a time with the tack. I learned that pretty quick but in order to do that you need your own personal hammer. You don't want to li – lick anybody else's hammer, right? So before I had the job I already had to invest a dollar and a quarter in a hammer, okay? But that's **America**. So, I had this job for a week, I got paid 12 dollars. In the meantime my cousin had lined up a better job for me cause I – well, I had l – trained as a – as an auto mechanic but they said can't get a job in **New York** as an auto mechanic, pump gas. They don't pay minimum wage for that. So he got me a job in the machine shop for 14 dollars and I worked in the machine shop for 14 dollars. And I we – stayed there til I

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went into the army. I became foreman, I ran the place. I was very good and he got a very good deal, even for whatever he paid me at the time, I mean –

Q: Did you feel like an outsider, or were you totally accepted by the other men you were working with?

A: No, I – well, I f – I was accepted, but everybody knew that I was Dutch. There was a German worker there. I had n – I wanted no identity with **Germany** whatsoever. First – I mean, first of all because I wanted to shed all of that and **Holland** was a lot closer to me emotionally than **Germany**. And people here in amer – in **New York**, in **America** didn't understand the difference between a German Jew and a German. You are German, you a German. Are you a Jew, or are you a German? They didn't understand. There was one fellow there, he worked in the shop who was German, he came here during the 1920's, a German, you know, Gentile. And he spoke German with me and I spoke German with him. But I s-sort of – fractured German I spoke with him. And he would say, you know, your German is awfully good for being a Dutchman. I said, well look, my parents were German, we spoke German at home, that's how I – and I didn't lie, we did speak German at home and my parents were German born, right? So I didn't lie. Said, but I am Dutch, because inside, I was Dutch. And –

Q: What happened on December 7th, 1941?

A: On December 7th, 1941, im – we had gotten our lift to **America**. We had sent our lift van that I told you it was m-made in – in **Bremen** and we had it sent, my mother had it

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sent to **Rotterdam** and then from **Rotterdam** to **America** before they left, so our furniture, everything was in **America**, and then when they got here, my parents, we stored the furniture in the basement of my aunt's apartment house in **Washington Heights,** made a deal with the superintendent and for like what, 10 dollars a month or something like that, in one of the storerooms, our furniture. So every Sunday, when my mother came from **New Rochelle**, we spent in the basement seeing to it that – spraying roach stuff and whatever, that we wouldn't get any roaches into the furniture, into the mattre – into whatever. And then they – you know, there were all sorts of bugs, we were told, in **America**, you know, like – um – s-so anyway, housekeeping. On December seventh, which was a Sunday, we were in the basement. At this point I had already bought a radio, of course, to ma – so that I would learn English. And went to a lot of movies on Saturday morning for 17 cents, to learn English. That's how you learned English. And then as – Sunday we were in the basement, when about 2:30 we heard about the sneak attack on **Pearl Harbor** and then we heard **Roosevelt**, so I know exactly where I was. And we were – well, we were glad.

Q: Glad about what?

A: We were glad that now **America** was forced to enter the war, on the English side, because **Roosevelt** was, of course, fighting that battle for a long time. And to us it was a step in the right direction. And well – my brother tried to volunteer for the service. They said, you can't volunteer, you're not a citizen. But you can be drafted. And well, I – so he

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went into the service in ’43 and I went into the service. And he went in May and I went in July of ’43. And well, I had gotten several deferments because I worked in a war central plant in the machine shop, we were making parts for aircraft engines and stuff. But after three deferments, I – they said you have to go. And well, my – I was – I was eager to go. I wanted to fight **Hitler**. And now I think I was one of the more motivated people certainly in the ou – in my outfit. You know, everybody went because they were drafted. I went because I knew what I was fighting for, so it’s – I didn’t mind. But then, of course, the outfit that I trained with went to **Europe** eventually, but our commanding officer said no German born personnel can go. So they pulled all the German refugee boys out and they shipped us to the **Pacific**.

Q: Are these German Jewish refugee –

A: Yes.

Q: When you were with those young men, did you talk about your backgrounds and exchange stories?

A: Yes, you knew where – you know, where you from, you know, what’s your hometown, yes.

Q: Did you feel a special connection to these young men?

A: Yes. And especially in the army there were a lot of prejudices, you know, so I found out. Against Jews. And the sergeant major in the outfit I was in, who was an anti-Semite saw to it that my papers – I was – when you are in the service you should – you know,

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you – you would become a – a citizen. I mean, normally it took five years to become a citizen. In the service within 90 days you could become a citizen. The papers had to be put through, I mean, you n – on the theory you're good enough to fight for the country, you're pledging allegiance, etcetera. And they couldn't send you overseas unless you were a citizen. Anyway, he held back the papers and screwed it up so when the outfit was alerted to go overseas, my papers weren't ready. And the – whatever excuses he gave, but I mean –

Q: Did he do this with all the other German Jewish young men?

A: I don't know, but none of them – he was the one in my – in my battalion. They w – you know, the others were not in my battalion, they were in other outfits, but we were in the same **[indecipherable]**

Q: So what did you think? Here you come to the **United States** and you're experiencing anti-Semitism again. What – what did you feel about that?

A: Well, I think I learned as I came to **Holland** that there was – even in **Holland –** but that everywhere in the world there is anti-Semitism, you know? When you had a church, a Catholic church which preached until 20 years ago that the Jews killed **Christ** and this was conveyed directly to the Irish, Italian and other predominantly Catholic societies, there were – there was, you know, anti-Semitism was preached, you know, and look, we certainly knew that in – in **Germany**, before **Hitler** there was anti-Semitism and that there was anti-Semitism – I mean, in **Holland** I joined a Zionist organization because – I

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mean in – in **Celle** we couldn't do much about it, but in principle we were – you know, let's say zine – Zionist oriented. When I came to **Holland**, of course **Harry** was there already and he belonged to a Zionist group, youth group and we would go to meetings. We'd go on bike outings and we had meetings and speakers and all that. And these were young people, and you know, we – we learned, which was the Zionist dogma of the day that you know, there's anti-Semitism everywhere and Jews cannot truly assimilate because it takes someone who wants to assimilate, which is the Jew, and someone who lets you assimilate, which is the non-Jewish society and they are not about to. So, you know, I knew that, and thi – it was true in **America**, and you know, we – we heard and learned that well, you can – that in certain businesses and banks you can't – you know, you can't go into the banking business, you can't go into the – at the time, that that was – those were businesses or professions where Jews were not welcome.

Q: At that time, or around that time, did you ever consider going to **Palestine,** or eventually settling in **Palestine**?

A: No, not really. Well, we had – as I say, my cousin tried – no, they went to **Palestine** because it was, you know, it was a way out of **Germany**, but we knew that **Palestine** was hard work and very physical and we were no – we were in a – we were in **America** and we really didn't consider **Palestine** as a – as a – as a very pliable option. We were here. And you know, being – as a family, we could have never functioned there, and we were not going to strike out on our own, let's say, my brother and I, go to **Palestine,** leave my

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mother and my father here. My father died in October ’42, and may – he really never recovered from the aftereffects of the concentration camp, really. So, you know, weren’t going to leave my mother by herself, you know, I mean it’s just never – never entered our mind. The same when I came back from the service, you know, I could have done other things, but I – you know, we – we – we were family oriented and you know, there was an obligation, a family loyalty and would have never considered, you know, picking up and going elsewhere.

Q: So where were you sent when you were in the army?

A: Well, first I went from **New York**, **Camp Upton**, to **Camp Adair Oregon,** I trained there. From **Oregon** we went as a – as a unit the whole division moved to **Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.** And from **Fort Leonard Wood**, really, the – by this time it was 1944, the division was alerted and went to **Europe** and they pulled us out and sent us to the **Pacific**. So I went – I went to the **Pacific** on **New Year’s Day,** 1945. Ended up in **New Caledonia**, entered a stray artillery battalion. If you read, “**Tales of the South Pacific**,” that was us. A stray battalion up in the hills of **New Caledonia,** away from everything until we got a new commanding officer. The worst possible combination you could have. The rank that the com – command called for was lieutenant colonel. He was a major, so he – he was a Jewish West Pointer, so he had to prove all sorts of things, and was he eager to get that, you know, those colonel – that – that – colonel’s – you know, own – so – well, I’m happy to say that it worked out fine. We – we missed the invasion of

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Okinawa and we missed the invasion of the **Philippines.** We got to the **Philippines** fairly late in the game. And then the war ended on August eighth.

Q: Wa-Was your life ever in danger at that time?

A: Yeah, yes it was, because of – well, the way the army runs. See, since we were in the – for instance, in the **Philippines** there were a lot of Japanese in the – in the hills. They were pretty desperate because they were starving, you know, Americans were – but the island was officially declared secured. Therefore, under army regulations, we were not issued any live ammo. But we would go out on exercises, we call them. And I was in the artillery, so they would send us out as forward observers. You go up ahead of the infantry, ahead of everybody. Now, since I'm the person that doesn't like to take chances, I had seen to it that I had a few clips of ammunition that I had forgotten to turn in, just for insurance. And now we were – we were out on a – on a mission at night and we had a young lieutenant with us, someone we referred to as a shaved hair, that was second lieutenant just out of boot camp and whatever. And well, we camped for the night, strictly tactical and then he – we heard things moving around out there. And we were – we didn't know what it was or who it was, but you have to assume that it is the enemy, right? I had passed the word to my two other colleagues that I had ammo, so we felt relatively comfortable. But the lieutenant didn't know, and he also had no ammo. So he said, do you think – do you think those are Japs? Lieutenant, we don't know, but when we find out we could probably arm wrestle them. So, you know, we found out that they had only

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raided our supply depot, the Japanese, they – they were hungry, they didn't want to fight. Maybe on a full stomach they would have felt like fighting, but – so you know, it's these little incidents, but otherwise –

End of Tape Four, Side B

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

Beginning Tape Five, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg.** This is tape number five, side **A,** and you were talking about being in the service and – and when did you leave the service? Or what happened after you were in the – in the **Pacific?**

A: Well, after – aft-after we – we won the war over there too, I – incidentally I – I was in touch with my original outfit, which was in **Europe**, in **Germany**, and I would get letters and I still have the correspondence. My mother saved all mine and my brother's letters. And I've – you know, they hoped that they wouldn't have to come to the **Pacific** after they finished the war in **Germany** and help fight there and well, they were actually, they were – they were trained to go for the invasion of **Japan** and all. Well, it didn't come to pass, thank heaven. I was in the **Philippines** until March '46, and then came home, was discharged on April ninth and re-entered civilian life. I went back to my original job, which of course he had to take me back. But I couldn't see being a mish – tool and die maker. So I wanted to get into business, I wanted to go to school, I wanted to you know, pick up my life and make up for lost time. And – and I did. I found myself a new job in the import export business, which was booming then. And I went back to school to get my – well, pass the **Regents** in all the things that you have to do in **New York.** That was very interesting too, I had submitted my records. I had all my German and Dutch records and they said, well you have to submit them to **Albany**, to the department of **Regents**.

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And then they sent them back, they said, they're in German. Yeah, they're in German, what do you expect in **Germany**, they write the records in German. But you're the department of education, you mean you cou – oh no, you have to translate those. Well, you've been in the educational field and you know what it's like. So that gave me a preview of coming attractions. Well, I did get them translated and I – you know, they told me what I needed to complete my American education, and I did, and I passed the **Regents** and had a like 89 average. And I **[indecipherable]**

Q: So you a – you attended hi – did you – you attended high school then –

A: I can di –

Q: – after being in the army?

A: Yes, I – I went – I went back to high school, and I went to **Stuyvesant High School.** Not that I knew of the reputation of **Stuyvesant High School,** but it was closest to where I worked on – I worked on **Sixth Avenue** and **20th Street** and **Stuyvesant** was on **15th Street,** on **Second Avenue.** So I walked over at night and you don't think I was going to blow a nickel each way to – to – I needed the money. And I finished high school and then entered **City College**, I guess in the spring of '48, on a – well, you know, I was fully matriculated at that point, so I didn't need the **G.I.** bill. I could have taken the **G.I.** bill and gone anywhere. I could have gone to the **Sorbonne**, you know, but I didn't think that way. I wanted to be home near my mother and my family and that's how we were

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brought up, you don't sponge off the government. So they – they paid for my books, and I –

Q: So you worked during the day and went to school at night?

A: Oh, of course, yes. I didn't – I didn't even know that they had school during the day. Well, and yes, I chose – I chose to go to s – to work during the day, make an honest living and went to school at night. And I – well, found a new – I got a new job after a year in the export business. I knew enough about business that I wanted to change into something else. Taught myself how to type and I got into a lot of interesting experience in banking, in letters of credit and dealing with shipping companies. I spent a lot of time downtown in the **Wall Street** area. It was very educational. When I felt I couldn't learn anything any more, I quit and I got a job with a friend of mine who had asked me to join his young, growing company. And this was the man who came out of the concentration camp with my father, **Hans Solomon**(ph), who had made it to **America** via **Shanghai** with his wife and young daughter. Waited for their visas, American visas in **Shanghai**, came here in 1940. And he was too old to go – I guess he was about 38 at the time, too old to go into the service and he built a – started his own business in 1945 and then asked me to come join him and I did in 1948, I guess. '47. And I was with him for 10 years and I was credit manager and I majored in accounting at **City College** for awhile, before I went into marketing and management. And I started – went into sales, into marketing, merchandising. And after 10 years with him I went – joined another company to set up a

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photographic division for them, and became vice president of photo products and I was with them for 32 years. So I don't – after that I didn't move around much any more.

Q: And – and personally, your personal life?

A: Personally, I – well, I – I found a very attractive young lady during my travels in **South America**, in **Caracas, Venezuela**. And she happened to be of German origin and she came to **New York** and we got married in 1957.

Q: G-German Jewish, or German –

A: No, German not Jewish, I – and well, that's an – that's a separate story that I don't want to get into now because it's rather complex. But she became Jewish, converted and we have a family, two children, a daughter who was born in 1959, my son in 1962. And we had a good life. My wife, well, started contract – well, suffered from cancer, and she died in 1989. And that's about the story. I retired in 1989, six months after she died. I had planned on it anyway, but – unfortunately without her, but well, i-in the meantime of course, we lived in **New Y** – we lived in **New York** when we first got married. We moved to **Riverdale** and then in – in **Riverdale** into a co-op and then when my daughter **Inez** became of school age, we decided to leave **New York** and head for the wide open spaces of **New Jersey**. And we ended up in **Tenafly** because it had a school system we liked, and I've lived there ever since. I'm now in **Tenafly** 36 years.

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Q: Can we talk a little bit now about some of your thoughts and your feelings? Do you think you would have been a different person today if you had not gone through the childhood that you had?

A: Yes, I would – I would be – my plans – I – I wanted to be an architect. I did a lot of drawing, I'm good at drawing, I enjoy drawing. I sketched houses, designed houses, I had a m – I'm – well, have good manual dexterity. Channeling that as a result of the, what was called in **Germany**, **umschulung.** That means converting to swi – switching your education, really. So literally translated, switching your education into something quote unquote, practical. And – oh, well – or – I wanted architecture or interior design, and my expert family in **America**, of course, interior design, in **America** nobody uses that. Learn something practical. So, when I came to **Holland**, what's more practical in **America** than cars, right? And I was interested in automobiles too, so that – so I chose what – we were sort of trained or oriented toward a nonacademic life.

Q: What about personally, personality-wise? Do you think your personality would have been different if you hadn't had the challenging childhood that you did?

A: No, I think it's been a m – it has been a good – I – I can only see it as a good affect, whether everybody agrees with me, I m – m – some people think that I'm too – well, I'm a – I'm a product of the 1930's environment. I think we have the same thing in **America**, you know, people are products of the ba – depression era. We are oriented toward practicality, economy, frugality, etcetera, and of course my German background m – of

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certainly m-me – German Jewish background, the emphasis in **Germany** is, I think everywhere in Jewish circles was education, you know? The saying was always, especially if you move around, as the Jews have for hundreds of years, you – what you c – what you carry in your – you don't carry heavy in what's in your head, however that translates, you know. And so we were always oriented toward learning and well, I think that is probably the basis of my **[indecipherable]** and planning ahead, I think. Planning, having a structured life rather than living out into the w-wild. But I think that's a matter of personality, I don't know whether that is any background. By the same token my wife, who grew up in wartime **Germany**, and she was five years younger, so she had to leave eastern **Germany** when the Russians came, as a small child. Her father by that time had disappeared. Mother was left with two children, and the stories of, you know, the Russians coming, raping, killing, burning, whatever, they, you know, they took off. They left with the last train. They were able to save themselves, they lost everything. And she, since childhood really never wanted to own anything because she didn't want to go through what her mother had gone, having to leave everything behind. So **Connie** was really very much oriented toward enjoying things. She said, I don't have to own paintings, I'll be very happy to see them in a museum. I don't want to own anything. I don't want to – you know. So the different people are affected differently by the same set of circumstances. And so, if we put the finger on what causes certain developments, or developmental trends, I think you can read a lot into conditions that you want to read into

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it. And you know, psychologists are so busy trying to come up with formulas of what happens why. I'm not a great believer in that.

Q: You had said earlier, you – you'll never forget the smell when your father came back.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Any other sounds or smells or sights that remind you of those previous years? Any other ones.?

A: Well, I think that we associate certain things, pleasant or unpleasant with first time experiences. I think that's a common human thing. Whether this is sounds, noises, music we hear under certain circumstances for the first time, you know. A – a song that we – that we hear for the first time under romantic conditi – it sticks. So I think that's just a human phenomena that ham –mi – I mean, they – the smell, yes, it was – it was very vivid, but I think that is like the question you asked, do you know where you were on **Pearl Harbor** day or on the day **Kennedy** was assassinated, okay? So the day my father came back from the concentration camp and the smell, and the way he looked is a landmark impression, whether I was a child at the time, or whether it was when **Kennedy** was assassinated and I was a man, you know, we were – I don't – I don't think we should separate that into either childhood or adulthood. I think it happens and it's lasting, or it isn't, so –

Q: What were your thoughts during the **Eichmann** trial?

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A: Get the bastard. During the **Eichmann** trial, well, I followed it with much interest. Matter of fact, I have the tape at home that I think I saw on **PBS** had a extensive – I have a whole collection of wartime tapes and this is part of my library, it's where my interests lie, his – historical. Not only war, but of course, World War II was to me a very personal and historic event that I lived through and that I can identify with. But the **Eichmann** trial was very – well, how should I say? Whatever goes around comes around, you know, that – well, **A,** the Israelis did what they did to bring him back and to expose him for what he was. And also I've seen enough of Nazi Germans, you know, in **South America.** I've traveled in **South America** and I know that they were hiding and are still hiding and have been hiding and that they were hiding in **Argentina** and **Venezuela** and **Columbia.** And, you know, ab – everywhere and that they got away – they got away with it and that there is a clique that exists to this day. It's a tight little circle, and he was part of it, but – and that we were able to break that. Bal – there's – the – the – the other one, of course, is the – oh what – what – what was his name, this French couple, Frenchman –

Q: **[indecipherable]**

A: Ger – German name.

Q: Yeah.

A: Anyway, that story, you know, who unmasked a – you know, in **Chile** the Nazi – the Frenchman, oh, hold on –

Q: Yeah **[indecipherable]**

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A: I'm terrible on names. Dates I remember, names come eventually. So, you know, I th – I think that they should be brought to justice. Yeah, go ahead.

Q: Do you feel very American today, very assimilated into American society? Do you feel you really belong here?

A: Oh absolutely. I feel it, I belong here. I mean, this is – this is my country, I spent most of my life here. I think I've paid my dues. I – and – however, I have not given up on my let's say, continental upbringing. I value – I like to think that I have the best of two societies. The European, which I have – I certainly was old enough at age 14, since I had a good schooling, to take the best of that and take the best of the American and when it comes to well, manners, attitudes, child education, child rearing, my wife and I brought up our children the way we were brought up. I mean, we didn't beat them up or anything, but we – there was no great permissiveness either. They learned to eat with good table manners. There were no different manners at home than when you go to a restaurant. So if we went to a restaurant with our children, from a very young age people would comment, oh how well behaved are your children. You know, a restaurant was just another place where to eat and there was no differ – what I'm saying is that education starts with the parents, and we felt we sh – we want to give them an education that pleases us and ultimately will please them. And so the parts of American society that I plan, that I – that we chose to ignore was, for instance, the lapses in child education that we saw, our view. And we're very happy with the results. Yeah, go ahead.

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Interview with Kurt Roberg
March 16, 2001

Q: Wh-When your children were the age that you were, for instance when herb – **Hitler** first came into power in the rest of the 1930's and early 40's, did that make you think of your childhood, when they were that age that you were at the time, you know, nine, 10 - 11 - 12 - 13, did that remind you of what you were doing at that time?

A: Not directly, but I will say that, you know, I'm into sports and I – I played with my children in a very active way, which my father never did with us, but he was older. My father was 38 when he married and plus that he was physically handicapped in a – by his sight. And other than that, I – you know, I – when – I think I always knew how a child feels, whether the child is five years old, or eight, or 14, because I've been there, and I remember. I remember what a child's emotions are, feelings, and I could identify with my children at the various levels, my son more than with my daughter. I never had a – you know, I never had a sister, so that's – was a little touchier, but certainly with my son – and – but I never, I n – you know, I never did them, when I was your age, or you know, bit, the –

Q: What I meant was – wha-what I meant was, when they were the age when you were going through difficult times.

A: Yeah.

Q: And your life was in danger –

A: Mm-hm.

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Q: – you know, as a – did th – did that – did you think about that, at that time. I mean, you had to leave one country, go to the next, and so forth.

A: Well, no, I mean, that was – those were the facts, that was, you know, that doesn't – I don't think that it influenced me or affected my – my life or my character or my – scarred me in – in any way. Of course, you know, people of my generation who went through the camps, who saw unspeakable, you know, brutality, etcetera, that they had to react and that it left scars, is beyond question. I was lucky in that the things that, well, I was exposed to were not, by and large, not traumatic enough, or I was able to deal with it because I, at the time, certainly in **Berlin**, all the things we saw, that I knew it was temporary. I have a way out, I have a ticket to **America**. I have a way out, even though that was very questionable, I always felt that I wasn't trapped over there.

Q: Are you more religious, less religious than when you – what you were when you were growing up? How did it affect you in that sense?

A: No, I don't th – either way. I belong to a Reform congregation, by choice. I'm considered, probably considered one of the more Conservative, but then the Reform movement is going toward Conservative anyway, you know, it's not what it was 30 years ago, Reform is no longer Reform. So no, I have no – I – I don't think I'm any more or less religious. I mean, the question of whether there is a God, you know, what does it really mean is deeply philosophical, I don't think we should get into that. But my children are not religious. I don't particularly – well, I wish they were more oriented

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toward being Jewish or feeling Jewish. They don't. But then, we gave – you know, those of us who give our children the freedom of decision making, we exposed them to Judaism, Jewish teachings. Unfortunately the Hebrew schools that they went to, while we thought they were excellent, turned them off rather than the other way, than inspired them. The damage was done, they – they had the choice of, you know, or th – they have the option of choosing and whatever they choose, what's important is they are good people, they are decent human beings and that is what religion is supposed to do, in my view, is make decent people of everyone; the purpose of religion, one of the purposes of religion. And that is the case, so I have no – I have no quarrel or problem with how they achieve their goodness, of being good. If they want to find religion, if later in their lives they turn toward religion, as a lot of people do, so be it, you know, but I – I have no – no problem with that. I mean, that's my view.

End of Tape Five, Side A

Beginning Tape Five, Side B

Q: – volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg.** This is si – tape five, side **B.** Because you saw people deprived of their civil rights in – in **Germany** in the 30's, do you think that makes you more sensitive, or did it make you more sensitive to the Civil Rights movement here in the **United States**?

A: More sensitive –

Q: Cause you actually saw it with your own eyes in **Germany**.

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A: Yes, I – well, I-I'm certainly more aware of it, but I'm also aware of the abuses and of the limitations and it's interesting that I've gone back to **Germany** many times and the change I see in **Germany** today, the change toward democracy is really remarkable. I had a very interesting experience. As a matter of fact I **[indecipherable]** I went back to my hometown, **Celle** on the anniversary of **Crystal Night** in '98, 50th anniversary and participated in a – well, I really instigated a memorial service at the synagogue in **Celle**, and I went over there for that and I was the keynote speaker. And I'll be glad to send you a copy of that speech. It was held in German, but I made a fairly accurate English translation for my congregation and for my friends. So I'll send you that, and you can put it into the records. But i – I really – and I met with some of my former classmates for whom I would vouch that they were not Nazis then or now. And it was a very interesting experience and I think sort of telling. The – yeah, what went on under **Hitler**, how a lot of Germans who were, let's say scared into following the party line. Of course there was a meal ticket too, that they didn't dare to go across the – against the party line because it meant their livelihood. And I think there is really a lot of true democracy, especially in the young people. We – we read about the skinheads, the anti-Semitism, etcetera. But just like here, the good people don't make news, it's the bad people that make the news, and I think in our society too, you hear about the killings of – you know, the teenagers that are shooting up our schools and all that, but you don't read about the good kids or the kids that are scared. I met a little girl in **Florida**, she's 11 years old. There was a – well, talk

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about a – an incident in school and she was scared and she asked her mother, I don't want to go to school today because there's gonna be trouble. You know, there are – so what I'm saying is there's good and bad everywhere. We don't – we don't hear about the good kids, we only hear about the bad kids. And I think you as a – as an educator, know that that is so. To condemn a whole generation or sector of the population because of a few, is unfair. Any time you generalize, it's unfair, or even inaccurate. What's his name, **Goldhagen?** Every German is guilty? I haven't read his book. I read the synopsis in the **"New York Times"** book review and all that. I don't want to read his book. He can come with statistics, but I don't think that every German down – deep down in his heart, felt anti-Semitic or was part – part-participated or wanted to participate. So he has a formula; that formula too, is not accurate. I think you have to take people as individuals and that's what I try to do. They're good and they're not so good and they're outright bad. And n – that has been – I mean, I made my peace with **Germany** in 19 – in the 1950's, when I went back the first time on business with **Hans Solomon**(ph). We went back to **Germany** to try and do business in 1952. We went to the photo show in **Cologne** and we spent two weeks in **Celle**. Now he, being 15 years older than I, was there as an adult. He remem – knew a lot more people, and we looked up a lot of them and talked to them. Of course, in the 50's, nobody would know or admit that they knew anything. But we talked to people who said yes, we knew that **Bergen-Belsen**, which was 15 miles away from **Celle**, that it was there, but we didn't know what was going on. We – the man who was –

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who supplied meat there, he went in there every couple of weeks, driving a truck in there, sure he saw. But he was told these are foreign **Zwangsarbeiter**, forced labor. But that they were systematically starved to death, or whatever, worked to death, he didn't know that. Nobody – nobody knew that other than the guards and the guards didn't tell, because it was self-incriminating. He supplied meats, he supplied food. Hey, we're taking food in there every week, you know. Whether – that this was only for the guards or whatever, nobody knew, right? So what I am – what I am saying is that we did talk about it. Ther- There was a death march where people were marched from the railroad 15 miles to the camp. And yes, some of the people saw it and even taunted the prisoners and whatever, you know, on the death – that came out later. Yes, but those people aren't going to talk about it or advertise it or admit it, even. They are the ones that say, we don't want to talk about the past any more, we want to lo – but the young Germans, who now – I mean – I mean the new, young generation, whose grandparents were the perpetrators, participants or silent participants, they are now asking, why did you keep quiet? How could you k- keep quiet? They don't understand how they could have – how their parents and grandparents could have kept quiet. And it's very hard in the 1990's, or 2000, to understand what the mentality was 50 years ago unless, you know the **zeitgeist** of the era, what the fears were, what the attitudes were and why people kept quiet. Why people didn't speak out. They were scared. The man I told you about who lived below us, the people who helped us on **Crystal Night,** he was a high official at the court, the Supreme

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Court. And he had the key for the ar – in – in the building, and up on – on the roof was a flag – you know, f – a – a flagstaff. And when the Nazis took over, they went up there to pull down the red, white and blue flag to hoist the Nazi flag. And who has the key? **Rusterfeld**(ph) has the key, get **Rusterfeld**(ph), and they said, we want the key. I don't have the key. Well, give us the key or we'll break down the door. So he rummaged and he found the key. And as they stormed up there and up there, he was heard to mumble under his breath, I hope they break their neck. Somebody heard it and he was indicted and – that he made this remark. He had enough friends in the court system that witnesses came up and said oh no, you heard it wrong. He said, I hope they don't break their neck, because it was so dangerous to climb up there. They gave him the benefit of the doubt and he was permitted to retire earl – take early retirement, okay? Now, there were people like that, okay? And he was watched from there on and he couldn't afford to make a wrong move, but he didn't permit his daughters to ever join the Nazi party, for the girl they have the **Jungmädel** or whatever, the **Hitler** youth. He could have redeemed himself to prove that he was not against them by saying I want you to join, even if it's only **pro forma.** No, he stuck to his principles. There were people like that. So who's to say who is good and who's bad?

Q: Do you get reparations?

A: I don't, no. My mother did, I don't. I got – yeah, I got a one time lump sum pre – reparations because I was deprived of my education, which was, I think 5,000

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deutschmark at the time, in 19 – in the early 50's, I think, under **Adenauer.** Nothing else.

Q: Is there anything else you wanted to –

A: No **[indecipherable]**

Q: – talk about that we haven't, or any final comments that you'd like to say?

A: No, I really hadn't thought about any final comments, I just wanted to really put on record a firsthand, you know, witness account of how I came to this country and why I came to this country and what the circumstances were because things are, when they are retold by people who have heard the story, it's often distorted, not intentionally, but just by repeating. And I would like it to go on record. I hope I have created a feeling of what the spirit was, both in **Holland** and in **Germany**, what the mentality was of the Jews in **Celle**, certainly. Why they did what th – why we did what we did, and you know, like some of them said, why do you stay so long? Why – you know, why didn't you leave earlier? I've also, when we came to **America**, had people ask, you German Jews, why didn't you fight back? Why k – you know, you should have fought the Nazis. It shows a total – comments like that at the time showed a total ignorance of what Nazi **Germany** was all about. How they operated, how they functioned and I mean, there were – there were people who fought back. They were hauled off to the concentration camp or shot on the spot, you know. Known as **öfter**(ph) **flucht es schussen**(ph). Shot while – you know, shot while trying to escape. Okay, so there – there was no th – they were gangsters. They

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were – they didn't play by gentlemen's rules. I mean, if you see what – what – what – what – what **Hitler** did to his own – to his own people whom he saw as threats, as rivals, as – you know, th-the **Wurm**(ph) affair. Anybody that – that was no longer convenient was eliminated. How? How does the Mafia eliminate people, right? Yes. So, people who say why didn't you fight back, there were people who fought back, but there was no way of beating a system where the government is the – where there is no government protection, where there is no police that you can go to, where there's no one to – to – you can appeal to for justice, for the right thing, for protection. No way of fighting that.

Q: Do you feel more connection to **Holland** than you do to **Germany**?

A: No, I feel – I feel very comfortable with **Germany** now. People ask me – American Jews ask me, how can you go back to **Germany** after all you – I've made my peace with **Germany**. They've paid the price. They've tried very hard to make up for – they recognize today very much what they have done. They are, you know, I feel that what we know today about the way the American government acted, the **Roosevelt** administration acted, of ignoring not only the **Saint Louis** affair, but the – you know, many other – look how close did I come of being – not being accepted in. You know, I'd like to find out. But it wasn't all peaches and cream and not everything that was pretended, that the Jews were a political pawn, that it was inconvenient to the American and British government to admit the to **Palestine,** that they wanted to s – you know, send them to **Madagascar** in transit, right? The Jewish state of **Madagascar** and other faraway places where they

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would be out of the way and not in the way of the Arab situation, the oil situation. So when you see all of that, it's not that one guy wears the black hat and the other guy wears the white hat. Everybody wears a gray hat. Anyway.

Q: Anything else you wanted to add –

A: No, no I –

Q: – before we finish?

A: **[indecipherable]** go on. No, I think I'll say thank you and I'll look forward to receiving the tape and I hope it is audible and makes – makes some sort of sense.

Q: Well, thank you very much for doing the interview. This concludes the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Kurt Roberg.**

End of Tape Five, Side B

Conclusion of Interview

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