

Fred Wittner Jan 8, 1978

Q: When and where were you born?

A: In Berlin in 1913.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your education?

A: I went to the Gymnasium until I was 16 and then I started an apprenticeship in a large company which I finished on April 1st 1933.

Q: You finished the apprenticeship?

A: Right and then of course was the question, would they keep me? Because it was one of the really big corporations and I didn't know what their policy towards the Jews would be. But there were not many Jews, only a few and they treated us very decently.

Q: Was it a Jewish owned firm?

A: Well, yes and no. It was a kind of firm which would here be on the Stock Market – a multi – million mark business there and the actual owners who owned the majority of the stocks were in Czechoslovakia and were Jews but this has nothing to do with it because this company was directed by gentile directors. And among hundreds of employees, there were only maybe 5 or 6 Jews and they decided to treat us decently and they did. And they didn't fire me. I was very unhappy about it because I wanted them to fire me.

Q: At the time, you were unhappy about that?

A: Yes. Not right away but a little later when my friends left and my father said what do you want – you still have your job and most probably you can keep it. How long can it last which is what many people said. They couldn't believe that it would last for a long time so after a few years I just quit.

Q: Let me backtrack for a moment. What kind of business was this?

A: It was a wholesale coal business. They owned coal mines in Czechoslovakia and Germany.

Q: Going back a little further when you were still a student, what was the relationship between the Jewish children and the Christian children that you were in school with?

A: Well, this was in the western part of Berlin and in this particular school, a very high percentage of the pupils in the school were Jewish – I think more than 50%. But there were a few real anti – Semitic kids among them. I knew this and we sometimes had arguments. They made it a little unpleasant but not much because the majority were Jewish.

Q: Were most of your friends Jewish then?

A: Not most, all of my friends were Jewish because I belonged to a Jewish youth organization.

Q: What type of Jewish organization was this?

A: The name of it was Kamaraden.

Q: Was it Zionist?

A: No. It became so later on. A group of this organization went to Israel and have their own kibbutz but at that time it was not Zionist.

Q: When you belonged to it, what type of activities did they have?

A: Mostly sports and they did hikes and during vacation, we went together in groups to different parts of Germany and went skiing in winter and they also had other activities during the year.

Q: Did you also belong to a congregation in Berlin?

A: No.

Q: Did you come from a liberal or orthodox type home?

A: Actually neither one because there was nothing Jewish in our home. My father went of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to business. My gentile colleagues in the office – they told me tomorrow not to come because it was a holiday. That's how Jewish I was.

Q: You mentioned that you were in this company on April 1st, 1933. How did the boycott on that day affect you?

A: No, personally not. The only thing, in the office, of course, because many people who were not anti – Semitic or at least didn't make anti – Semitic remarks before, they started to do it after Hitler came to power and it wasn't so pleasant anymore.

Q: Did you begin to notice a change in the attitude of the employees of the company as the years went by?

A: Absolutely. I worked in a small department with 10 or 12 people and there were a few who just openly made remarks against the Jews.

Q: How did you react when they made these remarks? Did you get into an argument or discussion?

A: No. Well, I'm not the type who would do that but I felt very uncomfortable and unhappy too.

Q: Did you ever see any signs Juden Unerwünscht?

A: Yes. Of course, I mean this started on April 1st on all Jewish stores.

Q: These people who worked with you, did they belong to the Party or any Hitler organization?

A: No, they did not. But there was one fellow with whom I was personally on very friendly terms. He was asked by somebody in the company to be the leader of the company NSDAP and he then became a member of the Party. But I continued to be on friendly terms with him and once I asked him about it and he said alright, I hate the Jews but you are a nice fellow, you are an exception. This famous thing that every Nazi knew one nice Jew. Otherwise, as far as I know, they were not Nazis. There was even one man who was a communist – he was before that time and then he told us that his son became a member of the Hitler Jugend. I asked him once about this and he said well, I have to think of the future of this boy because if he wouldn't belong to the Hitler Jugend, he wouldn't have any future in Germany.

Q: Did your firm follow a policy that when they hired someone, they had to be Party members? After Hitler came to power?

A: I don't think so. This was a company where people almost spent their lives. They stayed there for 20 or 30 years and there wasn't much of a turnover. I doubt that they had this policy.

Q: When you joined this company, what did you hope to become within this organization?

A: Well after a short time being there, I realized that the salesmen made a very good living and I hoped that would be my future there because they really had a chance to make good money as it was one of the biggest companies in this field.

Q: What were the first signs of trouble for you personally?

A: First, what I told you in the office and otherwise actually there was nothing. My friends, they were all students – I was the only one who did not study – and one after the other left the country because they saw that it didn't make sense to continue studying in Germany and I felt that I wasted my time there because sooner or later it would come to me too, and I didn't have the guts anymore to ask for a raise in salary which actually I thought I was entitled to because I thought that I had to be happy that they kept me.

Q: Did you think of emigrating at that time?

A: I cannot tell you when I began to think about it but it was pretty soon after 1933. The problem was that my father was already in his 60's and he was afraid to leave Germany and whenever I spoke then about it, he was absolutely against my leaving.

Q: Did he give you reasons why he was against it?

A: Yes. One reason was that he thought it couldn't last for long and the second reason was that my mother was much younger than my father and he was afraid that he would go before her and she would be alone. But then I have to mention that I have two brothers also. One was younger and the older one – he lost his job right in 1933 because his company was taken over by the Nazis and he went to Italy. But he had to go so that was a different story but I didn't have to because I wasn't fired and it didn't look like they would fire me.

Q: you mentioned a younger brother, was that brother still in school?

A: At that time, yes.

Q: Did he have any difficulties in school?

A: No, I don't think so because he went to the same school where I went but I think I gave you the wrong answer. He was not in school anymore – he gave school up on his own without consulting my parents and of course he didn't see any sense in continuing school.

Q: Do you think the Nazi propaganda that he was taught in school affected him?

A: No. I think for him there was another reason. My father was financially very bad off because at that time his business was ruined already and his income shrank constantly and he couldn't get not even pocket money from my father so he just decided he wants to make money.

Q: What type of business was your father in?

A: My father had representations of hat factories – ladies and mens hats. And those factories were not in Berlin. They were in smaller places outside of Berlin and he represented them in Berlin. Those factories either they were in Jewish hands and the people sold and left or they were in gentile hands and they didn't want a Jewish representative. Also, his customers were mainly Jews who left one after the other or sold their business so then there was no business left anymore – little by little.

Q: When he saw all these Jewish people leaving, did that change his mind about emigrating?

A: No it didn't. He just thought he was too old. Actually, I'm older now than he was at that time but he considered himself old and he didn't have the strength or the guts to say good – bye and he didn't have any money either. Maybe he would have gone if he would have been forced in some way. But he wasn't really forced and didn't make up his mind.

Q: Did your father serve in the first world war?

A: Yes.

Q: How did he feel towards Germany?

A: Oh, he felt like a real German. Whenever he had trouble with the tax people for instance, he put on his Izone Kreuz and he thought it would make some impression which of course it didn't. But like most German Jews of this generation, they felt German not as Jews.

Q: Did you feel much the same way?

A: No. Most probably I changed my mind when the Nazis came to power. I started thinking about it. I went to synagogue more and more.

Q: When you went to synagogue, did you ever hear from the rabbi or within the congregation urging people to leave or anything else?

A: Well, the rabbi of this particular congregation was Rabbi Joachim Prinz and he was a Zionist and I knew him personally and I met him sometimes and I was kind of influenced by him too. I belonged to his youth group and he did influence me.

Q: Did you consider going to Israel?

A: Yes. I joined the Zionist Youth Group – Hechalutz. It was my decision already when I was working, to emigrate to Israel.

Q: How did this change for you?

A: That I didn't go. When I finally decided to leave Germany after I quit my job, I belonged already to the Zionist organization – Hechalutz and wanted to go on Hachshara. First they sent me to Czechoslovakia but it didn't work out. I stayed there for two or three days and I had to go back to Berlin. Then they sent me to Denmark.

Q: What was the final incident that made you decide to quit your job?

A: Well, actually I knew for a long time already that there was no future for a young person in Germany and since my father fought me, I had to make the decision on my own. I had to leave this country – It didn't make sense to stay. I also knew what was happening to other people. I mentioned before that I knew Prinz and Prinz himself was in prison a few times and he told us about his experience. One heard what happened to other people and it didn't make sense to wait until something happened to me.

Q: What happened when you told them in your firm that you were leaving?

A: One of the directors called me into his private office and he said I understand fully that what you are doing is right. Later, I found out that he had a Jewish son – in – law and he was very unhappy about that fact. The directors and all the big shots of this company – they were all ex – officers or high ranking officials in the military and he was one of them.

Q: You mean the old Wehrmacht?

A: Right. They were not Nazis. Maybe they were actually against the Nazis. They may have been a little anti – Semitic but they didn't let us feel it – they didn't show it.

Q: You said that the Hechalutz sent you to Denmark. For what purpose did they send you there?

A: You know what was called Hachshara – to work in the country and to get prepared for life in a kibbutz in Israel. Since we came from the city, we didn't know anything about agriculture.

Q: Where did you go in Denmark?

A: Well, first I went to Copenhagen and there was an organization set up by Danish Jews who organized this Hachshara in their country and they sent us to farms.

Q: How did you adjust to farm life coming from Berlin?

A: This was nor difficult. I mean I was prepared for it. I knew what I was going into and besides I was very young – I was in the beginning twenties and you take those things not so serious in this age later on, as later on.

Q: The day that you left Germany must have been pretty difficult. How did you feel on that day?

A: I have to tell you a little story. I was given by the Hechalutz in Berlin just the address of a man I should contact in Copenhagen. This man had a book store, I don't know if I knew that before, and he occupied himself with the organization. Apparently he had the time for it and when I reached by train the border, a Danish officer came in and asked me what are your plans and where are you going. I said to Copenhagen and he asked me what I was going to do there. So I didn't know what to answer because I knew that it would be the wrong answer to give him the name of this man but I didn't know anybody else so I told him. So he knew who this man was and he said this man is supposed to give you a job in agriculture. I said yes and he said we know this but I cannot let you go unless we have the confirmation from this man that he knows about you and that he intends to take care of you. But this man was very nice like the Danes who behaved very nicely towards the Jews. He out up a telegram for me which I should send to this man (benefactor) and in the evening there was an answer there and I took the evening boat to Denmark. We had to go by boat – all I did was show them my passport and the confirmation that this man was informed.

Q: At this point, how did your parents feel about your leaving?

A: Actually, they knew that I did the right thing. They didn't fight it anymore. They were sad about it but they knew they had to give in and let me go.

Q: Did they consider making any plans at that point?

A: No. They never did and they stayed there.

Q: When you left, did you consider the possibility that you might not see them again?

A: No. Not at that time because it wasn't that serious yet at least not in Berlin. My wife has a completely different story because she comes from a small place. But in Berlin you didn't feel it that much and besides, Denmark wasn't that far from Germany and I did see my parents again. I went only once back to Berlin.

Q: When did you go back to Berlin?

A: It was in 1936. That was not from Denmark. From Denmark I went to Sweden.

Q: When had you left for Denmark?

A: 1935 in March.

Q: What happened to you after you finished in this agricultural training in Denmark?

A: I didn't really finish it. The way the Hechalutz worked – they sent me to work in the country and their plan was as soon as possible to send us to Israel but at that time it got harder and harder to get the certificates to enter Palestine and after I was one year in Denmark, they decided to open another Hachshara center in Sweden and they needed a few people to prepare that and I was one of them.

Q: A few old hands!

A: Yes. So they sent me to Sweden and at that time my younger brother was still in Germany and I promised him to bring him to Denmark but then when I was sent to Sweden I put the condition to it that they also got the immigration papers for Sweden for my brother which they did.

Q: So he was able to join you in Sweden. How long did you stay in Sweden?

A: About a year and a half and after this year and a half, I would have had the possibility to go to Israel but I didn't go because my older brother was already in Israel for a year or two.

Q: He had gone from Italy to Israel?

A: No, he was back in Germany in the meantime but he was sent from Germany to Israel. He was no Zionist by the way, he just went because he knew he had to leave the country and he wrote constantly to me that I shouldn't come to Israel because he hardly could make a living for himself and our plan was to get our parents out and he wrote again and again that he couldn't take care of himself and it wouldn't make sense for me to come there too – how could we do anything for our parents. Then, I decided not to go.

Q: When you decided not to go to Israel, did you decide on any place instead?

A: what happened was – I couldn't stay any longer in Sweden because I didn't have aufenteilserlaubnes – permit to stay. So I went back to Denmark because it wasn't too far – right over the sound there. And I contacted the people I knew from the Zionist organization and I explained the situation and they let me stay in Copenhagen. They didn't send me to a farm because they realized that wouldn't make sense and they gave me the address of a Jewish judge – a man in a very high position. He was really more than a judge and this man tried to help emigrants who got stuck in Denmark to help them to get overseas. He was in contact with HIAS in Paris and he prepared everything for me to go to Argentina.

Q: Who suggested Argentina?

A: He did.

Q: How did you feel about this suggestion?

A: At that time, one would go to any country. I mentioned before that I went back to Berlin for several weeks...

Q: When was that?

A: Maybe the beginning of 1937. I used this time in Berlin to do what other people also did – to go from consulate to consulate and everybody told me no, except one – I think Puerto Rico or Costa Rica. One of those small South American countries but everybody said that didn't make sense. So I let that go and went back to Sweden. So when I heard this and I knew I had to go somewhere and this judge in Sweden thought Argentina would be the right thing for me because in Argentina there was this Jewish Colonization Association. They had settlements where they settled Jews. This started in the late 1800's for the Polish and Russian Jews who wanted to emigrate and it was used also for the German Jews. They founded settlements only for German Jews far away from Buenos Aires of course in the middle of nowhere and I thought it would be the right thing for me because I would have had the chance to get my parents there.

Q: Was this a Zionist sponsored settlement in Argentina?

A: No. It had nothing to do with it. This judge was not affiliated with anything. He just had contacts with some organizations and tried to help some German Jews to get out of Europe.

Q: You spoke of going back to Berlin in 1937. Did you see any change in Berlin between the time you originally left and this time when you came back?

A: Not really. In Berlin you didn't feel it that much. There were more Jews in Berlin than before because people from the smaller towns came to Berlin because in Berlin, it was much easier to get lost. I was just a little bit afraid because I couldn't go to the police which you were supposed to do. I was kind of illegal in Germany at the time because I had emigrated already and for the Germans, I didn't exist anymore. I lived with my parents and I will never forget, I once crossed the street against the light and the cop came to me and I thought that would be the end but he was very nice and he let me go. But if they would have taken me to the police station, I would have been in trouble.

Q: Did you still have a German passport?

A: I did. I think at that time I still did.

Q: But could they see that you were in Germany illegally?

A: Yes. Because I had already left the country.

Q: when you left, was there already a restriction on what you could take?

A: Restrictions on the money.

Q: Then you only left with the 10RM?

A: Yes. Right. So I was financially dependent on the Danish Jews – completely. This one day I had to wait in Copenhagen for the telegram to come, I spent about all the rest of the 10RM I had for dinner and the telegram.

Q: Did you take any valuables which you could sell?

A: No. I'll tell you why...because I didn't have anything and my parents didn't have anything either. In this context, before I left for Argentina, my mother came to Denmark to say good – bye to me. I could arrange for – they gave me some extra money for this purpose – so she could stay in a hotel for two days or three days. And she had her golden watch and bracelets and little things – she didn't have too much jewelry but she had something and she had it with her. Shortly after she returned, all the Jews had to deliver everything of value, of gold and jewelry and then she wrote to me how sorry she was that she didn't think to leave it with me.

Q: When she came to Copenhagen, did she have any difficulties with the Nazis?

A: No. At that time you could still travel freely. The restriction was with the money. They knew the people from Germany if they wanted to come back, they had to come back very soon because with the 10 marks, you couldn't do much.

Q: When she came to see you in Copenhagen, do you remember her feelings about having to go back to Germany?

A: Of course. She was kind of depressed. First of all, to let me go so far away and she knew more or less that it was the last time she saw me and life in Berlin wasn't very pleasant for her either mainly because of the financial troubles my father was in – they hardly had to eat and they couldn't pay the rent and they had debts. They borrowed money from almost everybody – they were in a very sad situation.

Q: Were they able to get any kind of help from any organization?

A: No, not that I know of.

- Q: When you left for Argentina, what did you in your own mind expect to find?
- A: I knew they would send me to one of those settlements – those colonies and I knew that it would be a pretty tough life there and it was but that didn't bother me or it didn't worry me because I thought that it would be hopefully a chance for my parents to follow me and that was all I was interested in.
- Q: When you say it was a hard life, could you describe the kind of life you found on that farm?
- A: Oh, it was very very primitive. It was far away from a railroad station. There was really nothing there. There were maybe 100 German Jewish colonists there who tried to build up the farm for themselves. For the first few years, they got some help from the organization financially and also they advised them because they were not farmers before.
- Q: You grew up in Berlin, how did you adjust to that kind of farm life?
- A: Well, first of all I was already in Denmark and Sweden in the country. But it was completely different because it was so much more primitive. There was vast land – not cultivated, mosquitoes. It was kind of hard for me because the way we lived – it was not a real house. It was more a hut than a house. There was no running water in the house – you had to get it from outside. It was very – but I just took it the way it came. I knew I had to because I wanted to do everything possible to get my parents out.
- Q: Was there any opportunity to leave the farm and go to Buenos Aires – I don't know how far away this was.
- A: It was maybe 20-25 hours by train in the middle of nowhere. Later on I went to Buenos Aires.
- Q: When you agreed to go to this farm, were there any conditions such as the length of time you had to stay?
- A: I don't think so – they just promised me that after a certain time when I got accustomed to this kind of life there, that they would help me to get my parents out. But then they didn't do anything.
- Q: They didn't help you get them out?
- A: No. I made out an application after a while with the administrator of this farm or settlement and I didn't hear anything for a long time and later they told me that this man buried the application in his desk and he didn't do anything and then I gave up. I said this doesn't make sense for me to stay there. I didn't make any

money there because they didn't have anything. They just gave me enough pesos to write a letter once in a while home and to buy a few cigarettes.

Q: Other than the 100 Jews, did you have any contact on that farm with Europeans or only native Argentinians?

A: No. Mostly with the German Jewish farmers there. You see Argentina is different from the States, the people who lived in this part of the country, they were real natives – not the kind of people you meet in Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires is a very cosmopolitan city – a large city like any other big city in the world. But there were real natives and we had contact with them like at harvest time when they helped. Also my Spanish at the time was very poor and I didn't learn too much Spanish because from the German colonists, you couldn't learn it too well.

Q: What was the morale like among these 100 families in the settlement?

A: That wasn't bad. They all knew that for a while they had to struggle and they had to get used to this primitive life especially the ones who came from larger cities. There were others who were cattle dealers in Germany, they knew more of a country life but the city people did not. But I wouldn't say that morale was bad. I only know that after a certain time, the younger people made plans to leave the country – to leave for the larger cities.

Q: What about the older people – did anybody there plan to stay?

A: The older people yes – they knew they had to and they got accustomed to it. Some were able to get financial help from relatives in other countries and you didn't need much help to make life a little bit more comfortable. But the younger people little by little almost all of them left. Especially in some families, there were 5 or 6 children and they knew there was no space for all of them – the farms were too small to support a greater number of people – so they just had to leave.

Q: Were these farms supposed to be profit making or just self – supporting?

A: Actually self – supporting. These people were happy to make some kind of living.

Q: What I meant was there any plan to use the profits to go to Buenos Aires or someplace else?

A: No. Actually, they were supposed to stay there. They got first financial help from this organization in Buenos Aires. They gave them I don't know how many cows and horses and everything that was necessary to work the farm but this was kind of a loan not a gift. They were supposed, as soon as they had profit, to start paying up their debts. Once it was paid up, they were on their own. But this was

very hard because these people had no experience with this kind of work and didn't make any profit at least that I saw,.

Q: How did you adjust to the weather conditions and the medical or lack of medical facilities?

A: That wasn't a big problem. It is very hot there in the summer and cold in winter. I mean not as cold as here but you feel it more because there were no heating facilities but when you are twenty, you see it with different eyes.

Q: What was the age range among these refugees?

A: The colonists were between 40 and mid – 50's as an average. They were families with children. Of course, they took mainly families with children.

Q: For these children, was there provision for education?

A: Well, there was a school, yes. Spanish speaking.

Q: Who were the teachers?

A: I couldn't answer this – either I forgot or I wasn't interested but I know that the smaller children went to school.

Q: Did you get any medical care?

A: There was a German Jewish emigrant doctor. Later I heard he wasn't really a doctor. He studied but he wasn't really a finished doctor and later I met him in Buenos Aires and he finished his studies there. But he had kind of an office and he was able to treat things as good as he could. He had a nurse and there was a small hospital – just a few beds in a primitive little house and they could take care of the usual things. If something really serious happened, they had to send them to the nearest city.

Q: Were there ever any crisis situations?

A: Not that I know of.

Q: How long did you stay on the farm and when did you leave?

A: I stayed for about 1 1/2 years and then of course I was thinking how to get away from there. Because how do you get from a place like that without money. There were many people in the same situation that I was – they were alone and they went there to get their parents out of Germany. And I became friendly with one of these fellows and he left a while before me. I got his address and I wrote to him. He worked in kind of a tree nursery not far from Buenos Aires and he made

there 50 pesos a month which to me seemed like a fortune – it wasn't much but it was at least something. So I wrote to him and asked him if he could get me into this same outfit. I wasn't too hopeful because we weren't such good friends but after a while he wrote to me that I could come there – he spoke to the manager and he even sent me 10 pesos to show me that he meant it seriously. But this was not enough money to get there. But I went from one to the next and borrowed money from whomever had a few pesos and promised people to send it back as soon as possible which is what I did.

Q: Did the colonists or the organization mind that you decided to leave?

A: I didn't contact the organization at all. I went privately to people I knew to borrow the money and with this money I went there. This was about 1 hour away from Buenos Aires. My thinking was of course that from there, I would get a chance to go once in a while to the city and contact people.

Q: When you got to this town which had the tree nursery.

A: It was not a town – just the tree nursery.

Q: Where were you able to live?

A: All the people who worked there – they lived on the land and they had there. There were a few houses but completely without furniture. I'm sure that nobody that has not seen this can imagine that people can live like that. If you had a bed, you would sleep on the bed, if you didn't have a bed, you slept on the floor – nobody cared about that. And there was just a sink outside where you could wash. It was running water but cold of course, not warm. But this fellow who helped me get there, he helped me to make a bed because I didn't want to spend money. I wanted to save every penny so that I could get away from there and go to the city. So, that's what I did.

Q: How did you make a bed?

A: Well, it was canvas and wood – it was kind of a bed but at least it wasn't as bad as lying on the floor. There was no wardrobe or closet or anything like that. The little bit that I owned I kept in my suitcase. I didn't even own a decent suit at that time anymore .

Q: At this time, you knew that this organization man had buried the application you had made for your parents to come to Argentina...

A: Actually, when I heard about that I made the decision right away to try to get away from the farm. Because if they wouldn't do anything for me, what did I want to stay for.

Q: Was there any chance for you in either this area or in Buenos Aires to renew some contact to get your parents out?

A: Later, when I was in Buenos Aires, like here you could make an application. But, first of all, you had to prove that you would be able to take care of the people that you want to come. And I was hardly able to take care of myself so I wouldn't go this way. But other people told me then that every government employee in Argentina likes money – so with money you can get everything. Also the immigration papers for my parents but I DIDN'T HAVE THIS MONEY. I tried to borrow it. I wrote letters to relatives who were in the States already but they couldn't imagine that I wouldn't be able to get this money together on my own.

Q: Was it a possibility to contact a HIAS or JOINT in Buenos Aires to help you?

A: Of course, there was an organization which helped the immigrants but they helped only the ones who came there to get settled in the city because most of them wanted to stay in Buenos Aires but I didn't know of anyone who I could help for this purpose.

Q: When you came to Buenos Aires, was there already a large German Jewish community?

A: Yes. But I found out about that later little by little when I stayed in Buenos Aires but in the beginning I went to the city once in a while on my day off and then I met a few people I knew from the Hachshara from Denmark and Sweden. First, I thought I don't know anybody but little by little I found a group which I knew from Europe. But there was nobody who would have been in a position to help me.

Q: How long did you stay at this tree nursery?

A: Six or nine months.

Q: And then you moved to Buenos Aires?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you intend to stay there permanently?

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of job did you get there?

A: Well you see I didn't have any real profession so I did what quite a few of the younger people did – I started as a painter. I mean I told them I was a painter which I was not and the first time I had to paint a ceiling and had to stand on a

high ladder, I had to say good – bye because otherwise, I would have fallen down and broken my neck. But soon after I got a job in a commercial outfit. I started as a packer but I made enough to live somehow on it, at the lowest salary imaginable but at least it was enough to eat.

Q: Where did you live in Buenos Aires – by that I mean among other German Jews?

A: Yes. There were many people – German Jews – who rented large apartments with 10 or 12 rooms or as large as they could get. They and rented out the rooms to mostly single people. I landed in one of those places where some of my former acquaintances from Europe who were about my age were and I stayed there.

Q: You were a young fellow, where did you go to socialize?

A: There were groups – German Jewish organizations and groups like we had here like the New World Club.

Q: Were there any German Jewish congregations set up?

A: No. Not that I know. The more religious ones joined the Argentine congregations and for social groups, they had places.

Q: How long did you stay in Buenos Aires?

A: Until 1953, when I came here.

Q: During that time, was it your intention to come to the U.S.?

A: No, not right away. But there was the war in between and there was the letter I got from my parents that they were being sent to the concentration camp and then I knew that there was no hope anymore that they

Q: When did you get the letter?

A: I think it was 1942. I got a very short letter from my mother and she just told that in two days, we have to be ready to be sent away. They didn't know where to. It was Theresienstadt – I found that out later and then she asked me to get in touch with my brothers and tell them about it and that was the last letter I got.

Q: How did you find out what happened to them?

A: Well, actually I didn't find out. My brothers later on had come to the States – they had been in Israel for a while and they got in touch with all kinds of Jewish organizations and there was a Rabbi by the name of Neuhaus (nothing to do with Ohave Shalom) who was also in Theresienstadt and he managed somehow to make notes about the people there and my brother heard of him and he got in

touch with him and he knew that my father died in 1943-4 what was called a natural death – he was an old tired man by then and my mother was sent to Birkenau – Auschwitz and one knows the rest

Q: Your brothers had come to the United States earlier than you?

A: Yes. I mention this because this was one of the reasons I wanted to come here. I wasn't married in Buenos Aires and I had friends but I wasn't too close to them. I was more or less by myself. I had a group of friends but there was nothing really that was holding me there. Besides, at that time Peron was the ruler in Argentina – it was a dictatorship and it wasn't very pleasant politically there. I had enough from one dictator and it was quite unpleasant to live under Peron.

Q: As a Jew or?

A: No, not as a Jew, in general. He started to take anti – Semitic measures but he was told by the Americans that they didn't like – he closed the Jewish papers for instance. But even though he started such things, he stopped it right away.

Q: Did you ever see or come in contact with any of the Germans (Nazis) who had come to Buenos Aires?

A: No. they didn't come to Buenos Aires – at least not openly, they stayed far away. But there was talk about this and probably it was more than talk. The Argentines were very friendly towards the Germans always.

Q: During the war also?

A: Yes.

Q: How did that affect the refugee community?

A: Well, officially we were enemy aliens. We had to deliver our passports but this was actually a formality. Nothing else happened and later they returned the passports.

Q: How did the fact that you were German speaking or at least not fluent in Spanish (Port) affect your relationship with the Argentinians?

A: It didn't at all. Argentina is different from the States in this respect – that every group, the Germans, the French stayed and lived more or less among themselves. They didn't mingle with the rest of the people.

Q: So that was not unusual then for the Germans to stick together?

- A: Right. I knew British people for instance who were born in Argentina - he was a man in his eighties at this time and he spoke only broken Spanish. His sons went to Europe during the war voluntarily – they were British and they stayed British. And the Germans – they stayed German. They had their own schools, their own hospitals and they didn't mix. So I was always a stranger there and that was also one of the reasons I didn't see why I should stay there while my brothers lived here.
- Q: When you came here, did you stay with your brothers?
- A: Well, one of my brothers got married just a few months before I arrived here and took his own apartment and the other one kept that apartment which he shared with the other one because he knew that I would come soon and then we shared it. Then he got married and I kept the apartment.
- Q: How did you earn a living when you first came? Did you know English?
- A: Well, I had my school English and as soon as I made the decision to come to the States, I started to take lessons in Buenos Aires. I was financially not too well off but not bad off – I lived comfortably and I could afford to take lessons. I think I knew enough English to make a living – to work. Of course, my first jobs here were in factories or factory like places.
- Q: You were about 40 when you came here. Was it difficult to find work then?
- A: It was not too hard. But I did have to start with the minimum salary but I didn't stay in this place for too long – it was just a few weeks because my brothers already had some friends here and one of these people got me a job in a union place – at least I got the union scale wages which wasn't too bad. Instead of \$1,00, I got \$1,50 so this was 60 per week and at that time it wasn't too much but I didn't have to starve.
- Q: Was this in Washington Heights?
- A: No. My brothers had the apartment on 115th St. opposite Columbia.
- Q: When you came here, did you socialize with mostly German Jewish people?
- A: I wouldn't say mostly. I would say only because my brothers belonged to one of those Aufbau? groups so I met those people and besides I had some relatives here – a couple from Vienna that I hadn't seen since I was 12 years old but they were much older than we and they were almost like parents to us.
- Q: You had by this time worked in three different continents, did you notice any major differences in conditions between the three?

A: Well, it wasn't very difficult here. Because I found that people were helpful and easy to go along. My only problem was that from this first very poorly paid job, I went to the union place – it was a dairy outfit and it was organized like a factory and the work was very hard – too hard for me. I realized I couldn't do it – I didn't have the strength for that and since I had worked for six years in Buenos Aires in the shoe business, as a salesman, I thought I could do the same thing here. I tried it once – it was the Salamander shoe store and I worked there for a few months but those people were impossible. They behaved terribly towards the employees – that was the first time in my life that I quit a job without having another one. But I managed somehow. From then on, I found jobs – always one a little bit better than the other one and now I'm kind of settled. I'm not a millionaire but I have a decent job and make a decent living.

Q: Are your friends still today mostly of German Jewish background?

A: Yes. Almost all.

Q: You have one son. Do you see your son as part of the American mainstream?

A: Yes. I think so. Of course his friends are Americans but there are also sons and daughters of German Jews. He is at City College and right now he is taking a course on the Holocaust. I think it's because he wants to know more since he knows where his parents come from.

Q: Have you ever told him about your emigration?

A: Not too much, not as much as I told you. Once in a while, if he asks questions, I answer them.

Q: Have you ever been back to Germany?

A: Well, a few years ago, we were in Europe – in Austria because I wanted to see Innsbruck because I had childhood memories of Innsbruck and I wanted to go back – we were nearby anyway.

Q: Did you go back to Berlin?

A: No. Since you mention that, you know that the former Jews from Berlin get invited to stay there for a week and they pay all the expenses. I applied for this a few years back without thinking much – just when I heard it. I wrote a letter but I'm still not decided whether I will accept it or not. I still cannot understand that many other German Jews spend their vacation there and go back to them. I am very keen on going back to Europe to travel there but not to Germany.

Q: How do you feel about Wiedergutmachung?

- A: That's a very good question because when they started, I was still in Argentina and my brothers were here. They had the same viewpoint as I had – we didn't want money from the Germans and we didn't make any application. And when I was here, my older brother had found a friend he knew from Germany who was a lawyer and he worked here with Wiedergutmachung. Actually it was his way of making his living and he talked it into us. He said you are stupid if you don't take that money. If you don't want it for yourself, take it as a gift from your parents to the children – but take it. He convinced us. He even offered us to do it free of charge – just friendship. Of course, we didn't accept that. But we let him start it. In the beginning, though, we were very much opposed to accept it.
- Q: Today we have a lot of successful Jewish politicians like Koch or Kissinger. How do you feel about Jews being in these exposed positions?
- A: Well, in the case of Koch or Beame, it didn't disturb me in any way especially not in New York where there are millions of Jews. In the case of Kissinger, he was a German Jew like us. Of course, I think like most German Jews, we found it a little bit dangerous that he was in such an exposed position. But I think he understood to draw a line – he did his job as an American and his Jewishness or German Jewishness, he didn't let it interfere. I'm sure it wasn't easy for him.
- Q: Looking back on the whole period, what do you think was the biggest adjustment which you had to make?
- A: I think the hardest for me was to get into a position here where I could make a decent living and be able to support a family. Because after all I wasn't that young anymore and my English wasn't that good – not even now too perfect but since I work in a German Jewish company, it doesn't present any difficulty but that was kind of hard but I got there after a while. But the older you get, the harder it is. Besides when I came here, I practically didn't know anybody except my brothers and my brothers I hadn't seen for many many years. They were very young people when I left and we had lost contact. My brothers were complete strangers to me especially my older brother. When I saw him, I felt who's that – a strange person. With the younger one, I lived together so we became a little closer after a while. We overcame this but in the beginning, I said who's he, a stranger.
- Q: Did all three of you marry German Jewish girls?
- A: Yes, like most others.