Interview with Mr. Manfred H. Klein
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June 9, 1982

Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is an interview with Manfred H. Klein, known as "Fred" Klein for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust History Project by Gary Shapiro on June 9, 1982. The first thing I would like to ask you is about the place where you were born and a little bit about your family background and that kind of thing. What town were you born in?

A: I was born on April 6, 1918 in Posen, which was at that time Germany. In 1922, after opting for German statehood, we moved to Breslau, Germany

Q: You say that it was Germany at the time you were born. Was it part of another country?

A: After the Treaty of Versailles, it became Poland, because it was a province of Posen which was Germany and I was born half a year before the end of the war, so after the war, it became Poland, and that's when we moved to Germany.

Q: Does Posen have any other names? Was it called by something else?

A: No. That was the shtetl, the town of Posen. Today it is known as Poznan, which is the Polish name for it, but it was Posen at the time when I was born.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: My dad's name was Max Klein and my mother's name Leah Klein.

Q: Do you remember their Jewish or Hebrew names?

A: My father's name was Moshe Meir ben Mickolil, my mother's name was Leah bat Shmuel.

Q: And what is your Hebrew or Jewish name?

A: My Hebrew name is Mikol Naphtoli ben Moshe Meir.

Q: Were your parents also born in Germany?

A: Yes. My mother was born in Posen on February 24, 1884. My father was born in Kotpost, Germany on July 11, 1880.

Q: And what about grandparents? How far back do you go in Germany?

A: My grandparents were born in Germany, my great-grandparents were born in Germany, and as far back as we know, they were.

Q: Do you know your grandparents' names?

A: Yes. From my father's side, my grandparents were Michael Klein and Setilia Klein, and my mother's side was Samuel and Armarja Shachman.

Q: It's going back pretty far, but do you know their Jewish names at all if it's different from the actual names they used every day?

A: (Laughs) I don't have the Jewish names. My grandfather's name was Michael ben Naphtali -- from my father's side. My grandmother from my father's side was -- I don't know quite. My grandfather from my mother's side was Shmuel, but I don't know my great grandfather's Jewish name. My grandmother's Jewish name was Marka.

Q: What did your parents do for a living?

A: My father had a business, the wholesale business, and was also a public salesman.

Q: Did your mother work outside of the house?

A: No.

Q: And do you remember what your grandparents did?

A: My grandparents from my mother's side were in the china, crystal and glass wholesale and retail business in Berlin. From my father's side -- as way back as I can remember -- they were in the milling business -- flour mills -- in Kotpos and in Pinet by Posen.

Q: Now in your home, what languages were spoken?

A: German.

Q: Just German? No Yiddish?

A: No. German Jews never talked Yiddish.

Q: You didn't have any friends, or parents of your friends, who spoke Yiddish?

A: No. You see in German Jewry, Yiddish was not a language which was spoken among German Jews. The German Jews were very assimilated to the surroundings -- not always as far as their religious beliefs were concerned. But they were assimilated as far as their habits and their language was concerned.

Q: Did you think of yourselves, or did you think of yourself as assimilated? Is that something that you thought about -- that you were aware of?

A: No. We thought about ourselves as German citizens of the Jewish faith.

Q: Your parents or yourself didn't speak other languages like Polish or Russian?

A: My dad spoke Polish.

Q: Does that mean that you have some Polish background in your family?

A: No. Posen -- the province of Posen -- consisted of 50% German population and 50% Polish population. And so you had to know -- if you were a traveling salesman -- both languages.

Q: You mentioned about religious beliefs. Would you call your family religious when they were in Germany?

A: We were Orthodox.

Q: And were you Orthodox in observance, also?

A: We were Orthodox in observance. My parents were more Conservative. I myself was Orthodox in my youth.

Q: How did you become more Orthodox than your parents?

A: Through school and teachers.

Q: What kind of Jewish education did you have in Germany?

A: I had religious school, and cheder, and private studies in Talmud and Gemorrah with a rabbi.

Q: How did religious school differ, then from cheder? Was that a higher level?

A: The religious school was a school which was associated with synagogues mostly -- while the cheder was associated with some of the Hasidic sects of which I had

some friends and I took part in special studies, but I also learned Gemorrah with my rabbis from the religious school as well.

Q: Was this religious school associated with one particular synagogue?

A: No. The religious school was with a Conservative-Orthodox movement.

Q: What do you mean by Conservative-Orthodox?

A: The Conservative-Orthodox had one religious school and the Liberals had another one. We were separated with two religious schools.

Q: Because when you say Conservative-Orthodox, you don't mean like the Conservative movement is here?

A: The Conservative movement in Germany was nearly as strict as the Orthodox movement in America is.

Q: So they combined in one?

A: They were combined in one.

Q: Now, did your parents have any link with Zionism or the Zionist movement?

A: No. My parents did not. I did.

Q: Could you talk about that a little bit?

A: I was, in my youth, a member of Habonim, but at the same time, I was also with Agudas Yisroel, which was an Orthodox youth movement.

Q: What kinds of activities did you do in Habonim?

A: You're going back 50 years. (Laughs) The Habonim was actually mostly social, and it was actually more to associate with people, with boys and girls of my age. In the other movement, which was a youth movement of the Agudas Yisroel, I was leader of the Agudas Yisroel. I was a member and I was leading youth groups there. I was also for a while, city-wide leader of the organization.

Q: I wanted to pick up on one point that we covered a little bit more, and that was, you said that all German Jews had a feeling of being German -- of Jewish faith. Do you think that both the Orthodox and the Liberals felt the same on that, or were they different?

A: No. they felt the same. Especially in those times. Today, I think, sometimes the Jewish population are feeling very strongly as Jews in a nationalistic way of

thinking. In those days, it wasn't. The nationalistic thinking was that they were Germans, but they were very conscious of being Jews as a religious feeling.

Q: Growing up in Posen -- in Germany -- what kinds of experiences did you have when you were young with anti-Semitism?

A: In Posen I didn't have any experience at all. I was four years old when I left Posen. (Laughs) I have a very slight recollection of Posen itself. My growing up was in Breslau, Germany.

Q: My question was meant to ask, what experiences did you have with anti-Semitism, with any experiences of feelings?

A: The anti-Semitism which we had -- there was always this, naturally, a slight anti-Semitism -- like you have it also very often here in America, of gentile people who, when something doesn't go wrong, they don't feel right against the Jews. But real anti-Semitism started in 1933 when the Hitler movement came. Before that, you did not feel anti-Semitism that much.

Q: So you would say that the feeling that you had of being disliked as a Jew wasn't much different that what goes on here in America?

A: Definitely!

Q: Did you have any fights or arguments as a boy with gentiles? Because of your being Jewish?

A: That was after 1933.

Q: How old were you in 1933?

A: In 1933, I was 15 years old. I was still in high school then. And I did have to fight my way in and out of school, because I refused to leave the high school.

Q: Do you remember -- before Hitler came to power -- either of your parents talking about anti-Semitism or pogroms that they had experienced?

A: Germany didn't have pogroms. That was in Russia. Pogroms were in Russia -- in 1877 -- when you had the Kishinev pogroms.

Q: I didn't necessarily mean a full scale, but just outbreaks.

A: No. There were no pogroms in Germany, you see, and that's why the German Jews felt pretty secure -- the same as the American Jew feels secure.

Q: So, in the early 30's, when Hitler came to power, can you describe a little bit about what that was like? Do you remember the news events of the time? Do you remember his coming to power?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Were people afraid of him? When he came to power, Jews? Right away at the beginning?

A: Naturally. Afraid of him? Yes. The same as you are afraid of any dictator who would be coming, and anybody whose oratory was against a certain section of the population -- which was in this case the Jews. But we still had hope -- having lived in a democratic country for so long -- that, okay, he was voted in -- we will be able one of these days to vote him out. We had always hope to be able to get rid of him -- which we couldn't.

Q: So, when he came to power, did he seem more powerful than the government that came before -- in the beginning?

A: Yes, I would say definitely yes.

Q: Were you aware of any things that were done by the Nazis to change the government right in the first couple of years?

A: Yes. The Nuremburg Laws and the school laws. We were allowed to have so many percent of Jewish children in schools and things like this.

Q: There were never any quotas of Jews before Hitler?.

A: No. There were no quotas.

Q: At the time -- as opposed to what you came to know later on -- like the reading after the war -- what Nuremburg Laws were you aware of, and what laws affected your lives that Hitler made -- besides the school laws?

A: Our lives were affected, but you took a lot of the things in stride, hoping there will be a change in it. I myself, I was still fairly young and could cope with it. I took it in the stride.

Q: And what about your parents?

A: My parents had the same hope as we all had -- that things would change. We were wrong.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

A: Yes, two sisters.

Q: And what were their names?

A: Gertrude and Maliburt.

Q: Do you remember their Jewish names?

A: Maliburt was Malka bas Moshe Meir and Gertrude was Golda bas Moshe Meir.

Q: What ways did you find out about what was going on in the government -- through newspapers or radio?

A: Newspapers, radios.

Q: Was there a lot of information passed through friends and neighbors -- word of mouth?

A: You were very careful after ’33 to whom you talked to.

Q: So there was a feeling that there were people who were spying on you?

A: No. You did not trust anybody. It wasn’t so much a feeling, but you couldn’t trust. As a matter of fact, amongst gentile peoples, were parents who didn’t trust their own children and vice versa.

Q: So even among other Jews, you had a feeling of…

A: Oh, amongst other Jews you did not. You trusted Jews. Jews did not sell each other out.

Q: Did you have any non-Jewish friends?

A: Yes.

Q: Was this a great percentage of your friends, or just one or two?

A: It’s more a percentage of my friends.

Q: Did they express any concern, or did you talk with them at all about what was going on?

A: No. As I said before, you didn’t talk with anybody about anything.

Q: Even friends?

A: Even friends, because you never know what could happen.

Q: Did any gentiles make statements to you like, "Gee, I really don't like what Hitler is doing?"

A: Once in a while, maybe, odd ones. Of course, even amongst gentiles, it's the same thing as here in America, again. Every gentile has a "good Jewish friend." (Laughs)

Q: Your town that you lived in after Posen -- how far was that from Berlin?

A: 360 kilometers. Or 250 miles.

Q: Did you have relatives outside of Germany?

A: Yes.

Q: Where?

A; Here in America I had relatives. They came over in the 19th century. Before World War I.

Q: Did you have communication going with them?

A: No. Not direct. My grandparents did.

Q: Were you aware that they expressed concern about what was going on in Germany for you?

A: No.

Q: Can you talk about what happened later on -- in '35, '36 -- as things might have gotten worse? Did things escalate? Was there more and more as time went by, or how did that go?

A: Yes. When I graduated from high school, I couldn't go to University anymore. I went into business. And then of course in 1938, it all went "poof."

Q: How do you mean? What happened?

A: 1938 -- Kristallnacht -- they destroyed everything what Jews had.

Q: How did that affect your money and your economic situation?

A: I lost my job because our family business in Berlin was destroyed. The business I was working for was closed up. I myself was in concentration camp on the 9th of

November, 1938, and most of the bank accounts were closed. The Nazis just closed everything that Jews possessed. Gold and silver had to be handed over to the Nazis, all valuables, and so on. And then slowly they moved the Jews into certain sections after 1938, '39.

Q: Now, before this, could you travel anywhere you wanted to?

A: Oh, yes!

Q: Did you have problems doing things -- like you mentioned being involved in certain youth groups. Did you have problems with social functions? Could you act like you did before, as a citizen of Germany?

A: Under Hitler movement? It was getting from bad to worse. We had to divulge the membership of our youth groups. We had to let them know where our meetings are, and we started meeting, rather, in clandestine meetings.

Q: Who did you have to notify about the locations?

A: The Gestapo!

Q: Can you describe how they were around? Were there stations set up of Gestapo -- like police stations?

A: The Gestapo was in the police headquarters, up on the fourth floor. When you went in there, you never knew if you were getting out, because there were gates you had to go through, and you tried not to go up there. So when we had to go up there to report, we tried to avoid it, and just meet without letting them know.

Q: Did you know anyone during these years who just disappeared? That they had some contact with the Gestapo or Nazis and they never came back?

A: In July, 1938, was the first round-up of German Jews. They were so called "criminals." The crimes they committed was that some of them were married to gentiles. Others may have had an affair with a gentile, and things like this, and they were under these pretexts, they were arrested and, of course, later on I met them in Buchenwald. In 1938 -- October, 1938 -- Germany deported the Polish citizens across the border into Poland -- again arrested them and deported them over there . Then in November of 1938, after destroying the Jewish businesses and destroying synagogues and everything, they arrested us in a three-day round-up.

Q: You were one of the people arrested? What was your crime?

A: My crime? Being a Jew!

Q: Did they give some kind of reason other than that?

A: No. They didn't give any reason at all. They just picked me up. We knew the reason. (Laughs)

Q: So, what happened to you after this round-up?

A: After being 24 hours in the headquarters of the police we were shipped under guard to Buchenwald concentration camp.

Q: Which was in Poland?

A: Saxony. It was by Weimar. As a matter of fact, on the grounds where Goethe used to walk. That's where the concentration camp was. (Laughs)

Q: First of all, how did you get to Buchenwald?

A: By train.

Q: Was it an ordinary train?

A: A passenger train. In those days they did not send us by cattle cars.

Q: Were they crowded?

A: Not over-crowded. That was in '38. The transportation was, of course, under heavy guard with loaded guns and everything. It was, you see, but we were in ordinary passenger railroad cars at that time.

Q: Did you know where you were going?

A: We had a very good idea -- we had known where other people have gone in July and so on and so on, so I had my reasons to know where I was going.

Q: Did some of those people who were taken away in July come back?

A: No.

Q: Did they write letters? How did you know what happened to them?

A: Through the grapevine. (Laughs)

Q: When you got to Buchenwald, how were you taken in and registered and set up?

A: We had to run a gamut. We arrived in Weimar, which is about 10 miles away from Buchenwald itself. There we were pulled out of the cars -- and it wasn't

very gentle -- and we were loaded on trucks and then we were brought to the main gate of Buchenwald.

Q: Did anyone physically resist the Nazis at this time?

A: There was no possibility of resistance.

Q: I don't mean wide-spread, I mean was there one guy who was a tough guy, and tried to smack a Nazi or insulted him or something like that?

A: No, not in my presence. Anyway, it is a futile effort, because if he did he was dead.

Q: Did you see anyone shot?

A: Yes.

Q: When?

A: In Buchenwald.

Q: Now, you were describing the steps that you had to go through.

A: Yes. We were taken by lorries, by trucks, to Buchenwald, and there we had to jump out and we had to run a gamut between two rows of SS people who stood there with sticks and things hitting at us, and trying to trip us, and things like this. At the time, I had my dad with me, who was 60, and watching my dad, I didn't always see that somebody got close to me.

Q: So your father was taken too. Was your mother taken?

A: No. Not at that time.

Q: What about your sisters?

A: Neither, at that time.

Q: So it was just you and your father.

A: Just my dad and myself.

Q: Why do you think they made you go through this run?

A: They had fun!

Q: Were they cursing at you and swearing at you at the same time?

A: Naturally.

Q; What were the insults that the Nazis…

A: You didn't listen to that -- you were preoccupied in running and getting out of their way, so that you didn't get hit.

Q: Did anyone fall down and was too weak or old to get up?

A: Oh yes.

Q: What was done to them?

A: They were hit there on the ground. Nobody looked back. I had all my time to protect my dad.

Q: How did you protect him?

A: Keeping him in front of me to see that he doesn't fall.

Q: How long did this last, this run?

A: This run? Oh, for about a hundred yards.

Q: And then after that, what did they make you do?

A; We went through the gates and it was a camp.

Q: Was there an assignment process to barracks? Or how did that go?

A: We had to stand in line. (Laughs) This I can't remember anymore. As a matter of fact, I can't even remember how they registered us or anything. But we were, at that time, close to 10,000 men, in three days, at that section of Buchenwald, and we had five Nissen huts amongst us, and we were crowded into those five Nissen huts.

Q: What's a Nissen hut?

A: A Nissen hut? Oh, that is again, in English, an expression (laughter). Like a large army barracks. They had about five of those.

Q: Can you describe what they were like?

A: Well, inside, you had these tiers where five high -- just enough room so that you could crawl, crossways, into it. And we were all laying, one after another, in it. About five feet high.

Q: Were they clean?

A: You tried to keep it clean yourself. No blankets, nothing.

Q: What happened to your clothing? When you came to the camp?

A: I kept my clothing on. That group, that bunch which I was arrested with and brought in, we were ordered within the next few days to come to the gate for being dressed into prison garb. I never went. I always let volunteers go ahead. I thought I wait until nobody else is there anymore, and I never actually got any. I was never changed into -- I kept my civilian clothing. And by that time, I would have had to go through with all of that, the billion dollars were paid by confiscation of our own property in Germany -- of the Jewish property -- and by the money being raised in America and other foreign countries by gentiles and Jews, and paid to the German government for the release -- and the action of putting the men into government clothing was then halted. Then they started to release them by various stages.

Q: What was this billion dollars that you're referring to? Was this a ransom price?

A: This was a ransom price. In those days, mind you, it was all done while I was in camp.

Q; So this had no connection to your being taken away to the camp. They didn't say, "Give us your money or we'll take you away."

A: No. Not from us. That was a negotiation, somehow, outside. We were at that time in the camp. We didn't know anything about it.

Q: So how long were you in the camp?

A: I was in the camp nine weeks.

Q: Do you remember the actual day that you went in -- the date?

A: Yeah. The 10th of November. The 13th of January I came out.

Q: Starting in the morning, what was a typical day like in Buchenwald then?

A: We did not have to work where I was. Not 'til you were dressed up and you were sent into the work section, you see. We were in the other section -- in those five Nissen huts, and I do not know what the other section. But the usual day of work

in Buchenwald was that they were woke up at 5:00, and had to go out to the quarries and cut stones with stick and shovel and then carry them back and build roads.

Q: So you're saying that people were taken from your place and sent to a work camp.

A: No. Right in Buchenwald. Into another section -- in the work camp section.

Q: So what did you do all day?

A: Nothing. You just had nothing to do.

Q: Did they let you go for walks?

A: No.

Q: Was there a guard at your door all the time?

A: They had kapo -- camp police -- who were prisoners -- which were gentile criminals, who were put over us, who were sometimes worse than the Nazis even were. And then we had, of course, SS.

Q: What was the food like in the camp?

A: For seven days I didn't have any water -- anything to drink. For fourteen days I didn't have anything to eat. After that it was watery soup, which we got. Blood sausage, when we finally got it, and our rabbis told us we should eat it. And things like that. It was horrible. Some real meat once in a while. (Laughs)

Q: You went for seven days without anything to drink? I didn't think that was possible.

A: Oh, yeah. Lots of things are possible.

Q: There were rabbis with you in Buchenwald?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did people ask them questions about whether it was permitted to eat the food?

A: Yes, there were enough Orthodox who didn't want to eat it, and the rabbis told them they should.

Q: And what was the reason they gave -- the rabbis -- do you remember?

A: To preserve your life, you are allowed to eat anything. Preserving life comes first.

Q: So, from the time you described, I would imagine that Chanukah fell while you were in the camp?

A: I think it did, but I never noticed it. (Laughter)

Q: So you didn't notice anyone who was trying to secretly light a menorah or something like that?

A: We didn't have any.

Q: I've heard stories that they were able to, later on, smuggle in…

A: That was during the war, afterwards. That wasn't in the first weeks when we were in.

Q: Were there people who put on tefillin in the morning, where you were? Was anyone able to keep it?

A: No. we didn't have any. We didn't have tefillin. When we were taken from the homes, we were not allowed to take anything with us.

Q: What happened if a person got sick during those nine weeks?

A: We had our own doctors in our compounds and we tried to treat our own people, because when we let people go to the infirmary they didn't come back. So our own doctors treated our own people. One of our men had an appendix operation done during the night by candlelight with a pen knife.

Q: Who performed the operation?

A: A Jewish surgeon who was a prisoner. We had our own surgeons.

Q: Did you know anybody else in the camp when you came, beside your father?

A: Oh, yes. Our friends were there.

Q: Were there non-Jews in the camp?

A: Not in our section. These 10,000 Jews was a round-up of Jews at the time when the Kristallnacht was on.

Q: Is there anything else you want to tell me about life in Buchenwald in the nine weeks that you were in there?

A: Life in Buchenwald wasn't easy, but I was young, I was 20 years old. And you just took things as it came. I was together with five friends and we just tried to make the best of a very bad situation.

Q: You described how at the beginning there was the line that people ran through and were beaten. Did other things like that go on? Other games by the Nazis to hurt Jews?

A: Oh, yes! For the slightest offence you were punished. Sometimes you didn't know why. And you were punished with what they called the "Saxengrusse" which was standing on your tiptoes with your hands behind your head, and they might have made it that you stand like this as much as two and three hours.

Q: What does "Saxengrusse" mean?

A: It's a "Saxony Greeting" – that is what they called it. That was a punishment. One prisoner from the other sections escaped during the time I was in Buchenwald, and they captured him. So the next day, the whole camp had to line up in the courtyard and we were watching them all day to erect a gallows, and that night we had to watch the execution. If you tried to turn your head away, you would have been beaten. And anything to upset things.

Q: Were there beatings that you saw yourself?

A: Yes. Not so much in our compound, but we could see through the fence of the other compound of the other prisoners. What they did, we don't know, but we saw that they had to bring -- it looked like a saddle mount -- they had to bring it and they had to lay over there, and then they got 50 or 75 lashes. After that, they had to take the thing back again.

Q: Were you afraid for your life?

A: I think so. I'm pretty sure I was afraid for my life.

Q: Did you think there were chances of being killed there? Were you afraid of that?

A: Definitely there were chances of being killed! When you are looking at the tower with the machine guns pointed at you, you know very <u>well</u> you can be killed! Of 10,000 people, during the time -- in the nine weeks I was in the camp -- 2,000 died. So why couldn't I have been one of them?

Q: What was the main way that people died?

A: A lot of them committed suicide. They couldn't take it. And died of heart attacks, and things like that.

Q: Did anyone die of malnutrition or starvation?

A: Not in my time, because there wasn't enough time for malnutrition. In nine weeks you can't die of malnutrition.

Q: Disease?

A: Sickness, yes.

Q: Were there any outbreaks of diseases like cholera or anything?

A: No, because we tried to keep ourselves as clean -- under the circumstances -- as we could.

Q: Did you know any of the names of German officers who were in that camp when you were there?

A: Johnny, Gerta, (sigh) and the boyfriend of Gerta -- the one who had the tattoos -- made lampshades out of them. And she had a boyfriend. Her husband was the Obersturmfuhrer. He was the Lagerkommandant -- her husband.

Q: Do you think that you would recognize them if you saw them today?

A: No, not anymore.

Q: Can you tell me about how you left the camp? After the nine weeks?

A: I was supposed to have a permit to go to Sweden for Hachsharah to Israel. This was after all the payments had been done, because they let you out of the camp in those days. The first batch which they let out were people over 60, and people who were soldiers of the First World War and had the Iron Cross -- First and Second Class -- they were released. And then when you had somehow proof that you could leave the country within a certain time, they started to release you.

Q: How did you get this Hachsharah permit?

A: My mother got it for me, through the Habonim organization.

Q: So you left by yourself? And they left like a one-by-one basis?

A; Ah, no. There were always quite a few, every day, who were called out, and they were released.

Q: What about your father?

A: My father was released four weeks before me, because he was over 60.

Q: So, did you leave the camp area the same way you came, by train?

A; By truck to the train, and then by train to Leipzig, and in Leipzig, we were taken over by the Jewish organizations.

Q: What were the first things that you did when you got back to your town? Did you go back to Breslau?

A: Yes. Within a week, the five friends of mine -- we were all about the same age -- we all got drunk. (Laughter) If you want to know, we were all around 20 years old. (Laughter)

Q: Did you tell people about your experiences? Did they ask you?

A: People who were interested were those people, like my wife, who, at that time, worked for the Jewish organization in receiving the prisoners coming back, and they had heard enough. But on the whole, you did not talk too much about it.

Q: Why?

A: It was dangerous.

Q: Did you think you'd be sent back?

A; Definitely.

Q: People were afraid to find out -- also -- about what was going on? Were they afraid to know?

A: They didn't care.

Q: The other Jews didn't care?

A: No. Not the Jews. The Gentile people didn't care.

Q: What about the other Jews in the community? Did they already know very well what was going on?

A: Well, there was hardly a household who didn't have somebody who went.

Q: At this stage of the game, did your treatment in Buchenwald lead you to think that the Nazis would do anything -- that they would have no stopping point? Or did you think that this was about the worst it could get?

A: No, we knew that it would get worse. That there was no stopping point.

Q: Now what did you do from there?

A: I worked. I tried to get out of the country.

Q: How did you try? What was the process a person went through to try to get out of Germany?

A: Well I didn't have a permit to go to Sweden. That was a fake permit. And I finally got a permit to go to England. It wasn't so hard to leave Germany in those years.

Q: Before the war?

A: Before the war. By that time, Hitler was quite willing to let the Jews leave Germany. The hard thing was to enter the other countries.

Q: What do you mean?

A: America wouldn't take any Jews in.

Q: Was this a known fact in Germany?

A: It was a known fact. America wouldn't take anybody in unless you had an affidavit. Then they had a quota system. A person like me, who was born in Posen, although I was born as a German Jew, as a German citizen, was classified as a Polish citizen, as far as America is concerned.

Q: Why, do you know?

A: Because, in 1919, at the Treaty of Versailles, Posen became Polish, so I was classified as a Pole. Not even knowing the language, but I was classified as far as America is concerned as a Pole.

Q: Was it harder for a Pole to get in than a German?

A: The Polish quota was way over subscribed. It took me after I came to England, five years to get my visa for America.

Q: Was it hard to get into England?

A: It was also hard, but we could get there on a Hachsharah permit. I did have a Hachsharah permit which I finally got in April, and I got to England that way. Shanghai -- you had to have $200 to show if you wanted to enter Shanghai in China. You may have had German money, but you didn't have the dollars. And you couldn't buy any dollars for all the money in the world. You couldn't enter Palestine -- because the British government had a quota there, and wouldn't let Jews in. You had Exodus and all these things. And the same thing. I had friends who went over the "green borders" -- that means over the borders, through the forest or somewhere where there was no border posts. When they were caught within 25 miles inside like Czechoslovakia, or in Holland, or in France, within 25 miles from the border, that country's police handed them back to the Gestapo. That was the resort of German Jews in 1939.

Q: Before the war.

A: Before the war. Today, America takes in any number of Chinese, Hindus, Indochinese and everybody else. Don't have any quotas, nothing. But in those days, they wouldn't take anybody in. I could have saved my parents. But I couldn't even get into the Virgin Islands. They wouldn't even let them come into the Virgin Islands -- America wouldn't -- unless I could assure the American government that for five years they wouldn't be a burden to the American government.

Q: So your family stayed behind in Germany?

A: And got killed in Auchwitz.

Q: Would you know the day that you went into England?

A: On the 17th of July, 1939.

Q: So it was very close to the beginning of the war.

A: That's right.

Q: Did your family want you to go, or did they want you to stay?

A: My parents forced me to go, otherwise I wouldn't have gone. I wanted to try to get my parents out first.

Q: How long did you stay in England?

A: Twelve years.

Q: When you first got there, what was your contact with the Jewish community of England like?

A: Fantastic.

Q: Were they aware of what was going on in Germany?

A: Naturally. They had enough people -- they had some people coming over. But their hands were tied too.

Q: Again I'm going to ask -- did Jews ask you about what you went through in Buchenwald? Did they want to know?

A: When I came to England, after the initial registration and everything, I was trying to make a living. Didn't have time. I had a permit for agriculture, and I had to go to work in the country, so I didn't have that much. After the initial contact in London, for a couple of weeks, I didn't have much contact.

Q: What about after you were in England? What about communication with your family in Germany?

A: Through the Red Cross over Sweden.

Q: Were you able to write letters?

A: Notes. Red Cross notes. 24 words. But I do want to say that I sometimes also sent some longer notes, because Sweden was a neutral country and I had a friend in Sweden who then transferred it.

Q: How long did you get letters and notes back <u>from</u> your family?

A: Not too many, because pretty soon my parents and my in-law parents were re-arrested and taken first to Gersow -- which must have been a kind of concentration camp, and then in '43 they were taken to Buchenwald, to the gas chambers.

Q: How did you know what happened to them?

A: An aunt of mine who survived, who was by birth gentile, became Jewish, but still classified by the Nazis as a gentile, survived the Holocaust and she told us after the war.

Q: When did you stop getting letters or hearing from your family?

A: In about '42.

Q: During the war, what kind of reports did you get about what was going on in Germany and in Europe?

A: Different reports -- some of the reports we found were not quite true, but different reports.

Q: Were there stories of the gas chambers?

A: Oh, yes!

Q: How early? To the best of your memory?

A: I think in around ’42, ’43 we knew about it.

Q: Now, in England, you kept trying to leave and go to the United States? You tried to get a visa to the U.S.?

A: I had an affidavit for the United States, and we applied after the war to come to the United States.

Q: Did going to England have a big effect -- having come from Germany -- on how you got involved in the Jewish community of England?

A: I did not get involved in the Jewish community of England, because I never lived in a town where there was a Jewish community.

Q: Because of your work?

A: Because of my work. For four years I was working on a farm. For three years I worked for the War Agricultural Committee and I lived in a small town where we were just three Jewish families, of which two didn’t even want to let anybody know they were Jewish. (Laughs) And our closest Jewish community was Coventry, 12 miles away, and Doncaster, 42 miles away, Birmingham 48 miles away. And when I had my son and I needed b’rit milah I had to fetch the rabbi from Leicester, which was close to 56 miles, to come and, he came with mohel and performed the b’rit milah.

Q: How, then, was your observance of Jewish tradition affected from the time you were in the camp to the time you lived in Germany? Did that change?

A: Yes. I became an atheist.

Q: Has that continued?

A: No. (Laughs)

Q: Can you talk a little bit more about that? When did you first start having these feelings of turning away from the religion?

A: In the concentration camp.

Q: Was this happening to other friends of yours?

A: I think so.

Q: Did you know people who were very devout who were turning away even? Hasidic families?

A: No, not really.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about what was behind this? What were your thoughts -- angry at G-d at first? Or did you just feel, "Well, this is so bad, that…"

A: Yes, both of them.

Q: Was this part of why you didn't make a point of living with a Jewish community in England?

A: No. (Laughs) There are no Jewish farmers in England. And I had to farm. This was my permit. I had a Hachsharah permit, see, an agricultural student permit. So I had to go into agriculture. As long as I was on the land, I was on the farm.

Q: If you tried to change that, they wouldn't let you? You couldn't change the type of work permit?

A: No. Not at first, you couldn't. Later on, we did. It was a matter of also, when we first were in England on the land, we had quite a few young Jewish people from Germany, too, over there, who were in a circumference of about 16 miles, and we were the only married couple, and all the young Jewish boys used to come to us so we had some contact with Jewish people. I did hold a seder for them and things like this. By the time I came to England, I slowly turned a little bit back, but out of this reason, I had the b'rit milah for my grandson then, too, Also, I didn't want to go -- before we got married -- to the synagogue or anything. My wife felt that she wanted the synagogue, and I wouldn't even enter the synagogue at that time. I was still made at this time, but then slowly I softened up.

Q: How long did that take?

A: Oh, a period of five, six years. Just a few minutes ago, when I spoke about me turning back towards the Jewish religion again, and also with the b'rit milah, when I mentioned that it was a b'rit milah of my grandson, I made an error. I meant it was the b'rit milah of my son. (Laughs)

Q: How did you get together and marry your wife?

A: My wife and me met in Germany in April of 1939, after I came from concentration camp. And we were engaged -- we met at the Jewish Community Center when we were all of us young people, and also older people, met there because that was the center where we tried to find ways of emigrating to other countries. Within a couple months, we became engaged, and then we emigrated together to England.

Q: I wanted to ask this, even though it's going back on something we already talked about. Why didn't more Jews try to leave Germany before the war?

A: The same reason that I mentioned earlier on, that we always hoped it would revert to a democratic country again. Germany was a nice country, at one time, to live in.

Q: I'm not trying to put you on the spot or anything, but I asked you a question about whether the experience in a concentration camp showed you that there was really no stopping point for Hitler, and you said, "Yes, we felt that he could do anything." How could it get better?

A: That was already '39. That was just when we were leaving anyhow. But as I mentioned before, it was not the problem of leaving Germany. The problem was entering the other countries. The other countries didn't want Jews either.

Q: Were there quotas for England, too?

A: It wasn't quotas for England, but England wasn't that eager to take Jews in unless they would not become a burden to them.

Q: So, to go back, how did your wife get over with you in England?

A: My wife had a nursing permit.

Q: So you both went at the same time?

A: We both went together. My permit came through a little earlier, so I waited around for hers to come through, so that we both could go together.

Q: Which was more dangerous than you knew, right?

A: Which I did know was dangerous, but I was young and took chances.

Q: So when were you married?

A: In October of 1939, in England, in London.

Q: Was there any thought in your mind about wanting to get to Palestine when you were in England?

A: Yes. I had one time intention of going to Palestine. As a matter of fact, I also had an intention of going to Palestine as a policeman. I was talking about it.

Q: Did you experience any anti-Semitism in England?

A: I did not experience, but there is anti-Semitism in England the same as it is in America.

Q: So the gentiles that you loved with in the farming communities -- they treated you well?

A: Yes.

Q: Were you like a novelty for them? To have a Jew around?

A: I don't think so. I have a habit never to make a secret of what I am, but I also don't have the habit of advertising what I am. I take it the way it comes. I am proud to be a Jew. I never deny it, but I don't believe in advertising it for the sake of advertising, of being a Jew. If it comes up in the conversation, fine. The gentile people in England knew we were Jewish, they knew about our holidays and everything, we kept them, and we had no problems. They admired us for it.

Q: So the experience in the concentration camp, at first it affected your religious beliefs, but it didn't make you want to hide being Jewish?

A: No.

Q: It didn't make you so afraid of hatred that you wanted to deny even being a Jew?

A: Never would deny it. Never did.

Q: Just to go back and kind of finish off with the religious question, when you started to come back to a belief in G-d and religion, was it as strong as before?

A: No, it was not as strong, but it was more for the sake of my children, and later on, of my grandchildren, than for myself, really that I did come back.

Q: You were keeping kosher before in Germany?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you keep in England?

A: No.

Q: And have you kept since?

A: No.

Q: What about Shabbos?

A: I don't keep Shabbat.

Q: Would you say that that is because of the Holocaust, or just because you drifted away from it over time?

A: It's probably because I drifted away. It's an intertwining thing. Maybe the one gave the start, and I never bothered of getting back to it.

Q: Would you say that you believe in G-d today?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you say that you're committed to the survival of the Jewish people?

A: Definitely.

Q: What are your feelings toward the state of Israel?

A: I work for it.

Q: Having gone through the Holocaust, does that give you a special feeling about what Israel is all about, do you think?

A: It gives me more of a determination to make Israel work.

Q: How do you mean that?

A: That I would do everything to see to it that nothing happens to Israel.

Q: What kind of situation do you think the Jewish people would be in now if there wasn't an Israel?

A: That's hard to say. That depends a lot on the community itself, too, of the Jewish community as well as the other communities. You can be just as strong if you would be an American of the Jewish faith, or if you are an Israeli citizen of the Jewish faith. I can't see any difference of your pride in being a Jew. So, for some people, the State of Israel is probably a crutch to lean onto and to give 'em the backbone to stand up as a Jewish citizen -- as a citizen of Jewish faith --whichever

my citizenship would be at that time, without having the backbone of Israel to back me up.

Q: You know that Israel was founded in large part by people who went through the Holocaust, and this is part of what influenced them in the building of the State, and in their strength in fighting for Israel. Do you think, having gone through the Holocaust yourself, that a lot of what Israel does is motivated or affected by the fact that there was a Holocaust?

A: Definitely it is, because it gave them the idea that they have nothing to lose, only to gain. That gives them the strength to fight for survival. Through the Holocaust, they know if they don't survive or win, they will be pushed into the sea. In 1948, if they wouldn't have beaten the Arabs back, they would have been pushed straight into the sea, so they knew they had only one way to go. They had learned the lesson that if you keep quiet, it doesn't make the tiger go away, so you have to stand up and fight. Our parents did not see it at the time. Also, when Israel did fight, they were together standing in numbers, not the way we were, spread out over half-a-million Jews in 60 million Germans. We had no chance of survival.

Q: Do you feel like you, yourself, can criticize Israel? Do you feel like that's wrong? Or do you feel that you <u>can</u> say that Israel does do some things wrong?

A: Israel wouldn't be normal if they <u>wouldn't do</u> anything wrong. Nobody is perfect. Why should the State of Israel be perfect? As Ben Gurion has once said, "We will be a state when we have our own thieves and prostitutes. Not 'til then." (Laughter)

Q: One last question: What lessons would you want people who did not go through the Holocaust to learn from the things that happened to the Jews of Europe?

A: They should learn the lesson that things like this can happen anywhere. That no country is safe of any disaster of that kind.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You're very welcome.

Q: This completes the interview with Manfred H. Klein, known as "Fred" Klein, by Gary Shapiro on June 9, 1982.