

My name is Norma Stern. Today is April 15, 1985. I'm here to interview Kurt Bollweiller, who is a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust. I am doing this under the auspices of the Oral History Project, Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington. The purpose of this interview is to add to the oral history of the Nazi Holocaust so that through this living memorial, future generations will know what happened. With this knowledge, hopefully we can prevent any such occurrence in the future.

Kurt Bollweiller, 10214 Leslie Street, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Can you tell me your full name?

My full name is Kurt Julius Bollweiller. The address is 10214 Leslie Street, Silver Spring.

And where were you born.

I was born in Kirchheim Teck, Germany-- spelled K-I-R-C-H-H-E-I-M T-E-C-K.

What year were you born?

I was born in 1913.

Could you tell me who was in your family during the years before the war?

My parents.

What were their names?

My father's name was Moritz, and my mother's name was Johanna. Then it was my brother Walter, myself, my brother Fritz, and my sister Ruth.

Your sister's name again?

Ruth.

Had your parents lived-- had your family lived in Germany for a long time?

Yes. We have no knowledge of the family living anywhere else.

Did any of your relatives ever serve in the German army?

Yes, my father did.

What years did he serve?

He served on active duty when he was of age. It should be-- he was born in 1879. I would say, 1898. But the exact year escapes me. And then he was serving during the First World War.

Was your family religious?

Yes.

Did they attend synagogue regularly?

Yes. Not regularly, because we were living in a small town that didn't have a synagogue. We had a community where

we had services at the High Holidays, and belonged to a congregation, which was about 15 miles away from there.

Where was that congregation?

That congregation was in they called Goeppingen-- G-O-E-P-P-I-N-G-E-N.

Did you keep kosher?

No.

Did you observe the holidays at home?

Yes.

Did you attend a religious school?

Yes.

Hebrew school?

The rabbi from the congregation, Goeppingen, came to Kirchheim every two weeks. We had, for two hours, school. We had about five, four or five, six children there.

Were you a member of a Jewish youth organization?

Not when I was very young, because we were away from the congregation. But later on, I belonged to Jewish organizations, sports organizations, and so on.

Did your family have a political affiliation?

Yes. My father prided himself of being a good democrat.

What was the means of support for your family? My father was in business. He was a livestock dealer.

Did you live in a house--

Yes.

--or an apartment?

We lived first in an apartment, and then, later on, we were forced to buy our own house. That was in-- I think it was 1936. And we kept the house until the whole family left.

How were you forced to buy your own house? Could you explain?

Because the people we rented from gave us notice to move out.

Where did you go to school?

I went to school in Kirchheim. I went to school to public school. I went first to public school and then to high school. And later on to what you would call here commercial college.

What were you studying?

I was in school. I did the regular schooling. And then I was schooled as a merchant and bookkeeper, accountant merchant.

Was there a large Jewish population in your town?

We had five families.

Did the Jews tend to stick together?

More or less. We were together, and we were together on the holidays. And we had a close relationship because we needed everyone. When somebody needed a minion, we had to be there. We had only about, altogether, at the most, 12 or 13 male Jews there.

Did you have close friends who were not Jewish?

Yes.

Before the Nazis came to power, did you have antisemitic experiences, even before 1933?

Not many. Every once in a while-- I can remember that-- maybe it was 1931 we went roller skating. Not roller skating. Ice skating in a lake. And on the way back from the lake to the town, there was one fellow in the-- I still remember him vividly-- who was taunting me. And he did it for a while. And I took my ice skates and hit him over the head. And that was the end of it.

How did your life change when the Nazis took power?

I remember the day, the 30th of January, when we met, as every day, in center of the city.

What year was this?

It was in 1933. The people I was associated in sports with, the business I was associated in business with. We met in the center of the city. And I remember distinctly when the subject was discussed, and everybody told me that you don't have anything to worry about because we are right with you. The whole thing doesn't apply to you. It's for the others, not for me.

But how did your life change? What happened?

The first thing, 1933, I was finished with my apprenticeship as a merchant in 1931. And I kept on working there till 1933. And the first thing the office manager did, when he appeared in the office in the uniform was to fire me.

What kind of business was it?

That was a factory where they made small kitchen furniture, complete range, from cabinets to knife and fork [? box ?] through the whole wooden kitchen furniture.

How about your father? Was he able to keep his job?

My father was working for himself, and he could keep his job until-- I think it was about 1937 when they trumped up charges, which were lies, and took away his licenses.

How about your brothers?

My older brother was in business with my father, and my younger brother was in the same situation I was. He was working as an apprentice. He was finished with his apprenticeship. And he was released, was fired.

And from then on, we tried to keep ourselves busy. I took on a job first as a sales-- as a representative for a shoe factory, and I went traveling. And after I traveled for about six months on my own expenses--

Where did you travel?

In Bavaria, selling shoes. I was representing a Jewish shoe factory. And after working there for about six months, they closed them up, or forced them to sell. And I was out of a job again.

And then, after a while, I found a job as a bookkeeper for a lumberyard and wood mill owned by Jewish people, which was taken away from him at the Crystal Night. I was working there.

And I remember, I went to the office at regular time, and one of the secretaries told me that two gentlemen were there and asked for me. So I asked who the gentlemen were. No, they didn't identify themselves. But they had trench coats on. And I figured that I knew who they were. They were Gestapo people.

I left the office. I didn't go into the office. And I went to my furnished room. It was in Stuttgart. And when I got there, I found out that several Jewish people who were living in the same house were arrested. So I left the house.

And from then on-- it was on the 10th of November-- I spent the next five days in the woods.

Could you describe Kristallnacht?

Yes. That was, I would say it was about 10 o'clock. 11 o'clock. I was in my room. And I was told that a manager of a shoe store on the main street was summoned to come to the store because the store is being destroyed. I got dressed, and I left the house, went to the shoe store, and saw what was going on, that they destroyed every Jewish store.

They banged in the windows. They took the merchandise out. They put the cash registers out. A big department store, a small store, didn't make any difference.

Who was doing this?

The SA people. Stormtroopers.

Then I went to the synagogue, which was also in the business section, and the synagogue was aflame. I was standing and watching it. And as a matter of fact, this picture is in here.

I didn't go home anymore. And from then on, I spent the next five days either in a streetcar or in the woods. And that was a [INAUDIBLE] Thursday night. On Tuesday, I went home to see if I had any mail for my parents from their family.

How did you take care of yourself in the woods? How did you find food?

Well, I could go in a restaurant, buy something, or something. That was no problem. I was not recognizable as a Jew.

And Tuesday afternoon, I went to my room, and either two or three Gestapo men were in my room waiting for me, and arrested me. And first they searched my room, and took me first to police, to a police station, and then, after a couple of hours, to Gestapo headquarters.

At Gestapo headquarters, there was a big commotion because they had all the Jewish males up there.

This was from Stuttgart?

In Stuttgart. They put me against the wall with two other fellows, and then they beat up on me because I had my hat in

my hands. I had a hat. And after they were finished with me, they beat up the guy standing next to me because he had his hat on the head. It was whatever.

Was standing there. And after a while, they put me in a cell with-- there were about 24 other people in there, amongst them the president of the community council there, Mr. Wismann.

And I found out how fast you can become a criminal, because Mr. Wismann, whom we knew personally-- my family knew him-- told me that he is getting out the next day, and he asked me if he should contact somebody. And I told them that I had a cousin in France.

Then Mr. Wismann took a pencil, about 1 inches thick, and wrote his address on his shirt sleeves. And when I came out later on, I found out that he contacted my cousin. Not that he could do anything.

I was there for about, I would say, about 10 hours, 12 hours. 12 o'clock at night they called my name, and took me-- I was the only one out of that room-- lined me up outside. And there were 31 others standing there. And the reason I knew the amount was they counted 31, and I was the 32nd.

12 o'clock at night, the Gestapo men, SS men came and told us the role, to go downstairs. The bus is waiting. Anybody who talks is going to be shot. And anybody who looks around is going to be shot. And anybody who does is going to be shot.

And we were up. We were on our way to a concentration camp.

I'd like to back up a little bit. Before you were arrested, did the Jews in Germany have to wear a star?

Not at that time.

Did you have to carry any special identification?

Yes. Yes, we had. We had identification. As a matter of fact, you had to identify yourself any place you went to official place. When you went to the post office, and you wanted to buy a stamp, you had to identify yourself.

This is a Reisepass?

That's a German passport, which I got when I came over here. Identify yourself as a Jew.

But that, we didn't get that. We got that only shortly before we left, the passport.

Oh, this is later.

Yeah. But we had a card, a Kennkarte. And you had to show that card wherever you went.

Before Kristallnacht, was there much violence against Jews?

No, not in Württemberg. Not in that state. As a matter of fact--

What was the name of the state?

Württemberg. Let me see. Here.

OK.

That's in the [INAUDIBLE].

OK. All right. So you were lined up by the SS and put on a bus?

Yeah. And sent to a concentration camp.

Where were you sent? The camp was Welzheim-- W-E-L-Z-H-E-I-M. That was a side camp from Dachau. They took one bus out to Welzheim, one to Dachau, and they changed off. I was very fortunate.

Was it just the 31 or 32 people?

There were altogether about 300 there. I was there for five weeks. And during those five weeks, the former owner of that lumber yard and mill was forced to sell his place to Nazis. And they asked me-- that they ask for my release in order to straighten out the books.

At 5 o'clock in the morning, or it was 5:30, Gestapo man came to me, and he says, you're going to be released today. I wish I could go with you. It shows that not all of them were killers.

At 7 o'clock, I was called to the office, to the Kommandant, and he told me that I'm going to be released. I have to report to Gestapo headquarters in Stuttgart. That I was there for so and so many days at 3 Marks a day for room and board. I owe so and so much. I didn't have that money with me. If you don't send it within two days, you're going to be back.

So I went home. Went back to Stuttgart. Reported to Gestapo headquarters, where I was told not to talk to anybody where I was or what I have seen.

Well, could you tell me now about your ride to the camp?

There was nothing. There were 32 people in the bus. There was not a word spoken. And when we arrived at the camp, which was about, I would say, about a one and a half hour trip, two hour trip, we were taken off and lined up-- naked.

What happened to your clothes? They put it away and gave me a uniform.

They called the names of 31 people, and they were put in a room. And I was standing there by myself, not knowing what's next. And that was because I was the last one on the bus. They filled up the bus with me.

And they assigned me to a room. I went in there, and they showed me that there was a bunk. The bunk were about three or four high, like [? egg ?] crates.

I went up there, and I saw. They turned the light off. I saw there were people in the room. I didn't know if they were-- whatever they were. I had no idea. Nobody talked one word.

And about 10, 15 minutes later, somebody asks me where I came from. Right? I told them Stuttgart. Then somebody else lifted their head. And then I found out that I was amongst friends. All my friends were there.

Did you have any idea why you were picked up other than being a Jew.

No, no. There was no reason. I never had as much as a traffic ticket. Nothing. My family never had any problems. They picked up everybody.

So after I returned, and I reported to Gestapo headquarters--

I want to find out some more about the camp. What did they feed you there?

Nothing. I mean, black water. It was coffee. And go out and got coffee in the morning, and a piece of bread. And nothing. I mean--

Did you--

Go ahead.

Did you have to do any work?

No. The only work I had to do was volunteer work. They asked me one day. They asked one day if there's anybody with a driver's license in the room. And I reported that I had a driver's license. So did three other ones. And we had to-- they took us out. And we had to empty the toilet by hand.

How was the health of the inmates?

The health of the inmates was pretty good, with the exception of one, who was a handicapped man. He was not handicapped. He was a retarded man. He was the son of a doctor. And I never saw him before. And he was working on a farm somewhere. And they had their fun with him.

But at that time, in 1938, they were just playing with us. They didn't do any real physical harm in the concentration camp.

Were you with all Jews?

Yeah. No, there was one non-Jew who was the president in the room. And he was a communist. And he has been in a concentration camp [? four ?] years and then in '38. So that's the only one.

He got sick. Then that capitalist got sick. And they took him every day for sick, or took him to the office, march him to the office, gave him a glass of water, and send him back. Playing. Make believe.

Did anyone try to escape?

No. First of all, we were all locked in. We were not free. We were never outside. We were always locked in the room.

Did you have any contact with the other prisoners at Dachau?

No. No, nobody. Nobody. As a matter of fact, when you needed some shaving material or something like that, you had to fill out a piece of paper which said, Jew Bollweiller asked permission to buy a tube of shaving cream. And then they sent a Gestapo man with a bicycle into town to buy it.

We had one gentleman with us, Professor Baum, who didn't give himself out as a Jew. And when he filled out that label, or that piece of paper to get something, he didn't put "Jew" down. Then they beat him up.

Were there any religious observance in the camp?

No.

What did you think was going to happen to you?

No idea.

Was there any type of selection process when you came into the camp?

Not that I know of. Nothing. Nothing. That came later.

How far was this camp from Dachau, from the main camp [INAUDIBLE]?

Oh, I would say 100 kilometers. 70, 80 miles.

You were telling us about how you were released from Dachau, from the camp.

I was released. I went and reported as told. And I reported to work and finished my work. Took me about four weeks, five weeks.

What did you have to do?

Book. The bookwork for the transfer business. And then I was told to apply for a job as a construction worker. And they told me where to go. And from then on, I did construction work. I build air-raid shelters in Stuttgart. I helped to build air-raid shelters.

To build what?

Air-raid shelters. I worked there. And I lived in Kirchheim, which was about, I think, 22, 23 miles from there. And I got permission to leave the house before sun-- before dawn, because there was a curfew for Jews. You couldn't get out. I had permission to leave the house at 5 o'clock in order to go to Stuttgart by train and go to work. And I had permission to go home after dark.

And where was your family?

In Kirchheim.

How did their lives change?

Their life, it was life of nothing. There was no income. All the money we had was in a bank account, and you couldn't touch it. You had to have permission to withdraw a certain amount every month. And that was our lives.

My little-- my sister at that time was six. Let me see. Six, seven, eight years old. She was thrown out of school. And she had to go every day by bus to Goeppingen. And they had a school for Jewish kids.

Did your family consider trying to leave Germany?

We have been trying to leave Germany since 1933. And that's another story.

Well, you can tell it.

The story is that by the time I got permission to enter the United States, I had seven affidavits. And with the first one, I was told that the man doesn't make enough money. The second one, he's not related enough. The third one, he has enough applications already. So altogether, I had seven affidavits until I got permission to enter the United States.

You were telling about working as a construction worker in Stuttgart.

Mm-hmm. The work we did there was the same work anybody else had to do. There was no abuse or anything. We just did the physical labor. You didn't get paid-- hardly get, whatever, physical labor paid. You got paid the same as anybody else, which was nothing.

What happened to you after that? How long did you work there?

I worked there from 19-- let me see. I started there, I think, in January or February, January 1939, and I left in February 1940.

How old were you when the war broke out?

The war-- 1939?

Mm-hmm.

I was 26 years old. As a matter of fact, I don't remember anymore the year, but I was called for induction into the German army. And I reported, and I was examined. And at that time, I was a good physical specimen, ready for what you would call here the Marines. And after all your-- after the examination was over, you had to go into a ring, and you were looked over by the army, air force, navy, marine, whatever. And they picked what they wanted. And there was one of the local Nazis there who identified me as a Jew, whereby I was put in the reverse category-- not that I minded, but we went through the motions. So they got what you would have called here 4-F. It was the end of that.

How did the war change the lives of your family and your life? Did that make an impact?

Yeah.

You were still working.

I was working. As a matter of fact, I remember when I worked there, we were called together one morning at 9 o'clock. And Mr Hitler came over the radio and announced that Poland attacked Germany. And since this morning, we are shooting back. That was the beginning of the war.

What happened to you next?

I got my visa on the 20th-- [RUSTLING PAPERS] on the 16th of February 1940. And I went home, and packed my suitcase, and left.

What about your family?

My family, [? funny thing is you had ?] to put that in there yet. They allowed me to take 10 Marks, or \$3, with.

Mr. Bollweiller still has his Reisepass.

Yeah. I left with \$3. I went from Stuttgart to Munich, from Munich to Genoa. And there I had to wait for two days for the boat, which my cousin living in the United States bought the ticket for me. And I boarded the boat and arrived in the United States.

[RUSTLING PAPERS]

Mm-hmm. I was in Italy on the 19th of February. I left Italy on the 19th of February. We came here, 10-- I think, eight days later.

Was your family with you?

No, nobody. My family remained there. And I had a brother. My younger brother went to Argentina in 1938, and he could get my parents and my younger sister into Argentina about eight weeks after I came to the United States.

I had one brother left in Germany who couldn't get a visa because he had a rupture, and he had to go to the hospital first to have an operation. And he was there all by himself. And he came in 1941.

How did you travel to Italy? Was it difficult?

By train.

Was it difficult because of the war?

No, you had to take it, and you could go. It was no problem.

Did you have to pay a tax to leave Germany?

No. But see, at that time, I was young. I didn't have any means to speak of. It was my family's. And when my family finally left, they allowed them to buy-- or they bought the tickets for them to Argentina with the remainder of their money, what they had on the bank, which was considerable. But when they left, they left without a penny, left everything behind.

After the war, we confiscated our house again and resold it. As a matter of fact, yesterday I read letters from my parents where they told me that when they get the money from there, that they have enough to live for 10 years.

What was the name of the boat that you took?

SS Washington.

Was it Washington or Manhattan? There were two of the same boats, and I don't remember anymore. Hold one second.

The name of the boat, again?

Washington. SS Washington. See, that's how I was as a construction worker. [LAUGHS]

You have quite a group of photographs. From Germany? These are all Germany?

Some of them, yeah. Mostly, yeah.

Did you know other people on the boat?

I knew a couple of them.

Were many of the people on the boat Jewish?

Mm?

A large proportion?

I would say so, yeah.

Did you know any English at the time?

No.

Who was it who sponsored you to come over here? People I never knew. Was one of them from Detroit. Cousins, mostly cousins of mine.

Where did the boat land?

New York.

How long did you stay in New York?

Six weeks.

What did you do there?

Nothing. Walked up and down the streets looking for work.

Did you have a place to stay there?

I had an uncle who came a couple months before who had a bed for me. I was looking for work every day. Couldn't find any because I didn't ask anybody. I was scared. [LAUGHS]

From there, I went to Philadelphia to visit friends. And from there, I found a job in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Was my first job.

What kind of job was it?

It was a-- for White Owl General Cigar Company, as a laborer.

How long were you there?

Two years.

Did you remain a laborer?

No. I went back to New York because I wanted to get married. And my future wife was in New York, and she wouldn't get out of New York. And I took a job as a butcher.

In New York?

Was a butcher. Yeah.

Was your wife American-born?

No, came from Germany also.

Did you know her in Germany?

Yeah, I met her about two months before she left in 1938.

What town was she from?

Augsburg. It's near Munich.

What year did you get married?

1942.

And where did you live?

We lived in New York. I stayed a butcher for about five or six months. Then I became a tool maker. I made tools during the war.

And in 1946, after the war was over, 1947, we came to Washington, because my wife's mother was married here, and she wanted us to come. My wife wanted to be near her mother. So we came here in 1947. I started as a salesman for a local paper house. And in 1960, I was fortunate enough to buy the place.

Did you have problems adjusting to the United States? What were your problems adjusting to the United States?

I had no problem.

Did you learn English pretty quickly?

I went to school for a half a year, Americanization school in Lancaster. And after about six, seven months, it came, little by little.

The whole time you were at Lancaster, were you always a laborer with the White Owl?

Yes, I had one job. The manager of the place, who later became president of White Owl, was an acquaintance of mine in Germany, and he gave me a chance with a promise that I have to do anything, and no preference, which I did. And when I left, he wanted to make me foreman. And it was too late because it was not a healthy occupation.

We worked with tobacco, and I got sick almost every day. We worked in sweat rooms. But, had to be done.

Did you have any other education in the United States?

No. Just the Americanization school.

Did you associate mostly with other Germans, with other German Jews once you were living here?

While I was in Lancaster, I met a few people. But I integrated pretty fast into the Jewish circles. We belonged to the club-- but not German. And in New York, we were more or less forced to move amongst your own. But here we have German friends. But most of my acquaintances are not Germans.

Sorry, I'm not quite clear on something. Did one brother come to the United States?

Yes.

When did he come?

1941. I mean, he came in June in 1941, and he was in the army in September. And he was in the army for four years.

How did you feel when the United States entered the war?

How I felt? I made my first-- the first money I made. I contributed to a fund to buy an airplane for the United States Air Force.

I used to be very active in sports while I was in Germany, and then in New York.

Which sports?

Soccer. We played in a league which was composed of Europeans, most of them Germans or Hungarians. And we fought the war every Sunday on the soccer field, because we were the Jewish [INAUDIBLE], 100% Jewish team. And we played against the goyim. [LAUGHS] And there was a fight every Sunday.

Same thing when I was a butcher. Most of the butchers were German, and we were fighting the war every day. We had about three or four Jewish workers there and about 10 Germans.

After the war, did you find out about what happened to close relatives and friends of yours?

Yes. I mean, I didn't find out anything, but it just so happened that I was in Florida last week, and I have a cousin there who was in Germany, who was visiting the little village where our family originated. And he brought that back.
[RUSTLING PAPER] He went to the city hall.

To which city?

It's a little city in Baden, which is next to Württemberg, where the family Bollweiller comes from.

What was the name of the city?

It was called Berwangen. [INAUDIBLE].

[RUSTLING PAPER]

Now, those are all uncles.

Mm-hmm. And what does this mean?

[RUSTLING PAPER]

That doesn't mean anything. Now, I know there's a few of them escaped. All the other ones perished.

[RUSTLING PAPER]

That's my father.

Oh, these are their birth dates.

Yeah, their birth dates. And that's my mother. She was at the same maiden name.

Were they related?

Very distant. And she died. He died. She died.

Mr. Bollweiller has a list of his relatives in Germany.

No, there's-- none of them is alive anymore.

And how many of your relatives died in the concentration camps? Do you know?

I don't know. I know of 37.

Did other family members come to the United States or to South America?

I have some cousins who came to United States. Here, let me see some of here-- He came to the United States, and he lived in the United States. He lived in--

[? Litten ?] Boll--

[? Litten ?] Bollweiller. And Herman Bollweiller lived in United States. And Samson. And my mother lived in Argentina. And the other ones are Isaac. He died in the war, in the First World War.

Isaac Bollweiller

Isaac. And now there's not-- nobody there. None of those. I think one or two came out. Sigmund, he came out. That's the only one. Him and my father. Moritz.

When did you find out about your relatives?

I never found out. Today--

Not until--

No, they is just not here anymore.

What are your feelings today about how the war influenced you? How living under the Nazis influenced you?

How living influenced me. I am in a position to think it through, because I was living in it for seven years. I was living in it in 1933 till 1940.

I saw the transformation of good people to enemies or people who didn't care. And there were very few who really put themselves out.

Now we were living in a small place of 12,000 people. Everybody knew us. Everybody knew our family. My family was a very prominent family. Everybody knew me because I was very active in sports. And I was 18 years old-- 17, 18, 19 years. I was the big man in the city, as far as soccer is concerned. They didn't know me as a Jew. They knew me as a soccer player.

And my best friend-- how do I want to describe it? If I would have met him away from that town, he would have been my best friend. When I met him, when he saw me coming down the street, he crossed over. And then he went around the block not to see me.

Because he was gentle.

He was gentle. He was my best friend. And he's still, today, I was over in Germany about 12 years ago, I called him on telephone. When he heard my voice-- I didn't have to identify myself-- he jumped. Where are you? I have been looking for you for 20 years, you know.

And they say if you go through life, and you have one good friend, you are lucky. Now, he would have been that one good friend because we were together constantly, until they separate. He was working for the state. He was a surveyor. And if he would have been seen with me, that would have been the end of him.

I had only one person I remember distinctly who put herself out, and I'm very proud to mention her name in a letter to what I'm going to show you afterwards. The day before I left for the United States, she came over to the house at 10 o'clock at night and brought me three eggs. If they would have caught her doing that, would have been the end of her. But that is the only one who I could say did me some good.

What was her name?

Lauterwasser-- L-A-U-T-E-R-W-A-S-S-E-R.

What do you have? What kind of document do you have that you were going to show me concerning her?

Concerning her, I don't have anything.

Oh.

No. I'm in touch right now with a lady in Germany who found out my address. And she was active in the Christian-

Jewish community. And she's really turning things upside down. She went to the mayor and made him send a letter to me. And he sent me a letter a couple of weeks ago.

Asked me not to forget my birthplace, just as much as the people there can never forget and forgive themselves what they did to me. Let me see.

She went to the archives and found out about my family. What she found out, when my father was born, and they got married, where I was working, where my brothers were working, she went.

Is this the mayor of Kirchheim.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Here. That's the mayor of Kirchheim. He sent me that letter. And here he says what I just told you. "I hope that you will not forget your hometown. Just as much, we cannot forget the past, but we try to be responsible and carry it with dignity." Then he says he wants to receive me at City Hall if I come.

Will you go?

I don't know.

How did you wind up going back to Germany?

We went on a trip, my wife and myself. One of the reasons was that-- it's another story. My wife lost her father then. And in the Crystal Night, he was arrested, and he was heartsick. And at that time, while he was in prison, she was ready to leave for the United States, and they gave her permission to visit him in jail.

And I pay for that right now. Because (WHISPERING) my wife is in just kind of a depression. She was in the hospital. And during her-- in that depression, she had treatments. She went back to Germany. I came to the hospital to visit her. And she asked me to kill her.

When was this?

December. Because, she said, they want to put her in a casket alive. They want to bury her. I'm still not out of it. The second time she does it.

Is your wife here today?

Yeah. She won't come down.

That's all right. That's fine.

Now, let me show you--

Do you have any children?

Yeah. I have a son and a daughter.

What are their names?

My son is Jeffrey, and my daughter is Ellen.

Have you talked to them about your experiences in Germany?

My son doesn't want to know about it.

How old is he?

He's 38.

Does he live here?

He knows everything, but he doesn't want to [INAUDIBLE]. He grew up when everything German was out. He doesn't even want to speak German. He understands a little bit, but he will not speak.

He was-- see. [RUSTLING PAPER]

I got one little thing here which I would like to show you-- [RUSTLING PAPER] if I find it. If it's still here. That was my father's family.

When was-- oh. In 1938. How many brothers and sisters did your father have?

Nine.

Did they all live in the same town?

No. Nobody lived in our town. [RUSTLING PAPER]

[INAUDIBLE]

[RUSTLING PAPER]

This one is the cousin of Kissinger.

Was he from your town?

Yeah. That is my family here.

Your sister.

With my sister, my brother, and my mother.

How much of your family is still alive? Your sister?

And my brother.

And your brother.

This was my older brother in New York. Passed away about seven years ago.

And where does your sister live?

Argentina.

And does she have a family there?

She was married, and her husband died, and she got remarried and a second husband.

And how about your other brother? Where did he live?

The one in Argentina. He's [INAUDIBLE].

How long did your parents live?

My father was 78 when he passed. My mother was 80.

[RUSTLING PAPER]

Now I just wanted-- I have a [? credit ?] card here which I send to my parents. And an hour later, I was arrested. And when I came home, I find that they found the card, and my father made a note on it. This was the last news I had for my son, Kurt. [INAUDIBLE] Yeah.

Oh, this is the postcard you sent to your father.

Yeah.

Could you translate it? I told him, I hope everything is all right. As soon as I have a chance to come home, I will come home, right? And then, this is the last news from my Kurt. And it was on a Thursday morning.

Have your war experiences, your experiences in Germany, changed your feelings in any way about your being Jewish. Are you more religious now or less religious?

No. I was always a good, believing Jew. I was-- I'm not-- Conservative.

Do you belong to a synagogue?

Yeah, [INAUDIBLE].

Are you active in any Jewish groups?

I belong to the men's club, yeah.

Are you a member of the survivors group here in Washington?

[INAUDIBLE]. I think I'm going to join them, contribute to them. I went to a couple of their affairs, and I can't help but feeling that they are later-- later [? comers. ?] I don't know what why or so. But I don't feel comfortable there.

Did you attend the gathering in Washington?

Yes. Was the most moving affair I ever attended.

In what way? How did it?

The whole thing. The whole, whole, whole thing.

Did you ever apply for reparations from Germany?

I couldn't expect much because I was just getting started in life, and I got a little bit something-- not much. And I am right now receiving what would be the equivalent of Social Security from there.

Did you have any problems getting the reparations, any special difficulties?

Well, I had a lawyer over there. I don't know if he did the best he could or whatever, but I couldn't expect much.

This is Norma Stern from the Oral History Project, interviewing Isaac Gendelman.