

Are you still working today?

Yes.

Where do you work?

Paramount Paper and Supplies. And if I wouldn't be a partner there, I wouldn't work anymore. But I don't know how to get out of it. I have my son in there. And it's an interesting picture.

Who's in this picture?

That's my mother and my sister and the Nazi flag.

Yes.

What year was this taken?

It should have been taken, [? she's about ?] seven. It should be '34, I think.

Does the fact that you lived under the Nazis still affect you?

Yes.

OK. Let me see.

Have you ever spoken to groups about your experiences?

No.

Would you be willing to speak to school groups?

With the proper guidance, if you could tell me what they want to learn and how much they want to say.

Is there anything else you'd like to share? Oh, you were showing me the book about showing the synagogue in Germany. Could you describe that?

Yes. This little booklet they sent me, there is a exhibition going to be held in the town of Kirchheim on the 10th of October. And that's the catalog of that exhibition. The exhibition's theme is Jewish communities in WÃ¼rttemberg then and now. And they gave out this booklet with a picture. On the first page, they have mapped where all the Jewish congregations were and they have all the synagogues.

I learned things in there I didn't know. I didn't know, for instance, that Jews in Germany were not allowed in the big cities up till about 1850 or so. I was living there. I didn't know that.

Are any of these synagogues still standing?

Yes, they said. And some of them are being renovated. Now here's something else interesting. My wife comes from Augsburg. And Augsburg is a well-known city in Germany, old city.

They are celebrating their 1,500 years of existence. And they had the most beautiful synagogue in Germany. The inside was destroyed. The outside was not destroyed. And they rebuilt it.

And at the 1,500th anniversary, they are going to-- let me see what they have to say.

[PAPER RUSTLING]

They're going to rededicate the synagogue. And they invited my wife to that dedication. They want to put her up for a week there with me.

She did not even read the letter yet. They invited her to come to the celebration for dedication. They invited all the Jewish citizens there who can be found.

Do they pay for the travel expenses?

Not the travel, everything else.

So we have all of a sudden correspondence with the mayors there, you know, which doesn't mean anything.

What is your wife's name?

Susie, her maiden name was Schwab. Now I have here a letter which should be very interesting, which I got. I got first this one.

Would you like to read it?

What is it, in German?

Or in English.

He got my address from that woman in Germany. Now here's a fellow I didn't hear from since 1933. He went to Sunday school with me.

This is a letter from a friend of yours, Alfred Burns.

Yes, Bernstein is his name.

Who now lives in--

In Canada.

--in Canada.

And I didn't hear from him since 1933. He went to school, to Hebrew school together with me. I answered this letter. And that is what he wrote to me.

Oh, that is very lovely.

Now read through the--

This is dated February 12, 1985. Dear Kurt, Thank you very much for your nice letter of January 31, 1985.

Yes, I have often wondered what came out of the five families from Kirchheim Tech. I left Kirchheim Tech in 1933 and went via the Saargebiet to Paris, where I had a hard time. From there, I left for Italy and tried my hand at a farm at preparing for Israel. Then I worked for a while as a translator in an Italian Jewish law office.

Finally, I had to leave Italy for Shanghai, China, where I spent 10 years of my life working as a bookkeeper, handyman, et cetera, 10 years lost. In the meantime, I acquired languages like Italian, French, and English, which came to good use,

especially French, which is very important here in Quebec. I worked as a credit supervisor with a few large companies such as Westinghouse, et cetera.

I'm glad to hear that you have a family. I passed a few times on my way to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where I have a cousin living, through Washington, DC. My brother Philippe does not want anything to do with Kirchheim Tech. His wife, Geboren, in Esslingen-- [INAUDIBLE]?

[INAUDIBLE]. That's Esslingen.

OK. Spent some time in Neuffen. She remembers that at the entrance of the city, there was a sign, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

Juden is forbidden here.

I do not know how you feel about it. Even here in Canada, it appears that during World War II, Jews could not immigrate into this country. I read statistics USA permitted to immigrate during World War II 200,000, Canada 5,000. No comment.

I got married in Shanghai. However, my wife is since three years in a nursing home, no children. Thanks again for your letter. Hope to hear from you one of these days. Good health and all the best. Alfred Burns. That's lovely.

They wasted life.

That's very nice.

All over the world.

This book on from WÃ¼rttemberg must have easily 50 or 60 synagogues shown in here from all the different towns.

And the cemeteries.

Cemeteries, including the synagogues in Stuttgart.

You have a lot of contacts with Germany still today?

No, no. That's brand new.

Oh, but I mean, you've gotten the letters from your hometown, from the mayor. Yeah, but that's just recently.

Just recently. How do you feel about the Germans today?

Didn't change my mind. They are the most politically, the most stupid people. And the best thing as far as I'm concerned, the best thing that happened to them as far as I'm concerned, is the division of Germany. Because if it wouldn't be for that, we might be in another war right now, if they would be together.

Do you have any grandchildren?

I got one.

Do you read any literature on the Holocaust? I get the literature from there. I see television, but it becomes nauseating. Because I know it. Whatever they show. I know.

Is there anything else?

Anything? I had something before. I had a thought before, but I lost it.

Why, I do not know.

You were saying you're very sensitive?

Yes.

When I am at a family gathering, or when I see parents, I get overcome and can cry in a minute. It might have to do with it, because it sticks in here. You don't know how it feels when your family is torn apart.

Did you ever get to visit your family in South America?

Yes. We went down to South America about five or six years ago. And the hardest day of my life, [INAUDIBLE]. Especially down there. Because down there, [INAUDIBLE] is the picture. [INAUDIBLE]. But did you ever see that?

No.

No. It's into the cemetery, and it drove me there, drove me there for years. And now that I was there, I don't want to go anymore.

I know what I was saying. When we went back to Germany, we went first to Kirchheim, to my hometown by car. And Kirchheim is a place where, when I was living there, there were 12,000 people, 13,000 people in Leysin Valley mountains in the Alps.

And when you come around the corner, it lays in front of you, and it goes down the hill. And I went to that fellow whom I mentioned before, who is in correspondence with me now.

What is his name?

Schierle, Albert Schierle, S-C-H-I-E-R-L-E.

S-C-H?

I-E-R-L-E. And when he heard that I was there, he came running, and picked us up. We went to his house.

And he told me the hardships he had. And he is the one who turned from my friend to not my enemy, but neutral. You know, he got away from me.

So within a couple of hours, he arranged something in an evening. We were there just for two days. There was a congregation of about 50 people in a restaurant celebrating me, you know, singing operas to me, carrying on.

Any of the Jewish families come back?

There's nobody there.

No.

So we went. They were singing and carrying on. And the newspaper comes out in a picture in there of me, my [INAUDIBLE] activities and sports. I still have the paper, but that's unimportant.

We left. We stayed in a hotel. When we checked in, the owner comes over to me and says to me, Bollweiller, are you related to Moritz Bollweiller?

I say that's my father. He says here, he was sitting at that chair every Monday evening before he came home. He had a glass of beer and a piece of cheese. He was sitting there. That owner of the hotel was a youngster, was the second generation already, but he was sitting by me. So we left there, and we went to Susie's home town.

And here, everything was in contrast to my notes. We didn't know anybody. We went first to that synagogue is going to be rededicated now. And we went to the cemetery.

I think we stopped there before her father passed away. And she never went to the grave, and she wanted to go to the grave. The cemetery was locked.

Somebody came out. And she identified herself and said she wants to visit her father's grave. And we say her father is Jacob Schwab. He says when did he die? 1938, '39.

He says are you sure he is here? Where else could he be, you know? And she said that she never heard of the name. She took us into the office and looked through the books and said oh yes, he's here.

But she doesn't know where the grave is because she didn't have time to cross file it, for about 30 years. So we went [INAUDIBLE] and we found his grave. And he was the last one to be buried there.

And behind his grave, there were a couple of small stones. And one of them said the name of a child, and just deported and never returned.

[CRYING]

A five-year-old child. And my wife said, let's get out of here. And we left and couldn't talk to anybody or see anything.

Was just in contrast with when I was [INAUDIBLE]. See, I was a little bit older, and people remembered me, and this was a small town. But hers, it was a big town. And I knew, everybody knew me. So it was something entirely different.

We left. And we felt, when we were in Germany, we felt that we didn't belong there. We felt just like tourists, you know? Any hotel you went to in Italy or something, was full of Germans. And I [INAUDIBLE] them and sometimes it's all unjustified.

We met a fellow in Italy in a hotel. He was sitting with his wife, blond wife. And he was a real Gestapo man. You could see it from 100 miles.

And we get into a conversation with him. He turned out to be the best friend of the Jews. His wife was Jewish. You know? You never can tell.

But the Germans are all over Europe, wherever you go. They came out on top.

Your name is German, isn't it?

Stern. I'll talk to you later.

Oh, you can. Thank you.

Is there anything else you want to add?

What could I tell you?

I don't know. Anything you want to ask, I give you. Anything you want to ask?

Let me just-- I don't remember if I found out how your parents wound up going to South America.

My brother went to South America in 1938. And he was able to get his parents and his minor sister into Argentina by taking them onto a farm where they did stay. But that's how they got in.

OK. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Bollweiller.

You're welcome.

You were showing me your pictures of a dance in Germany. And the SS were--

In uniform, it was in 1933. And at this particular time, in that town where I lived, nothing was clear. Six months later on, they wouldn't have associated with me.

But you were all at the same dance at that time?

Oh, yes. Because I was the only Jewish person there in that age group. Altogether, we had about five or six Jewish children in the whole community. And they ranged in age from 10 to 20.

During the holidays, we had services. We imported a rabbi or a student. And we had to go to shul from 8 o'clock in the morning till the time. Because if one of them left or in the bathroom, there was no minyan.

How large was the town?

The town was, at that time, about 12,000 people.

Was there a major industry there?

It was a real cross cut of industry and agriculture. It was the county seat. You had all kinds of factories. You had surrounded by agriculture.

You were telling me when you came to this country, you just had a little suitcase.

That's right. I had to ask for permission what I want to take along. If I applied for six pairs of socks, they allowed me three pairs of socks or so, whatever I could put into one suitcase. I remember I had a typewriter, which they didn't allow me to bring.

But you were able to take your picture out?

Picture out. I can still remember when the boat, the SS [? Washington ?] was in Genoa. And in the middle of the night or whenever it was, early in the morning, without any motor or anything, I felt that the continent moved away from the boat. It was pulled away from there. And it's hard to describe the feeling you have after seven years of danger and being watched over, to be free, free.

And when you think back, when we think back to our experiences, it's unbelievable that people can do to people what they did when you hear about it. And when we were living there, you took it in stride. There was nothing you could do. You couldn't escape. You couldn't go anywhere.

When people say, why didn't you leave, you couldn't leave. You couldn't go anywhere. You didn't have papers, and nobody accepted you.

How did you finally get the papers that allowed you to get out?

By writing every day, and day in and day out for months and months. Until I had enough papers, and maybe they got sick of my applications. And they called me, and I got examined. And I got my visa. I left.

OK. Thank you very much.

You're welcome.

You were saying that life before the Nazis came to power--

I was born in 1913. We had a wonderful youth. There was no difference between Jewish kids or non-Jewish kids.

Everybody was aware of his religion. The Protestants went to their religious school. The Catholics went to their religious school. The Jews went to their religious school. And that was the only difference.

Society before Hitler was not built up on religion. Society was built up more on class. You associated with people in your circumstances, either in trades or in the professions.

A doctor wouldn't go out with me. He went out with doctors. Or a carpenter didn't have any business to go out with a merchant, you know? The society was in classes.

Who did your family associate with?

Our friends were mostly from school or from sport. I was very active in sport, and I dedicated quite-- against the judgment of the will of my parents-- I spent quite a bit of time in sports. And that's where you got your friends.

And even in sports, people in the same standing belonged to the same club. In a small town like Kirchheim, for instance, we had 1, 2, 3, 4 sport clubs.

Who sponsored the teams?

One of them was communistic. The other one was bourgeoisie, you know, to which we belonged. And it was people of the same [? nouveau ?] belonged to the same clubs.

The same level?

The same level.

What political party was in power before the Nazis took over the city?

Social Democrats, a center party. The Catholics had quite a bit to do with it. But the Social Democrats, and as far as we were concerned, the life was fine.

They had the unions. But the unions were not left, not all the way to the left. They were Social Democrats. And it was quiet. It was a nice life.

Did any of the Gentiles speak out when the Nazis came into power? it.

Yes, for a while. Then they disappeared. I know quite a quite a few Gentiles who were anti-Nazi. They made short [INAUDIBLE] concentration. You never heard of them anymore.

Let's see. The Jews were kept out of the regular schools, and they were sent to other schools. I believe you mentioned that.

Afterwards. I remember my older brother was-- how far was he in school? I would say about the seventh or eighth grade or ninth grade, something like that, they got a new teacher. And I remember his name, Luib. He was a Nazi, but he didn't identify himself as such.

It was before 1933, maybe '31 or so. And the first day he came to school, he started off against the Jews in school, his first. And everybody looked around at my brother, who was the only Jew in the class.

And he made him stand up. And he said to him, when he saw the people looking at him, he looked at the book to find out if he is Jewish. You had to be registered as Jewish.

He said to him what I just told the class, I don't think it should give you much pleasure, you know. Whereby, my father went to school. It was 1934, before Hitler, complained, and he was put to task, and he was put out.

And what year was this?

It must have been 1931. But those are things which stand out.

Never forget his name, his name was Luib, L-U-I-B.

I remember when my sister was about five or six years old, somebody threw a rock at her and broke her leg. I remember her sitting up there with her cast on, five, six-year-old child.

Because she was Jewish?

Sure. Nobody hurt me in any way in Kirchheim. The only time I got abused was at Gestapo headquarters. When I was in a concentration camp, nobody touched me.

Why do you think that was?

Why? First of all, it was 1938, where they didn't do much abusing. They played. That was a rehearsal of what was to come.

I remember on a Sunday morning when I went out to get the coffee, there were four or five Catholic priests sitting out there peeling potatoes. And suddenly, you know, the Jews had to do it on Saturdays and priests on Sundays. And they put the dogs on them because they couldn't peel potatoes right. You know, they most likely were not proficient in it.

So they put the dogs on them. Didn't make any difference. They were just playing.

Is there anything else? OK. Thank you.

I was wondering if your family spoke Yiddish at home or German?

No, German. As a matter of fact, the first time I heard Yiddish was when I was in the United States. Because there was no need to speak Yiddish in Germany, because it's German with a few slangs, you know, a few Jewish words. I mean, with a few Hebrew words, a few Polish.

You were saying that the first time you heard Yiddish was in the United States. You were telling about the ceremony for the Holocaust gathering at the Capitol.

When one of the representatives, [PERSONAL NAME], got up and started his speech in Yiddish, it was very moving. Or at the Capital Center, when you were in the same room with the president of the United States, give you a wonderful feeling, whoever the president is. It wasn't Reagan. It was the president of the United States.

And when he thanked me for coming to the United States, I felt mighty good.

Good. Thank you.



This has been Norma Stern interviewing Kurt Bollweiller about his experiences as a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust. This interview will be included as a valuable contribution to The Oral History Library of The Oral History Project, Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington.