

Oral History: Helmut Reifenberg, August 3, 1999

Helmut Reifenberg, born January 1923 in Munich, Germany, to Alfred and Paula Reifenberg, the youngest child of four sisters and one brother, describes: his father, an author and musician; his mother, a homemaker; a well-to-do family; his parents being patriotic Germans; not learning until about 1936 that he was half Jewish; his father being expelled from the musicians union, probably because he was Jewish; as a youth, not paying attention to politics until Kristallnacht; his father having a valuable book collection, which was seized by the Nazis; his father being arrested, possibly for political reasons, sentenced to hard labor, and then being released; a very close relationship with his father; being an apprentice in a printing shop; growing anti-Semitism in Munich; economic hardships; at eighteen, being arrested for carrying political papers and spending about eighteen months in prison but not being mistreated; not being religious; working in a factory and meeting his future wife; his factory being hit in a bombing raid; being sent to work in a salt mine; moving in with his fiancé and her mother; his sister being arrested and tortured; carrying a pistol and hand grenade obtained from his best friend; not finding out until after the war about the existence of the concentration camps; visiting Dachau just after the war [01:46:00]; getting married; his mother having a serious stroke after his father's arrest; attempting to find his father but never finding him and later hearing that he was likely killed and in a mass grave; people asking him for letters attesting that they were good Germans and not Nazis; threatening to turn in a couple whom he believed had denounced his father years before, and returning to find them dead by suicide; and feeling no remorse [02:08:00]; believing the claim that the German general population didn't know about the concentration camps; the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda, which kept people from knowing about the D-Day invasion or other aspects of the military situation; the postwar situation in Munich; being grateful to his fiancé and her mother for taking the risk of allowing him to live with them; moving to Australia in 1954 to pursue economic opportunities but missing Germany.

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