

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HANS BRAUN

Transcript of Audiotaped Translation of Interview

Interviewer: Hanna Silver
Date: April 21, 1985

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HB - Hans Braun [interviewee]

HS - Hanna Silver¹ [interviewer]

Date: April 21, 1985²

Tape one, side one:

HS: Where were you born?

HB: We have to talk in German. I was born in Hannover, Germany, 1923.

HS: How many were in your family?

HB: Father and mother, and eleven children, three brothers and eight sisters; I was the eldest.

HS: How did your father make a living?

HB: You have to know I am a Gypsy. Our lifestyle was different from the Jews. We traveled in a horse drawn wagon. We had a small carnival with swings, merry-go-round, shooting gallery, etc. So we traveled around the countryside all summer long. And in winter we stayed in our home place.

HS: So you were always on the go? Not stable in a specific town?

HB: Yes.

HS: And when you were young traveled, you were always with your parents, your family?

HB: Yes.

HS: Did you suffer from any anti-Gypsy sentiments?

HB: Not yet at that time. Not at all. I was very young then. The persecution of the Gypsies started after the Jews, our co-sufferers.

HS: That was after 1933?

HB: Yes.

HS: Were you in Germany during the whole Hitler period?

HB: Yes. We were all born in Germany. We were all German Sintis.

HS: German 'Tsigane'?

HB: We don't say Tsigane? That is Hungarian.

HS: German 'Zigeuner'?

HB: German *Zigeuner*; we don't call ourselves *Zigeuner*, because that is a pejorative. That's what the Germans called us.

HS: I did not know that.

HB: You must know our forefathers came many generations ago from India, maybe hundreds or thousands of years.

¹This interview was conducted in German and later orally translated by the interviewer, Hanna Silver. Additional written translation of the original German tape added by Edith Millman.

²Recorded at the 1985 American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, PA.

HS: Were you able to travel around Germany all this time unmolested by the Nazis? Until when could you do this?

HB: It began in 1939 when the war started, then the persecution started also.

HS: You were then probably limited in certain ways.

HB: Oh, yes in everything. Ration cards. We also were not permitted to leave our home compound. We had to wear a "Z". Like the Jews had to wear the Star of David, we had to wear the "Z". We had to sign papers that we would not leave home, otherwise we were to be punished.

HS: Were you able to stay together as a family?

HB: Yes. We lived together in a wagon.

HS: Were you able to make a living as you were before?

HB: Oh no. We were limited there too. We were drafted to work. Father had to work in a munitions factory. And I had to work in a munition factory.

HS: Did you then receive regular ration cards?

HB: No. Our rations were reduced, just like, like those of the Jews, the rations were cut to one half, sugar, flour, etc. Little meat, as was usual, that is well known.

HS: How long were you able to live in this kind of limited freedom?

HB: Well, I would say it started to get extreme in 1940-41. We were not permitted to leave our compound and we had to abide by it. We were drafted for work in the armament industry for the German army.

HS: Were you paid, even if little? And did you get your rations, even if limited?

HB: So it was. We were paid, but not like skilled labor, not enough to pay for our rations. Father had on the side a little transport business. We had a few horses, which later were taken away from us. He worked for the city and always made a little extra money. Then, we are basically dealers. We traded with horses.

HS: And this continued for a while?

HB: Yes. This went on for some time.

HS: When came an important change for you?

HB: A great change came in 1941/42. I had to work in an armament factory making cartridges. One day I was called for night shift. And during this night shift my machine broke. This machine made cartridges. I must have unfortunately put one part into the machine the wrong way. The machine broke. They sent me home during the night shift. In the morning about nine, ten o'clock came two gentlemen from the Gestapo and wanted to arrest me.

HS: Arrest you for sabotage?

HB: It seemed so. My mother saw them coming. As I said, we lived in a place, in our living wagon. I had told my mother about it. It was very strict. When the machine broke you could be sure to be arrested. When my mother said, "There is Mr. Manthai and Mr. Kretschmer of the Gestapo," I will never forget these names.

HS: Were they in uniform?

HB: No, they were in civilian clothes. I got dressed in a hurry, went out through a window, over the fence, and ran away.

HS: Where did you run to?

HB: We lived in Bernau near Berlin, now East Germany, and I ran to the next railway station and took the train to Berlin, to my grandfather who lived on Wassertor Street. 68. I stayed for a few days there in hiding, until one day the Gestapo appeared again at my grandfather's. They knew where our family lived, dispersed. So the idea was close that I had run to my relatives or grandfather. Fortunately my uncle had sent me at nine o'clock in the morning to buy him some cigarettes. I did that. In the meantime the Gestapo came. We lived in the basement apartment. You know those basement apartments, I'm sure?

HS: Yes, I do.

HB: They searched for me. My uncle said to his son, who was about eight or ten years old, in Romany, our language, to warn me not to come back. So they left and did not catch me. But I couldn't stay there any longer; the danger was too great.

HS: How old were you then?

HB: I was then 16 years old.

HS: Where did you run then?

HB: Friends had found a hiding place for me in the same street.

HS: Was this in Berlin?

HB: Yes. Actually, it was just a few houses away and kind of taboo for us. Because the man was a pallbearer by profession. I could stay there for about 14 days. I always had to return to my grandfather's to eat. The danger was great and constant. So it was decided, I had an uncle who lived in Sudetenland, in Eger. He worked there as a chauffeur. My mother—I was the eldest of eleven—took me there. Of course, I was not permitted to leave the home place but I went to Eger and stayed for about four weeks. But the search went on. I don't know, but I suppose today that they wanted to accuse me of sabotage. So I was in Eger four to five weeks, when the Gestapo came again looking for me. So I had to run from there again. I escaped to Luxemburg. There were also Sintis, and they had a hiding place under false names. They had false papers through *K.d.F.*, then called *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through joy). They had false papers for me too. And I was able to stay there, in Luxemburg, for a year.

HS: But Luxemburg was not occupied by the Germans at that time?

HB: Oh yes it was. But there were possibilities to move around. It was Christmas time again. My parents still lived in Bernau near Berlin. My father had to work. The horses had been taken away. I longed so much for my parents, and sisters, and brothers so that I dared to take the train to Berlin. Mother picked me up and took me secretly to Bernau. I was there only two days when the Gestapo turned up again. Again I ran away, escaped to Bamberg where an uncle lived whose sons were German soldiers. I

thought I would be doing well there, was there for a few weeks. Somehow I felt free there and went for a walk in town, when suddenly a police car stopped. I was walking with my cousin.

HS: Did you wear your "Z" sign?

HB: No. I did not wear that anymore. The police car stopped. My cousin wore the German army uniform. He was just on furlow. I was pretty sure that not much could happen to me walking next to a German soldier, a relative of mine. They arrested both of us and incarcerated us in Bamberg. I was there in jail for four weeks. My cousin's uniform was taken off, he was discharged, and also put in jail. Of course we were not in the same cell. Four weeks later in Bamberg, at a hearing in the court building, I escaped through a window in the toilets, went in town, grabbed somebody's bike, and escaped to Bamberg where my relatives lived. During my flight to Bamberg—the distance from Bamberg to Radelsdorf was about 20 km.—where they had a house—they had lived there for decades—during that flight I saw again and again cars coming probably looking for me. Whenever I saw lights approaching I ducked into the roadside ditch. It was evening in November and it got dark rather early. I waited in the ditch. Cars passed, stopped, returned. I knew then they were looking for me. Anyhow, I made it to Bamberg, at night about 11 or 12:00 I arrived at my relatives. They were quite surprised to see me, that I had escaped. Of course these people were terribly afraid. If I would be found there, they too would have been arrested. So the first thing they did, they gave me ladies clothing. They made a girl out of me. A skirt, a jacket, a turban on my head. I kept hidden for a few hours. Of course they gave me something to eat and gave me food to take along. From Radelsdorf to Mhynchberg, where I had an uncle was about 30-35 km. Five o'clock in the morning I was on the way, in my ladies clothing on the first workers train, and went in the direction towards Mhynchberg, which is in Bavaria. During the trip, facing me, sat an elderly gentleman who tried to get fresh with me - a young girl - I had silk stockings on my legs, but I managed to keep him off. About 7:00 in the morning, I arrived in Mhynchberg, went to my uncle. He said, "You cannot stay here. Me and my family," —and he had a large family with many children— "will be in trouble if they find you here." So I was hiding outside the place where his wagon was, and hid in a guard house about 600 to 700 meters away. It was cold, very cold. I stayed there until my mother came. They had sent word to her. She came looking for her child, and she saved me again. So in my ladies' outfit with my mother—who did not look like a Gypsy, she was blonde, etc.—we went to Berlin. Again I was hiding out with friends. My mother came every week to Berlin to bring me food. Then I met a German girl, with whom I had an affair, and I lived with her. One day this girl said to me, "Last night they put your parents on a truck and took them away. I do not know where." Anyway, now I couldn't go back to Bernau.

HS: When was that?

HB: That was 1941 to 1942. As I had learned later, they had taken my parents to Berlin *Alexanderplatz*. They were there for some days and then, as I learned later, they were taken to Auschwitz.

HS: How long did you stay there?

HB: I was without shelter, except for the girl who was hiding me on and off. I stayed on in Berlin under a false name, had false papers. Then with several relatives, an uncle who was one year older than I, and who was in the army, but was discharged later, because his parents and all his brothers and sisters were arrested.

HS: Taken to a concentration camp.

HB: Yes, but at the time we did not know about concentration camps. He didn't want to be a soldier for a government that arrested all his family. So he told them that he was a Gypsy and wanted to be discharged. It did not take long, and he was discharged. We met in Berlin and we made plans. First we had to find out where our relatives were and how to support them with packages, etc. The three of us escaped again to Luxemburg, where I had Gypsy friends. We stayed with them for some weeks. We said, "We'll make music so that we find shelter." We were musically talented. But it didn't work out that way. We had our instruments and decided to cross the border into Belgium. And then we tried to go on from there. When we stood on the railroad station platform to pick up our luggage and our instruments, three policemen in uniform appeared and arrested us. We walked between the three policemen, one on the left, two on the right of us.

HS: Were they Gestapo or German police?

HB: They were German police in uniform. No Gestapo. They must have gotten a tip. We stayed in that small town of Eschen for two weeks, and we were strangers, so we were noticed. During the walking we said to each other in Romanich, our language, "We must run away." At a certain glance, all three ran. Two to the right, one left, across the railroad tracks, over the hill we gained some distance. But, I lost my way. I ran into a dead end street and there they caught me. Two of the policemen caught me. They threw me down, beat me up, and arrested me. They took me to the municipal jail in *Esch Alzig*, where I stayed three days. They questioned me about the where and why. I did not look like a Gypsy. I told them a fairy tale, that I ran away from home. That I wanted to become a soldier. That I wanted to join the S.S. They bought that. You know, there were a lot of volunteers to the army and to the S.S. Young men had a certain better chance in uniform. The guards were changed, new guards came and I told them the same story. They did not treat me too bad in that jail.

HS: But they kept you in jail?

HB: Yes. I was in jail until there was a transport from Esch to Luxemburg.

HS: And then they took you on the transport?

HB: Not yet. In the meantime, they had arrested my two relatives and put them in jail in Luxemburg. And they asked them, "Where is the third man?" "The third man is

in Esch." And that was I. In the evening between 5:00 and 6:00 the *Kommando* was put together. I had again a chance, and again I ran away. Along the streets, into a house, up to the fourth floor, and there I was hiding in the attic. Then I knocked at a door. It was opened. It was a tailor. I will never forget that. I told him the whole story, about my arrest, my escape, the Gestapo, etc. The man helped me. "Listen," he said, "you stay until it gets dark and then we will see to get you out of town." I told him that I wanted to go to Luxemburg because I had shelter there. The man sewed some rags into my jacket, to give me the look of a hunchback. With a cane handy, I played the role of a hunchback. He showed me how to limp. He took me by the arm and walked me out of Esch. I walked along the road, but there was one problem. There was a coal mine and every 15 minutes the glowing coal was brought out put on a very large mount and it lit up the whole area like daylight. On top of that there was a very strong wind in the opposite direction, hindering me in my walk. I could move only very slowly. After about one hour I saw a light. I had to be careful, it could be police. The light was the light of a bicyclist. This bicyclist passed. After a while he turned around and went back. Then two lights approached. A car. I thought, "He must have told them. I have to turn away to the right." I disappeared into a field, laid down on my tummy. It was raining lightly, which helped me. The car passed again. I heard dogs. People talking, "He must be here, he cannot be any further." The lights of the coal mine went out again. Apparently the dogs didn't have my trail through the rain. I got away from them by a mile or so. All of a sudden I found myself standing at the Mosel River. How could I get across?

HS: You couldn't swim across, could you?

HB: Yes I did. I took off my clothes, tied them up, and put them on top of my head-it was very, very, cold- and swam to the other side of the river. This chase went on till 6:00 in the morning. I arrived in Luxemburg, in the hotel where we always stayed as gentlemen of the KDF, *Kraft Durch Freude*, part of the Nazi Labor Union, as actors. I had always some money sewn into my clothes, so that in case of danger I could always manage to go on and continue. [*Tape one, side two of German tape*] I gave my soaking wet clothes to the chambermaid to dry and clean, and told her to wake me up at 5:00 a.m., which she did. I got dressed and the flight continued. But, it didn't last very long. I had hardly started out, when the Gestapo stopped me, and put me in jail in Luxemburg, where I met my two cousins. The questioning started again. We stayed a few more days there, then a transport was assembled. We did not know where to. The final destination was Auschwitz. We arrived in Auschwitz, as usual, in a cattle car. Not only we but other families of Sintis too. We were delivered to Birkenau Gypsy Camp. The first question was, "What are you?" The answer, "Musicians." "So play some thing for us." The SS camp commander - his name was Palitsch - came to me and asked, "What instrument are you playing?" Answer, "I play the harp." "Well we don't have a harp." "So you can't play and won't get anything." The others got a piece of bread, I got nothing. The registration continued and we had to go to a "political room." Mr. Bogdan, a Pole, was

their clerk. A prisoner. A green triangle. A criminal. The numbers were tattooed. Our clothes were taken away. The hair shorn off. We got into a barrack, a block. I was asking, "Where are my parents, my brothers, my sisters?" And then I saw my mother. My parents with their children. I did not recognize my mother.

HS: Were you able to talk together?

HB: Only very briefly. Her hair was cut off. I did not recognize her. Then we were taken to the quarantine barrack. From there taken back to the family. I was in block six, with my mother, my sisters, and brothers. I asked her where the two children were. So she told me they were dead. I had two little siblings. One was one-and-a-half, the other three years old. They were dead already. For a certain time we were permitted to live together in this barrack.

HS: Were there only Gypsies in this block, separated from other inmates?

HB: Yes. This was a Gypsy camp. Next to it was the Jewish camp. Next the Czech camp. People were sorted out like goods. Then I volunteered for a work detail, night shift, you know. We helped to collect the dead from the hospital barrack, at night, between six and seven o'clock and take them to the crematorium. [tape off, then on] We had an army truck which we had to pull with straps. The Gypsy camp Birkenau was next to the crematorium. So we collected the dead, threw them off the truck, and they were burned there. And for that, for the night shift, we got every time an extra ration of one-half a loaf of bread. This bread I saved to give to my mother, and my brothers and sisters. We also disinfected the barracks which continuously received new inhabitants. You know, there were lice. Many, many lice. And from time to time the blankets were disinfected. I was there also, just to get a bit of extra bread.

HS: Did you get used to that gruesome job of loading and unloading the dead?

HB: Oh no. I cannot tell you in words. I can never forget that. You see, I'm now 62 years old. I will be able to forget when I am dead.

HS: How long did this go on like this in Auschwitz?

HB: There are a lot of other things I could tell you. But. They put me in the stocks and beat me. They said I had stolen bread. They put me in the stocks. I do not want to tell you all that. I want to be brief and come to the end. One day, my mother had typhus. She was forty two years old. Six children were still alive. Also my father and mother. We were all in one bunk with four tiers. Six to eight persons had to live in each. Mother had to leave for the hospital barrack, that was the rule. They took her there and put her in a lower bunk. She was so emaciated that she did not have any strength left in her to live. The next day I visited her and tried to wash her mouth. You must know, typhus is terrible. I had typhus too, and typhoid fever. All my teeth were beaten out, my mouth was so dry one looked always for some liquid, and liquid was equal to death. I washed her mouth out. She embraced me. [Tape off-crying] It is so sad. Next day she was dead. And so it went on. After a certain time-I still had some of my brothers and sisters-one after the other died of starvation.

HS: Right in front of your eyes.

HB: Yes-they starved to death. Then I also got typhus and was also taken to the hospital barracks.

HS: Did they do anything for you there? Give you any medication?

HB: No. They gave us injections.

HS: This was too late...

HB: No, they made experiments with us. That's how I got typhus. They gave us live typhoid injections.

HS: They gave you typhus?

HB: Yes, they gave us typhus and that's why I went to the hospital. But I managed to survive. My father was beaten severely. He starved to death. I survived. Three children were still alive. I testified here today as a witness what I had experienced. Dr. Mengele came one day into the hospital barracks. You know, he experimented on children and especially twins. [tape off then on] He took a pretty boy about five or six years old, who had also typhus, but was on the way to get better.

Tape one, side two:

HB: In the middle of the hospital room there was kind of an oven. Sometimes the inmates sat on it or used it to cook some potatoes which they had stolen from the kitchen. It was a beautiful boy. Dark-skinned. Dr. Mengele put a white cloth on this oven, put this child on it, bent him over, took a *long* needle and inserted it in his back, his spine. All the way to the top. I was in my bunk. I was already getting better. The needle broke. He tried to pull it out but he did not succeed. We were not too distressed to see that because we had seen too much before.

HS: So he left the needle inside the boy's spine?

HB: Yes. The needle was broken off. Only about 10 cm he had pulled out. Some white stuff was oozing out.

HS: Do you think it was his spinal cord?

HB: Yes, I think so. The child was returned. One of the block doctors took him back to the barracks. A few hours later the child was dead. The next day on my way to the toilet, you know I had typhus and dysentery. If you didn't hold your drinking with water, you could not stop. I always had to pass this butcher block on the way to the toilet. Dr. Mengele had added a room of six to eight square meter. There was a one to one and a half long groove in the cement for the blood to drain off. There was the child. He had it cut open from top to bottom with a saw. Like a butcher would cut open an animal.

HS: Cut it in half?

HB: Yes, cut in half, opened it and took the intestines and put them into jars, filled with a clear liquid. These were his experiments. I was released. I was sent with a transport to Flossenburg. There is much to be told about what happened in the meantime, but we want to come to a close. I have to stop, I cannot go on anymore.

HS: Was Flossenburg a labor camp?

HB: Yes. Flossenburg was a labor camp, it was called number 2004. Airplanes were manufactured there, the Moehr 109 planes. Who was able to work had to work, under the supervision of civilians, watched by the S.S. I was again put over the block and beaten. I have to stop, I cannot go on anymore.

HS: Were you liberated in Flossenburg?

HB: Yes. We thought it were the Russians.

HS: Who was it who liberated you?

HB: The Americans.

HS: Did you then go to another camp?

HB: We wandered about, we were "on transport". The camp had to be emptied. Four nights and four days. Just before the Americans liberated us, the Nazis

sent us back and forth from Flossenburg to Schwatzenberg, from Schwatzenberg to Neuenberg.

HS: The Nazis did that?

HB: Yes, with the S.S. Five of us, arms linked, we walked. Did you know one can sleep standing up? We did that to the end. Those who could not make it were shot on the spot. There was a *Kommando*. They were buried on the spot, about one-half meter deep. Then we reached the last station, about 10 at night. The American planes were flying overhead. These were not bombers, they were reconnaissance planes. They followed us. We were about 1000 to 1200.

HS: Were these all Gypsies or a mixture of prisoners?

HB: No, not only Gypsies, all together, all kind of prisoners. There were some woods and meadows and we had to turn to the right. Together with two others, it was one o'clock in the morning—because we had heard that they wanted to do us in at the last station—we ran away. We were hiding in a barn about one km from there. About three o'clock to four o'clock in the morning, we heard machine gun fire for about one hour. Later on I learned that *all* had been shot. We went into a village and were hiding in a school. There was S.S. in that village and the village was attacked because the S.S. defended themselves. I went to the basement and found a long stick, a bean-pole, and kind of a white sheet, attached it to the stick and held it out the window. And so we surrendered the village, and that saved the village from being destroyed. The S.S. ran away. They caught some S.S. later. Under their uniforms they wore prison garb. A certain Mr. Gneist [phonetic] *Obersturmbannführer*³. The hangman of Flossenburg, they caught him. Many of the S.S. went to the camps, to UNRRA⁴, and presented to be, and pretended to be inmates. And later emigrated.

HS: What happened to your family?

HB: Everybody is dead. All of them.

HS: Mr. Braun I feel so bad that I made you bring up all of these terrible memories, but you wanted it to be on record. Thank you very much, Mr. Braun.

³The United State Holocaust Memorial Museum website lists the term *Obersturmbannführer* as Lieutenant Colonel.

⁴UNRRA - United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration