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HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ERNST L. PRESSEISEN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Elizabeth Geggel
Date: April 22, 1983

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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EP - Ernst L. Presseisen [interviewee]
EG - Elizabeth Geggel, [interviewer]
Date: April 22, 1983

Tape one, side one:

EG: Dr. Presseisen, could you tell me where you were born, when and a little bit about your family?

EP: Certainly. I was born in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands on July 13th, 1928. Both my parents, Moritz Heinrich and Flora, were born in Rotterdam as well. My father was a businessman. He had a wholesale business in carpeting, in furniture textiles and in curtains. We lived in Rotterdam in the residential area at the northern edge of the city. I had two older brothers, both who are now deceased. The oldest died in Bergen-Belsen at the age of 23. My second older brother survived with me and died in 1978. He never came to the United States. He stayed in Holland after the war, married there and had children. I would classify our family in a sociological sense as middle-class, perhaps slightly tending towards the upper-edge. I use standards here. We had an automobile, we had two servants. These are several of the measurements that one would use.

EG: Was there a large Jewish community in Rotterdam at the time?

EP: Rotterdam, if I remember correctly, had a Jewish community between 14,000 to 16,000 people. These figures are somewhat approximate. I can't be entirely certain. My understanding is that, after World War II, less than 200 survived of that community. The Dutch-Jewish community in general was very badly devastated.

EG: Did your family experience antisemitism before the Hitler period?

EP: Well, let me begin personally, since I was very young when the war began; that is when the Dutch [Germans] came to Holland on the 10th of May of 1940, I was not quite 12 years old, so that my only recollections would be rather narrow, but I do not recall any incident that had antisemitism affecting me personally. I went to public school. I had gone in fact to nursery school before the first grade of elementary school called *a Freugel* school and I had then gone to elementary school, and I don't recall anything. Nor so I recall my parents ever mentioning antisemitism, but again it may have been because I was simply too young. We did belong to one of the two major synagogues in Holland. We were not particularly observant. We did go to synagogue for the High Holidays. We were perhaps rather liberal. My parents regarded themselves as liberals.

EG: Did you go to Hebrew school or anything like that?

EP: I had training. Both my brothers and I were trained for Bar Mitzvah but we...this was done by a private teacher coming to our house. We never went, I certainly didn't, and I am fairly sure neither did my brothers ever go to a Hebrew school. All three of us had Bar Mitzvah...I had Bar Mitzvah in 1941, that is, before we were deported. All three of us read portions of the Torah, on the *Bimah* but I must say, looking back, that

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Jewish education in Holland was very inferior. We were drilled in the Hebrew part to read, we received a smattering of Jewish history, and that is about it. The lesson would be for maybe two or three years once a week at home. Compared to what my children received in this country, it was certainly very inadequate.

EG: So there was no organized Hebrew School like we have here?

EP: Not that I am aware of. The problem in Holland was that there was neither a Reformed or a Conservative Judaism. One either had to belong to an Orthodox synagogue or there was nothing.

EG: I see. So, your parents provided it for you privately.

EP: Yes, they provided it. And, I remember the Hebrew instructor I had very well. He later on became the chief, later on, I mean after 1945, became the Chief Rabbi of Rotterdam. His name was Melamed which, of course, means teacher in Hebrew. But, looking back on it, as I said, it was really very inadequate. And the result is that my Hebrew today is really very inadequate or insufficient because I feel that the training was not very good.

EG: Well, that was the culture.

EP: It was the culture at the time, and because if one's parents were very observant, one would have gone, not to what today in this country one regards as Hebrew school, but to a *cheder* which would be in place of the regular public school.

EG: Well, I get the picture, it was either Orthodox or on your own.

EP: Well yes, but even so the synagogues were all eventually Orthodox because the *bimah* was in the center of the synagogue.

EG: So, it was a Sephardic service?

EP: No, no it was not. Sephardic, the only Sephardic synagogue that I am aware of was in Amsterdam. This is Ashkenazi, but the *bimah* was in the center and the women were upstairs. This was a very historic synagogue that we went to in Rotterdam and the building went right back to the middle of the 18th century. It was right on the river where the [unclear] was, and it was unfortunately destroyed in the bombing in May 1940. Both major synagogues, the other one being the more modern that is from the 19th century.

EG: It sounds very interesting. Are there any pictures of this available?

EP: Yes, as a matter of fact I do have pictures, I have upstairs. I have a book of the Rotterdam Jewish community and a relative of mine in California has a little Delft blue tile of the outside of this. I have a book of photographs that was published some years ago, that a cousin of mine sent.

EG: Yes, that sounds very interesting.

EP: I can show it to you afterwards, if you like. But of course, the text is in Dutch and not in Hebrew. But the synagogue, now the synagogue that I had my Bar Mitzvah in in 1941 was much smaller. It was really a chapel in the Jewish old-age home. Because the two major synagogues had been destroyed in the bombing which destroyed and leveled so much in the center of Rotterdam and has become of course one of the prime

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examples of terror bombing by the Germans in the early part of the war. Like Coventry, like Belgrade.

EG: Yes. Apparently you still lived there at that time?

EP: We lived in Rotterdam. We lived and I have some very vivid recollections of that bombing, because we lived through it. A bomb fell outside our house, a block up, and our house caught on fire because of it. An entire block up in flames because of incendiary bombs. And, I remember later on in the same day of the bombing...it must have been now the 13th or 14th of May, we manned pumps because the water system had been bombed and there was no pressure in the lines. About a block from us was a very fine villa, with a thatched roof and it was in a little park where there was a pond, and the thatched roof was burning, people were carrying out all sorts of valuables out of the house, and here I was with other men and I was only yet a boy, manning a hand-pump, to pump water out of the pond to pour water or spray water on the house.

EG: That was in 1941?

EP: No, no that was in 1940 during the invasion. Rotterdam, you see, was a key defense area in what was called Fortress Holland. And the Dutch had flooded the lower end. And the Dutch army received a German ultimatum to surrender Rotterdam or they would be bombed. If my knowledge is correct, the surrender, in fact, had been announced. The Dutch said they would surrender the fortress or fortification. The bombs had already been sent and apparently missed the signal being recalled and in a short bombardment the center of Rotterdam was completely wiped out. I have an entire album of photographs of that as well.

EG: At that particular point there was no difference between the Jewish and Gentiles?

EP: Oh no, no. In these early days of the war, after all, there was no ghetto or anything like that in Rotterdam. There were Dutch and this is really a quite separate story, because Rotterdam had been flooded for over four days, when the war began on the 10th of May, Rhine barges opened up and the German soldiers came out and were smuggled into Holland. Paratroopers were dropped in the middle of Rotterdam to seize the bridges. And there was street fighting for two, three days and because the Dutch army put up a very good defense, the Germans had failed to capture Rotterdam and so we were in the midst of all of this. We thought of fleeing south. My father had a car and the reason that we didn't and - now of course it appears extremely foolish - was, my father said "Well I don't have enough money on me. I have to go to the bank and get money, but the banks are closed and there is no way to get money." Of course we should have just got into the car and fled south. We might have been able to get to Spain. Well, we didn't do this. We stayed put. I remember that in the midst of the bombing, when the bombs were falling, we ran out of our house, and ran down the street to go to a safer place. I remember that after Rotterdam surrendered, a block away, there was a very fine liquor store and in fear of German soldiers coming and drinking alcohol and going absolutely wild, that every bottle in the shop was

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smashed, and that the floor of the place was literally filled with wine and liquor. You could stand there and could smell it, and everything in there was being smashed so it wouldn't fall in German hands. A neighbor of ours who had quite a wine stock poured it all down the toilet because, again, he didn't want German soldiers to get drunk. People do crazy things, under circumstances like that. These are things that I recall that come back to me.

EG: There must have been things that made a big impression.

EP: Well, another thing, of course, immediately after the bombing, so evident is the concussion. Everywhere it knocked out windows, in spite of the fact that we had taped the windows. The streets were literally so littered with glass that one was walking on glass all the time. Amazingly none of us was seriously injured by flying glass. Fragments can kill people. None of this was, which was in itself amazing.

EG: Must have been some type of miracle, yes?

EP: In our own house we had a large flat over a store, a flat that was two stories. A number of plaster ceilings had fallen down because of the concussion of the bombs.

EG: And all your family was together at home at the time?

EP: All of the family was together. As a matter of fact, we happened to be guests at that moment to an aunt and uncle who lived in Finland and had returned about 5 days earlier, when the war[1] broke out in Finland, for a spring holiday, and who were now caught. There was a sister of my father and her husband who were now caught in Holland and they never did get out. My uncle died during the war and my aunt was deported to Auschwitz. So, they were staying with us, and we were all together and we stayed all together until August 1942. In that period, a number of things happened. Shall I continue to talk?

EG: Yes, please.

EP: We moved in probably July or August 1940 to a somewhat smaller but much more modern flat in another part of Rotterdam. I don't quite know why we moved, whether it was somewhat cheaper in rent or whether our apartment or our flat had been too damaged, but I was too young to be told that. But we moved, and at first we continued to go to the public schools. Looking back now and understanding better, very gradually measures began to be taken that began to separate the Jewish community, or the Dutch-Jewish citizens from the rest of the population. One of the things that happened and affected me personally in 1941 was that it became...it was forbidden, from the new school year 1941-1942 on for Jewish children to go to public school. This was one measure, as a historian I know, following the Nazi policy in Germany where Jewish schools had to be set up. These were not religious schools; these were copies of the public schools. Thus, in 1941-42 I went to a Jewish high school, that meant all the students were Jewish and all the faculty was Jewish. Indeed, we had an outstanding faculty. And we met in a barn building, a sort of rump of a building that had survived around which there was nothing. It could have been a high school, part of it which remained standing after the bombing. I'll never forget that year because it was in many ways a very stimulating year. Jewish children from all over

[1]The Russo-Finnish War broke out in November, 1939.

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Rotterdam had to go to that one high school and I think I was there a year in the first or second grade of high school.

EG: Were you still allowed to see your non-Jewish friends that you had?

EP: Yes, I used to play. There was no problem with that. Sometime in either late 1941 or early ‘42, I cannot put my finger on that, there came a new restriction that, of course, affected all of us, and that was the wearing of the Jewish star. Where we could now no longer go out without being marked. In all of this, the Dutch population was affected, but I can’t say from personal recollection to what extent. Naturally, since I was going to school with other Jewish children, my friends were now mainly Jewish. Another restriction that I recall that became, as I will explain later, very serious that sometime in the early summer of 1942, the hours to shop for groceries were restricted and we could only go certain hours of the day and, apparently, home deliveries of groceries, which was a very normal fashion or a normal practice in Europe before World War II, was also forbidden.

EG: To Jewish people?

EP: To Jewish people.

EG: Were you restricted to the stores where you could shop?

EP: That I do not know. I only know about the hours. I don’t think it included the shops. But I can’t answer that for sure.

EG: Were food articles rationed at this time, also?

EP: Some rationing had started, yes.

EG: For everybody?

EP: For everybody. But again it wasn’t yet too serious. We were eating quite well. There was as yet no deprivation of any sort of food.

EG: But Jewish people couldn’t shop as much as...?

EP: Well, apparently it began in July or June of 1942, restrictions were imposed, and this was very important to me because it eventually affected the manner of food delivery at home. Our groceries used to be delivered and it led my mother to violate the law. And I’ll explain in a minute that this became serious. Something else that I was going to mention, in terms of restrictions... oh yes, my father had, as I said earlier, a wholesale business, and at some time during 1942, in the first 6 months, suddenly a man arrived at our door - my father had his office at his house although he had a warehouse, a wholesale warehouse which was separate - a man arrived at our door who informed us that he had been appointed by the German authorities as trustee of my father’s business; *der Treuh≅nder,* is, of course, a German term. This was part again of the German occupation policy of gradually taking over all Jewish businesses and, although my father’s business was not very large, simply going down the list had led eventually to him being appointed. And in effect, he took over my father’s business. I remember my father’s panic and deep concern about this. One other aspect of our gradually restricting circle of life was that sometime in, probably 1941, or early 1942, my father sold his car. He, apparently...the car, being a young boy the car meant a great deal to me was, I think, a 1938 Chevrolet, but he

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either felt that he could no longer use it, gasoline, of course, was one of the things that was restricted. Anyway, he sold that. But, beyond that, things weren't too restricted yet, for us.

EG: Did your father still work in his business?

EP: Well, he still tried to carry on, but once the trustee had been appointed, he really was no longer very much in charge. This came relatively, just before we were deported. We were one of the first families deported from Rotterdam. This is something specific that I will get to in a minute. There is one other thing that I...there are several other things that I want to mention until I come to what happened to our family specifically. We lived fairly close to the new zoo in Rotterdam and there in the winter of 1941 and early 1942, the Dutch-Nazi leader Anton Muzet came to speak. I decided that I wanted to go to see him. That is, stand on the street and see him drive by. Well, I did this and then went home to tell my father, who of course, gave me a thorough lecture about how could I have done this. Well, I was just interested. I was not politically conscious. But here was someone who somehow played a role. So I saw him. It was of no significance whatsoever. And now, sometime in the summer of 1942, it was either June or July, I remember my father came home in a terrible panic because there had been some sort of roundup of Jewish young men. The word we used for this was an Italian word it was ***razzia*.** And my father was terribly upset, he had his older son who was now 21 years old, and he was terribly worried about my older brother. This put now definite fear, if not panic into our lives. And, as I said, this must have been in June or July, probably in July 1942. There was also then, I do know this, rumors that we would be deported. And my parents were aware of this and the rumors were...that deportations would take place to Poland. And I remember very specifically my father saying, "I will never allow this to happen to us." And as a result, and I did participate in this, we began to make plans with Christian friends, and we had some contact apparently with the underground, yes okay, I'll mention that it was the underground, that we would flee. We would take what might be called an underground train to Switzerland. We had plans. We were going to take the train to south of Holland to Brabant. We would bicycle across the Belgian frontier. We would be aided. We would go through Belgium into northern France, the *Maquis* would somehow get us over the Jura into Switzerland. We had plans. My father had accumulated some money and we had made contacts. Do you want me to stop, do you need to...

EG: No, I just need to watch the tape.

EP: I have to back up here. Our contact -

EG: Who is the *Maquis*?

EP: The *Maquis* is the French underground. This was the Dutch, the Dutch had contacted the Belgians, the Belgians would have contacted the French. One of the reasons in fact, that we were able to do this - my oldest brother had graduated from high school, I guess in 1939 or 1940, and had been studying chemistry with a chemist, a trained chemist from Hague who it turned out was an officer in the Dutch army and who had such underground contacts. In fact, this is one of the tragedies. He offered my brother, my oldest

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brother, a chance to stay in England. In those days apparently in the lake in northern Holland, in the province of Friesland, these planes used to land at night and pick up people, and my brother was given the chance to escape. My father would have none of this. In those early days, he felt that it was too dangerous. Later on, of course, he deeply regretted this. But, anyway, we did have some contacts through this individual, and I do not know of all the details of this, but I know that we had plans apparently in August of 1942 to try to make a run for it. It was dangerous, we were aware of this. Now...

EG: But, this was something you could do as a family?

EP: We planned to do it as a family. There was still sufficient freedom in 1942. In 1941 as a family we had taken a vacation together in Brabant, which is in southern Holland on a farm. We could still take the train, we could still go by bicycle on long trips. There were no restrictions. And as I said, we were a family of boys and ready to do this. And then, in the second week of August, I can be fairly specific on that, around the 7th or 10th of August 1942, my parents received a summons to come to the police station in Rotterdam, the headquarters of the police. This, I don't need to tell you, is a very unusual thing, because as law-abiding Dutch citizens we never had any contact with the police. We had no idea...

EG: I see, it must have been something. Wait a minute, I want to change the tape.

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Tape one, side two:

Long pause before tape starts.

EP: This summons to the police was, of course, unusual. My parents went together and in the late afternoon my father came back alone. My mother had been arrested, and had been held in prison. Now, when I tell you the reason for this, it's quite incredible. About two houses down from us, actually an apartment house, lived the Inspector of Police. He turned out to be a Nazi. And, he observed that my mother had had some groceries delivered to her house, and this was illegal. This is something that she had done all her life, as a housewife. I can't tell you if it was a Jewish grocery or non-Jewish grocery, I doubt it was a Jewish one, but probably one that she had done business with for maybe 15 years. She had called as usual to order something, quite forgetting that it was no longer allowed, and the manager and owner had probably said this was an old customer, and had probably not paid attention either, but the delivery had been observed. We had registered as Jews. I have to go back here again to 1940. On of the first acts of Dutch occupation, or the German occupation authorities, had been to require all Jews to register, and as good law-abiding citizens, we had done so. Terrible mistake. Of course, now, hindsight. So we were listed, it was known that we were Jews. Anyway, my mother was kept arrested. This meant, of course, that we were now caught. We could not leave. Our whole plan to go to Switzerland, on the underground connection had fallen to the ground. About...I may be a little wrong on the date because I think my mother was in prison for four weeks, and so the arrest may have actually taken place in late July or early August. I do know that we were deported on the 22nd of August, and I think that she was in prison for four weeks so that I may have been somewhat a few days off. Anyway, around the 20th of August, two police inspectors came to our house and informed us that we could be reunited with our mother, but that the only way we could do this is that we would have to go with her to a camp in Holland. This camp was called Westerbork. Westerbork in fact had a prewar history. This is of no great renown to the Dutch. German refugees, Jewish refugees, coming from Nazi Germany into prewar Holland had temporarily been housed there. It was in the province of *Drenten* in northeastern Holland, very close to the Dutch frontier, in a fairly uninhabited part of Holland. We were told that we would have to be ready in something like 24 to 48 hours to join her, and we would be taken by Dutch police, on the train to Westerbork.

EG: During the month that your mother was in prison, were you or your father allowed to see her?

EP: I know I didn't see her. My father may have gone to see her, I don't remember that. No action was ever taken against her, that is, no court procedures were ever held for anything like this.

EG: And of course there was no possibility to...

EP: No possibility to do anything. We didn't know what this... We did become aware of the charges, but there was nothing we could do. Just wait and find whether she

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would be released or whatever. And, then, when the police came, I remember this very specifically, it was rather in a vicious way that we were told that my mother would be freed - they had good news but we would have to join her, to be deported to Westerbork. Now, I do know that the first round of deportations had just then started, and what happened was that the Dutch post office sent notices to people and there was some Jewish families living around us, who were then informed by mail that they had to arrive at a certain date, with only that which they could carry, at a collection center and they would be put on a train to Westerbork. But we were a special case. I never did quite find out why. Anyway, on the 24th of August, 1942, we all came to the Dutch police station, the headquarters of the police in Rotterdam and there were united with my mother and the next morning we were put under special guard on the train. It was not a special train, it was a regular scheduled train to Utrecht and from Utrecht I think we made a connection.

EG: So it was the Dutch police...

EP: The Dutch police, right. And as a matter of fact, looking back on it, when we changed trains in Utrecht they were so lax that if I had run away then, I could have easily escaped. I could have managed without any difficulty to run away. They were very pleasant about all of this, they were in no way cruel. They delivered us to...

EG: Were there any Germans involved?

EP: Not in transfer until we got to Westerbork. That was a different situation. That was guarded by the Germans, as far as I remember, but, again, when we arrived in Westerbork it was very early in the whole process of deportation. And the first thing that was done in Westerbork, I remember that, was to build a railroad through. I don't recall how we were taken, probably by truck, from the railroad station near Westerbork. But, while I was at Westerbork, a spur line was built so that trains could come right into the camp, and it is that the entire deportation from Holland took place, because Westerbork became, to use the German phrase, *SS Polizei Deutschlage*. It became a transit. And, we were one of the first arrivals and what happens, then, is a rather unusual story, because, instead of being deported in late August or early September to Poland, we managed to hold on, to hang on, to stay in Westerbork from August 1942 until February 1944. And we saw, in fact, virtually the entire Dutch-Jewish community pass before us, including some of our relatives, including my 83 year old grandfather, and once or twice, we ourselves were on the point of deportation, and then we were pulled out of the line.

Now, this gets a little complicated, and I'm not sure that I remember all of the details. Anyway, very shortly after we arrived in Westerbork, my mother was found to be ill. I cannot tell you if this was partly feigned or real, but she was sent to a regular hospital in *Groningen* which was the university hospital in *Groningen* which is the capital of the province of *Groningen* in the northeastern part of Holland, just north of. And she stayed in that hospital from early September 1942 until February 1944, so that my mother all of this time, maybe pulled some strings there and was not in Westerbork at all, and that was one way that we managed to hang on. And there were other ways. Because we arrived so early

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in Westerbork, all of us got jobs there in the camp bureaucracy. My father became, I don't know what to call it, a registrar or the manager of one of the barracks. My brothers did something. I don't recall what. I became a messenger boy, but I had a marvelous title and even an arm band. The name was *Ordinance*. And, in the process, we became very well known in the camp. We made, of course, connections, political connections. The interesting thing was, there was an office in that camp headed by an elderly gentleman, German-Jewish, who had been there apparently from the pre-war era, who was sort of a liaison with the Germans. His name was Vechtel and I became an *Ordinance* in Bureau Vechtel. I haven't the slightest idea what Dr. Vechtel did. He had a doctor's title, but I ran messages and I was all over the camp. I knew when a new transport was arriving. I knew when a train came in, that a train would go to the east. Usually when it became fairly systematized, it amounted to a thousand people a week that were sent on the train. Gradually, as these transports became systematized and the railroad spur had been built, the SS became more prominent in the administration of the camp. Nevertheless, security in the camp was fairly lax. And, I remember once or twice being sent out of the camp to a nearby place, outside the barbed wire and I just walked out and I was not stopped. Again, I could have escaped but it never occurred to me. Perhaps because, perhaps I was too young; perhaps because we felt fairly secure. Again...

EG: Now this Westerbork was a transit *lager*. It wasn't a ghetto where people stayed.

EP: It was no ghetto. People stayed in barracks. Although men and women were separated, they saw each other all day. There was a lot of registration. When you came in, you had to list what you had with you, what you'd left behind. There was a whole outfit in Holland, that after people had been deported, emptied out these homes and it became a very profitable business. But I only know this by hearsay. And, let me say, too, that while food was not plentiful in Westerbork, it was sufficient, and I will admit, I am not ashamed that I became one of the specialists at somehow finding food or plainly stealing it. I became excellent. I was very good at going into the kitchens in the food supply and managing to scare up extra rations.

EG: Did you live with your brothers and father?

EP: Yes, I lived with my brothers. We were all together.

EG: And your mother was in the hospital?

EP: My mother was in the hospital.

EG: Otherwise she would have been separated?

EP: She would have been in a separate barrack. I also recall that toward the end, when things began to slow down, and there was more space, we had something like a little apartment in camp. We were all together. But my memory of that is very vague.

EG: When your mother was in that hospital, outside of the camp...

EP: Oh, this was quite a distance away.

EG: Could you see her?

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EP: Once, we went to visit but that involved a 2-3 hour bus trip.

EG: Could you have escaped at that point?

EP: Yes, we could have, but I think we probably went under some sort of escort.

EG: Oh, I see. I guess you really wouldn't have gotten too far.

EP: Well, that depends. I was young. I spoke, of course, the language...

EG: I mean your father and brothers...

EP: That again was it. I mean to leave, somehow, the family, if I had been older, more organized, or if I had known what was in store... Again, there was only once an incident that I now recall which should be mentioned here. The commander of the camp, these were the *grηne polizei*, I think probably the SS, was a man by the name of Genecker. He was in prison in Germany after the war, and they tried to try him again. Anyway, we had a sort of parade or drill area where a group of prisoners, deportees, had been lined up and during one of these assemblies - I don't quite know the purpose of why the people were standing there - people tried not so much to protest as to argue with Genecker that they should not be deported. And he spoke to them in German which most of us were able to handle and he sort of lost his temper and said, "*Nein, nein, sie gehen in gaz*." [You are going to be gassed.] We...while I heard this, the significance of this never made an impact on me. This was 1942-43...general knowledge of Auschwitz and, of course, the execution and gassing of people was not known. If there would have been knowledge, if there would have been knowledge of what really happened to people in Poland, I suspect that there would have been far more protest. People went on the whole peaceably. They thought we were being resettled. I remember one group of young Zionists marching to the train to be deported and singing the "*Hatikvah*". That was impressive. I also remember very distinctly in September 1942, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services in Westerbork which was held in the barrack, where we were surrounded by the iron bedsteads, 2 and 3 high, and that either one of my brothers or my father said, "Well, this is one High Holiday service that we won't forget."

Now, the fairly long period that we spent in Westerbork created probably a false sense of security. We thought we were going to be able to hang on, and as I said, a couple of times when, there weren't enough people, because of the quota, a certain number of people had to go each week, could not be filled, then the Germans would resort to rounding up what might be called the more permanent staff of camp. Nevertheless, we had really managed loopholes [unclear] to be pulled out again [unclear] the selection process. It's obvious now, although it wasn't obvious to me at the time, that by the beginning of 1944 they were beginning to run out of people. I mean Holland was virtually free of Jews. There were, of course, Jews underground. Some of my cousins who survived in the underground, but aunts and uncles and a grandmother, these had been underground, and they had been caught and had been sent to Westerbork and we had all seen them go on the train. Now, we also had some contact with people outside the camp. We could send letters, we could have some foodstuff sent to us.

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EG: Did you get any information about what was going on in the Western world at that time?

EP: No, not very much. Of course, before we were deported, Hitler had gone to Russia. The invasion of Normandy would not take place until we were in Germany. But the last half of '42 and '43, well we may have gotten some warnings. There were some radios in the camp, I do remember that vaguely, and we may have known, but I don't recall now, the landing in Africa or the invasion of Sicily. I was still fairly young. I was 14 or 15, and the political news didn't interest us that much. Or at least me, that much.

EG: And, as you said, you felt sort of in a false sense of security.

EP: Yes, a false sense of security. I knew my way around the camp. I never, incidentally, went to school. There were some attempts to organize a school in the camp, but that failed, and I was then too free and too wild. The whole...one really should make a study of what the relaxation of standards and civilized behavior does on young people. I was something of a wild devil. I took all sorts of chances especially in finding my way around, and, literally, to use the word of the time, "liberating" food supplies.

EG: That was part of the German plan to disrupt...

EP: Yes, to disrupt the structure of life. Yes, so I never went to school in that period in Westerbork and I was sort of growing up rather wild. Anyway...oh, I know what I wanted to get to. My father had some business contacts and had apparently arranged, I cannot tell you how, that we would be in a rather select group of Jews that would be deported to a special camp. The basis of this was, so it may have in fact been made up, since my father was an importer and exporter he had a wholesale business, he had done business with England, with Italy, that, if the Germans won the war we could be exchanged for foreign exchange. He had a sister in America... apparently the Germans had bought this idea that he was a fairly important businessman and could be exchanged for scarce foreign exchange. How we got on that list, how we managed this I do not know, but it was achieved. By late January, early February, in 1944, my mother was sent back from the hospital to Westerbork and this was probably an indication that our days were now numbered, although again this is now somewhat vague in my memory. Anyway, we were deported in February, I can't give you the exact date, in 1944, but we were not sent to Auschwitz, we were sent on a special train to Bergen-Belsen, which is, of course, in northwestern Germany near *Tsela,* on the *Luneberg heath*. It was a rather special camp. It was not, in the traditional sense of the word, an extermination camp. Here there were indeed several different camps together. There were Russian prisoners of war, there were French prisoners of war, in separate camps, and then there was this group of Dutch Jews and there may have been some other French or Belgian Jews I am not too clear, yes, there must have been, because of the train later on. These were all select Jews who apparently they had special plans for. In fact, now that I recall, it is from that camp in Bergen-Belsen that later on in 1944, two small contingents of Jews were allowed to go to Palestine, because - how this was arranged I do not know - and these people really did get to Palestine. Moreover, in that camp at *Tsela*

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we once or twice received small food packages from Sweden that were apparently paid for by our relatives, aunt and uncle, in America, and that we were allowed to get and at very critical periods supplied us with some food that may have very well kept us alive. Now...

EG: They knew where you were? You could get word to them?

EP: Yes, apparently. I don't know quite how that was achieved. I do not remember that we received any mail, only these once or twice packages in *Tsela*, in Bergen-Belsen.

EG: I think the Red Cross.

EP: Yes, the Red Cross once or twice made a visit to Bergen-Belsen. I remember that, too. But the situation in Bergen-Belsen was much more difficult and much more severe than in Westerbork. Again, there was, of course, separation of men and women although only by barracks, not by camp. Conditions were much harsher, food was much more limited, and the work was much harder. I was in a barrack with wooden beds stacked three high, I was on top. I remember once at night when I got out in the middle of the night I fell down and fell on the brick floor. Outside from almost being knocked out, nothing happened to me. The first work we did in Bergen-Belsen, which was very hard work, is dig an enormous pit which was apparently meant for a septic tank, I don't know. And we dug a huge pit that may well have been later on used for a grave, a mass grave, I don't know. And we also had to push railway lorries up a small track that could then be tipped over. It's hard to describe. It was specifically meant to carry sand or gravel and then when you got there you pushed on a hinge in the center and they would simply empty out. I remember digging and I remember... this was now, I was now 15 going on 16, pushing these lorries. That was the first work. It may have lasted a month or two months, I don't remember. Work was done that in the morning we lined up on the drill grounds and then the guard would come pick us out for specific labor groups. My brothers were very tall, my oldest brother was 6'7". He was very tall and that made him an immediate object for attention and he was always picked on the first to be picked for work. After the initial work of digging this pit, I was then assigned to what is known as the shoe battalion. (Tape ends before it was completely used up*.)*

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Tape two, side one:

EG: I neglected to ask you when you were talking about Westerbork, was there any organization among the Jewish residents of Westerbork?

EP: I was not aware of any, but that doesn't mean that there wasn't any. I was simply too young. But, there is one thing that I do recall. In fact I have some evidence with me. I still have the evidence. We organized a theater group, and we put on a cabaret, Cabaret Westerbork. I still have the program. I have a whole file of things. There must have been. There was one other thing that happened in Westerbork, of which I also have the evidence. Sometime during our stay there... I don't recall exactly when... the Germans gave the opportunity to Jews who wished to avoid deportation to do so by allowing themselves to be sterilized, through a surgery, through an operation, and you had to sign a form. I have copies of that form. So, I suspect that there may have been an organization, a Jewish organization. There almost must have been because my father worked for the organization, but he was only on the barrack level, he was not on the central committee. He would have avoided that because he did not want to take responsibility. It was obvious to us that certain decisions had to be taken, but to him at least, it was obvious that he would have found them morally unacceptable. So, he kept himself at a low profile. I remember that cabaret very well, because I went to it, and it made an enormous impression. There were some very fine Jewish actors. Not all of the Dutch, and, as a matter of fact, the entire cabaret, I think the entire text was in German and the Commander Genecker and all those came and thought it was terrific and applauded and sat in the front row. And, there was lots of, you know, good cabaret humor.

EG: That was really amazing in a place like that.

EP: No, it wasn't, because I had read later on that in Auschwitz there were orchestras and everything, and plays were put on as well. It was a way to keep alive, to keep going.

EG: Yes, yes.

EP: So, it was not all that amazing. Should I go on with my?

EG: Yes.

EP: Now, the second type of work, the second shift of work in Bergen-Belsen was, as I said, shoe commando and this is now almost seems comical but of course, it wasn't at the time. We discovered that there was at Bergen-Belsen literally a mountain of old shoes. It must have been at least 10 or 15 feet high, and this was part of the German effort to save resources. These were worn-out shoes, that was very obvious. These were old shoes that the Germans had saved. We sat in a tent at long benches and we took those shoes apart, the nails, the cardboard, the leather, whatever. They were completely separated and they were all put, each piece was put in barrels. And, in the next three or four months we conquered that mountain completely. Every shoe was taken apart, and I'm sure that the

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products were useable in the economy at war that was very short of raw materials, so I must say I'm afraid, that I contributed to the German war effort.

EG: Do you find out whose shoes they were?

EP: No, they were German. I don't think they were shoes from Auschwitz, no, because they really showed signs of being very badly worn. I'm pretty sure that they had simply been collected all over Germany. If they were, let me say, of course, that question has come to me later...there was no indication that they were from another camp. Later on we found things from another camp but that was the third phase of my work detail before I became ill. After the shoes had been conquered...by now it must have been the summer of 1944, or maybe even the fall, the situation for Germany began to change. I was not aware of this. We did know two things. One, we somehow learned of the invasion of France, the Normandy Invasion. That didn't make an impact because that was far away. However, we also became aware, and that was a strong rumor, of the attack on Hitler's life in July, and at that point, the guards were extremely nervous and more vicious than usual. So, we were aware that something had been going on, but we didn't know details. The third type of work that I did, and this as I said must have been the summer or early fall of 1944, was the railroad detail. And this was very had work. I was taken in the morning, and we took it, we did it because there was somewhat more food involved. We were put on trucks in the morning and taken to the railroad station outside Bergen-Belsen where trains were arriving, and what these particular trains were, they were freight trains loaded with parts of barracks. At the time we didn't realize these must have been from camps in the East where the Russians had arrived. And we were unloading them. It was very heavy work and there were two men to a freight car. And we had to unload the entire freight car. In the process I think I must have then injured my back, because I have had back problems ever since. But this was the sort of work that I did for several weeks. And of course we were at that railroad siding under guard. We had no chance to escape. By then not the lack of food but the inadequate diet of getting bread and soup essentially once a day was taking it's toll. Now it's at this point... oh, two more transports arrived from Holland, from Westerbork, in Spring of 1944 and that kept us somewhat informed of the outside world. Bergen-Belsen was much more isolated than Westerbork.

EG: Was your father put on this work detail also?

EP: No, my father did not do any major work. It was discovered in camp at Westerbork that he had tuberculosis. Not Westerbork, I think it was at Bergen-Belsen. He was...that he had tuberculosis. One of the reasons for this is, I'm now convinced, is that he ate entirely too little and gave most of his food to us. Anyway, he was put in a special barrack where there were people who were ill, but there was no difficulty seeing him. My oldest brother Hans began to get very ill. He had a number of physical breakdowns and before his last illness, he became partly paralyzed. He had to walk with a cane. And he had a badly infected hand. He didn't do much work. He did one type of work that we discovered later. He wrote poetry which has been published in Holland. It was all in Dutch.

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EG: And he was only 23, you say?

EP: He was 23, he was born in 1921. He was 23 years old. And he must have suffered spiritually and mentally very much. It is obvious from his poetry. He was obviously more aware, maybe I was a tougher character, or maybe because I was so young, I was simply not conscious of things yet. But I somehow managed to keep going. I lived through the first two, I lived really through all the work details. My middle brother also managed to somehow hang on, although both he and I had one night a very bad experience when we came back. I can't even remember why. The guards decided we ought to be punished. We had done something wrong - either we had spoken when we shouldn't have been talking, or something. Anyway when we had arrived at 6:00 or 7:00 at night to be sent home to the barrack in the drill-ground, we were told to stand with our noses against the barbed wire at the fence, and for punishment we had to stand there for several hours until the guard came along and told us to go. But, somehow, we both managed to keep going. So that my middle brother, as I'll call him, and I continued to work until... and I can't give you an exact date on this, but probably sometime in the fall of 1944, that things began to be very badly deteriorated in the camp and the reason for this simply was, one word: lice. The absence of sanitation. In the beginning we had still been taking showers. Although that was not all that healthy because we made to walk wet and undressed through the cold weather back to the barracks. Anyway, we had managed somehow to keep clean in some way. But, partly because, perhaps, also new transport had arrived from the East that were already in bad shape, people began to come. By now, of course, the Russians were beginning to put great pressure on in the East. We began to be infested with lice. And, as a result of that, we all became sick because lice carried typhoid. [typhus-ed.] And, sometime in the fall of 1944, I became ill and so did my oldest brother, and my oldest brother could not fight the infection and he died in November. There was no way to get the fever down because we didn't have any medication. I apparently was very ill. There were apparently whole weeks that I was not even rational. I could really block it out. I could remember nothing. I do remember my mother coming to visit me once with a little extra food. That is a vague recollection that I have. One other thing that happened that stands in my mind which was a terrible thing. My mother had long hair and it became impossible to keep it clean and then she too became infected and her head had to be shaved and, that of course, was a dreadful experience. Somehow I did survive the typhoid [typhus] fever and I had it at least twice, maybe three times. But apparently in December...

EG: Without medication?

EP: Without medication. In November, I remember that my father came to tell me that my brother had died, which, of course, broke him completely. Anyway, in either December or January, around that time that my brother died, I finally threw off the fever, and I was allowed to get out of bed. I was in some sort of sick ward. But when I got out of bed, I fell on the floor because I had absolutely no strength left. My legs wouldn't carry me. And I literally had to learn to walk again. I remained extremely weak and I remember

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once that I had to go up three steps in to a barrack and that I couldn't negotiate it. I had to crawl. I was so weak. In the first month of 1945, my parents were then still alive and my middle brother was still alive, and now the camp was becoming terribly overcrowded. More and more people being added, not just to our camp but to other camps next to us, that you could observe. Another thing that began to happen now, not so much in our camp but in the prisoner-of-war camp, people began to die like flies, and the sight that you may have seen in photographs, I saw with my own eyes. People stacked up like corpses. Row upon row. Moreover, I know that in Bergen-Belsen, certain dying prisoners, most of prisoner-of-war, were given gasoline injections which is fatal. It will kill you after agony of several hours. Apparently, this was some sort of crude experimentation. I remember one specific incident when my brother and I were watching where two prisoners in the prisoner-of-war camp said the prayers of the dead over dead comrades. Finally - oh, in February or March, 1945 - the camp was bombed by the British Air Force. Why? We don't know but several barracks caught on fire, several people got killed, some part of the camp inhabitants. Some helped to put out the fire. Oh, yes, some other things that come back to me now, that I talked about the international nature of the camp. We had among, in our own Jewish camp, Jews were separate, we were international because we had Greek Jews and they were not the most pleasant. In fact, some of them were criminals elements, and they all were the *Kapos* or foremen. And they handled the food distribution. This led to a lot of corruption and comes back to me now. One of them whose name I remember was a character by the name of Albala.

EG: How could you communicate with them?

EP: German usually. Pigeon-German. German became the *lingua franca*, the international language. We all spoke German. Well, to somewhat jump here, we were informed sometime in early April that the camp would be evacuated. At least our section would be evacuated. Because the British army was close.

EG: April, 1945?

EP: Yes, April 1945.

EG: Almost the end of the war.

EP: Almost the end of the war. And, as far as I can recall, around the 9th of April, we were taken in trucks, my father, my mother, my brother and I. We were still together, of course. Our oldest brother had died. We were put in trucks and then put on a train. A very old train, some with cattle cars. We were not in a cattle car. I would call it a fifth-class railroad passenger. Wooden benches, very old. And, the train began to move; we did not know where. What apparently the intention was, was to destroy the entire train, with people in it. We were taken by locomotive, sometimes we sat on a siding for a few hours, the locomotive disappeared. The train got bombed, or machine-gunned, thinking that the British or Americans that it was an ammunition train. We tied some white bedsheets to the top of the train to indicate that it was not. We got to the River Elbe. We were on a bridge, we went over the bridge. The bridge blew up. The plan had apparently been to blow

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us up on the bridge but the detonation didn't go off in time. Now we were on the other side of the Elbe. We continued to go and we arrived eventually in Berlin. And we went from west to south to the suburbs of Berlin. We saw the... in April, 1945, the subway was still running in Berlin. We were in the suburbs where we could observe it because of our vantage. We continued in the southeasterly direction.

EG: Still on this train?

EP: Still on this train. Sometimes we'd stand on the siding for a day or two if we had no locomotive. Once we ended up in the countryside scouring for food, my brother and I. We somehow got away although we had an SS guard. Once we got back in just the nick of time as the train was pulling away. We managed to get on at the last minute.

EG: Was there any water on the train?

EP: I can't remember. We must have. I don't know. We cooked a little bit on the open platform between the cars and once a wooden part of it caught fire and the SS came and was very angry with us, and kicked a hole in part of the train and the bricks that we had made into... Anyway, one night we stopped and the locomotive disappeared and we just stood there. We stood there and we went to look for food but we didn't find much. And one morning we came out and there was a soldier standing there that we did not recognize. In a different color coat with a rifle and a fur hat, and he stuck out his hands and said, "*Tavarish"* [comrade]. During the night we rushed into town and occupied the area. We were in the neighborhood of a small German village called Tr b̄itz, which is between Breslau and Leipzig. We were in southeastern Germany, near, well, I would say the northern part of Silesia. Anyway, we were now freed within the Russian zone. The Russian army had moved in. And, the Russians...oh, incidentally, a typhoid [or possibly typhus] epidemic raged on the train and people were dying and as the train moved we used to throw corpses off the train, to get rid of people. What can one do? So that while originally there may have been 800 people who were on the train, I don't know how many, by the time the war came to an end, the number was going down all the time, and then the Russians told us to get off that train immediately. They needed it for their war effort and they told us, "You see Tr b̄itz there. Go into that village and occupy it. Throw the Germans out of the house. It's yours. Just take it." It was very easy. The Germans were now different Germans. The Russians had come in and it's hard to describe it to you, but the Germans now knew that we were suddenly no longer prisoners. We were now friendly with the Russians, although that sometimes took some doing communicating with the Russians is not easy. Anyway, my brother and I ...

EG: What did this Russian do with the German guards?

EP: Oh, we saw them being led away. They were being handled very roughly. The guards were immediately made prisoners, they were beaten and they were taken away. We went into the village, my brother and I, and we found a place.

EG: Your parents were still with you?

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EP: Well, then, we had to... By now my mother was very weak and my father was weak and I found a little cart and I literally, on the cart, took them into Tr ̄bitz. Now, at least, we had a little decent place in which to live, but we had no food. We had to go scouring for food, then. I remember getting my hands on a bicycle and going to various farmhouses in the little villages nearby and I only managed to get a chicken. But, then, going on the road back, I ran into some Russians. See, there were a lot of Russians too, who were forced labor, who were now free, and they stole my bicycle. Easy come, easy go. So, I walked back to the village, still with my food, and managed to ... we managed to eat something. But, unfortunately, now, the typhoid [typhus] epidemic, the fever as we called it, had got to my parents, and, in fact, we infested the whole village. Everybody was sick, including the Germans who lived there. It was literally an epidemic. The answer that the Russians took was simply to isolate the whole village, give us some aspirins. And leave us alone thinking things would work themselves out. My mother died from the fever on the 20th of May, 21st of May. My father was then also very ill, and I was ill again having again gotten it. The Russians came and took my father and I to some sort of hospital, where my father died on the 1st of June. I again recovered from the fever. My brother, my middle brother, apparently did not get the fever. He was all right. So, now it was early June and my brother and I are left. And you had no idea of the current conditions. We had a few Russian nurses. One man had pneumonia, and they tried to treat him with the old-fashioned method of glass suction cups and instead of treating him, they greased his back and then stuck the glass cup over a candle. Well, the nurse knocked the candle over and set fire to the man's back. And they put it out with the blanket and then proceeded with the treatment. I can't tell you whether the man lived or died subsequently. I just don't know.

Sometime in June, in the first two weeks of June, when the frontiers between Germans was still very fluid, it was discovered by the Americans that in eastern Germany there were people from Western Europe and an arrangement was made for an exchange because there were a lot of Russian laborers and prisoners-of-war in the western sector. Anyway, on the 18th of June, I remember this because it was my father's birthday, we were taken from Tr ̄bitz by truck. There were not more than 200 of us left, probably less, to Leipzig, and this... in Leipzig, we were housed for maybe one or two days. I must say that Leipzig was very badly destroyed and it gave us an immense pleasure to see how badly Germany was destroyed. We were, of course, filled with hatred, and a desire for vengeance. We, after a very short stay in Leipzig, not more than one or two days, we were put on an American Red Cross train that had been permitted to come, to pick us up, and it was at this point that we really began to get some medical care, my brother and I, and I ...(Long pause), I remember meeting a Jewish nurse of the American army and I was very impressed. She was wearing a Star of David and had in it the number 13, and I asked, "Why was that?" and she said that 13 was a Jewish lucky number. Anyhow, the Red Cross train took us too... We were taken on this Red Cross train from Leipzig to LiΠge, in Belgium

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and then, if I remember correctly, we were taken... Excuse me, I'm usually not that emotional.

EG: It's only normal.

EP: First we were taken into LiΠge and we were housed for a while in LiΠge, I think in a monastery or something like that, and while we were in LiΠge the little handbag with a few clothes that we had were stolen. I don't know however how that took place. We were then taken by truck to Maastricht, which is the capital of the Dutch province of Limberg, a southern part which is called the Dutch panhandle. Anyway, here we now entered into the Dutch jurisdiction. The Dutch government was, of course, again functioning. We went through a sort of a health control inspection. And, it was discovered that my brother had tuberculosis. And he was therefore not permitted to travel on because this was a very dangerous, communicable disease. He was put in a hospital right away in Maastricht. I was allowed to go on and told I was on my own to get back to Rotterdam. There were no trains running because all the bridges over the many rivers in Holland were all destroyed. I found out however after a couple of days that there were trucks taking food delivery and so on and that I could probably get a ride on a truck. And, indeed, I managed to get a space on a truck and we went across rivers on old ferry boats and trucks put on ferries, and it took me all day but finally, I think it was on the 5th of July, I got back to Rotterdam, and the truck dropped me off in the front of City Hall.

EG: Excuse me.

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Tape two, side two:

Long pause before tape starts.

EP: The truck then took me to Rotterdam, an all-day trip, through very badly damaged country and on the 5th of July, I remember exactly the date, in front of City Hall in Rotterdam, they dropped me off and I was back in the city where I was born and I didn't know what to do. I didn't have more than the shirt on my back. So, irony of ironies, next to City Hall, is the headquarters of the police where I had originally been taken in and I went back there and said, "Well, is there any sort of Jewish home?" They said, "Yes, there is." Anyway, they took me there and a few Jewish refugees, some who had been in hiding and others who had just got back from some places in Germany, were living there, and the head of the home, a sort of a manager, was somebody who had been a Jewish undertaker and had an undertaking business before the war and survived and who knew my family and knew my name, and, of course, I asked him, "Are there, do I have any relatives left?" I knew that several of my cousins had gone into hiding, and the question was, had they managed to stay in hiding. And I mentioned their names. It took a little doing because one of them had married and he didn't right away recall her maiden name, but, yes she was there. I think in the next day or something like that two of my cousins appeared and, in that way, I began then to ... to... I left the home shortly after and lived for awhile with one of them. These were very difficult days because one didn't know how housing had to be literally allocated to the Jews who had survived, in terms of business and making a living. We had literally nothing for awhile. We did get some money grants from the government to live.

EG: And your brother? How long did he have to stay?

EP: My brother stayed in Maastricht for a few weeks and he was brought to...I am not sure on that...I think he was brought to Rotterdam briefly, or even directly. Anyway the Dutch government flew to Switzerland to go to a sanitarium.

EG: Of course, you knew where he was, but how did he know where you were?

EP: Oh well, I communicated with him. Anyway, he was taken and received the best care in Davos. He was in Davos in Switzerland. He stayed there from either July or August 1945, until about the Spring of 1946, March, April, May or something like that. Then he came back to Holland, although subsequently he suffered from recurrences of tuberculosis. In those days, there were no drugs. Well, do you want me to go on in terms of my immediate post-war situation?

EG: Yes.

EP: Well, I had no desire to stay in Holland. Of course, I did have a sister of my father, my aunt and uncle who had gone to America in 1939, and I had an intense desire to leave Holland and go to America. This wasn't so easy because there weren't even any diplomatic relations with America. It was only in October 1945. Then an American consulate opened in Rotterdam, and I went immediately to register, to emigrate. [unclear]

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In the meantime I had started school in the second grade of high school but I really didn't fit in at all. I was too old. I was now 17 and my whole wartime experience, my whole outlook...I can now looking back see was one of not wishing to be restrained or restricted by any Dutch schoolmaster or classroom. And, so I quit school after no more than a month or two, and I was told at the American consulate that I would have to wait, because I wanted to go on an immigration visa and I was a quota visa. Since I knew I was going to America, I decided that I wanted to learn something useful, that I could make a living at, and somehow I hit on idea that I wanted to become a diamond broker. I had been in Westerbork acquainted with the head of the largest diamond factory in Amsterdam, a man by the name of Asscher. And he had survived the war, [unclear]. Anyway, I went to Amsterdam. I had some money and told him I want a job. I want to learn the diamond business. And he said, "Okay, I'll take you on." So I moved from Rotterdam to Amsterdam and got an apartment and was in the business. I learned various aspects but only superficially, for about six months. Then in the meantime, I was developing a terrible cough and I went to see a specialist, and he said, "Well, you have a spot on your lung but there is nothing to worry about." Then, in maybe August or September of 1946, I was told that my visa had come through and I could go to America. My aunt and uncle of course, had to give a guarantee, an affidavit, but I had to get passage, and that was very, very difficult in 1946. And you got a visa for four months. It was non-renewable, and if you failed to get passage...

EG: You had to start all over again.

EP: At the bottom of the list. I did get passage on a Dutch ship. It was very inadequate and had to be paid in dollars by my aunt and uncle. They would not take guilders on the Holland-American line. And I managed to leave Holland on the 19th of October, 1946, and it took 10 days to come by ship. Out of Rotterdam, I landed in...

EG: Hoboken.

EP: Yes. You know? You came that way?

EG: No, but that's where the Holland-American line lands.

EP: It is not exactly the place to enter the United States.

EG: No.

EP: And, the moment that I arrived in the United States it was discovered that I was very seriously ill with tuberculosis. It was a miracle that I wasn't sent back because there are restrictions against this. It is a communicable disease. I had been examined by a doctor, a Jewish doctor, at the American Consulate in Rotterdam, and he said, "Do you have a cough?" and I said, "Yes." My English was then very inadequate. I said I had a cold and he let me slip through. Anyway, the moment I arrived, my aunt and uncle, who had come all the way from California to meet me, took me to a doctor, a specialist in New York, and he said, "Well, he's very, very ill and he may not live beyond three months." So, they took me back to California and put me in a sanitarium, and I recovered in 6 months. So, after that, I then began a new...I think we might end it at this point unless you want more detail. I mean, what happened in California, is really quite a separate story. My

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recovery was, I think, partly luck, partly much better circumstances, partly the treatment I received. It was a very old fashioned treatment - called pneumo - [unclear] - partial collapse of the lung, where air is pumped in between the diaphragm and the lung and that part of the lung is...

EG: Allowed to heal.

EP: Yes. It is immobilized.

EG: Well, and also your will to live. That's probably what contributed...

EP: Probably. I was 18 years old. So, that's the story. Now, you know there may be other details I've forgotten, or that may come back to me. But basically in an outline, that's the situation and, you know, it does involve a certain amount of emotional strain when I talk about it. More than I anticipated, than I expected, which is why I try not to talk about it. Immediately after the war, in 1945, we used to talk about nothing else. And you used to meet people in Rotterdam and Amsterdam that went through so much hurt. I apparently talked of nothing else and people didn't want to hear about it. I did not understand then. Maybe I was too young. I can understand now. You want to forget. The great luck to me was that I not just left Holland, but I left Europe and I went to an entirely different world. I went to California of all things in 1946, and then I made such a completely clean break, and from then on, I began to almost be born again. I did not go back to Europe until 1958. For 12 years I did not even have any contact with Europeans. Then in 1958 I had finished my studies and had a doctorate degree in my pocket and was an instructor at Stanford University. It was a very different person who went back to Europe and had then some perspective.

EG: Didn't you feel kind of hurt or angry that these young people your age that you met in California had been completely spared all these things?

EP: No, oh no, I never...What I learned very quickly, very early on was simply not to talk about this because there was no understanding and people weren't particularly interested. There's an old saying that "Your hurt means nothing to somebody else", and in the immediate post-war period, the universities were full of veterans from World War II who were very motivated to make something of themselves. I went to Berkeley, and the GI bill was sending all sorts of people to college who never would have gone to college, and I wanted to make something of myself, I had to study. There was one thing that I always had a love of even as a young man, and that is history. I was very interested in history. My aunt and uncle wanted me to become a physician, a doctor, typical standard idea. I couldn't be interested in that. I had absolutely no interest in that. I fairly [unclear] strongly, although I would not hear of it, and eventually I chose to study what I wanted to study.

EG: Good for you. Especially after all your experiences. I guess you were even more interested in what brings this...

EP: Yes, people have often wondered how could you possible study German history and I can be very objective and detached there. I can really understand... I can't always explain, but I can understand what happened in Germany. You know, I think I've

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taught German history for many years now. I've been teaching, since 1955. I've been teaching for 28 years, and I like to think that I did a fairly objective treatment of German history. But, anyway, there is no doubt that going to California and starting a whole new life was really what saved my existence. If I had stayed in Europe, I would either have died of tuberculosis, or I would have turned into a criminal element. I am sure of it.

EG: Why are sure of that?

EP: Well, because I was not interested in any education or training. I was interested in "making it", and I was beginning to be awfully interested in 1945 or 1946 in the black market.

EG: It was the only to survive?

EP: That was the only way to survive. There were very few restraints or moral guides except the one of survival...of World War II.

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