

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

RABBI HELMUT FRANK

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Josey G. Fisher  
Date: February 19, 1982

© 2005  
Holocaust Oral History Archive  
Gratz College  
Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

HF - Rabbi Helmut Frank<sup>1</sup> [interviewee]

JF - Josey G. Fisher [interviewer]

Date: February 19, 1982<sup>2</sup>

*Tape one, side one:*

JF: This is an interview with Dr. Helmut Frank, on February 19th, 1982, with Josey Fisher. Dr. Frank, can you tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your family?

HF: I was born on April 15, 1912, in the city of Wiesbaden. [unclear] My upbringing was Jewish, not Orthodox, but some way traditional. My great-grandfather was a rabbi. Not a rabbi with a pulpit but a talmudical scholar who made a living by a store, whom his wife operated. In addition to that, his wife bore him 10 children and took care of the household so that he could, the whole day, take care of his learning and study, and in this way had an easy life. So I am his great-grandson and while most members of our family were not religious, or not interested very much in religion, I was in love with Judaism. I was different than everybody else. Different than my sister, different than cousins and all other members of the family. Most other members of the family.

JF: Were you able to spend time with this great-grandfather when you were a child?

HF: No. He was not living any more when I was born, but my grandfather was also very religious, and I was influenced by him. He was not a learned scholar, but he was a very observant Jew and I liked his ways of spending time in *shul*, liked his laying *tfilin* in the mornings, observing *kashrut* and I was influenced by him, I would say. He was one--he died when I was 11 years old.

JF: Was it with this grandfather then that you learned your early Jewish education?

HF: I don't think I learned it with him but he was very much interested that I should get a good Jewish upbringing, and he suggested to my father that he should give a special sum of money to our teacher of religion so that he would teach me more, but my father didn't like that idea at all. But you'll see.

JF: Did he do that?

HF: He didn't do it but he would have liked to see it. He was more a Jew in the old-fashioned way.

JF: Now, were your parents members of the synagogue?

---

<sup>1</sup>Rabbi Frank was the last Rabbi of the Worms Synagogue. He also holds a PhD from the University of Bonn.

<sup>2</sup>Collateral Material files include: Melodies used in Worms Synagogue pre-WWII handwritten by Edith Lebrecht, age 11, and given to Dr. Frank - File #33 (see page 16 of this transcript); Personal documents of Dr. Frank - File #33; and photographs and negatives of Worms Synagogue pre-*Kristallnacht* - File #45. Available through the Gratz College Tuttleman Library.

HF: Well, in this town where I grew up there were two Jewish communities, one small one that was Orthodox and one larger one that was Liberal. Today, according to American terms you would call it Conservative. There was no Reform in Wiesbaden. Altogether in Germany there was only one Reform congregation and it was in Berlin that had Sabbath services on Sunday. Later on, I was also once in that Temple to see how they performed services there, without hats, as is done in America in Reform synagogues. But, I think they were much more Reform than the congregations, the Reform congregations in America. They were national Germans, felt altogether more German than Jewish, for Jewish was only a very small part of their life. I want to come back now to my own upbringing.

JF: Yes, we were talking about your families...

HF: In comparison to my classmates who received their religious upbringing in special classes, I was the best one. I learned more than them because I was more interested. But from a children's point of view of Jewish requirements I did not learn very much altogether.

JF: Which of the groups did your family belong to?

HF: We belonged to the Liberal congregation, but my grandfather, when he was in our home, of course he wouldn't go there. He went to the Orthodox. So, I was somewhat in between, sometimes I went there. I think I was one of the few who went to both. To both congregations, to both synagogues.

JF: So, you are saying that the education that was given in the Liberal congregation was not what you would have liked it to have been.

HF: That's right. The Orthodox, where my wife went, had a kind of better education, not very much also, not very much either, but it was still, they still learned more than we learned.

JF: What was involved in your education?

HF: You mean Jewish education?

JF: What kind of classes that you had in the Liberal congregation.

HF: We learned Hebrew, to read from the prayer book. We learned some *Chumash*, not too much, but I, I excelled because I learned the whole *sidra*. Nobody else did. Because I did that on my own. We learned Jewish history, Biblical history, I should say first. Jewish history. I mean those that were interested could get something out of it. Generally, not too many were interested.

JF: What kind of community were you living in, in Wiesbaden? Was it a Jewish community or was it an integrated area?

HF: Wiesbaden was one of the large German communities. We had 4000 Jews in Wiesbaden. It was in the time before Hitler, Jews were known among Gentiles. There might have even been some Jews who were friendly with Gentiles. And, of course there was intermarriage, not like today, 50 percent, but there was quite a size of an

intermarriage at that time. Jews were then through marriage friendly with Gentile families, through personal relationship, family relationship.

JF: Were you in a public school?

HF: Yes, yes, there was no Jewish day school in my hometown, and since my schooling was finished before the advent of Hitler, in 1931 there was no problem as far as Jews attending public schools was concerned. I went through regular high school, and I finished with a diploma in the year '31. There were incidents, antisemitic incidents, already at that time.

JF: Can you describe them to me?

HF: Well, people kept away from me because I was Jewish.

JF: Was this still while you were in high school or earlier?

HF: Well, earlier I do not think there were any anti-Jewish incidents, but in high school there were people belonged to national organizations, nationalistic organizations, I should call them, and were not very friendly to Jews. I still remember one incident where one was not nice to me all the time because of his antisemitic attitudes. He wanted help during a test and I refused to help him and he then handed a note over to me, "Typical of a Jewish..." The same person, unfortunately, I should say, was killed in the Second World War so...

JF: As a child growing up, did you have non-Jewish friends as well as Jewish friends?

HF: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact in the beginning of my schooling I had only Gentile friends. Later on, it changed. We were only three Jews in our class and one unfortunately died, natural causes, when he was about 13 years old. Then we were only two, and this one, this other Jew who was in my class became my best friend, very good friends. He then, he died about 12 years ago in Israel. He was in a *kibbutz*, Dalia. I visited his widow when I was in Israel in 1972 and I am still friendly with his widow who wants to visit us here in America during this year. Generally, there were Jews who were well known, who had Gentile acquaintances. I cannot say whether here in America, Jews are in better terms with Gentiles or whether if in Germany Jews were more friendly with Gentiles. I do not know.

JF: Were your parents involved with Christian families?

HF: Well...

JF: Socially?

HF: We had a cousin who was a Christian and, of course, my parents were very friendly with him, but he was related to us through marriage. Otherwise I do not think we had any social relationships with Gentiles, I cannot remember, except this cousin of course that my parents liked very much.

JF: And, your home was not observant as far as...

HF: Let me [laughing]--especially as long as my grandfather lived with us, he wanted my mother to make him a kosher household. And as long as he was there, there

was something like a kosher home. Later on when he passed away, I don't think there was much *kashrut* observance in our house. But we didn't have pig, at least, so it was [unclear] kosher.

JF: Were your parents involved in any Jewish organizations in the town?

HF: Yes, oh yes. There was the *B'nai B'rith* Lodge to which my father belonged. My father was very active in Jewish organizations. In addition to the community to which we belonged by the fact that we were Jews, we had to belong unless you declared before the courts that you wanted to be a Jew without belonging to the community, you had to belong and pay taxes to the Jewish community. That's different from American.

JF: In the *Gemeinde*.

HF: That's correct, yes.

JF: Now if you did not want to, you had to declare so before a court.

HF: Yes. For instance, the Orthodox had a special privilege to leave the *Gemeinde* because they formed their own *Gemeinde*, so they had to go. Let's say the parents of my wife, they had to go before they moved to Germany, they had to go before the court in Wiesbaden. No. When the parents of my wife moved to Wiesbaden, they wanted to join the Orthodox community, and in order to do so they had to go before a court and declare that they want to leave the *Gemeinde* and become members of the Orthodox community.

JF: The court was under whose auspices?

HF: It was a general governmental court.

JF: A German governmental court?

HF: Yes.

JF: I see.

HF: That was a law that came out in the year 1876 under the influence of Samson Raphael Hirsch, only in Prussia, not in all of Germany, only the province of Prussia that it stipulated that any Jew may leave the Jewish community and still remain a Jew. This was for the benefit of Orthodox people who did not want to contribute money to the general community because the general community used in their synagogue organ and that was against their principles so they could declare--but, as I say, only in Prussia and Wiesbaden was part of Prussia.

JF: At what point did you decide that you wanted to go into the rabbinate?

HF: Actually I wasn't so sure about it at all. And even today I don't even know that it was the right thing for me to do. But as I say, I had a love affair with Judaism. And I found that this was the only way in which I could learn something or something more about Judaism. So, I felt in order to know as much as possible the best thing is I attend a rabbinical school and once I was there already it was the most natural thing that I slide into that profession. I think that I could have lived even without it. I mean that I don't

think that I felt that it was absolutely necessary for me to be a rabbi but, as things happened, with the way it turned out...

JF: Which seminary did you attend?

HF: Well, this is a good question that you ask me, because in Germany there were three places where you could be or become an ordained rabbi. One seminary was in Breslau. It was the oldest one. And Berlin had two, one Orthodox and one Liberal. Now you would think that according to my feeling it would have been the right thing for me to go to the Orthodox seminary, but I did not, and I could not, because they would never have accepted me.

JF: Why?

HF: Number one, lack of Hebrew knowledge. Number two, a rabbi would have to confirm the fact that I come from an Orthodox family; I did not. So they wouldn't have accepted me. And, I don't think, I am doubtful whether I would have stayed there very long. Of course, the need of learning Talmud was very great and I know that even some who came from Orthodox families were told that they could not tolerate them because they didn't learn enough Talmud, even after they were accepted. So they had no other choice. The only choice I had was between Breslau and Berlin and everybody told me that Breslau seminary was on a decline downwards and Berlin is still a good seminary. They had famous teachers there like Rabbi, like Dr. Elbogen<sup>3</sup>, Dr. Guttmann<sup>4</sup> and Dr. L. Baeck<sup>5</sup> at the time and so...

JF: This was the *Hochschule*?

HF: Yes. *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. It is correct. So, I went there from '31 till '37.

JF: Can you tell me about your experience during that time?

HF: Well, actually I was not too happy there. Because school was very liberal and I didn't like it but I had no way of changing it. School had not even a *mezuzah* at the doors. School was under the influence of Geiger<sup>6</sup> that was founder of the school. I did not find there the atmosphere, the religious atmosphere that I was longing for. I didn't find there the type of company that I was longing for. So...

JF: What do you mean by that?

---

<sup>3</sup>Dr. Ismar Elbogen (1874-1943), born in Posen province, famous German-Jewish historian. [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 6]

<sup>4</sup>Dr. Julius Guttmann (1880-1950), German-Jewish philosopher and historian of Jewish philosophy. [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 3]

<sup>5</sup>Dr. Leo Baeck (1873-1956), German rabbi, philosopher, community leader, and leader of Progressive Judaism. Born in Lissa in Posen province, Germany. President of *Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden*, (*Reich* Representation of German Jews) from inception in 1933. Worked to preserve internal unity of German Jewry and served as its accredited representative. Refused opportunities to leave Germany and deported to Theresienstadt in 1943 where he served on Jewish Council of Elders, continuing his spiritual and academic leadership. [Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Vol. 1]

<sup>6</sup>Dr. Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), German rabbi and scholar, one of leaders of Reform movement. [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 7]

HF: Like-minded people.

JF: The students were of a different nature than...

HF: More or less. Yes. I found the one who became my friend who lives now in Jerusalem as I mentioned before. His name was Fischer and he was like me. He came from Poland and he came actually to this school because he didn't know about the fact that there was another school that was Orthodox. He thought it was the only one that existed. That's the way he got stuck there.

JF: Were the other students more interested in the scholarly aspects or the academic aspects and not as much in the traditional observance?

HF: Yes. Yes. We had very serious scholars in our school among the teachers as well as among the students who became later famous through their scholarly work. Others played their role in the Reform movement. Just now the New Torah came out with the explanations by Rabbi Plaut<sup>7</sup>. Rabbi Plaut was originally a student of the *Hochschule* and there are quite a number of Reform rabbis today who are prominent former students of the *Hochschule* with whom I had associated there. Others are now in the Conservative rabbinate.

JF: Was the training, the religious aspect of the training sufficient, do you feel, in the *Hochschule* for what you were looking for?

HF: No. Unfortunately, I must say no. We learned Talmud, where I felt that the Orthodox were learning too much, we definitely learned too little. I mean, we still could, I still should say we can compete with what is taught today at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

JF: Here?

HF: Here, and we learned definitely more than is taught here at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. When, at one time, Cincinnati took over about--after the advent of Hitler, in order to help us--took over, six volunteers who wanted to go to America. One of them was Plaut whom I mentioned to you before and as far as Talmudical knowledge was concerned, they were considered scholars there, so it shows you how relative everything is as far as knowledge is concerned. I personally felt we did not learn enough, not in enough time, not enough energy was devoted to us. And not enough understanding for the needs of the student who came from a western Jewish home. Because we had there many students who came from Poland and Russia. They knew, many of them knew Talmud very well. They didn't come there for Talmudical studies. So, there was this discrepancy, on one hand, the German-Jewish student who had hardly any knowledge and on the other hand, the Polish-Russian student, who was already a scholar when he came to the seminary, the *Hochschule*.

---

<sup>7</sup>Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut (1912- ), born in Muenster, Germany. Emigrated to U.S. in 1935 and ordained at Hebrew Union College. [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 8]



JF: But, unless you came from an Orthodox family and already had some Talmudic knowledge you were not permitted to go to the Orthodox seminary from what you are telling me.

HF: That is correct. Yes, that is correct. They were not interested in making converts, like the Lubavitcher here in America.

JF: You couldn't switch tracks.

HF: No, no, in order to go there, if I would have to go there, I would have to go, at least, as I learned later, to be made kosher by going to a *yeshiva* for one year and then maybe would be acceptable.

JF: Were there academic requirements in any other university in addition to the *Hochschule*? Did you have to take courses of study in any German university, in addition?

HF: Well, in order to be a rabbi in Germany it was generally done that you had to acquire the Ph.D. degree. If you didn't you weren't excluded from the rabbinate, but that was the general way and the rabbis in Germany were, I would say, 90, 95 percent in the same time Doctors of Philosophy. So, it was expected from a student of the *Hochschule* that he would spend at least half of the time at the Berlin University. I personally also studied at the Berlin University, philosophy and Oriental languages, like Arabic, Syriac, and, but, I went then to the city that is now famous, but at that time it wasn't so famous as a capital of western Germany, Bonn. I went to the city of Bonn where I graduated with a Ph.D. in the year 1935.

JF: What school was that?

HF: It was the University of Bonn.

JF: The University of Bonn.

HF: Yes.

JF: You were doing this at the same time that you were pursuing your rabbinical studies?

HF: When I went to Bonn for one year I took a leave of absence from the *Hochschule* for the purpose of doctorate.

JF: Why did you switch to the University of Bonn?

HF: Very simple. Because the requirements in the University of Berlin were very difficult and I felt it was too hard for me to do it. Most of the students did not graduate at the Berlin University. Most of them went either to Bonn or Wurzburg or other university cities where it was a little easier.

JF: You said that it was most prevalent than it was not required that you have a Ph.D.?

HF: Yes.

JF: You could still be ordained?

HF: Be acceptable as a rabbi in Germany without a Ph.D., but most congregations wanted to call their rabbi, *Herr Doctor*.

JF: As opposed to Rabbi?

HF: *Herr Rabbiner* was not well-liked in Germany as a consequence of the Emancipation. The name *Rabbiner* was not very well-liked. Also it would have been acceptable, but generally it belonged to it. It was part of the rabbinical study you must have university training.

JF: Did you have any experience during those years with either Rosenzweig or Buber or any of the off-shoots of the *Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt.

HF: Well, Rosenzweig died at the time that I was a student. Buber was not a teacher in our school and he also left for Jerusalem. I don't know which year he left Germany, but also early. So I had no direct connection with either Rosenzweig or Buber.

JF: And what about Leo Baeck?

HF: Leo Baeck, yes. He was prominent in our school, and I was one of the few who did not fully appreciate him. For very personal reasons, I would say. He kept aloof from the students. He just entered the hall in which he was teaching and gave his lecture or taught us and left again. The only time when I had personal contact with him, and he himself was surprised that he didn't know certain things and I didn't know it, was when I met him in the year 1947 in Philadelphia. And I visited him in his hotel. After all that had passed in all these years, then all of a sudden we felt that we had certain things in common, we knew certain things, but while he was a teacher, he did not know anything about me personally and I had no direct contact with him. This was one thing that disturbed me, his being so far aloof from the students.

JF: From all the students.

HF: I wouldn't say from all of them, but most of them. Then, that personally reminded him of certain things that he said prior to Hitler, and during the Hitler time and I was sure that I was right and in Philadelphia, reminding him of these things, he denied them. For instance, he had said that you should stay in Germany but should keep a line open so that in the last moment you still could, would be able to leave Germany. Things that was just academical, theoretical.

JF: At what point did he say that, do you think?

HF: Well, he said it while we were students, while we were, while he was teaching us.

JF: That he felt that you should stay in Germany, and only leave if it was absolutely necessary at the end?

HF: He personally did so.

JF: Yes.

HF: But not everybody came out the way he did come out. Healthy. And he was lucky this way.

JF: Were you familiar with his works with organizing the Jewish community during the '30s, as he was also your professor?

HF: Yes. Yes. He was, I mean, as a scholar and as a man, as a person, he was special. He was something that not everybody could emulate. For instance, he would get up in the morning at 3:00 and start studying because he said at that time he said, "Nobody disturbs me." In other words, five, four or five hours of sleep would be plenty, would be enough for him. And while he was a great scholar, at the same time he could be the President of the *Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland*, and do a lot of organization work. Also, I have...

*Tape one, side two:*

JF: This is tape one, side two of an interview with Dr. Helmut Frank on February 19th, 1982.

HF: You see, the fact that he was called in this organization, the *Reichsvertretung*, he was called the Cardinal, shows already that people considered him the dignified person, but the actual work was not done by him. Daily work. He was just the important person who was considered, without having the actual title, the Chief Rabbi of Germany.

JF: He didn't actually have that title officially?

HF: No, there was nothing in the constitution of the Jewish community, of the Jewish congregation that would permit anybody to be the Chief Rabbi, but he was considered like a Chief Rabbi. If he came to the congregation, people felt, like, maybe I should say, that in comparison like the Pope comes to the Catholic Church. That's how people felt about him in Germany.

JF: What role do you think he was most active in the *Reichsvertretung*?

HF: Well, if I would be honest, I would say that he gave his name, his prestige and his knowledge for the benefit of this organization.

JF: Was it Baeck who was in contact with the Nazi government more than anyone else? Or was someone else in that role?

HF: Now, that is a difficult question because, at one time, he described how people tried to get him in contact with some minor officials of the Nazi party, but it didn't help much. It didn't help him, it didn't help the Jewish community. For instance, the Nazis had, for instance, the practice of, when they would arrest Jews, they wouldn't come at 7:00 or at 9:00 in the morning or at 8:00 at night. They would come in the middle of the night in order to frighten them more. So they came to Baeck and he himself told us at 3:00 in the morning, and they thought they could chase him out of bed. That would have been what the Nazis would have liked but to their great surprise, they found him at his desk working. So this was different. But, I mean, he himself had no special privileges from the Nazis.

JF: You said that they came to his home. Were they about to take him? To deport him?

HF: No, at that time he was arrested as a prominent member of the *B'nai B'rith* Lodge, but it was only temporary arrest. He was deported later on to Theresienstadt, as is known to you and to most people.

JF: Who else, then, in the group do you feel was a significant?

HF: Well, the most significant, as far as the students were concerned, was Professor Elbogen, and he really cared for the students. We used to visit him at least once every term in his home, and he was like a father to all of us.

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

JF: What position, he was a professor and he had an official position in the school?

HF: In the *Hochschule* it was like that, the term of the president of the school changed from year to year, but it made very little difference whether Elbogen was president or somebody else was. He was the actual president whether he had the title for that term or not. So, if you wanted to have something that was something special, you had to clear with him, with nobody else, because he was as I say the actual president, the actual leader of the school. Nobody else was.

JF: What was the relationship between the students in the *Hochschule* and those in the Breslau seminary and in the Orthodox seminary?

HF: I can speak only about the Orthodox seminary because not only were we in Berlin, we were on the same street. We were about less than five minutes walk from each other, so we met often. The relationship as far as personal, social relationship was, I should say, was good; when we met, there was no discrimination in any way. I personally knew quite a number of the Orthodox Jews. Breslau students, of course, Breslau students, unless we met in certain places outside of Berlin, in Breslau, I would have not known anyone of them. There was no meeting with them, no organized meeting with students of Breslau.

JF: Was there much conflict theoretically between the two groups that presented any problems?

HF: I do not think so, for a simple reason. The Orthodox, students I mean, would be interested only in Orthodox synagogues and congregations. We would be interested only in Liberal synagogues, so we both went different ways. Sometimes we would meet, but very rarely in synagogues I would say. Sometimes.

JF: Was there any requirement during the time that you were in the *Hochschule* of any kind of social work experience working in the Jewish community in some kind of social agency?

HF: Yes, those who wanted it could take special courses. I remember there the name of Ohlendorf, a man who became well-known in Germany, as a social, Jewish social worker. Those who wanted to take that line could do it. I did not.

JF: This was an optional.

HF: Optional, yes. In my time at least, yes.

JF: Your education in the universities either in Berlin or in Bonn was not affected by the Nazi restrictions during those years.

HF: I cannot, no, I cannot say that, you see. I was, I entered the university in 1931, but when the Nazi Party took over the rule in Germany, I was still in the university. So, at that time I was lucky that I was kept in the university due to the fact that I had been there before. Had I not been there before, I would not have been able to be admitted unless my father would have been--at that time, they had this law--had been a front line

fighter in the Second<sup>8</sup> World War, then I wouldn't have been admitted. That was a rule at that time, so...

JF: And when you transferred to Bonn, that was legal?

HF: Yes, the fact that I was already in the university before was okay, but, unless I would have found a man who was my professor there who was a real good friend of the Jews, Professor Kahle, K-A-H-L-E, I think, I think I wouldn't have been graduated there.

JF: This is in Bonn, you are speaking of.

HF : This is a real good friend of the Jews and had the same faith as the Jews. He had to leave Germany later on.

JF: Did you see an increase of antisemitism within the universities themselves between '33 and '35?

HF: Well, you see, what I could see was that many of the Gentile students would think of the future and the future was a Nazi state. So, even if before they had their doubts about Nazism, when they thought of their own future they felt they had to join the party or the more or less military divisions of the party like SA and SS. I remember, in at that time, I went with a student of theology, a Christian student of theology in Bonn, I went with him to college, he had his Nazi uniform on and he didn't mind walking with me and I didn't mind walking with him, at that time.

JF: This was what year?

HF: It was '35. This was still possible, theoretically.

JF: Did you discuss it with him?

HF: No, no, I wouldn't. I wouldn't. I would never discuss it with him. But among the teachers, strangely enough, even among Catholics, we had real Nazis. Now, I have to tell you a story. So, in Germany, we had all examinations, all written examinations for the doctorate. The written examination was your thesis, but there was connected with this an oral examination. So I had chosen the oriental languages, as was a field of Dr. Professor Kahle, that I mentioned before, and I had to take two minors, so I had taken philosophy and I had taken history of religion. So, I was not too much afraid of oriental languages since this was with my friend Kahle, and also the history of religion, was a real friend of the Jews, who was the professor of that. But in philosophy I had attended lectures by a Catholic professor who taught some kind of Catholic philosophy, and I felt sure with him. But at that time then they changed the rules, then, in philosophy you cannot select your professor, you have to select a professor whose term it is to test you. And it happened to be that they selected for me as my professor to test me a man whose brother was a leading minister of Austria. I forget his name but he was the Secretary of State like Haig in America today, in Austria, and he was a brother, and I know he was a Nazi and he was supposed to test me in the philosophy. Can you imagine

---

<sup>8</sup>Rabbi Frank means "First" here.

with which feelings I went for the oral examination. And then the great miracle happened. Either he did not know that I was Jewish, or he did not want to know that I was Jewish. He was the most cooperating professor I ever met. He made it so easy for me when he saw that I knew a certain part of philosophy well, he let me talk, and I could show him everything that I learned and he was a real darling. [laughter] So, since you asked me about experiences...

JF: That's wonderful. Now, you mentioned before the Professor Kahle that you were so close to. That at a later point he came to leave.

HF: Yes, at a later point what happened was that on the 10th of November [1938] when businesses were plundered and destroyed by the Nazis, his wife who was the daughter of a Christian minister, went to those stores and helped Jews to find their belongings, part of their belongings, which he helped Jews.

JF: This was at *Kristallnacht*?

HF: Yes, and after that, and of course it was soon that he was denounced to the authorities and the professor had to leave, he and his wife for England. I mean he had to leave Germany unless he would be arrested so he, he had the same faith like the Jews. He died in London.

JF: Were there any other changes that affected you during, say, the period from '33 to '35 and the onset of the Nuremberg Laws?

HF: Well, you saw the famous "J" on my passport, my book that I had for showing to the authorities in which the professor had to testify that I took part in certain classes. That also had a "J". Of course, there were certain Nazi festivals, holidays which I was not permitted to take part, so we felt discrimination but it was one of the facts of life that we couldn't change. There were American students, quite a number of them who came to Germany to the medical school because they were not admitted in America.

JF: They came during the '30s?

HF: They came during the Hitler time. Strangely enough.

JF: And they were admitted.

HF: They were admitted. They did not fall--they were not considered Jews, they were considered Americans. While German-Jews could not become doctors, American Jews could. Isn't that strange? So, I met a number of them, whose name I saw later on here in America who studied in Germany at that time.

JF: And they had no difficulty in leaving?

HF: Leaving what?

JF: Germany, before the war.

HF: Oh, I guess they left before the war broke out, but, during that time of studies they had no trouble. They were not discriminated against.

JF: Were they considered Jews in any respect? Did any of their papers fall under that?

HF: I don't know. They, of course, kept us Jews from Germany company but officially they were considered Americans, not Jews.

JF: What about your family during this time?

HF: Well, my father was a business man, and my father was at this time in his life very optimistic, and he could not believe that the Nazis would do the real bad things. Our rabbi sometimes was even, making even jokes about my father being so optimistic.

JF: He never spoke of leaving Germany then?

HF: Yes, we did. At one time there was an offer for me while I was still not finished yet but I had an offer to go to South America and I discussed it with my father and maybe I should say I was happy my father said to me, "Don't we want to keep the family together? Don't leave." I think I was happy because I was the type of person who would have hated to leave Germany and leave the family alone not knowing when we would see each other again. So, I was happy that my father said it to me.

JF: What was this opportunity?

HF: There were some South American congregations that wanted to help German Jews and future rabbis and employ them there even while they were not finished. I wasn't finished yet.

JF: So, this was directed towards rabbinical students, this offer.

HF: Yes.

JF: Did you personally think of leaving during that time?

HF: At one time Professor Elbogen who was a historian, used to say, "See, the Nazis all the time, they tried to destroy Jews but still when the Jews are here they have to live with them." That was approximately what he said in the beginning of the Nazi time, because he did not know about the Final Solution, he could not figure that such a thing would happen at that time. So, that's how we felt. There will be as much as during the medieval times there was a Jewish community in Germany in those countries where there was persecution of Jews. He felt there must be a German community even if the young people leave there will be old people who have to be taken care of. There will be, they will let us live. What kind of life? It will be hard, but they will let us live. We never thought, or at that time, let's put it this way, we never thought that the time would come when we would have to--when we would face a question of life or death, to leave Germany or have to face death at a later time. So...

JF: What happened to your father as far as his business was concerned during the Aryanization period?

HF: Well, after the *Kristallnacht* his business was destroyed. He had a wine business and all the wine that was available was poured out...

JF: This was a shop that he had?

HF: Yes. Yes. Yes.

JF: Up until that time he still had his shop, then until *Kristallnacht*?



HF: Yes, he had a wholesale business of wine and up to this time he was actively engaged in the wine business. After that he had to give it up and he was then busy by just trying to sell whatever was left. But he could not work any more as he did before.

JF: At what point were you ordained?

HF: I was ordained in '37.

JF: In '37. Before we move on to the period of your life after that, is there anything else about those years before 1937 that you would like to tell us about?

HF: Well, as I say, today it seemed to be an easy time because I was following my course of studying and could do as I pleased within certain restrictions, and I had a future at least, I believed I had a future as a rabbi in Germany. It turned out different, but from what came later in the years '40 to '45, it seemed everything today from that point of view it seemed to be very easy. I didn't have any problems. In the year 1937 I was appointed rabbi of the congregation in Worms. My predecessor had left for Israel, Palestine, as it was called at that time, and I was there for the High Holidays. The first time that the synagogue was sufficient for the Worms Jewish community, because in former years there was a synagogue across the street from the Old *Shul* called the Levy Synagogue, was used for a service during the High Holidays for those who did not have tickets for the Old Synagogue. But for the first time that I was there in 1937 there was no need for a second service.

JF: You say this other synagogue was called the Levy Synagogue?

HF: Yes.

JF: It sounds like a Sephardic name. Is there any history of that?

HF: No, the history of that synagogue was like this. A rich man did not behave well in the Old Synagogue in about the year 1860, and the *gabai* in charge asked the man to be quiet. And he came a second time and asked him to be quiet and he did not help and he came a third time and it did not help, and the man said, "If you don't like it the way I behave in *shul* I will build my own *shul*." And it was not an empty threat, because he had the means to build another *shul* and what he did, he acquired a building across the street of the Old Synagogue and built another synagogue and this synagogue was according to his name--his name was Levy--so it was called the Levy Synagogue. So, in the meantime, the congregation in later times became much larger, they could use the--congregation who had acquired the building, then later on, the later generations who were not interested in the doings of their father, they had it given as a present to the congregation, used that building for a second service on the High Holidays, sometimes for lectures. In my time in that synagogue was converted to a gymnasium because we didn't have one and the children who attended the Jewish school and didn't have a gymnasium. There was no need any more for a second synagogue so we converted it to a gymnasium.

JF: This was a Jewish gymnasium now?

HF: Yes. And still the Nazis tried to destroy whatever furniture was still--they didn't know about that--so when the 10th of November came they still destroyed it. Today it's completely erased by American bombs.

JF: The synagogue in Worms at that time was what denomination? You were trained as a Liberal.

HF: It was, I would say, Liberal, but very conservatively Liberal. The only Liberal thing was, as I say, the employment of an organ and the choir, but the ritual of the synagogue followed exactly the Orthodox ritual. Men and women were sitting in separate buildings. So, later on, when the organist left for London we did not have an organ, I mean that the organ was not used any more. Today's reconstructed synagogue does not have an organ.

JF: You said to me before that when you were hired, you were also hired as a cantor?

HF: Not at that time. The cantor was--there was still a cantor there, but the cantor also emigrated about a half a year later and I told them I could do his job since I was always interested in *chazanut* and so I had both jobs as a rabbi and a cantor of the synagogue.

JF: Can you tell me the story of the young girl who gave you the music, as you told me before? [prior to taping]<sup>9</sup>

HF: Well, she was a product of a divorced marriage, and was educated in the home of her grandmother and her cousin. Her cousin was our organist, Miss Honig, who is still alive and now lives in England; she left the summer of '38, I think it was. She left for England and since that time there was no more music, no more instrumental music in the synagogue. So, that is the story of why I was also a *chazan*. In the time that I was, the congregation became diminished day by day through emigration.

JF: Before we go on, the young girl whose aunt had been there gave you something which...

HF: She was, this was a very musical family. Her cousin was very musical--excuse me, I shouldn't say her cousin, it was her aunt who was the organist. It was her aunt and she was very musical and even she could, she could play something on the organ if I would ask her, but she couldn't accompany a whole service. When she gave me those musical notes that you saw before...

JF: This was the music for the regular cantorial...

HF: Well, what she gave me was mostly the congregational singing. The music for the *chazan* was to the *chazan* and I had a volume of Lewandowski<sup>10</sup>, a German

---

<sup>9</sup>Copies of handwritten music included in collection of Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive (File #33). Edith Lebrecht, born June or July 21, 1926, hand wrote the melodies used in the Worms Synagogue and gave them to Dr. Frank in 1937 when she was 11 years old. She was deported to Theresienstadt March 19, 1942 and is listed in the *Gedenkbuch as Verschollen*, fate unknown.

<sup>10</sup>Lewandowski, Louis (1821-1894) Born near Posen, Germany; choral director and composer of synagogue music. [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 2].

Jewish composer that I already studied before I came to Worms and with that music I was very familiar. There was no problem for me to sing this music.

JF: So that this music that this child wrote at the age of 11 was the congregational part of the service?

HF: Yes, what they used. They used Lewandowski, they used Japhet<sup>11</sup>, they used Sulzer<sup>12</sup> and they used a modern Jewish composer by the name of Adler, Hugo Adler who came later to America and passed away, he was also in some synagogue a musical director. And, as I told you, unfortunately, that child was later on deported with his [her] grandmother.

JF: And, she was deported in 1942?

HF: [long pause] That is correct, yes. So, which part of my activities would you want me to describe?

JF: Let's talk for a minute about the history of the synagogue. Perhaps you can describe that to me, and then we will go into your activities.

HF: Well, I mean there were books written on that. It's one of the oldest congregations, if not the oldest one in Germany. Köln was probably as old as Worms...

---

<sup>11</sup>Japhet, Israel Meyer (1818-1892) Born in Kassel, Germany; composer. [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 9].

<sup>12</sup>Sulzer, Solomon (1804-1890) Born in Hohenens, Tyrol, Austria; cantor and reformer of liturgical music. [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 15].

*Tape two, side one:*

JF: This is tape two, side one of an interview with Dr. Helmut Frank on February 19, 1982 with Josey Fisher. You were beginning to tell me a little bit about the history of the Worms Synagogue.

HF: Well, when I tell you that the Worms Synagogue was built in 1034 we must assume that the congregation exists very much longer. So, some say Jews were already in Worms with the Romans. That would be many centuries earlier, but we definitely know that 1034 was the building time of the synagogue and I don't think there are too many other synagogues in the world that can boast being in existence more than 900 years. If I speak just for one minute of the synagogue. The synagogue's fate was not always an easy one. There were times in wars and persecutions that the synagogue was partially destroyed. So what happened on the *Kristallnacht* of November '38 was, in a way, nothing unique. The only difference was the wholesale destruction, as it happened, was for the first time, and it had to be in order to be completely reconstructed. The Jews, when they rebuilt the destroyed synagogue in the medieval times, had always some place to continue to add, to correct from what was destroyed by the enemies.

The greatest change in the community life was the beginning of the Emancipation, the new time that came with Napoleon when he ruled in Worms after the year 1806 and the new time that was, as far as the synagogue was concerned, was initiated by breaking down the wall that separated men and women in the synagogue. And at that time already was they had only Orthodox rabbis while looking for Liberal rabbis. But there were still many traditionally-minded Jews in Worms so they found a compromise. Not a man who is half Liberal and half Orthodox, but they left an Orthodox rabbi and engaged a person with him together, whom they called preacher and that was a Liberal rabbi. So, at one time both officiated together.

JF: They called the Liberal rabbi a preacher?

HF: Yes.

JF: And, what was his function then?

HF: To preach.

JF: That was totally his function?

HF: Yes, and the Orthodox rabbi was to what they call in the Yiddish *paskin sheilas*, to answer the religious questions, as they came up every day and, by the way, the person who was a preacher, the Liberal preacher at that time became famous later on. In America, his name was Jastrow<sup>13</sup> the man who wrote the Talmudic dictionary. Jastrow's dictionary and as far as Philadelphia was concerned, he was later on rabbi in Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia. He died here in Philadelphia.

---

<sup>13</sup>Rabbi Marcus Mordecai Jastrow (1829-1903), descendant of family of scholars in Prussian Poland [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 9].

JF: So, about what time was this that there was still the split?

HF: It was about between 1840 and 1860, 1870. At that time they didn't have an organ yet, but at one time a man gave a donation of 1000 *marks*, and that was a lot of money at that time, for the purchase of an organ and that the congregation could not refuse. And so they put on, even though it really didn't fit into that environment of that old synagogue which is named after Rashi they put in an organ at that time. But, as I say, this was actually the only reform that they had in the synagogue.

JF: The organ?

HF: The organ, together with the singing with the organ. That was the only thing. Otherwise, the order with the service was Orthodox.

JF: Was the split of rabbinical function something that was done in many other synagogues in Germany?

HF: No. I think of the many things that were unique to Worms was one for sure. Because, most congregations they made up their minds either, or. Usually they were Liberal and then after that, like what happened in Wiesbaden my hometown, a Orthodox minority split up from the large congregation. But that they had both together at the same time I think that, I don't think happened anywhere else. Later on, of course, only Liberal rabbis were hired, and when I was there I think many felt and pointed out they never had such a religious rabbi like I was. At least as far as they could think back historically.

JF: Now, you have mentioned the Rashi chair and you have told me that there is a story connected with its preservation. Could you tell me about that?

HF: Yes. In other words, when, after the burning of the synagogue on the 10th of November, 1938, the chair did not burn because it was out of stone. But, while I was, after I came back from the concentration camp of Buchenwald--that was in December 1938--I was told by our *shamus* that, who lived next to the *shul* on the other side, he saw that workmen came and took out the Rashi chair. They divided it in three parts and on a truck it was taken away. Until after the war I had no idea what had happened, but now I know. There was a Director of Antiquities in the city of Worms who was very friendly to the Jews but couldn't show it to the outside. Nominally he had to be a Nazi like everybody else. We thought he would give it to the Nazis but what happened in reality was he had saved many parts of the Jewish Museum. During the time of oppression, following the year 1938, he hid them in the Museum of the City of Worms and during the war hid them in the newer part of the Worms Cathedral. In the Cathedral he hid not only the parts of the Rashi chair, but also many parts of the museum that were confiscated on the 10th of November. All of the documents, and old *mahzorim* [High Holiday prayer books] and many of the antiquities of the Jewish community. I had no idea of what had happened to them. Only after the war I found out that this man by the name of Illert had taken them into his own safe keeping and, as I said, during the war he had hidden them in the newer part of the Cathedral.

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

JF: These were all of the things from the Jewish Museum that were confiscated?

HF: Well, again a story. Originally we had them all in the Jewish Museum. If you remember the picture I showed you that was on the second floor of the Women's Synagogue.

JF: That is where the museum was?

HF: Was. But during my time, even before my time, they felt that this was dangerous to have the Jewish Museum and all these very valuables, very valuable documents, to have them here in this part of the synagogue. There could be a riot and it might be better to transfer them to the congregational building that was next door where the school was later on was located and the congregation offices were located. So, that was what happened. They took them over to the congregational office in the congregational building and that time only they were not accessible any more to the general public who wanted to see the Jewish Museum. And we--that happened during my time--contemplated selling them all to the Jewish University, to Jerusalem because we were not sure what would happen to them. But, our secretary, I never can forget that he was more familiar with the Nazi laws and he found out there is a Nazi law, a Nazi law that prohibits sending any kind of valuables for museums out of the country. So we could not do anything about it. But, on the 10th of November they were not in the synagogue building. Whatever was in the synagogue, like all of the *Sifrei Torah* was burned. Was lost. But, the Museum was in the congregational building and I was told when I came back from the concentration camp that somebody from the city had taken off all the treasures of the Museum. I thought that the Nazis had taken them for their own purposes. Only after the war I found out that Illert had taken them out and had, as I say, safeguarded them during the war. After the war, they were, most of them sent to the Jewish Archive in Jerusalem. Where they are now.

JF: They man's name again?

HF: I-L-L-E-R-T.

JF: And, the Rashi chair was restored.

HF: I come back to the Rashi chair. After the war, of course, Illert came out the truth that he had saved it and it was divided into three parts, and it is in the original, it is in the reconstructed synagogue today. Those miracles that happen in Jewish history. That's one of them.

JF: That's true. Tell me, then, about your beginnings in 1937 in Worms. What kind of experience did you have and where was the Nazi pressure?

HF: As I say, during my time the Nazi pressure increased day by day. One day it was businesses that were smeared over officially by Nazis with the word *Jude*. All the businesses, the show windows were plastered with white color and now this interesting thing is that you could not take it off. It was done officially, or with official sanction, and you had to wait until police would give them special permission to take all of this off

again. Then there were arrests of Jews who had one time had an encounter with the law, even if it was only, somebody had only not observed a traffic law. They were taken to concentration camps on one day in June 1938. It was not a pleasant life during that time, and there came a representative of the *Reichsvereinigung* to Worms. I will never forget that meeting that we had with him in which he said, "I wish I could give you better news but, unfortunately we heard through the grapevine that things will not become better for Jews. Just the opposite. There is no hope, things will become worse."

JF: When was this meeting?

HF: It was, I would say, about June 1938. It has for me, personally, it has good sides, because I was, I saw so much antisemitism, so much persecution in Worms more than, by the way, than in other cities in Germany, I applied for a immigration then to America, pretty early, and since I was one of the earliest, this application was received here by America, and I received a so-called, out-of-quota visa, that saved my life and I came here just before the war, I came to America. So, if I would have been in a congregation where there would have been less antisemitism I would have probably wanted to stay there and maybe I would have stayed there too long; I don't know. So, everything has its good sides. At least, that was what happened to me.

JF: What kind of experience did you have with the Christian community, as far as any positive acts were concerned?

HF: I couldn't say anything because I had no connection with the Christian community except what I had to do officially. Let's say I had to visit the prison. I felt that it's my duty to visit Jewish prisoners in prison. Now, let us say they were not discriminating against me. They did what they felt was the right thing to do. The, I felt that the prison officials were not unfriendly to Jews. It was my personal impression.

JF: You did not feel that the prisoners were receiving any different kind of treatment?

HF: Definitely not, no. I remember I visited one prisoner who had gone to Baden Baden. This was a place that could be compared today to Atlantic City and the gambling that takes place. They had gambling in Baden-Baden. And, he told the community, "I am bankrupt, I played in Baden-Baden and lost all of my money." For that he was taken to prison. But, it wasn't the truth. In reality, he had taken his money out of Germany to be prepared for his immigration and so he was in prison for a while. I don't know for how long, but after that he had it easy in leaving Germany. He had all his money outside.

JF: You mentioned before that the Old Synagogue across the street, the Levy Synagogue, had been converted into a *Gymnasium* for the Jews.

HF: Yes.

JF: Were you involved in the educational process as the Jewish schools took over the education of the Jewish children?

HF: Yes. I had a very important position in the congregation, the congregational school. In other words, I was a teacher for Hebrew, especially for the higher classes. I was in the school every day. I had to teach, and the school was a very important part of the rabbinical functions.

JF: What about the economic situation of the Jews in Worms? Was the synagogue or the Jewish community involved in any way in helping those who were losing their businesses and in the...

HF: Definitely. We had a social office, and we call it in English, Welfare Office, and unfortunately the number of people who were depending upon a gift from the Welfare Office became greater and greater every day. And this was a very important part of the rabbinical function.

JF: The Welfare Office, then, was under the auspices of the synagogue?

HF: Yes, of the Jewish community. Yes. We had a special man in charge of that. This was, this job became very important, unfortunately. It all happened in my time. The number of Jews became smaller. The dependencies of Jews on welfare became bigger every day. In other words, it was a visible decline before the eyes of the rabbi who at the end, after what happened during the *Kristallnacht*, had to tell the people that, "You must prepare for your immigration, and every day in which you do not prepare and work for it is a lost day for you."

JF: You told them this at the time of the *Kristallnacht*?

HF: After. Afterwards, at the time of the *Kristallnacht*. I was arrested and sent to Buchenwald with most of the men of the congregation. And...

JF: Can you tell me the details about that, please?

HF: My wife has heard it long before. It started very early in the morning. I must tell you something before because Huttenbach<sup>14</sup> mentions this and he thought this is very important. A member of the congregation--one of the good members, not, he didn't have an office, he says it was a vice-president but he was just a member of the congregation-- had called me the day before the *Kristallnacht* and told me he had heard from other congregations that they have burned synagogues or have damaged the *Sifrei Torah* and wouldn't it be a good idea to take our *Sifrei Torah*--we had 30 of them, 30 *Sifrei Torah*--to take them out and save them.

JF: This was how long before the *Kristallnacht*?

HF: It was the day before. And, I did not do anything about it.

JF: Did you not think it was going to happen?

HF: First of all, I wasn't so sure whether it would happen because of the congregation. We were a small congregation. Always the smaller congregations were where antisemitism was, were stronger than in the larger cities. But even if I would want to save the *Sifrei Torah* where should I go with it? Now I take page 33 of the book by

---

<sup>14</sup>Professor Henry Huttenbach, a Holocaust scholar.



Henry Huttenbach, *The Life of Herta Mansbacher*<sup>15</sup> and read what it says here: “That evening Rabbi Frank received an unusual telephone request from the vice-president of the Jewish community asking him as a precautionary measure to move the scrolls from the synagogue. Feeling himself utterly unauthorized to take such an unprecedented step, Rabbi Frank decided not to assume responsibility for bringing the 30 historic and priceless *Torah* scrolls to his lodging. A fresh graduate from the seminary in Berlin, only 27 years old, and awed by his first appointment to the prestigious Jewish community of Worms, Frank felt it unnecessary to protect the scrolls, unable to imagine what could possibly happen to them. What took place 12 hours later violated all his basic assumptions about Jewish existence in Germany and taught him instantly what indeed could happen in a civilized society.” Well, I tell you. It wasn’t exactly like that. If I would have taken, as Huttenbach suggested, if I would have taken these *Sifrei Torah* out of the *shul*, now how could I take 30 *Sifrei Torah* out? 30. I alone could carry one. But not two. That would have been a whole procession. Now that should have gone on without people noticing it? And even if I would have taken it in our home, then the Nazis would have still, maybe not burned them, but thrown them out of the window and whatever would have happen to them? Just as my own furniture, my own books that were partly destroyed during the next day. So, it is not exactly the way Huttenbach describes it here. And, the man was not a vice-president, as I say. But, I couldn’t have done anything. Where should I have gone with the *Sifrei Torah*?

JF: You did believe then that this was possible, but, hopefully, it wouldn’t happen because Worms was a larger city.

HF: It was possible. Unfortunately, at that time, everything was possible. You could not--there was nothing that you could say from the beginning that cannot happen. A man who was very smart, who left about ‘37, left shortly after I came there, he told me, “And I tell you something, I believe what will happen to the Jews you could never imagine in your keenest fantasy, or in your dreams.” Unfortunately, he was right. He was a man who was eccentric, and nobody believed him, but he could tell you the truth. So, I want to continue what happened then, the next day. Very early, I was very tired because the evening before, the Jewish organizations, the youth organization--we had quite a number of them--there were not too many young people there altogether, but they had still a lot of organizations. They brought their material to my room because they wanted to dissolve. So my room was filled with all kind of papers and magazines from the organizations, and I was tired, and they called me about quarter of six. Rabbi Frank, the president, that the synagogue is on fire. So, you know what I answered him? “You have to call the fire brigade.”

JF: You still trusted in the law?

---

<sup>15</sup>*The Life of Herta Mansbacher: A Portrait of a Jewish Teacher, Heroine and Martyr*; NY: Memorial Committee of Jewish Victims of Nazism from Worms, 1980.

HF: I didn't have a better answer, but I got dressed in a hurry and I went on my bike and I traveled to the *shul*, it wasn't too far away, it was about ten minutes to walk, but on a bicycle it would take me three, four minutes. And, I was there, and I saw not the *shul* was aflame, but there was a fire in the synagogue.

JF: Inside?

HF: Inside. So, I went in and I saw, yes, there was--the pulpit was burning. But, it wasn't a big fire. I mean it wouldn't have destroyed the synagogue if that would have really burned a little more. Meanwhile, I immediately went to the telephone in the house of the *shames* it was just across the street, called the fire company. They answered and I told them that they should come right away. There's a fire in the synagogue. "We are so busy," they said, "that we haven't got the time now. We can't come now." At that time I did not understand two things. First of all, I did not understand why the fire company would not come and I didn't know that what happened in Worms was happening all over Germany. I thought it's a local action. I didn't know that this was planned, I didn't know. So, I said, "Can we do away with the fire ourselves?" No answer. So, meanwhile--in Worms, you know, everything is together, the synagogue, the congregation, the building where the school is, the *shames*' house. So meanwhile, children had come already for the school on the 10th of November. The schoolhouse was closed. I did not know why. It was locked. I had no key. There had never been any problem. The caretaker, a non-Jew, was living in the building. Only later on I heard that he had gotten orders to lock the building, but I didn't know anything why he had locked it. So, the children came and didn't know where to go, and they were quite cold. Boys also came. And, before I could think of anything, they had already buckets filled with water and went to the *shul* and the fire was out in no time. And, you will find this all described in this book. There were Nazis around, although not in uniform on that day, but you could see that they were not friends to the Jews who watched us during this time and when this all was finished I felt I had nothing to do there any more. I wanted to go home. And, I looked for my bicycle, I wanted to take my bicycle home, I couldn't find it. I looked here and looked there, I thought it was stolen. And, I say today I believe it wasn't stolen, I was just so disturbed, so disoriented that I didn't know where I put it. I don't think anybody took it away because later on, a month later when I came back from the concentration camp I heard already there's a bicycle that was listed as found at the police headquarters. And I went there and it was my bicycle, so they had found it. So, while I was looking for the bicycle there was a policeman there whom I had seen already at other occasions, and I see that he had--the boys had helped with the fire, I saw that he rounded them up, but when he saw me, he said to me: "*Kommen sie mit, Rabbiner.*" It means, "Come along, Rabbi." So, from that moment I was arrested. We were brought to the police headquarters and were put in the police cells, the four boys and me together. And, there we stayed until noontime. Then we were taken out and we were told that we would have to clean up the streets. What happened was that the Nazis had entered the homes of

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

my congregants and taken and thrown all of the furniture, all of the belongings that they could get a hold of on the street and that was blocking traffic and that cannot be tolerated in Germany, the traffic...

*Tape two, side two:*

JF: This is tape two, side two of an interview with Rabbi Helmut Frank. This is a continuation of the interview started on February 19th, 1982, on February 24th, 1982 with Josey Fisher. You were talking about the things that had been thrown into the street and the obstruction of the traffic.

HF: Yes, I just want to say one peculiar episode that happened before that. You must understand that I was taken to the prison early in the morning. I hadn't eaten anything. We were actually fasting until the moment the police came to take us out. So that "Can't we have anything to eat?" Isn't it something that as a human being even in prison you should get something to eat?

JF: You were purposely fasting.

HF: No. I mean, I did not have a chance to eat. In the morning at six o'clock I left in a big rush to get to the synagogue and from then on I was walking around and then I was taken to the prison and nobody bothered giving us anything to eat. So, we were very hungry, especially the boys. But I was hungry too. So, I said to the policeman, "Couldn't you give us something to eat?" So, first of all he went out, then he came back and, "We don't have anything kosher." Not that I had asked for anything kosher. He gave me that peculiar answer. "We don't have anything kosher." But, then he still, I guess he was sorry for us, so he brought us some sandwiches, with something, probably butter on it, but he gave us something to eat. So, then, as I say, we were on the streets and when I saw the picture I saw, let's say I come to the home, and it was a Jewish house. What do I see? From the windows hanging sheets, bedding, whole beds were thrown out of the window but got stuck someplace between the window and the ground.

JF: The beds were thrown out?

HF: Yes, everything. You must understand, when we entered the rooms, it was completely empty. Just imagine. This would have fascinated the Nazis: the closet with all the china and glass in it, because anything that makes noise can be broken in a second--that fascinated them to throw out. You would destroy that, anything that...

JF: So, they made no distinction as to whether they were breaking into shops, or private homes or...

HF: Well, I think shops were the most vulnerable, because if they knew which shop is Jewish and where to get in and destroy everything--but they had lists of Jewish households, which, for instance--I will tell you a funny story. A woman just had, she told me later on, just had cleaned up most perfectly her whole house, and then they came and threw everything out, and when I say everything, things that fascinated them were glassware, porcelain, china, typewriters, valuable things to throw out and destroy them by throwing them, so, when they landed in the street, of course, they were not, they couldn't be used any more, they were broken. So, that was the picture we saw. Everything, valuable things. I still remember one man had a case with liquor and they threw the

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

whole liquor on the street, and then the liquor was found on the street. I mean the liquid, with broken bottles around. So, the only thing, of course--the women were still around, the men, some of them were already arrested, the only thing I could say to console them was this reminds me, I said, of the pogroms in Russia which I had read. But I don't know whether that was a consolation for them, that I...

JF: You said this to whom?

HF: You see, when I came to those houses, the picture was not only that those rooms were empty, but that the women, the women and the children whom I knew, most of them, were there completely helpless. You could imagine what state they were. A state of shock. So, I tried, of course, at that moment I still was a rabbi, and I tried to console them but the only thing that came to my mind was to tell them that this reminds me of the pogroms in Russia, what they did to them. If that was a good consolation, I don't know, but I reminded them of something that happened years before in a different country.

JF: They immediately rounded up the men?

HF: Yes, the men were, I didn't meet men any more because they had rounded them up in the morning. When we got active, it was already by around noon time and they were taken to the main quarters of the police. We were in a branch office in the police, so I didn't, until I came there, I didn't know about the others that were already arrested in a different part of police headquarters.

JF: In other words, when you saw these sights that you were describing now, you were walking home from the synagogue through the streets?

HF: No, no. We were taken by police like prisoners.

JF: You were being taken.

HF: The boys and I were taken like prisoners as a, how do you call this, commando, a clean-up commando.

JF: You were to clean up?

HF: Sure, do you think that a German would do that? I mean we were to clean up because we Jews had caused all of this trouble. We had murdered somebody in Paris. We are responsible and for that, that was how the Nazis pictured that, for that, the German Volk, the German national soul boiled over and did all this, but, of course it was not true, it was well organized by the Nazis, this whole action, it was well organized.

JF: But, were there any other Jewish men that they were also having clean up the streets with you?

HF: Yes, we were not, I found it out later, but at the time I didn't know, there were other commandos also. Yes, but, I didn't meet them. We were taken to certain homes. "Here, work, work here, bring everything back up again," as if that would help the people, if I would bring up a broken dish or a broken typewriter or anything, if that would help them in anyway.

JF: And it was when you were taking these things back into the homes that you were able to talk to the women...

HF: Yes, I had a free moment. The policemen couldn't watch us every minute, that we didn't take a minute out, and we were talking to them. We tried hard, at least, to clean the streets because people were watching us, not only the policemen, but other people, other Gentiles were watching also, looking how we Jews were driven by the policemen and were told what to do and--in other words we couldn't help, actually, the Jewish home that had lost most of their valuables. Just understand, there were people whose kitchen was completely empty. The people didn't know where to make the next meal for those who were there, for the children, for themselves, because all the china, all the dishes were taken out.

JF: Can you describe to me the response of the non-Jewish population as you saw it?

HF: Well, I'll tell you, the non-Jewish population was silent. They were looking, but they were silent. What they thought in their heart, in their hearts, I do not know. I can only imagine some of them thought, "Oh the poor Jews!" And some of them thought that it serves them right, I do not know. No words were spoken.

JF: Were the guards who were in charge of you, on this detail, physically abusive towards you in any way?

HF: I could not say that. You see, these were not the professional S.A. or SS. These were regular police.

JF: Of the town.

HF: Yes. I don't think that they had any feeling there. That it was command for them, that's what they got to do, like anything else, they wouldn't say to us, "Oh, it's terrible, we feel sorry," or anything. No. At least I didn't hear it if they said it. Not to me.

JF: How long did you spend working, trying to clean up the town?

HF: Oh, I would say from about twelve o'clock to maybe four or five o'clock in the afternoon.

JF: And then what happened?

HF: Then we were taken and we were, I think, about four or five people, four boys and myself. Then we were taken to the main building of the police to a hall, and in that hall I found most men of my congregation. The first thing when I came in there, they offered me the first seat in the first row. I wasn't so anxious to sit there with a father, I would have preferred to sit in the back row. But my congregation felt the rabbi has the first seat in the first row. And, there was the commander of the police, he was the Nazi, because that's the way it was in Germany. While the regular men of the police staff were still from years before, in other words, they were Nazis because they had to be Nazis, but the real Nazi was the commander. And, that's the way he approached us, the way he talked to us.

JF: What did he say?

HF: Well, he would take out people who were known. Let's say there was a Jew by the name of Sonnenheim. "You, you are known. You were a Communist all your life and you did this and this and you cheated the Germans; now we get even with you." Something of that type. In other words, he would take out individual Jews. About me, nothing was known since I was relatively new in the community, but people who were living in Worms for centuries, people who were born there, they took them out individually. Then I saw people coming in and their whole head was bandaged. So then, that was the reason for the SS people and together with the commander of the police to make fun of them. When they came in, he would say, "Are you Turks? So the poor men didn't know what to answer. He said, "I want an answer. Are you Turks?" So he said, "No." In other words, there were people, apparently this must have happened outside of Worms in the outlying districts, that they were beaten up and they needed bandaging. They were so much beaten up, something that did not apparently, apparently, I am careful, did not happen in the city of Worms. At least I personally was not beaten, but there were, and I can never ever forget these poor people bandaged with bloody heads, and they would ask them yet, "Are you Turks?" So, we were sitting there, let's say I was from six o'clock until eleven or twelve o'clock in the nighttime, and I heard already from other congregants, who had heard it from somebody else, our next destination is the concentration camp of Buchenwald. So, finally, twelve o'clock we were driven out of the police headquarters and outside there were three big trucks waiting for us. At that time, compared to what I heard happened to later years, they were still human, because trucks had benches for us to sit. I know in later times they used freight trains where there were no benches. People had to either stand or sit on the floor if they could.

JF: What suspicions did you have at that time about what going to Buchenwald would mean?

HF: Well, I knew pretty well, and I tell you why. In June of 1938, I might have mentioned that already, congregants where they had committed any offense, even though it was only a traffic ticket were taken to Buchenwald. And, it happened that just a few days before, a couple of them came back. And I, as a rabbi visited them. It was strictly prohibited for anybody to talk about what happened in the concentration camps. This now, I had a little bit--when I was dismissed, or anybody was dismissed from the concentration camps, one of the officers of the SS would tell us, "Look, we dismiss you now, but if you tell anybody what you have seen here, what happened here, you know what will happen? You will come right back and then you'll never get out." So, this was, of course, told to this man, too, but since I was his rabbi, he was confident that I wouldn't talk about it. So, he told me already about Buchenwald. So at least I knew what was facing us. This way I was a little bit privileged. I at least knew what was going to be.

JF: Did you share any of this information with the men, once you found out that you were all going to Buchenwald together.

HF: During that night how could you? You were just horrified, terrified during that night. What happened now, we were chased into these trucks, three trucks, I remember. They were civilian trucks that didn't belong to the police, but they were confiscated for that purpose and they put benches in these trucks. We were chased in the trucks. And there were, it must have been known among the population, because just imagine, they left police headquarters about twelve o'clock at night, and there was a huge crowd of people standing there to clap, showing their happiness that we were carted off, that we were taken, that we were driven off. In other words, it was known among them what happened to us. We were, of course, I was personally concerned about what happened to my apartment. I had two rooms in an apartment that belonged to Jewish people. I don't know whether I should tell you now before I forget later on. I was in my apartment and the following thing happened. Just the day before organizations like Zionist Youth Corps had given me all their belongings, because they weren't sure any more what to do with it. So they had piled up papers in my room, and when the Nazis entered my room, they were so happy to find all of these papers, out of the window it went. My diploma, doctor's diploma, rabbinical diploma, I had nicely hanging on the wall, out. Anything of paper that I had lying around, important documents on my desk, or things that I would have needed for immigration, all went outside.

JF: How did you find this out?

HF: Well, this, I found out later on.

JF: When you came back?

HF: I had an inkling that such a thing would happen in my living quarters, but later on, that's why I want to excuse myself on telling you now something that I found out a month or so later. In other words, my room was almost emptied out, except that I had my books, and this was my greatest pride, in a big sturdy bookcase. So, the Nazis didn't, the Nazis wanted to do damage, not only throwing things out, but to do damage. This was a huge bookcase, first they put it upside down, and so the backside of the bookcase was, of course, there was a wall of the bookcase made out of very solid wood, and they would take their knives, and took their knives and tried to empty it from the backside, and then take the books out and throw them out. But they didn't succeed. It was such good wood that they just made--this way I saved 95 percent of my library that I have now here. What I lost was the following: for instance, there was a five-volume encyclopedia, and just the day before I had something looked up in the encyclopedia, and today I have to suffer for my being not so orderly, because I left the second volume of the Jewish encyclopedia I left on my desk, so I have now four volumes, and the last volume is missing. You cannot get one volume of an encyclopedia, so it was lost. And so the same thing happened to a very valuable Hebrew Talmudic dictionary. I had it in four volumes, and the last volume, I must have looked up something and left it on my desk, and that went out. Three volumes I saved. But this I can give you now consolation. In the year 1961 I heard from a professor of Gratz College, Dr. Shereshevsky, that this Hebrew

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*



dictionary by Levy had been reprinted in Germany, so they sent me that volume back. So it is complete again. I can show it to you later on.

JF: Oh, I'm glad.

HF: But, as I say, I lost a few books but most of them I saved because, on account of these circumstances. When I came, I found the bookcase upside down and this way, at least, I had saved my books. Everything else I lost. Religious articles that I had outside. So, but I actually at that time I didn't know it yet. So, we were taken, we had a night ride through a good part of Germany until we reached Buchenwald concentration camp.

JF: Were there any openings in the truck that you could see where you were going?

HF: Yes, I was lucky. I don't know why. I was sitting at the end of the truck, so I could see which cities we went through. I mean, I could see. The others that were sitting inside couldn't see it.

JF: And, did they give you any food at this time?

HF: No. We didn't get anything. I think that the boys that were with me had been promised by the S.S. men when they were active in extinguishing the fire of the synagogue, that they would be beaten up on our way to the concentration camp. But, as far as I know it did not happen. I don't know. So, then, when we came to the concentration camp in the early hours of the morning, I could see from the outside already the men carrying big burdens, and not one man, but hundreds, all with prison guards beating them, and this was outside of the camp. So, my first idea was--I mean, I was almost apparently thinking in historical terms--my first idea was this is like in Egypt, this looks to me like. Jews had to work in Egypt. So, we were then told to leave the trucks, and there was already a reception committee waiting for us after we entered the gate of the concentration camp. This reception committee were S.S. people with sticks, large sticks in their hand, and they would beat anybody who wouldn't run fast enough and would be a victim of their beatings, so many people arrived there wounded in the face, feet, and if you would have the bad luck of falling, they would do even worse. But, I was lucky at that time. I wasn't in the condition like today. At that time I was young man, I could walk fast, so they did not hit me. But, unfortunately, the older people couldn't run as fast. They got hit. Then we had to take our stand, and looking towards the gate of the concentration camp, and that happened now every five or ten minutes, a group of 20, 30 Jews being hit by guards there, and then they have to stand in front until there were maybe thousands of Jews assembled. What happened was they came from other parts of Germany.

JF: These were other arrivals at the same time?

HF: Yes, other new arrivals at the same time, the morning of November 11th. Friday morning, November 11th.

JF: About how many men do you think came with you from Worms that day?

HF: Well, I would say maybe 100.

JF: And that do you think was most of the men in the synagogue?

HF: Well, the prominent people were taken. There were some left out because they were not known. I don't know. Some had, maybe, a little bit of protection. I don't know. There was for instance one man, the historian of the Worms congregation, a man by the name of Sampson Rothschild, and he had many friends among Gentiles because he was a teacher in the public school system, already before the First World War and during the First World War. He was a man close to 90, and when I came back--now I shouldn't say that actually in this connection, but this happened when I came back, I visited him and he told me, to him the Nazis did not come. They gave him special protection. His house was not touched, which he ascribed to his good standing among the Gentiles. So, there were people for one or other--he was not taken. He would have been too old anyhow. There were some people who had a little privilege, I would say. I don't know how many. I think some of the poorer Jews were not taken. But all of the people who had some standing, business people, they were all taken. The whole board of the congregation, the officers. So, we had to stand in front of the gate, maybe--long, long hours until the day was finished. Meanwhile, some of the people was given haircuts. But haircuts was that your hair was totally shaven off.

JF: Were you?

HF: Definitely. Everybody.

JF: Everybody was.

HF: But what happened then, for some reason the commanding officer would say, "Stop," so that people were half-shaven and half not-shaven. That's the way it remained. They went there all the time until they were dismissed. They do this just to make fun of the Jews.

JF: Did you also have to change into a uniform?

HF: Well, this was a thing. Now I have to give you some idea how this concentration camp was organized. You see, we were one of the first people to come there; there were many people before, but that was such a large group of Jews, thousands of Jews would be taken in one or two days. For this the concentration camp organization was completely unprepared. They built, while we were there, they built houses. I shouldn't say houses, I should say--it's not the right word--it's huts, huge huts, where we just would be pushed in to stay overnight. So, we were called *Aktionjuden*, Action Jews. We were the Jews who were the victims of the entire Jewish action of 10th of November, but there were other Jews there from before. So, they were in uniforms or in prison, in their, how do you call it, prison garb, prison clothing? And the Gentiles who were there. There were many Witnesses, you know, Jehovah Witnesses were there. They were a definite Gentile group who were there already for a long time. So, if you ask me about, you asked me whether--what did you ask me? Whether I had a uniform. Now, at one time, they wanted to make it easier for the rest of the Jewish population, and those new

huts they wanted to make it easier for them, so an S.S. man passed by and that, “I need some men, the younger men. All come out!” And I followed the call and from that time on...

*Tape three, side one:*

JF: This is tape three, side one, of an interview with Dr. Helmut Frank, on February 24th, 1982 with Josey Fisher.

HF: I just wanted to say that something that happened, maybe two weeks later, that they wanted some of the Jewish prisoners to be like regulars, in uniform, and the worst thing was working like the regulars. While we were in the special huts of the Action Jews we had no work. We had no uniforms. Actually we could do as we pleased, except leaving the compound. We got, for instance, one of the features was we would not get regular meals. We would get no water, and they warned us, "Don't drink the water, the water is poisoned." I personally believe it was a lie. But, everyone was careful not to touch any water. In one way it was better to be one of the regular prisoners, because you got at least a little bit of food, better food than you would get as an Action Jew.

JF: What kind of rations did you get?

HF: Well, in the morning, they gave us something what they called breakfast. It was actually a drink that was called coffee and one piece of bread. And soup for dinner and maybe some kind wurst for supper. In other words, you would not get enough to eat, especially I as a young man was constantly hungry.

JF: What were the barracks themselves like?

HF: The barracks themselves--I'm sure, you have seen pictures of them because that has never changed. That was never changed. Once they were built, they stayed until '45, or maybe they are still there now. Huge wooden barracks with maybe five or six layers of wood where the people were supposed to be crowded in and sleep in the night, if they could sleep. This was especially made--I mention this, for me as a young man it was no problem for me to climb up and go to the highest layer, especially when some crazy S.S. men would come and would just do beatings for no good reason, just because he felt like doing it. He wouldn't go up to the highest layer. Only the poor people who were lying on the first or second layer would get it. So, I was lucky. I was all the way up on these layers. But I just was telling you that after two weeks I was one of the regular prisoners, in regular barracks, outside from that Action Jews compound, and there things were worse for us because we had to work, we had--and what was the work? Working the quarries and carrying, under constant supervision, very heavy stones. Thank God, as I almost constantly emphasize, I was young and still could do it. To give you some idea what kind of work--in school you call it busy work--we had to do. At one time there was a huge pile of stones. And we were told that you have to remove it to the other side, and we were told if we don't finish it in one hour, you won't get anything to eat. So, everybody tried to do his best in moving these heavy stones and carrying them from one side to the next and we were lucky, we did it, and we got our soup. Do you know what we did in the afternoon? What the command was? Everything back again the way it was before.

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

JF: Were you threatened again in the afternoon?

HF: I don't remember if we were. But it was terrible. I mean to live--and then the psychological strain would be that you would never get out here, the only way you would get out here would be through the chimneys. Although they didn't have gas chambers yet, there were people, I imagine 10 percent of our, of the congregants, did not come out alive any more.

JF: Did they die or were they killed?

HF: They got sick, they got sick, and you can imagine that they would get easily sick under those circumstances. Especially if you come there already with some sickness. So, they had no hospital there. They had, if you were sick, you were put in a special department, another of these wooden barracks that was called hospital, but it had no medicine. But it had the other prisoners who were doctors, who were--but what can doctors do if they don't have any medicine to help you. They can just watch you die, and I think, of our group, 10 percent died in this so-called hospital, by lack of care and...

JF: During the time that you were there, was there any opportunity for any kind of praying for any kind of religious meeting among the prisoners?

HF: Yes, there was within the Action Jews compound, we actually were most of the time without supervision. We could do what we pleased, and there my congregants asked me on Friday night, on *Shabbos*, to have the regular prayers. That's what I did.

JF: And, you were not hindered in any way in that compound?

HF: No, I mean, as long as nobody knew about it, as long as it was done clandestinely, nobody bothered us. We wouldn't do it too loud. You know, the concentration camp was surrounded by electric wires. So, many people, or I shouldn't say many people, but several people on the first day of our arrival were just completely broken mentally and would run to these, towards these electric wires, and the guards seeing that wouldn't even want them to have their body burned within the, from the electric wires, and they would--you remember these towers from the pictures--the guards standing on top would shoot people who would come near the wire. They wouldn't even wait until they touched the wire. Quite a number of our people lost their mind and ran into those wires, and we could see the people lying dead there. They didn't move them for quite awhile. It was a warning to us, apparently. And, as it happened, people forget--60 years old and older--were put in such a situation suddenly, many people couldn't stand it mentally. And they would talk irrationally. It happened to one of my members. I couldn't do anything. I don't think I should tell you what happened. I don't know whether I should mention. What do you think, it's--? Not to mention it. He said to me, "I don't like it here at all." I said, "Why?" "What kind of hotel is this where they don't give you nice beds, they don't give you appropriate clothing? What are they doing to us? This is not nice. I don't like it here."

JF: Now, this was someone you had known before and he was coherent before this experience.

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

HF: Definitely. Definitely, yes.

JF: So, this happened immediately upon coming into the camp?

HF: Yes, they lost their minds, they lost their coherence.

JF: When you say that this happened to many people, can you give me any idea out of your group of 100--?

HF: I would say 10 percent we lost to sickness, and maybe one or two by strange behavior that they didn't know how to cope with the situation.

JF: Other than these people, what was the general reaction of the men that you knew, having known them before, having known their personalities, what was the general way of reacting?

HF: I must say some were excellent. And what I mean by excellent, mostly people that served during the World War as soldiers, who tell how to behave in order to survive. They gave us, in this way, some strength. For instance, they would treat us like soldiers, and maybe some Nazis would be impressed by that, giving us commands. Whether it helped I do not know, but there were people who were marvelous in that respect and would see to it that when there was some food it was distributed in the right way among our people.

JF: They took charge as if it were an army unit.

HF: Yes. Yes. They took charge, as you say, they took charge as if it was a military unit. As I say, some of our men were marvelous, were helpful, and tried to make the best out of it. Most of them who went through the First World War said that being in concentration camps was much worse than fighting the war.

JF: Did they say what they meant by that?

HF: It was a strain on a person, was worse in concentration camp than in a front line of the war. Just to show you how the Nazis worked, for instance, the Nazis told us through the loud speaker, anybody who has from the First, not only served in the First World War, but also has a certain medal that the Nazis gave out a couple of years prior to that to everybody, Jew and Gentile, those that have that medal would be freed. Now, about, I would imagine about 50, 60 percent of the men that were with us were fighters, soldiers in the First World War.

JF: At what point did they say this to you?

HF: After a few days. So, that you would imagine they would be freed on saying that they have the medal but didn't bring it along. So as far as I remember only one person had the medal with him and he was dismissed right away. The others didn't have the medal. No dismissal. They could not call by telephone, but they could send a letter home, that they send it to them. Do you know how long it takes, especially under those circumstances, of having the letters cleared. So, that's how the Nazis worked. The mental strain was especially difficult for us to bear. For instance, naturally, we were addressed by the Nazis as "*der Jude*," the Jew, and no name was ever called without the words, "the Jew." The Jew so-and-so should do this. The Jew so-and-so. This was

humiliating. At least most of them felt that way. And then, when, sometimes, in other words, a Jew was called to the headquarters and then there they would give him a beating and say, "Now, you go back where you came from." People in high standing, all of a sudden, were treated in such a way. I know in later times it was much worse in the war years in the concentration camps. But already at that time it was very difficult for us to bear.

JF: Did they know that you were a rabbi?

HF: I tell you. Even if they know, they were not interested in that fact. It happened in one case that from a neighboring congregation the people came with their preacher or *chazan*--it was not a preacher, it was a *chazan*--and when they arrived at the concentration camp gate the S.S. man in charge said to him, "Now I want you to say a prayer," and so he started, the *chazan* started, and said a few Hebrew words, and the Nazi in charge then twisted these Hebrew few words and then beat him up for that. "You say this," and repeated the words the way he heard it. In other words he took it as an excuse to do bad things.

JF: But, did you feel that you were singled out in any way because of your standing as rabbi?

HF: No. As I say the Nazis were not, except this one case where that happened, I don't think that the Nazis were interested in it. At one time a rabbi--it was said through the loud speaker, "Rabbi so-and-so is permitted to keep his beard." I don't know what made them have this privilege, but I remember yet that this was a case where a rabbi was singled out; otherwise they did not bother them who was a rabbi, who was not a rabbi.

JF: Did you have any idea during this time--you said after two weeks you were put into the labor union [unit, probably] in the quarry. At this time you were given uniforms?

HF: Yes.

JF: How long you would be there?

HF: This is just the very bad thing. No idea. You had no idea what, how you would be freed. You had no idea when you would come out. Today, it seems easy, because altogether I was there just one month, from the 10th of November till the 10th of December. But, today I know what happened. If your family got you papers for immigration and brought them to the Gestapo, in most of the cases you were then soon dismissed where the papers were found okay. In my case, my parents both were living, I wasn't married yet, and my parents went to the headquarters of the police, and at this moment, I don't know how, but some way they got for me a visa to China. I had no intention of going to China, but some way, somehow, they got a visa for China. And, this was one thing. And, I belonged to the Gestapo district of Darmstadt, and that is the largest city close to Worms, and there they were a little more lenient than my home town in Wiesbaden.

JF: Your parents were still in Wiesbaden.

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

HF: Yes, but they must have gone to Darmstadt and must have shown them these papers, and on the basis of these papers I was dismissed. On a Saturday morning, on the 10th of December.

JF: What were these papers that the Darmstadt office...

HF: They showed to the officer the paper that I may leave Germany based on the visa that I have from China.

JF: So it was the Darmstadt office that made the decision that the visa was valid.

HF: At that time, you must understand that at that time, in '38, end of '38, there was no "Final Solution" of the Jewish problem yet. Jews could be dismissed from concentration camp by showing immigration papers and, as I say, some Gestapos were stricter, like Frankfurt and Wiesbaden who knew already which papers might be fictitious papers, which mine certainly was, and which might be real papers. So, I was lucky that I belonged to such a district where they were a little bit more lenient in that respect.

JF: So, the papers that your parents got were fictitious papers. They were not brought as real immigration papers.

HF: They were for China, but who at that time would have wanted to go to China?<sup>16</sup> There came soon a time when even a visa to China, Shanghai especially, would be used and would be welcome. But at that time Jews still were a little bit choosy and would go only to a country that would give them a living.

JF: Before this time that you were released did you work in the quarry? That two weeks?

HF: Yes, those two weeks I was in prison uniform, yes.

JF: And were you doing similar work to that which you described to me earlier, carrying stones from...

HF: Yes, it happened quite often that we had to do that work. First of all, we had to get up five o'clock, earlier yet, and then we had roll call at six o'clock standing. All of this the Action Jews didn't have to do, and then when we left the actual concentration camp to work outside, of course under a strict guard, whatever work we had to do.

JF: Clarify something for me, if you would. Were you still considered an Action Jew?

HF: Definitely, yes.

JF: After you were working in the quarry?

HF: Yes. Yes.

JF: And that meant that you did not have to stand for roll call?

---

<sup>16</sup>However, some Jews from Germany and Austria had already left for Shanghai.



HF: As Action Jews, no. Action Jews were just like a herd of animals put in that huge hut there in the barracks, and unless some S.S. man got in a rage, nobody actually bothered you there. They were a group by themselves.

JF: But, after you were sent to the quarry to work two weeks later, then you got up and went to roll call or no?

HF: Well, when I was called--yes, we had roll call every morning and evening.

JF: Even as--you were still labeled as Action Jews at that point.

HF: Yes.

JF: Yes, you still had the roll call, and were treated the same way as the other Jews?

HF: But this--everything was not very logical. After I was maybe ten days, the command came: "All Action Jews back where they came from." So we had to get our regular clothing again, take the uniforms off and the *Mogen David* that we had on top of the uniforms, everything off again and go back. So, when I was freed from the concentration camp I was again with the Action Jews as before.

JF: And, at that point you were not working? You were back in the barracks?

HF: Yes, there I could loaf and could go around and talk about philosophy and anything I wanted to do with anybody. Yes. I mean, in this way we were better off.

JF: Does that make any sense to you now as you look back on it?

HF: Now I understand. There were already some Jews were already dismissed by that time, so that there was more room in these--it made sense in that way. Some S.S. officer must have said, "Look, there are too many Jews. They're in such a small space. They haven't got enough space. We could relieve their living a little bit by taking the younger people off and put them to work with the regular units." That's how I see it today. Then through dismissals there was more room, and they thought, "We don't need to use the Jews any more as a working unit here. Back to where they came from." That's how I would explain it. But there were quite a number of Jews who would stay there much longer than I did. Six weeks, eight weeks, twelve weeks...

JF: Was anybody else released at the time you were?

HF: Yes, yes, I was with a group. Usually you weren't dismissed by yourself. First of all, when you were dismissed, there was a whole group and they were given instructions, as I had told you. What kind of instructions, not to talk. That was the most important instruction. Also you had to, you couldn't leave the concentration camp the way you were walking around before. You know, there was no barber to shave you, but when you were, especially when you had the hair halfway shaven off--so before you were dismissed, you must look decent. That was because you were facing the Gentile population, and the Nazis didn't want them to know what was going on, what was really going on, in the concentration camp. So, I and the younger men had to clean the shoes of the older men and to be helpful, so that they would look some way respectable coming back to normal, so-called normal life again.

JF: What did they do with the men whose heads had been half-shaved? Did they shave them fully?

HF: Yes.

JF: They were very concerned about the effect on the general population. How did you feel when you were brought in? Did you know that something was going to happen, possibly?

HF: Well, let's say, I was lucky at least the things were not unknown to me through my interview with the man who was in my congregation who had come back. So, I knew already what I had to expect and that made it a little bit easier. But, for those who saw that for the first time, they were just shocked, shocked.

JF: And when you were called to be told that you were going to be discharged from the camp, why did you think you were being called? Did you have any suspicion that maybe you were going to be able to be released?

HF: Well, don't forget. This was a thing that had happened throughout four weeks. There were some lucky people, at least we considered them lucky, who already after the first week or less were called but always started like this: "*Der Jude* so-and-so and *der Jude* so-and-so, and *der Jude* so-and-so, come immediately to the big gate." And, from this way we knew already that means discharge. We had to run to the big gate, and then it took about, the whole procedure took about two, three hours. Now, at that time they were still a little more human because they provided a bus to take us to the train station. At least we could board. Later on I heard that people had to walk, they were not permitted any more.

JF: How far was the train station?

HF: Oh, I would say it took about 15 minutes by bus.

JF: 50?

HF: 15 minutes by bus. 15 to 20 minutes by bus.

JF: And what happened after you returned? Did you go to Worms at that point?

HF: First I had to go to the Gestapo. That was already one of the instructions to report to the Gestapo at Darmstadt.

JF: At Darmstadt?

HF: And that we did in the middle of the night. You know with these people there was no eight hours. Day and night. So, we were there and, as I told you before, the Gestapo in Darmstadt happened to be a little more lenient than the one in my hometown. In my hometown, they would say, "Now how long will it take you to get out of here? Out of Germany? All right, you leave until February 1st. If you don't leave, you know where you go back." But, in my case they didn't give us a time limit. They were more lenient. We could go back where we came from. So, I went back to my congregation. I was needed there quite, I was needed there much.

JF: Tell me about your return to Worms and what you found.

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

HF: Depressing. This could be the picture of the synagogue in Worms.

JF: How much had been destroyed of the synagogue?

HF: Well, I mean the interior completely. And the roof had gone. What I saw was left, this is on the picture of the book, was only the bare walls.

JF: And this had been from the fire that had been set inside the synagogue.

HF: Yes. And there was a sign at the synagogue by order of the police, "It is strictly prohibited to enter the premises."

JF: So, there was no way of searching to see if anything remained of the holy objects.

HF: I went there. I had so much guts, still I wanted to see inside. I went inside, but it was dangerous because the neighbors could see me there. But in many cases the Jewish community not only that they had to suffer all the damage from a burned-down synagogue, they were ordered by the authorities yet to take what was left on their own cost, to clear up the destroyed buildings so that they would be completely level. This did not happen in Worms. There is a history that happened years later that the Nazis leveled it off by explosions during the war years. They had nothing better to do, nothing more important to do than level off the synagogue, the [unclear] of the synagogue, I should say.

JF: In Worms, are you talking about now?

HF: Yes, in Worms. It's what happened in Worms. But in other cities Jews were ordered by the authority to take care of leveling of the synagogue.

JF: Now, you had mentioned earlier to me that the synagogue was also bombed by Allied bombs during the war.

HF: Yes, actually, there was actually hardly anything left by that in 1945.

JF: This was after the Nazis themselves had destroyed...

HF: Whatever was, I imagine a pile of rubble was left, and on that a bomb came.

JF: Okay, so there was further Nazi destruction after *Kristallnacht* of the synagogue.

HF: Yes, in the synagogue in Worms, and long after I left.

JF: When you did sneak back in, what did you find?

HF: Well, what did I find? The ruins of a synagogue that was very close to me, and there were no more benches, no more inside, no more any furniture. All the Torah scrolls had gone.

JF: There were no remains at all?

HF: Just the stones that hadn't burned and it was difficult, of course, to walk, because it was chaos, chaos. Some people...

*Tape three, side two:*

JF: This is tape three, side two, of an interview with Dr. Helmut Frank on February 24th, 1982.

HF: Some people went to the burned out *shul* and said *kaddish* at the *shul*.

JF: Was this when you were there?

HF: But they would all do that clandestinely when nobody would see them. Maybe some did it at night time.

JF: Was the Levy Synagogue, the old Levy Synagogue across the street still standing?

HF: The Levy Synagogue was--there was vandalism inside, but as such it was standing between houses. Wherever a synagogue was standing in the middle of houses, the Nazis would not burn it. They would dynamite it inside, and in this case the Levy Synagogue was not a synagogue any more. We needed a gym for our Jewish school and with my permission and under my supervision the synagogue was converted into a gym. The Nazis didn't know about this. They still thought it was a synagogue and that we have to do some work of destruction inside.

JF: Were you able to use this or any other place for another place of worship?

HF: Yes. That is right. We immediately worked restoring a temporary house of prayer. In this case we took one of the, one of the larger rooms of the school, the congregational building, it was all the same thing, and converted it to a synagogue. I should mention at this time that we had a very dedicated teacher among the teaching staff of our school. Her name should be mentioned. It was Miss Mansbacher. Miss Mansbacher immediately went to work right after the pogrom of the 10th of November in getting permission from the authorities to open the school again. And after she got permission, I think, after two weeks, she had to find benches. A funny thing happened. My wife knows the story. She starts laughing when I mention it. You know, people had lost all their furniture; they didn't have a chair to sit on. So, there was one of the, of my leading congregants, a man, I don't know at this time why he wasn't taken to the concentration camp, but he was home, one of the few left home. But his living room was completely destroyed; he didn't have a chair to sit on. So, since he was prominent in the school committee, he went to the school and took out chairs from the bench. By the way, the congregation building was locked. I think maybe I said it and maybe I didn't say it, but it was locked by order of the authorities on 10th of November and nobody could go in, and nobody could go out. But by that time it was opened again so he took benches out for him to have some place to sit for him and his family. So, that teacher Miss Mansbacher went to him and said, "Mr. Meyer, I know you have taken out my chairs from the school building but I need them back. I want to start teaching again." So, his answer was, "You have nothing in your dumb mind but your dumb school." In German dialect it sounds even better, I can say that. But she was very angry.

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

JF: Did he give them to her?

HF: He had no choice. They were not his chairs and he was a man who still was in financial condition to buy himself new chairs.

JF: This was Herta Mansbacher that Dr. Huttenbach has written about?

HF: That's right. There's a book on her. Yes. She was a person, I should say, who deserves to be mentioned. Her name is perpetuated in the book and by a special memorial tablet on the synagogue that was dedicated two years ago.

JF: In the restored Worms Synagogue?

HF: Right. And, so when I came, the school was open. The school was in session. So, whatever school children had remained, they were taught by a dedicated staff of her and some other women teachers who had not been taken to the concentration camp. No women had been taken to the concentration camp at that time, so she was there and taught the children.

JF: Now, at this point, you had said to me that the original Jewish population of Worms before 1933 was about 1200.

HF: I believe so, yes.

JF: And, in 1937 it was about 500?

HF: Yes.

JF: And, at this point, there had already been another decrease?

HF: Yes, don't forget, from 1937 till 1938 many people had left, and under the condition of the pogrom many had left other cities. I found the congregation was very much depleted. Even if I account for the fact that some are in concentration camps, still they left. So, we had enough space in schools, the larger schools, for services. First we went to, by the way, to the old age home for services, then one skilled working man built us a very nice synagogue, as you can see on that picture in back of you. It wasn't a bad place, so at least until I left we had regular services there.

JF: The painting that you are referring to was done of you praying in front of the ark.

HF: Yes. By one of my congregants who, thank God, was saved very late to marry a man named Gustof, and he lived here in St. Louis and he got very old and died only a few years ago, a very fine man.

JF: And this picture was painted of you in this make-shift synagogue.

HF: That's right.

JF: In the school building?

HF: That's correct. That's right.

JF: Were you able to find any prayer books or get another Torah from any other community?

HF: I see you are thinking of the right thing. Yes. Absolutely right. The first thing, yes. One hundred percent. The first thing we had to do before starting services, we had to get a *Sefer Torah* because all 30 of them weren't there any more. And, as it

happened in Germany, we were not the only congregation that was destroyed or burned down. There were quite a number of small congregations in Germany where the synagogue was already sold and the people had taken the *Sefer Torah* that they had in their own safeguarding. So, there were congregations like that where they had Torahs for sale. The first thing was, and I will never forget it, we went to a village community, what was once a village community. There was one man left who had been trusted with a *Sefer Torah*, so he brought a *Sefer Torah*. We needed it. So we had a *Sefer Torah*, and the rest of the furniture was done, by, as I said, one of the skilled workers of the congregation who did a very good job.

JF: Had the community been taxed after *Kristallnacht*?

HF: Well, you know the Jewish community, as such, by order of the Nazis was fined for the murder of vom Rath. We was taxed one billion of *Mark*.

JF: Did this make a severe impression on the economics of your town?

HF: Definitely. Everybody would have to part with, in order to pay this, he would have to part with his valuables, whatever he had, had to be given to the Gestapo-- the financial authorities and this damaged the congregants, not the congregation but the congregants, those who had means, quite severely, because many wanted to immigrate. Before this debt, so-called debt was paid, they wouldn't get permission to leave Germany.

JF: Did this also then affect the funds that you had available to you to perform some of your tasks as a synagogue?

HF: No, the congregation at that time, the congregation as such was not fined. So, I continued to receive my salary as before.

JF: And the Torah that you purchased was able to be bought through the congregational funds?

HF: Yes, this way we were not out of funds. We had the same funds we had before.

JF: Were you still able to carry on your work in the community, the visiting of the prisons?

HF: Yes, I continued teaching as before; I continued officiating at services as before.

JF: Was there any interference on the part of the Nazi officials in the town in your performance, your religious performance?

HF: I don't think so. Once they gave us permission to hold services, they didn't bother us any more. Don't forget, you mentioned before, it just comes to my mind, whether we had lost members. We had lost many members, but at the same time we had gained some members, because from very small communities where a life for Jews was just impossible, Jews came to Worms to live there, so we had gained quite a number of new members during that time.

JF: About how many then do you think were in your congregation, say, in 1939? Between the exodus and the increase in population?

HF: I would imagine that when I said good-bye that, I spoke at that time to a group of maybe 50-60 people. Don't forget not everybody came to the synagogue. But, maybe we had, maybe at that time, there was still 150 Jews in Worms, maybe less.

JF: Were there still incidents in the town of excesses on the part of the Nazis towards people on the streets? Any kind of random violence, as there had been before?

HF: After that, you see, Jewish personal life came to a complete standstill. There were no more Jewish businesses; they were prohibited to function. So, they couldn't then boycott Jewish stores. There weren't any more stores. And, every day brought some more limitations of Jewish activities so, actually, the Nazis couldn't show how to harm the Jews because Jews kept away from the street as much as they could. They stayed home. At that time I don't think there were any personal attacks; at least I don't remember that. You always hear of new arrests. The Gestapo would make a search in the house and would find things that were to your disadvantage.

JF: Your parents were still in Wiesbaden, right?

HF: Right. Yes.

JF: And, is there anything else that you can describe to me about that period of time before you left in 1939?

HF: Well, when I left my congregation it was a very bad feeling. Because I knew those who I left, whom I leave now, I don't think I will see them again. Now, I left in August '39, and up to August '41 Jews were still leaving. Some were leaving for Poland because they originally came from Poland and still thought it is a better place to stay than Germany. For a while they might have been right. But you know what came later on.

JF: This was from the original application that you had made?

HF: Yes.

JF: To immigrate to the United States?

HF: Yes, yes. I had made that application already years before the pogrom of '38.

JF: Had your parents also applied to leave?

HF: Yes, they also were--you see, I must explain to you how that worked. They wanted to leave for America, the USA, and the consulate would give out waiting numbers. They would give a certain quota of people leave Germany. The quota was very small, so that they got a waiting number in case the quota--they would come to their own waiting number, it might have been maybe 45, 46, normally things would go on. In other words, to wait for quota numbers was impossible, but for professors and clergymen there were certain out-of-quota conditions under which you could leave.

JF: Why is that?

HF: So, if a rabbi, I'm speaking of my own case, if a rabbi would receive a job in a Jewish congregation in America, and the contract would be sent the rabbi, he would get a visa outside of the quota.

JF: The Nazis respected that?

HF: The Nazis were not interested. They were happy to see every Jew leave. But the consulate respected that.

JF: I see; the American consul respected that.

HF: Right, and that's how I got out in time because Rabbi Simon Greenberg of Har Zion [synagogue in suburban Philadelphia] sent me such a contract. Why I was sent because I was not the only one? I was not the only one that applied. There were 50 rabbis, maybe 100, who applied for that, but I was one of the first ones at least. So, I got preference this way. About my parents: we, my parents lived in Wiesbaden, about three-quarters of an hour by railroad away from city where I was rabbi, the city of Worms. And, of course, I had to say good-bye to my parents. I didn't know would I see them ever again. But as I pointed out, sometimes when I spoke about my Holocaust experiences before an audience in the congregation of A.J. [Congregation Adath Jeshurun] here in Philadelphia, I was lucky in two ways. Not only that I could save myself from Germany yet before the war, but also was able to save my parents, and that my parents lived here in America until their death. After I came here in the beginning of September '39, we heard that the war had broken out. Germany was marching into Poland, something that we who lived in Germany had expected, because we saw the preparations for war being done very openly before us, and originally I had planned to leave Germany about November, December '39, but when I saw what was going on, I was able yet to get a passage for middle of August, and I just had to leave my belongings behind. But I could at that time save my life by leaving just shortly before the war.

JF: You left all your books and papers.

HF: Yes, my parents were able then to send them, but it was a slow process because they had to send them first to Holland, and in Holland they were at the time of the invasion, the Nazi invasion, so that--it's a whole story and I don't think it's worthwhile to tell you the story of my life. Anyhow, it was saved at the end of the war and then I got back whatever I had in my belongings.

JF: They were held in Holland then from the time they were shipped?

HF: Yes, the only thing was, this man where they were sent had ten warehouses. Nine of them were bombed and completely destroyed, and my stuff just happened to be in the tenth, and when the Germans came to the warehouse and wanted to know what are these things here, so the man supposedly told the German officers they belonged to some non-Jews or Aryans living in Germany, so he wasn't interested any more in confiscation or anything. Anyhow, after the war I got everything back. So, I was lucky in this way. I wanted to tell you about my parents. After I came here and had a job myself, I devoted much of my time to make possible immigration of my parents to



America, and, thank God, together with my sister, we worked in getting not only an affidavit, what they needed in order to get to America, but also we got something that I never knew outside of America that something like this existed--political push.

JF: Your sister was here?

HF: Here before me, yes.

JF: What year did she come?

HF: She came in the same year but a few months earlier.

JF: Had she been living in Wiesbaden with your parents?

HF: Excuse me, I was wrong. It was not the same year. It was '38. It was the year before.

JF: And she had been living where?

HF: In my home town in Wiesbaden. My brother-in-law is a dentist. So, she was already in New York at the time. And so I went to Cincinnati in April 1940 and found relatives who were willing to give an affidavit to my parents. But not only that. Lucky I was in this respect that these relatives were friendly with a senator, and that this senator sent a telegram to the consul in Stuttgart, Germany, to immediately see that these people get their visa to America. The consulate followed the order given by the senator, and my parents were able to leave in the summer of 1941. It was a long, drawn-out journey, but one has to consider that a few months after they got the visa from Stuttgart, all consulars in Germany were called back to America, and the offices were closed, and that half a year later, after the Wannsee Conference, the deportations started already. One of the first ones to be deported was a brother of my mother, my uncle who was not married; and this was a category in Frankfurt that was taken first for deportation. He was yet able to send a postcard from Poland and there were only a few words on that postcard. He said, "Still I am living," and then his name. That was the only time we received any mail from him.

JF: Were your parents able to tell you what their experience was like until 1941?

HF: Yes, terrible. Because, we had our own house. One day there was an English bomb attack on our home town and Nazis immediately came to my parents' house and said, "Look, Aryans were bombed in this attack, and if you as Jews caused it, you ordered it, so you have to vacate your living quarters within a few hours, and the beds have to be made so the people can have their night rest as usual." So, from one minute to the next they had to find, they had to live together with some other Jews in very cramped quarters. This was one experience. And, thank God, that they were able to leave yet on almost the last boat. Still, another point to mention it, since I want to stop with a happy ending. Best friends of my parents, another family, they were deported to Theresienstadt. Both survived it; both were, both came to America and were reunited with my parents again. So this I would say this was a ray of light, of hope, in a very dark time, a very dark world.

*From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive*

JF: The synagogue of Worms had also been restored as you have described to me? And it was rededicated in 1961?

HF: Yes. I was not there. At that time I was working and didn't want to leave my work unattended. I have a financial loss so that was to be considered. However, in '79 I was asked by a committee to dedicate memorial tablets for the people who had lost their lives and this memorial tablet to be affixed to the new built synagogue. This time I was asked to come along. I would have had the time to come along. Unfortunately my condition of health would not permit me to come along. But, I sent them a personal message, and that message was read during the service of dedication.

JF: You were able to visit the synagogue, however, in the early '70s.

HF: '72, yes.

JF: And you were able to see the chair of Rashi that is restored?

HF: Yes, definitely, yes. The synagogue from the outside looks almost the way it looked before. Inside the furnishings--and as I told you I believe that the money must have gone out after they built it, and there was not enough to furnish inside the way it should have been done.

JF: At the time that you left, you mentioned before there were probably only about 150 Jews?

HF: Or less.

JF: Or less left in the town and a certain number of these might also have been able to leave Germany before the deportation started.

HF: Yes. Yes. In the list of Miss Mansbacher, the book of immigration--you can see about 20 or maybe some more names of people who were able to leave yet after I had left. Some did the desperate step of going to Poland, because at one time they had Poland citizenship and thought they would escape the "Final Solution" of the "Jewish Question" in Poland. Unfortunately I don't think anyone of those who went to Poland was seen again.

JF: They elected to go?

HF: Yes, yes.

JF: Is there anything else that you'd like to add to what you've already told us?

HF: Well, I left Worms with a heavy heart because I was afraid that the worst could happen, and I found that it was almost ironical on my part that I blessed the congregation before I left, because what kind of a blessing is that? You just decide the words, but in your heart you are afraid that the worst thing could happen to them. That was the feeling with which I left the community. If I could have done only anything to help them, to take them with me, to save only one of them, to come to America, I would love to have done it. I did make some contacts with relatives of the people here, but by that time, after the war had broken out in '39, it was almost impossible for those who had

not made former efforts in order to leave Germany that they would get, after that, get a visa for another country. Very sad picture.

JF: Dr. Frank, thank you so much for talking to us.

HF: You are quite welcome.