

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

KONRAD BIEBER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Harold Stern
Dates: January 14, 1998
January 28, 1998
March 22, 1998

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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KB - Konrad Bieber [interviewee]

HS - Harold Stern [interviewer]

Dates: January 14, 1998

January 28, 1998

March 22, 1998 (addendum)

Tape one, side one:

HS: One, two, three, one, two, three, testing. This is tape one, side one, of an interview with Dr. Konrad Bieber, interviewed by Harold Stern on January 15,--excuse me, January 14, 1998. Dr. Bieber, could you tell us how you have--where you were born, and a little bit about where you were born and your early history?

KB: I was born in 1916 in Berlin, Charlottenburg, and had a very happy childhood. My parents moved to a section of Berlin, Grunewald, which was founded by Bismarck, but was very comfortable. We had an apartment, and I was the only child, and I became very friendly with a boy, since I was the only one, who was also a single, only child, two years older than I, across the street, who was half Jewish. It so happened that my mother was a gymnastics teacher and she sat in the park, when I was playing with this boy, and the mother, tall and blond, came and spoke with my mother, and found out she was a gymnastics teacher, and she said, "I'll send my boy to you." And my mother said, "I must tell you that I'm Jewish." "So am I", said the other lady who had converted to Judaism. He and I became very close, like brothers. He went...

HS: In what year was that?

KB: From 1922 to 1933. He went to Norway first and then to Argentina, and I eventually lost him, then we found connection. And one of his children is now our adopted daughter.

HS: Wonderful. What was your life like school-wise?

KB: I went to a school which was a twin of the Frankfurt Goethe Schule, Gutenrat Gymnasium, where my poor mathematics were given a chance to even out with humanities. I was very good in German and French, and History, and when I left the school in 1933, my father wrote a letter to my Greek teacher, whom I venerate like many generations, saying that I had no future. This letter...

HS: What do you mean, you had no future?

KB: Had no future in Germany.

HS: I see. Did he spell it out because of...?

KB: Oh yes. He spelled it out. The letter actually was exhibited in 1996, when Berlin had an exhibit of Jewish Education, and the now principal of the school, which is ironically called Walther Rathenau Oberschule, sent me a copy of my father's letter. It was amusing exhibit, anyway...

HS: How old were you at that time in 1933?

KB: I was seventeen.

HS: Seventeen.

KB: And when I left Germany, the math teacher looked at me and said, "You have never had anything better than an F, but I'm not a Nazi, I'll pass you."

HS: [Chuckle]

KB: He did that to many people.

HS: That was wonderful.

KB: He lived to 94.

HS: So he gave you actually a...

KB: Passing, passing.

HS: He was very nice to you.

KB: Yes.

HS: Now, let me ask you, did you belong to any special organizations?

KB: I was affiliated in a very unofficial way to the *Kameraden*, the Jewish group, and that was all, and I had a very--my parents were liberal, my paternal grandfather was deeply religious man, and for his sake, I went to the synagogue on holidays.

HS: Was that a liberal synagogue, or...?

KB: It was, yes, *Friedenstempel*, it was Rabbi Prinz.

HS: Yes.

KB: And Rabbi Prinz, when my grandfather died, asked my father for a photograph, to give a good speech at Weissensee, and he saw him and said, "This is my best customer." And, of course, I had some education. A schoolmate, who's still my friend, in London now, Tim Neuhaus, and I had religious history, Jewish religious history, from his aunt, Helena Caspary, so we had a good grounding. On top of that, in our school, we had a visitor, Rabbi Emil Bernhard Cohen, who also was a playwright, that's Emil Bernhard, who came on this bicycle and gave us Humana, a very excellent grounding in Jewish history and philosophy. We had also, of course, being very brazen, asked him to always deposit a joke for the end of the class. I remember, not only the joke, but also the...

HS: What grade was that would you think, just about...?

KB: *Unterprima* [second to last grade in *gymnasium*], *Oberprima* [last grade in *gymnasium* prior to graduation], the last two years.

HS: Was that a Jewish school, or was it...

KB: No, the school?

HS: ...part of the synagogue?

KB: The school was a general school. Actually when my mother, in 1925, talked to the principal, who wore one of those starched collars, he was a German national, who later refused to hoist the Nazi flag, and therefore was dismissed, he said, "I

must tell you that there is only one non-Jewish child in that class.” My mother said, “I hope it’s also a decent boy.”

HS: What was the name of the school?

KB: Grunewald Gymnasium, which is now the Walter Rathenau Oberschule.
Yes.

HS: And what year was that again?

KB: Well, I joined the school in 1925 and left it in September of 1933, well before the *Abiturium* [final exam at secondary school].

HS: Did your parents belong to a special organization, like politically or religiously? They belonged to a congregation, I think you mentioned.

KB: In New York, yes.

HS: No, I’m talking about Berlin.

KB: No.

HS: No. How long have your parents or family lived in Germany that you can verify or go back to?

KB: Well, a cousin of my father’s made a family tree, in London...

HS: Yes.

KB ...and it goes back to about the beginning of the 18th century. The family, Bieber family, came from West Preussen, from the Vistula, a town called Schwetz on the Vistula, and they were, most of them were, my grandfather was one of eight, and they were well-known as leather manufacturers.

HS: Was that your father’s family?

KB: My father’s family, yes.

HS: And your mother’s?

KB: My mother comes from the Rhineland, from Elberfeld, which is now Wuppertal, and my maternal grandfather was the owner in a company of a menswear store, Natan and Gumpers [phonetic], and I often went to see my grandparents, of course, as a child.

HS: That was in Elberfeld?

KB: Elberfeld, yes. The grandfather died before Hitler. My grandmother came to this country early. So did her youngest daughter and actually her youngest son had come in 1922 and married [unclear].

HS: Did any men in your family serve in the army in Germany in any of the wars that you can...?

KB: My uncle, my mother’s older brother, was an officer, was a lieutenant in the Germany army, and unfortunately was deadly wounded at Verdun. I still remember vaguely, my first memory as a child, he was in Halberstadt in the *Lazarett* [military hospital] and eventually died.

HS: And you knew him?

KB: Well, I knew him when I was a baby.

HS: Yeah, yeah, and of course that was World War II; did any...

KB: That was World War I.

HS: World War I? Did any of the relatives serve in, that you know of, serve in the Franco-Prussian War?

KB: No.

HS: No.

KB: My father was a reservist. He was a *Landsturmmann* [member of the Home guard]. He was injured, he had a head injury in the Russian front, and my mother visited him in Grodno, that was a [unclear] outside and he recovered.

HS: Yes. And did he serve on the Russian and the Western front then?

KB: No, my father did not.

HS: No. Did you have any contact with the *Reichsvertretung*, or Council of German Jews, in any way, with your family?

KB: Actually, we did, and my father later, he was a writer, wrote an article that was translated into Yiddish in the *Hebrew Letter* on antisemitism in the Weimar Republic and it came through this organization.

HS: That's very interesting. And did you also experience any antisemitism when growing up?

KB: No. As a child in school, with about half the class being non-Jewish, we had very good relations. I knew that some of these, [unclear], later on one of them became an SS man, but still individually we were all respected. The teachers, there was a gymnastics teacher...

HS: Yeah.

KB: ...was very antisemitic and did never conceal that, but he was reprimanded by the principal. And when my mother and father took me to spas on the North Sea, or the Baltic Sea, then it was a question of where to go, because there were several that were not open to Jews.

HS: What little town? What resort did you go to?

KB: We went to Norderney.

HS: Yes.

KB: And we went to Baltic and Finkenhagen. I remember those, because my parents talked about them and we have photographs.

HS: And how did your family react to the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor?

KB: Well, as you know, the Nazis had lost from June 1932 to November, 2,000,000 votes and were on the way down, when, unfortunately, President Hindenburg's son was a gambler and needed money, and behind the wings brought in [unclear] the Nazis. Naturally, we didn't greet this with enthusiasm. My mother being very German, very Jewish, but very German, had a very successful school for gymnastics. She had just two years earlier transferred from a small studio to an enormous studio that had been used by the sculptors who made the enormous outdoor sculptures for the *Nationalgalerie*

[unclear]. And had this was, was very nicely appointed, and she decided, if they don't want me, I'll leave Germany. And we had a neighbor on our landing, who was, as she told us, number eight in the Nazi party, her name was Kriegoleid [phonetic] [unclear]. She had inherited money from her boss, who gave her the money, provided she took care of a big Newfoundland dog, and when she heard that my mother wanted to leave Germany, she was beseeching her, and said, "I know Hitler. He is no anti-Semite." And my mother said, "That's very odd, I'd rather go." The next morning on the landing there was like a funeral, there were flowers all over. She wanted us to stay. I mean it was a personal, nice gesture.

HS: Gesture, yes.

KB: Now, my mother, the day before we left Germany, went down from the apartment to do the last shopping, and she met a young Protestant neighbor with a baby, and she told her, "I'm leaving Germany," and this woman said then to her, "*Frau Bieber, ich beneide Sie,*" "Mrs. Bieber I envy you!" and it happened to be the woman whose own husband and famous brother-in-law, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were both beheaded by Hitler before, days before the end of the war. Emmi Bonhoeffer. When we moved in 1990 from Long Island to here to Pennsylvania, I wrote my school, where I hadn't passed the *Arbitur* [final exam], but my classmates had put me on the list of old comrades.

HS: Your own classmates.

KB: And we got the alumni bulletin, it said that the house on the, of the Bonhoeffers, not far from our apartment in Grunewald was now a memorial, and that Mrs. Bonhoeffer lived in Frankfurt. And I wrote a letter to her saying, "You don't know me, but you might remember my mother," who was at the time still alive, she died in 1991, and she immediately answered me.

HS: How?

KB: In Germany, in German, and said, "Of course, I remembered your mother, and my husband Klaus", who later became President of Lufthansa said, even then, 'This will not end well,' realizing he would pay with his life." We corresponded until she died last year.

HS: That's terrific, and [doorbell rang]. Excuse me, this is somebody [short pause]. Dr. Bieber, did you have any close relationships socially with non-Jewish people in Berlin?

KB: Certainly, my parents had, and, I had from school, and even after Hitler came to power. I walked to school with a, the son of a doctor who lived on the same street, Karl Loeb [phonetic] and he made a point of walking with me when some others were more reserved, although not hostile. And after the war I, and he also [doorbell rang]...

HS: [short pause] Did your friend get into trouble with any of his classmates because he was befriending you?

KONRAD BIEBER [1-1-6]

KB: No, even the Nazis were not [doorbell rang, short pause]. He told me in 1933 that his mind was made up. He wanted to be in the army, and he wanted to study medicine like his father, and eventually he did become a military doctor. After the war, I wrote to his address, and his sister answered that he died in the last day of Tunisian occupation by the Germans. And I had another friend from the tennis club, the son of a publisher, Gert Luedtke, who also died, and all my non-Jewish classmates died. Some of them, actually the first one, was the son of the *Adjutant* [aide-de camp] to the previous Chancellor Schleicher, who was murdered by Hitler, and to be on the safe side, they killed the whole family, including the *Adjutant* and his family and my classmate.

HS: Dr. Bieber, can you tell me a little bit more, how your parents realized that there was no future for your family in Germany? Also, what happened to your other relatives? Did they share in this opinion and your preparations for leaving Germany in 1933?

KB: Certainly. My mother was from a very German-Jewish family, with stress on German, but when the boycott in April of that year occurred, she was so disgusted that she said, "I cannot live in a country where I'm not wanted." And she thought about it, and had a few addresses of friends in Paris, and she decided to go, and my father entirely agreed with this.

HS: Did they agree, naturally, to meet later on, or did your mother think she wanted to sit it out for a little while and see what happens?

KB: Well, it was, of course, unpredictable, but with the consolidation of the Nazis' grip on power, my father was confirmed in his decision, although all his colleagues from the boss, the president of that organization to his colleagues, insisted that he should stay. He said, "No, I can't," and he left. He had a very difficult time in emigration, but he never regretted having left.

HS: What exactly was your father...

KB: He was...

HS ...doing in...

KB: He was a *Germanist*. He had published books, which are still in American colleges and universities on the reserve shelf as standard books on German literature. And, he had never been teaching, but he had been a freelance writer who was considered among the top people in his field. So for him, it was a very difficult thing to go. He, he under--he was very well read in French literature, English literature. In New York, when the phone rang at 11 p.m., we were sure that somebody said, "Dr. Bieber, where in Shakespeare is a letter?" and he would say, "There are three places," which I would never find, and so on. And yet, he had this great difficulty. He continued his scholarly work in the French libraries and had occasional contributions to international publications, and then of course, he worked for the *Neue Tagebuch* that was published in Amsterdam.

HS: How did you prepare, how did he by himself prepare the emigration? Were you able to take your household with you?

KB: I had been in a, in a student exchange. For years, I had been selected by my school to represent them in meeting French citizens in Berlin, and we met, and, therefore, I had been also in a exchange camp in 1932, 20 German and 20 French boys met in a town here, Berlin Woltersdorf [phonetic] and I had made some good friends at the time. And we began in 1933, since my father was a *Frontkämpfer* [front line soldier], I was allowed to continue. Actually the woman who took over from Ernst Schwartz [phonetic], who was a wonderful Social Democratic organizer, came to this country and worked for the unions. Ella Cousselor [phonetic] was a *Deutschnationale* [political party]; she looked like a *Germania* and spoke like it, and at least they were fair, and let a few Jewish boys continue. And in the exchange was a French teacher, among others, who was married to a Jewish lawyer in Paris, who immediately told me, "You must leave Germany, and I'll help you." He had a close friend in the French embassy who facilitated my father's sending the *Lift* [large shipping crate], limited number of things, and he had to dissolve the household. I remember one item. My grandmother visited with her older daughter, my aunt, and my aunt was standing on the balcony.

HS: That was your father's mother?

KB: My mother's...

HS: Your mother's sister.

KB: Now it was strictly forbidden to have anything new. You had only the right to take used things. So, I have to say this in German, to her mother, who stood on the street level, my aunt said, "*Diesen wunderbaren Teewagen hat der Hugo der Luci gekauft bei Rosenheim.*" [Hugo has bought that wonderful tea wagon for Lucie at Rosenheim.] "She bought this tea wagon at Rosenheim," despite all the things, which was a small item, of course.

HS: Can you translate it into English?

KB: Well, he bought...

HS: This very good tea wagon...

KB: He bought it [chuckle]...

HS: Yes, for Luci.

KB: For my father.

HS: And you left Germany officially?

KB: Yes, we had emigrated at the time; there was a very small allowance of whatever we could take, and we lived in Paris in an apartment.

HS: And how did you get a start in Paris?

KB: I was a student. First of all, my father took me to a *lycée*, to a high school, where the principal very kindly said, "You can come here, and in one, two, or three years you have your French baccalauréat." He said, "You also may just take a equivalency exam at the Sorbonne," and this was not, as we say, in the ears of a deaf person. I went

to the Sorbonne, found out about the preparation and I passed the examination. Luckily, in the written, I didn't have any mathematics.

HS: So you had very good schooling in Berlin?

KB: Excellent schooling.

HS: So, would you say that the Berlin *gymnasium* was a humanistic, humanistic *gymnasium*?

KB: Well, it had three sections, and I, being bad in Math, walked, had the last four years, had eight hours of Latin and eleven hours of Greek every week, and we had a Greek teacher who was wonderful, most non-conformist, non-political. And when I had left Germany in the spring of 1934, a classmate wrote me, this heavy man who was so unhappy with the Nazis died in class, he must have had a heart attack, he was for many generations unforgettable.

HS: And so you could continue your higher education in Paris?

KB: Yes.

HS: What did your parents, what was the beginning of your parents' existing, existence in Paris?

KB: My mother had taken an apartment in the nice section of Paris, the 16th *arrondissement* "Auteuil" with a view of finding people interested in gymnastics. And she rented a studio near the Trocadéro, and had, through ads in the German *Deutsche Tageblatt* immediately a few people who came. And then she had also some French students. She went during the summer of that year, 1933 -- 1933, [KB corrected himself] to the seaside, to Deauville and she played medicine ball with all comers, and as the season...

HS: What was that?

KB: Medicine ball, it's a heavy ball that...

HS: Medicine ball.

KB: Medicine ball, and as the season neared its end, some of the people wanted her address, so they could be students in her gymnastics club.

HS: Yes.

KB: And one brother and sister came, and wrote their name down, and my mother said, "Natasha Chernikowski, you were in my studio in Berlin, when you were nine!" This actually led to my later marrying, because when people asked me here at Folkways, "Where did you meet your wife?" I said, "On the street in Paris," [chuckle] which sounds terrible but, but introduced by her cousin, who my mother had rediscovered.

HS: Well, you can say we were introduced. [chuckle] And what did your father start with?

KB: Well, my father being a scholar, went to the Bibliothèque Nationale, to the National Library, and he also met a Polish gentleman who had some diplomatic connections. And they started a very deluxe, very luxurious, presentation of a periodical,

and at all embassies in all Western nations. And it started very successfully with the help of the Brazilian ambassador, and I met a young Guatemalan diplomat, who was my friend, to study, whose family later became tragically famous in the coup at Guatemala. Anyway, it started well, but it didn't end up too well. Also, my father had invested what little money he could take in a play by a very famous German language author, Ferdinand Bruckner, called *Die Rassen*, The Races.

HS: Oh.

KB: Which started with a famous stage director and famous actors in a small theatre, and had rave reviews, but did not last. And so this was not successful. But my mother had been able to feed the family, and I, being a student, was very fortunate in having lots of tutoring to do...

HS: Oh.

KB: ...in French families.

HS: In German?

KB: In German, and Classics. There was, for instance, the family of an army general, who had need of a Latin teacher and I filled the job. And I was really able to, to pay for myself. Studies in France are nominally onerous, and to give a little money to my parents, too.

HS: When you were living in Paris, were you in touch with other members of the family in Germany or elsewhere?

KB: Yes, my mother's sister, at the time, still lived in Cologne. And her husband was a traveling salesman, who describes his success, he was born in Brussels, in France, by coming to the famous stores. He came to the Galerie Lafayette where he had come for years, and Monsieur Badère [phonetic], the buyer of Lafayette...

HS: Buyer...

KB: ...said, "Monsieur Schirokauer [phonetic] I...

[Tape one, side one ended]

Tape one, side two:

HS: This is tape one, side two, of Dr. Konrad Bieber interviewed by Harold Stern on January 14, 1998.

KB: So this buyer for Lafayette said to my uncle, "I'm sorry, I can no longer buy from you because people won't buy German merchandise." And my uncle answered, pointing to his heart, "Here, Mr. Badère, I understand you, here," pointing to his stomach...

HS: ...Yeah.

KB: ...I can't. [chuckle]

HS: What year was that?

KB: It was '34, 5, 6...

HS: '35? So there was apparently an inkling of hostility on the part of the French people against what was happening in Germany?

KB: Oh yes. Much later, after the war, my uncle came back to the same place, representing Israeli firms, and he had Americanized his name, because the other one was unpronounceable, and became Mr. Shearer, like the actress Norma Shearer.

HS: Oh.

KB: Mr. Badère [phonetic], the same man came out of his office and said, "*Monsieur Shearer for maison à lettre*, I don't know, *Monsieur Shirokauer, Rue de Ramère, de Rue de Ramère*, I remember.

HS: And what happened to the relatives that were left in Germany?

KB: Well, they also immigrated, and they went directly from Germany to the United States. My mother's sister, her husband, and her mother, who had been in Aachen in a retirement home, all went to the United States.

HS: And I presume that was later in life, 1936 maybe?

KB: Something like that.

HS: Yes. Was there apprehension on the part of the French people that war would break out sooner or later? Can you describe maybe the...

KB: Yes.

HS: ...political conditions a little bit?

KB: In France, yeah?

HS: In France.

KB: Well, no, I think--my father was an avid paper reader. We had at least three or four different papers every day, and followed trends in France, and I as a student was militating for the pacifist groups. We had a 1,000,000 [people] demonstration a year before the war in the largest square in Paris, where people were singing songs against war, and of course...

HS: Was that Concorde?

KB: Place de la Concorde, yes.

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HS: Okay.

KB: ...and of course, the outbreak of war was treated with very mixed feelings, as you know, by many people. The eventual collapse probably had to do with this.

HS: In 1939, was there a great deal of preparation going on for the war after the invasion of Czechoslovakia? Did people think there would be a war?

KB: Well, as you know, after Munich, the French Prime Minister Daladier came home and he was hailed, but he said, audibly enough for people around him to understand, "How stupid can people be?" And he, as a politician, foresaw that this wouldn't hold, but the English Prime Minister did not. Neville Chamberlain.

HS: Yes, that is it.

KB: And this was very limited, and although the French army was reputed to be the strongest military power in Western Europe, unfortunately, the people in charge had resisted modernizing the army, as you know, and this was one of the reasons of the defeat.

HS: Was there primarily a reliance on the Maginot Line more than justified?

KB: Well, the Maginot Line, as you could see afterwards...

HS: Yeah.

KB: ...did not cover everything. And for the Germans this was no problem, they just went around again.

HS: Yes.

KB: To Belgium.

HS: Belgium. So when the war started in September 1, 1939 what happened to you and your family?

KB: I had married days before the war. Actually, the mayor wanted me to marry my mother-in-law, which didn't--he was so confused. And my mother had a vacation camp in Brittany, for the third time. I was helping her and I had also gone to the police Commissariat to offer my services as a volunteer of the French army, which, of course, didn't register.

HS: Why not?

KB: Well, as a German subject, I would be subject to internment as an enemy alien. One day in this vacation place arrived a car of friends, these, this friend came in a car and had followed warnings by having a mattress on the roof of his car, and he was dressed in September, in hot weather, like for a mountain climbing. He was ready to go to internment camp, and he said to me, "You must go!" And I tried to hold out. I went two days later.

HS: Were you supposed to register for an internment camp?

KB: No, just to present yourself. Just to come.

HS: So you had to register as an enemy alien?

KB: Right.

HS: And what happened there? What was the procedure?

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KB: Well, we were just accepted as we, as we got in there. I came late, two days late.

HS: And that was anywhere you were at the moment? It didn't have to be your home town?

KB: No, wherever you were. Actually, it specifically said, not the place of your legal residence, but the place where you are. And I was admitted by the military to this place, and they said, "It's too late, we can't register you." So I slept there on the straw. The next morning, it being a warm day, I found that the outdoor water was warm, and I stripped and washed, and I heard from very nearby, which I hadn't seen at night, where the masses of people interned had seen me, a pile of laughter. So when I joined the group an hour later, I was greeted by a man who was almost as wide as he was tall, one of the Austrian workers in a metal factory, who said, "You are the one who washed," [unclear]. Anyway, we were then brought by train to, this was a former monastery, to a disaffected sardine factory in Brittany, and everybody who had been in territory occupied by the Germans was interned, including Germans, Austrians, and Czechs. The...

HS: What happened to your parents?

KB: At the time, in 1939, my parents were not subject to internment. Later, they also extended the internment to people over 55, so my father was in a camp, my mother only in 1940 after the alert.

HS: Can you give me the name of the camp?

KB: Oh yes. My father was in 1939 in Francillon. That is on Loire, F-R-A-N... [very long pause on the tape; most of that side of the tape] We were sent to Laroche-sur-Yon. The camp was actually more a farm, and our beds were easily made of chicken wire which turned out to be very elastic. The food was mostly canned tuna fish, or sardines, and it wasn't too bad. Now, we were 30 people, mostly academics, asked to build an airport, so we were--I still have a photograph of a group of us--and we tickled the ground with our hoes and spades for weeks and months. And then one day the administration wanted to rush it and they brought in a bulldozer...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...who in one hour did more than we did in our...

HS: ...in all those months...

KB: ...in months. Also, my wife could live in the town nearby, and I could visit her on Sundays.

HS: Where is the Vendée situated in France?

KB: It's South of [unclear], it's on the Atlantic coast, south of Brittany. And for my birthday, she did what every housewife does; she prepared a cake and brought it to the baker...

HS: Yes.

KB: To be baked.

HS: Ahhh...

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KB: ...and two of my camp mates came for tea, which was heated on an alcohol lamp, and one of them who had been in Oranienburg compared the German concentration camp favorably with the French and German camp--he lived in Chicago afterwards--asked Tamara, "Did you also bake on this alcohol thing?" And she said, "Yes, of course." Anyway...

HS: How did he compare Oranienburg to the camp he was in?

KB: Because it was clean, it was organized; the rules were strictly followed in 1933...

HS: Yeah.

KB: ...and four. And he had been able to get out.

HS: Well, that's the main thing. How long did you stay in that camp?

KB: Now, this must have been over, yes, it must have been from January to March. In March, those of us, who had been screened and found eligible for the French army, were sent to an artillery barracks in Le Mans, that is between--it is a famous car racing...

HS: By what standards were you declared eligible?

KB: To be loyal to France.

HS: Yes, in spite of being an enemy alien...

KB: Yes.

HS: Officially.

KB: Yes, there must have been something like from all over France, it was like 1,200 people in one day. I can't judge about the next batch which came. We were called *prestataires*, that is soldiers of work, labor companies, and immediately detached to the British army, which was wonderful. They asked us, "How much do you get a day?" and we said, "*Cinquante centimes 50 centimes*;" and they said, "Not enough for soap," and they treated us very decently. We were given yellow corduroy suits as uniforms, and treated militarily, so that at one appeal, one what you call it, gathering, the captain said to a refugee, "You go to jail, dirty and unshaved at 11:00 pm." That was the motion for having somebody sent to jail. Also, we were, this was already spring, we were first in a camp not far from Le Mans, where we had tents, and were neighboring to people from India, Hindus with mules, but when the King of Belgium came by as a refugee, and things become very, became very critical, the whole camp was evacuated west to the suburbs of the big city of Nantes, famous for [unclear]. And we were located in a triangle between an important railroad junction, a small airport, and a huge ammunition depot, so that we were bombed. I was in a ditch and the British sergeant said, "Are you scared?" I said, "Of course, I'm scared." This became a friendship with the man.

HS: Yes.

KB: Later. I was also sitting on a chair on the ground, and a Viennese dentist with a foot treadle was doing my tooth work, which was very painful, and he said, "I'm waiting for the planes. You forget all about the pain." Now, I could tell my wife in my

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broken English, which was corrected by the lieutenant, who was very impressed if anybody made an effort, and we were given different ranks. I was a corporal in this camp, and a Viennese doctor, was a very nice guy, became a sergeant, and one of us passed the sergeant major. Now, when Paris fell, the major called us all, Major Watkins, who later became a general in Egypt, and said, "We are leaving. We have a ship in Saint Nazaire at the port and we leave some lorries for you, trucks. You take the lorries and follow us, and all those who wish to come to England with us are more than welcome and necessary." I went on instructions from my fellows, fellow prisoners, fellow camp mates, to another camp, where I met a friend who later became discussed by people here at Folkways.

HS: Yes.

KB: Who was standing on one of those trucks and receiving the backpacks of the others. When the French, the liaison officer came, who had been in the First War, he was the major of the *Chasseurs Alpins*, the Alpine Soldiers, who didn't understand what was going on. He took this pistol and said to my friend, "Go down this second or I shoot you as a deserter." And he said, "I'll be going with the British. The British are all deserters." So my friend, to save his life, came down, and we were eventually made prisoners, compliments of this major. So we were in a prisoner-of-war camp by, held by German army. The German soldiers in 1940, the young Panzerschützen, the tankers, were without any prejudice, they treated everybody very, very, in a humane way. They were friendly, they weren't overwhelming, of course, and they treated us like human beings. The camp commander was hated by his own students, who made a nasty joke about his name. His name was Bügel, Vice Bügel [phonetic], of course, but the Sergeant Major, who yelled at us from the front, came and talked in a normal voice and said, "I have to shout because the old man watches me. If you work, I will try to get improvement for your condition." They sent us out on work into the neighborhood, and we had to, some of us, had to mix cement.

[End of tape one, side two]

Tape two, side one:

KB: This was in 1940, and we had been captured in June and were still in the camp when the grapes were ripe, which was our saver, lifesaver. We went out with the cement bags, we were empty, and we used the cement bags to hide tons and tons of grapes on our wheelbarrows, until the owners of the vineyards complained to the commander, who then asked his sentry to shoot. That day we went out, it must have been September, early September 1940, and we had a soldier who was a reservist from the Sudeten, the most Nazified area of Germany. He was broad shouldered, and he told us, "Go to work, I get, I get me," as he said, "I get me," in German, "a couple of chickens." But he didn't get chickens only, he also got two bottles of spirits and had already emptied one complete bottle. So when we returned to the camp, he did not salute the sergeant major, who whispered to him, "Idiot! Salute me!" "I won't do it." "I have to report you." "Go ahead, report me, it's only fortress, I'll survive the war," not realizing that there would be sometime a Russian campaign, and he would go. Now after the unpopular, for his own soldiers' commander, we got a younger, taller, but more correct commander who was *Oberfeldwebel, Offizieisanwerter*, candidate for officer, who also talked in very cutting words, but pledged to improve our lot. Many years after the war, a friend of mine, who is a professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, Artis Rehman [phonetic] of Norwegian abstraction told me that he had been for two years on a Fulbright lectureship in Berlin, and had met the most sensitive, the most cultured, the most humane German, and he named the name which ring, had a familiar ring because I knew that after the war in Bonn, in the foreign office, there was a man of that name, Von Deu Buschen [phonetic], and I said to my friend, "Oh, he was very correct." Now in 1988 we were ready, my wife and I, to go to Paris, where we had an apartment, and the phone rings and my friend is on the phone and says, "Konrad, I, apologize I didn't keep in touch with you." And my friend is angry with me, because he thinks he is like Waldheim, that he must have forgotten something. He was an officer, and did I correctly say that he arrested you? I said, "No, he didn't arrest me. He was the camp commander after a very bad one, and behaved not only correctly, but improved our lot. Tell your friend." An hour later, the phone rings, my wife says a German accent from Geneva, Switzerland. I take the phone and I say, "Didn't our friend correct this?" "Yes", says the man in German, "but it goes much deeper." Now for a German officer, 40 some years after the war, to say that something goes deeper--then he asked me could I can come to Geneva when I came to Paris. I said, "No I can't." "Will you see me?" And I said, "I will have an hour for you." My wife said, "You need to see a German like a hole in the head." This German was very tall, he had one leg, and we talked, and he said right away, "I couldn't have been your commander because in 1940 a black Senegalese soldier shot off my thumb and I was in the hospital. Tell me your story." I told him my story and asked him and he said, "I am from a liberal family. My mother was Danish, I married a

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British lady, and the army was the best refuge against the fanatical S.S.”, which turned out to be true. Later, this man was often on public television in America as a witness, and he told more of his story, although not everything. He said that as a young officer he had hoped to hold out against the Nazis, and then later he was sorry, they were powerless, so that when in Russia, he saw mass executions of men, women, and children, he asked, he was a major at the time, he asked his colonel, “Can’t we shoot down these swine?” He said, “Of course you can, but they will shoot you”, and eventually he said, “I was almost glad when I lost my leg.”

HS: Can you tell me his name?

KB: Yes, Axel Von Der Buschen [phonetic]. He is also mentioned in a book by a friend from Berlin from boyhood who is now writing under the name of Michael Douglas. But in the obituary, when he died, in the New York Times, it said that he was involved in the plot against the Nazis, the Hitler, and had been meant to infiltrate with his bomb the headquarters under the excuse that he had to present the new uniforms of the Reserve Army.

HS: Oh yes.

KB: But the night before this should happen, the British bombed the whole outfit and burned everything down, so he couldn’t, and went back to the front where he lost his leg.

HS: How--after this camp, you, did you have to wait it out during the war? Were you in the camp during the war? How did you get out?

KB: Now this is an interesting question. The camp was very big. We had also 70 white flyers from Canada, who had been caught by the Nazis in Brittany. They came to our camp offering bread and we had a hard time understanding their French.

HS: Oh.

KB: Then we had a number of British civil internees and hundreds of North African auxiliaries of the French army, and this was our rescue. Sometimes we shared what little food we had with them. And one night in October of 1940, one of them came to our camp, and said, “We have a train.” What happened is the Nazis wanted to ingratiate themselves with the North Africans, and they liberated the people in French uniform from Morocco and Tunisia. And this Tunisian invited us to his train, which didn’t, of course...

HS: Where were they going?

KB: To the un, to the non-occupied zone of France. France was two-thirds occupied.

HS: [unclear]

KB: So we joined, lots of us, joined that train and indeed it went over the line, and there was a short scene of horror when the S.S., who had been the guards on the train, harassed the older people. And we got away as far as we could, and eventually

landed in the town where eventually my son was going to be born much later, Montauban.

HS: Now where was your wife all that time?

KB: My wife was in Paris, and as soon as I reached, as a free man, this town, actually we were brought there after being arrested. We had asked, six of us, if a farmer, if we could sleep in this, in the barn, and he said, "Any cigarettes?" "No." "Any matches? You can sleep." But before we could sleep they had denounced us to the police, to the Gendarme, because they were recent immigrants from Italy and they were afraid for their own status. So we were...

HS: Now, where were your parents, too?

KB: My parents were already, no, my parents were still in France at the time.

HS: But not in Paris.

KB: Not in Paris. My wife was in Paris. Now we were brought to a prison in La Réole near Bordeaux, and were very depressed, and another group of four was also landing there, when the sergeant, who is the postmaster, came and said, "Relax we can't keep you. We have no food here, and no guards. Tomorrow we'll ship you out." And we were brought by police to Montauban, and the first thing I did is went to the railroad station, and there was a train for Paris, and one of the railroad employees was about to get into the train. I asked him if you could take a message to my wife. He said, "Of course." I gave him the phone number and wanted to give him the equivalent of five dollars, and he said, "No money, this is an honor." And that same night, my wife knew I was free, and eventually she could join me. This was--the day of our escape was Yom Kippur 1940.

HS: Yes.

KB: And many of us were quite happy to have the ending, which was uncharacteristic.

HS: Were your parents in Vichy, France?

KB: My parents were in non-occupied France, and they had already what's called a emergency visa.

HS: Yes.

KB: But the Vichy government would not let them out. I heard they were in Toulouse, but meantime they had gone to Marseilles. And I was given--I rejoined to be in order, I rejoined a labor company, and the commander was a wonderful captain, [unclear] in the first war, he gave me, of course, a furlough for Marseilles. I saw my parents and, actually, the American consul told me, "You're entitled to go on this visa with your wife and your parents, but we are just moving, so come back next week. I don't have any rubber stamps." I said, well...

HS: Was that in Bordeaux?

KB: In Marseilles.

HS: Marseilles.

KB: So I didn't get to go with my parents, but I was relieved to know that they left. Eventually we found out that the man who helped them was now very well known, Varian Fry...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...who did bring them to the border, where my parents on foot were entrusted to a regular smuggler, who did take very little money, very happy to do this kind of job, and they crossed over through Spain to Lisbon. They had as baggage a briefcase and a knapsack.

HS: Do you remember the month or the year?

KB: Yes, it was in late October 1940.

HS: And how many people were in that saving situation, like 200?

KB: The total--this man, Varian Fry himself...

HS: Yeah.

KB: ...brought over 2,000 people, Jewish and political refugees.

HS: Yeah.

KB: Artists, musicians, writers; Chagall was the first.

HS: Werfel?

KB: And he was, Werfel, he was several times jailed, especially when the new dictator Marshall Pétain was visiting Marseilles. They were shipped, they were put on the ship without food for three days and then released.

HS: And your parents arrived in America?

KB: My parents arrived in America.

HS: In 1940.

KB: In 1941.

HS: '41, yes.

KB: They had to be in Lisbon, quite a, quite a while. There was sustained by committee there. They also sent us something and we were eager to get some good coffee or something, and when we opened it, it was a can of spinach. They had been gypped by the Portuguese.

HS: And then how did you continue then?

KB: Well, I had been detached from my work company to be a teacher.

HS: Was that a Free French work company originally?

KB: Well, no, the company was officially organized by the Vichy government, and they kept people in camps. Now my first and only military distinction can be told. I came back from Marseilles after seeing my parents, and at the station I met the captain. He had a bicycle, because no officer could have a car because of gasoline, and he said, "How was your trip?" "I was pleased." "Come and see me. It's nothing unpleasant." And he said, "I see from your file that you can read and write." I had the equivalent of a Masters from the Sorbonne, and he said, "Do you want to be supply sergeant?" I said, "What does it entail?" "Oh", he said "It's a *sinecure* [an office requiring little or no

work]. Six men bring a two wheeled cart from the barracks to the place where you work, and you have to supervise it.” And I did, and it was indeed a *sinecure*. But at that time I had very bad news. The last camp, where a friend of mine, who was inept for the service because he was too deaf and had TB, a composer, was bombed, and he was supposed to be dead. So that day, my people came with the food and I held the lead, what you call the axle of the cart, while they took off the bread, the wine, the salad, the cheese, and just as they were about to pick the *plat de résistance*, tripe, my dead friend came around the bend of the street, I let go, and all the tripe was in the street. And my friend--everybody said, “Hurray!” except the amateurs who scooped from the top, and for days the dogs getting it all.

HS: Had a wonderful time.

KB: This was my only military distinction.

HS: Now in all this time, was there any kind of Jewish services, or lectures, or...

KB: Well, the camp had many refugees, and the majority were not Jewish.

HS: Yes.

KB: Now, we were at the time staying in barracks and a friend of mine, whom I had met in the first camp, the prisoner-of-war camp, Jacques Offenbacher [phonetic], whose military papers I have now, had been actually never free from 1938. He had been, in 1938, in Palestine to see his sister, when a wire from Nürnberg came, and said his mother was dying. He took a plane, but never got out of the Munich airport. They confiscated his car, and he was in Dachau. And eventually his brother set him free, who had married a non-Jew, and came to France only to be interned right again, and go through. Now he had been a salesman, salesman, of kitchenware, of hardware, and he had been in the First War. He thought nothing of cleaning kettles, whereas dentists, doctors, lawyers, didn't like that and he became a cook, and he could do good soups with nothing, with no oil, no fat, with the given produce, and he was a cook. Now the camp eventually, when I was separated and detached as a teacher, the camp was transferred to a former internment camp for Spanish people, in Septfonds¹, in the same area, about half-an-hour from Montauban and my friend was a cook, but the chief cook was a political refugee who ironically had been born on his fake identity in Salzburg, but he spoke with the thickest Berlin accent...

HS: Oh.

KB: ...and when the Nazi commission came to select people for deportation, the chief cook disappeared. And my friend Jacques was already selected, when the French guard of the French police said, “We have no cook. Come back!” So he credited me with saving his life because I had put him in the kitchen. Now, and he wasn't through

¹Internment camp for Spanish people; located S.W. France: Columbia Gazetteer.

yet, because he was sent to build the Atlantic Wall, and he survived, but the last quarter of an hour was very critical, because when the S.S. left and fled, the British machine-gunned his camp, and he said, "For the first time since my Bar Mitzvah I prayed, 'not by British bullets,'" and he survived.

HS: That was the end of the war?

KB: That was the end of the occupation. It wasn't the end of the war. It was 1944. The war was still going on for quite a while, until '45. So I met him in Paris. He had a chauffeur's uniform as the only clothing, and he joined me again in Montauban where we had been, and eventually married there. And when my wife was pregnant, and I was detached by the Army to give an interpreter in Paris, and another friend who eventually would give birth to the future leader to the student rebellion of '68, Donny the Red...

HS: Oh yes.

KB: ...who was born 18 days before my son, the same bed, the same hospital. So my friend Jacques came and helped the two ladies who were pregnant by cutting the wood, and the neighbors speculated that he must be the father of both babies. Well Jacques was the most wonderful human being. He always used to say, "*Eins musst Du den Franzosen lassen: Ordnung haben sie Keine.*" You have to...

HS: You have to leave it to the French...

KB: ...they don't have any order.

HS: Yes.

KB: And he always was able, with little language, to make human contact and business contact, and eventually leave his wife well provided for.

HS: And your son was born?

KB: My son was born--actually I have to tell the story of how he was conceived, because we were in hiding, and this comes later.

HS: Okay.

KB: So...

HS: Professor Bieber, can you tell us more about the legislation pertaining to the Jewish population in Vichy France and how it affected you and your surroundings?

KB: Well, while in occupied France, Jews had to wear the yellow star. This was not enforced in Vichy France. However, the authorities sent enough questionnaires to have everybody censed. Now in 1942, as you know, the terrible police action arresting thousands of Jews in Paris was carried out, and, in September, the Germans pressured the Vichy government to surrender 10,000 more foreign Jews, which Vichy accepted gladly. My wife, at the time, was working in the office of the JDC, Joint's Committee, supported rescue committee in this town, which had been well-known to Central Europeans for being hospitable to people who didn't want to be prosecuted.

HS: And that town was?

KB: This was Montauban.

HS: Montauban.

KB: On this day in September, the police commissioner of the town came to the office and said, "Mrs. Bieber, I have to warn you. Tomorrow morning at four, if you are at home, you and all your friends, you understand, we will regretfully have to arrest you. Now I haven't told you anything." This had to be snowballed, without telephone, without cars, but successfully we could warn practically everybody of about 300 families that were dependent on the committee.

HS: Was there no telephone service in general, or was...?

KB: Oh, there were telephones, yes, but very few had, people had telephones. And we went, my wife and I, to a place about five miles from town, thinking that we would get a little time ahead. We stayed with the family of Convended [phonetic] and their neighbors, a non-Jewish refugee, Ludwig Klaus, when in the morning, I was just taking a sponge bath, there was no bathroom, of course, the neighbor's wife said, "The police are coming on motorbikes up the hill." So I picked a pair of pants, and ran after my friend, Convended and Klaus into the woods, and we stayed for three weeks in the woods, having the good fortune that a farmer whom we had worked for, invited us to his kitchen, at night, to give us food.

HS: And did you have any cover during the night?

KB: Well, it was mild. The only difficulty was that Convended's father was a heavy smoker, and he ran out of cigarettes, and had to wear, to have oak leaves. But the morale was good, and my wife went to town occasionally and came back with the news after three weeks that this "action," in quotes, was over. But during the time that we were hidden, a truck gardener, a farmer who came by our house, a little outside of town, every morning, and had befriended my wife, over the two years we lived there, came and saw that the shutters were closed in our apartment. And in front of the house was a truck and policeman, and on the truck were older people and babies and women, and she was very disturbed, and she said to the police, "What are you doing?" No answer. She said, "You're worse than the Germans." They still didn't answer. So when we came back, she hugged us, and kissed us, and said, "I'm so relieved, I couldn't sleep at night. This must never happen to you. Come to my house." And I said, "Odette, you're very good but we can't." "Oh it's not good enough." I said, "Of course it's good enough. But it's always possible that we are found in your house, and you have no idea what trouble you could have. It's just not arrest. It could be torture." She said, "I don't care, nor does my family. You come, at least bring some clothes, so you are ready," which we did. So then a few months later, in February of 1943, when all of France had been in occupied by the Germans, after the Allied troops took North Africa, we were ready and we came to her house, and stayed there for 18 months in a room without heat, without indoor facilities, but with good people to help us. I also had worked for the Director of the Novitiate, Father Chalumaux [phonetic] who was a Nazareth Priest of the Society St. Vincent de Paul, and we were acquainted, and he heard that we were well sheltered, and he said,

“Can I do something?” and I said, “Yes, I need books from the library, but I can’t go out.” “Never mind, I’ll bring them to you every other week,” and he came, still wearing the cassock, on his bicycle, and he brought me books, and said, “Oh you are putting me to purgatory. You are reading Zola, and he is on the index, and today we have a tender love story. And one day I heard the neighbor calling our hostess, “Odette?” “What’s the matter?” “Is your father dying?” “No, he’s out picking beans.” “What about the priest?” “That’s for the Parisians.” “How churchy they are!” He was very pleased when he heard that. And we remained friends from there on, for many decades. Then in August of 1944 the last troops came, and these were Mongols, as the French called them, they were the Vlasov army, that is Russian prisoners-of-war who didn’t understand a word of any language, and they held out.

HS: And they were helping the Germans?

KB: They were employed by the Germans, and they were fierce in fighting, and we had to be really killing the last of, to liberate the town, a little before Paris. Now, in June of 1944, as you know, on the 6th of June, the landing in Normandy took place. On that day, I was standing on a ladder picking sour cherries, and a quarter of a mile away another man picked some fruit, and he shouted to me, “Come down, they’ve landed!” I said, “I have heard this time and time again, I won’t come down.” At that moment, all the church bells in all the villages around there was ringing, and we, who couldn’t have thought of having a child, we decided this is the time to have a child.

HS: Very interesting. And what, were you then almost free, I mean, you were in no camp; you lived in that little village...

KB: Well...

HS: ...with Odette.

KB: This was the liberation, of course.

HS: Yes, but your own situation.

KB: Now, we used this opportunity since we had, since our legal apartment was occupied by a German refugee who wasn’t Jewish, we moved to a, to a, to town, into a furnished apartment.

HS: What is the legal department you are referring to? You just said something...

KB: Yes, yes...

HS: ...about a legal department.

KB: Well, we had the liberty, we were able...

HS: You were free...

KB: Yeah, we were free, and we could resume our real names after having had different names. Now, we had been given faked papers, and it so happened that my wife got one as the wife of a prisoner-of-war, and I had a different one, which would have been perfect if a French police had come in a normal situation. And we were lucky not to be challenged, as so many people who didn’t study hard, especially young people,

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sometimes were taken without being allowed to go and take even a toothbrush, and sent on forced labor to Germany. This incident actually happened on this, on the neighboring town of Toulouse, the regional metropolis, when from six different areas trains arrived and the police commissioner conducted a screening. All the young-looking men were asked their name, birthday, and so on, and quite a few of them didn't know and got confused, and he had about two dozen of them in a place, on that station, and they were pretty shivering, they were pretty worried what would happen.

HS: These were Jewish men?

KB: No, no, these were people...

[End of Tape two, side one]

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Tape two, side two:

HS: This is tape two, side two, of an interview with Professor Konrad Bieber, continuation of an interview started on January 14. Today is January 28, interviewer Harold Stern. Professor Bieber, in the last interview we stopped when we were talking about the young men who were being interviewed at the station in Toulouse, and I asked you whether they were Jewish men, and you started talking about it. Can you tell me a little bit more about it today?

KB: Yes. This scene took place in the winter of 1942, after the Germans had persuaded Laval, the then Prime Minister of the puppet government, to enforce labor after the volunteer service didn't work, and many young men took flight. They went into the country, into the forests, into some of the so-called *maquis*, resistance groups, to escape. And they were given identity papers. Now, anybody who got a fake identity card was impressed with the vital notion that you must know your name, your birthplace, your home, and so on. And these young people, sometimes, were very casual about it. And when several trains in the major railroad junction in Toulouse came in, and the police commissioner sorted out young-looking men, he had more than one, who stumbled over his proper identity, and he--they were put in a corner, and already rather frantic because they had heard that once arrested, you were taken to Germany without even a toothbrush. But this man, by the name of Bouquet, got close to the young men and said to them in a loud voice, "Imbeciles! Stupid! You risk your life for nothing! Now you go home, do your work, and never let it happen again." But, yes...

HS: Was that the police commissioner?

KB: That was the police commissioner. These young men were random, in other words, they were Catholic or Protestants or no religion, not particularly Jewish young men who would be more cautious for good reason, and the Germans who had surrounded the station, heard of this, and they arrested this man, who eventually...

HS: The Commissioner?

KB: Commissioner, came out alive after the liberation. It's just an incident. But it tends to show how important it was. Now my wife was given an identity different from mine. She was supposed to be the wife of a prisoner-of-war, and one day she found out a week later, the woman who gave her this identity had traveled on the same train, in the same direction, with the same identity, not realizing the danger they both incurred.

HS: And both of them had the same names?

KB: They had the same names. After the liberation, I was taken to my supposed hometown, Marsac and my friend who drove, pointed to a tall man, and said "That's you." And I went up to him and I said, "Thank you", and he said, "I did it for a few people."

HS: That's terrific. Can you tell me a little bit more about the issuance of identity, identity papers.

KB: Yes. Well, naturally, one had to resort, resort to forgery to some extent. You could buy blanks of identity cards and get photographs. Then, of course, the difficulty was to find a hometown believable, and this was before television, which would have a register of a given name, if you were fortunate enough to have a real existing person give you his or her identity. In my case, I was a dealer in shoes, born on July 10, 1910, in Marsac, which is 20 minutes by train from Montauban, and I'd never been there. And this was given to me. Now we lived in hiding, as I mentioned earlier. and the young man of the family, George, worked in the office of the *prefet*, which is the sort of governor of this *departement*, and he took my card and got the real stamp, and so I had a pretty authentic identification.

HS: Did you have to pay for it?

KB: No, not a cent. In general, all these things were done free by political, politically minded people who had some stamps, or had acquired the notion where to have birthplaces. Now for many people in the beginning, they chose towns that had been bombed, and where the archives therefore didn't exist. But the Germans, of course, got wise to the number of people who claimed to be born in such circumstances, created difficulties. One priest, Abbé Gastag [phonetic] who was very well known for his patriotism, was checked, and asked where was his birthplace and he said, "Brest", which is a western French port. He didn't say the second part of the name which was Litovsk, Brest Litovsk was the 1917...

HS: Armistice.

KB: ...armistice between Russia and Germany. These identity papers, we called them *bifteck*, beefsteak, and I will tell perhaps, if I haven't already, done my only military heroic deed. I had mentioned that I came to the unoccupied zone.

HS: Yes.

KB: And that I reenlisted with the foreign labor company. We were having our meals in a barracks and dentists, lawyers, doctors, and other intellectuals didn't like to clean the kettles. But a friend of mine, who had been in Dachau, who had done already service in the German army in the First War, said "Somebody has to clean the kettles," and he became a cook, and with very little material, very little good material, no oil, no butter, he could make edible soups.

HS: And his life was saved in the end.

KB: His life was saved in the end. Now since I was in charge of the transportation of food from one barracks to the place where the people worked, I had to supervise a cart, a two wheel cart, that six men were pushing, and loading and unloading, and I had that day a very depressing news, that the last bombing by the Germans before the Armistice had happened in a camp for people who could not be fit for military service.

HS: Was that in 1940?

KB: In 1940. And a friend of mine, whom I had met in the Jewish choir, where he was the pianist, a quite well known composer, having TB and being deaf, had been in that camp. I heard he had been killed. Now, I came with the cart, and I had to hold the leads of the cart, like so, of this two-wheel cart, and they unloaded the bread, the cheese, the wine, the salad, and just before they came to the main course, my dead friend came around the bend of the--this goes on now--of the, of the street. Now, this friend did not remain long in the same area. He went east to Valence on the Drome [SE France] and met a man who was a poet, eventually became after the war, a member of the French Academy, a Catholic poet, Pierre Emmanuel, who said, "Do you have a *bifteck*?" "You mean an identity card?" "No." "We go to Lyon, right away." They went to Lyon and in the civil register they found a gem, under the date of October 20, 1908, a stillborn child was recorded in the register, the mother deceased in childbirth and the father present suicided on the spot. All this was done in pencil, and Emmanuel said, this is too good to be left alone, they filled it in ink and my friend became Louis Saguer, S-A-G-U-E-R.

HS: Did everybody have access to these records very easily?

KB: In theory. Of course, in practice you had to...

HS: To know somebody?

KB: ...to grease some palms, yeah.

HS: Oh, I see.

KB: But, Louis Saguer, after the war, recovered his fame, and was sent by Malraux as Minister of Culture to Italy, to Rome for two years, and his name became well known as the composer of the famous *Graffiti of the '68 Student Rebellion*, an opera produced in France, Belgium, Holland, and Italy. This is enough of his identity.

HS: Can you give me his name as a composer?

KB: Yes. As a young man, before Hitler, he came to Paris as Wolfe Simoni and every time you went to Italy, the Italians joked and said "Oh, your maiden name is Simoni in Italian."

HS: We are now going back to the time, you had mentioned before, when you first got the news that the Allies had landed, and the church bells started to ring, and how did your life continue from there on?

KB: Well, the situation was still very tense because France was occupied and still some people were arrested. It--I was--my only function in the underground, that is the resistance, was to listen to language broadcasts, because the Germans had jammed French, Spanish, Italian, and German from London, from the BBC, and I could understand Flemish, and Nelk [phonetic] and Dutch, and therefore, had a picture at least of the general situation. Also, since my English was still very...

HS: Elementary.

KB: ...uneven, I benefited from news and dictation speech that the BBC broadcast and that helped, but it didn't, of course, have any strategic value. However...

HS: Did you pass it on to special people?

KB: ...the news?

HS: The news.

KB: What news I got, I distributed by riding my bicycle to two farms, where people were occup--were employing a number of young men, and one day in August of 1944, when the Germans had already withdrawn most of the troops from the Pyrenées area, because it wasn't important, I came too late to realize that behind the hedges of this farm were any number of German military vehicles. I said if I go back, this is suspect. I walked ahead bravely, and entered the kitchen on the ground floor, and a German SS officer in flawless French said, "Are you a farmer?" I was dressed for the city, and before I could answer, one of the grandchildren of the owner said, "This is my uncle." "Oh, he's a very young uncle. Can I see your identity card?" "Oh, you're a dealer in shoes. This is wonderful, have a seat, have a cigar." I was feeling very uncomfortable.

HS: You're accent must have been perfect.

KB: Well, our savings of both my wife and myself was that we had been young and could speak French without accent. And he looked at this and said, "That isn't far away. This is great." "Well," I said, "I don't see how I can help you. Do you have any ration points?" "I don't like this joke," he said. And he said, "Oswald, *fahr mal den Wagen an*," start the car. And up very close by stood a Mercedes, and I was really sweating profusely, profusely wishing I would find my way in a town that I had never been, and persuade perhaps the father of the man who gave me his identity. And after a few minutes the driver came and said--I don't know what the rank was of this man-- "Well, sir, I don't understand. I overhauled the car. It's dead." "Oh," said man, "Forget it. We find our shoes."

HS: Very good.

KB: I was sit, still sitting with the cigar unlit, and finding a way slowly, because I could barely get up, to go out without too much to do, and can't get home. Now I never told this to my wife even after I testified at the Archives that year about this particular incident, but it's documented already there.

HS: Yes.

KB: And the next day I went back to the farm and the Germans were gone, and I wanted to find out. Now the young man who had done something was from Martinique. He was a half-bred, and he hatred the Nazis. He was one of 17 farm workers, all of them, what the French called *réfractaires*, that means opposing forced labor, and gone the way, and living illegally in this farm. And I said, "But Guy, you are crazy, they could have shot you on the spot."

HS: Yes.

KB: "What did you do?" "I just removed the distributor head, and that was all." "But you was in full sight of people indoors!" "Never mind, it was quick and it worked, didn't it?"

HS: [chuckle] That's a marvelous story.

KB: It saved my life, of course.

HS: And this man was from Martinique?

KB: Yes.

HS: With several other people?

KB: No, the other people were from different French, he was the only one.

HS: Was he from, were these people from different colonies or was it French possessions?

KB: There could be some, somewhere, but I don't know.

HS: It's not clear.

KB: Now this wasn't, of course, an incident. Now also I was sent to farms at the time when even in America and South America, North America, everywhere people thought that France was sort of fatalistic, passive, and the Republic was gone forever. And I came to a large farm, a different one, at night when the BBC was starting their program in French, and they had dogs outside and people to watch, because it was illegal to hear, of course, the...

HS: Who had the dogs?

KB: The farmers.

HS: There were no Germans anymore?

KB: Well, there were Germans possibly in the area. That's why they had the dogs out, and so the moment somebody came, even the French uniformed person, they would have shot the--and the speaker of the Free French in London says, "You may erase the words Liberty, Freedom, Equality, from our monuments, but you will never erase them from the heart of the French." And the people said, "That's true. That's the way we feel," and I had compared notes with other people who had been in touch with people in towns and in other countrysides, and this was the feeling of the French waiting for the British to come. There were incidents. Now closer to the liberation of our town in August, I was going with the mother of a young man who later became famous as the young rebel in the Red, Danny the Red, he wasn't born then. We went to Castres, which is south of Toulouse, and southeast of Toulouse, and is again the seat of a *prefet*, and what happened there was interesting. Removing a, an armored train from the Pyrenées, the Germans had gone north and had come into a situation they couldn't solve. The Resistance had removed the tracks over a distance of more than two miles, and the train was captured. It was well equipped, well armored, and in Castres was a *maquis* [underground forces cell] run by about 120 young Jewish boys of the Jewish Boy Scouts, the Eclaireurs Israélites de France, commanded by Gamzon, an engineer, who was the captain, and another man who later also will play a role, and they had only as armament, mortars, but they lobbed shells on this train, and they had a bullhorn, and they said, "You are surrounded, surrender!" And the Germans answered, "This is bullshit," and they shot, and two or three of the young men were killed in this exchange. Eventually, after this had lasted for five days, the Germans surrendered, and the commander said to the

officers, "You will serve at the banquet of victory." And they said, "It's against the laws of the war of Geneva Convention," and he said, "Let's talk about the Geneva Convention, which you have so scrupulously applied." Well, I came, by chance, to the banquet and was there when these young people were elated. The Germans, when they saw there were just 120 young people, Jews on top of that, were furious, but...

HS: How many Germans were there?

KB: Well, there was a large number, in the many hundreds.

HS: A train, I mean it was an occupied, what would you call it, the garrison of the train.

KB: Yes.

HS: Maybe there were just 30 Germans.

KB: Oh, no, no, no, there were more than that, there were hundreds.

HS: Oh yes?

KB: There were hundreds, because they evacuated troops as the safest way to bring them north.

HS: I see.

KB: They hadn't counted on the sabotage. So this was a historical--now I still see one of my friends who lives in New York now, he's in the jewelry business, and he doesn't talk about it much, but when we remember, we talk about those who no longer are around.

HS: But what happened to the Germans? Were they taken...

KB: They were prisoners-of-war.

HS: They were officially taken into a prisoner-of-war camp?

KB: Oh yes, yes.

HS: In France.

KB: Well, the *maquis* worked with the *armée secrete*, in other words, the army that was sworn to de Gaulle.

HS: Yes.

KB: And they had already had other prisoners and had a camp for them in Southern France.

HS: It's amazing that the Germans did not have the force to fight this situation. They must have been pretty much pre-occupied...

KB: Well...

HS: ...elsewhere.

KB: ...this train normally would have gone, about a week earlier, to Normandy...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...if it had met the other obstacles. And they were completely shut off and way behind the forces. Now you have heard about--I don't have to speak about these terrible things. On the way from the South to Normandy, a German troop, it was the S.S.,

Das-Reich, the division *Das-Reich* came under fire from a small village in the Dordogne Department, and, as a revenge, the Germans looked at the map, and they chose the wrong village, because there are two Oradours, Oradour-Sur-Vayres and Oradour-sur-glane [site of 1944 massacre by Germans]. And they--on that day, some of the men had been to town, and all of the inhabitants, all the women and children and old people, including the priest, were forced to go into the church. And the German set fire on the church, so they all, they all perished. Luckily, one woman was able to go through a window and hide in the bushes outside, and she testified about this. This is now a national memorial, Oradour, and many young people, we visited in the 1960s, many young people come with their families...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...and visit the devastating state, which is like Lidice.

HS: Yes.

KB: In Czechoslovakia.

HS: I think I've heard about it.

KB: Yes, yes.

HS: Unfortunately, there are so many...

KB: Yes, well, this is history, this is no lie.

HS: Yes, yes.

KB: [unclear]. But we heard about it. Also, in several towns, before they left, the Germans hanged people, who were found to be with arms in hands. One of these gruesome executions happened in Tulle, T-U-L-L-E, Tulle, which is north of Montauban, northeast. And my wife going out one day in Montauban came back shuddering and shivering, she had seen the people hanging from the lamp post in front of the governors' palace, at the *prefet Préfecture* [district headquarters] in Montauban.

HS: That was in 1944?

KB: '44 in August, just before we left. Now the last troops they left behind were called the Mongols, I don't know if I had this already.

HS: We had, yes, yes.

KB: And they offered fierce resistance, but eventually...

HS: You had to kill them all, I assume.

KB: ...the fighting took place, and I had no hand in this, and they were either killed or made prisoner. So we went free on August 19, 1944, and were able to reappear in public.

HS: Yes.

KB: I came to the little shopping center, with the equivalent of the A&P, where we used to shop, and the old woman said, "Our Jews come back." And she embraced me and said to her husband, "Don't stand there, come in and kiss him." And...

HS: Were there many collaborators left, and what happened to them?

KB: Not very many. I can tell you this in a moment, too.

HS: Very good.

KB: Now, another woman came and kissed me, and said to her husband, "You're standing there like a stone," and he said, "I've seen it," because he was the electrician. He had crossed my path, but of course, he wouldn't tell his own wife that he had seen me.

HS: Wonderful.

KB: Now to come to this situation...

HS: Now in 1944, after the invasion of Normandy, and the Germans had partially evacuated already.

KB: Now we go back for one moment to the beginning of the year 1944. In 1940 I had had a hernia.

HS: Yes.

KB: A [unclear] hernia, and a friend said, "Why don't you get your operation? I know the surgeon, he will cover you."

HS: Yes.

KB: "He will not take any money," and I went to the clinic of the man who became famous through a movie, which I haven't seen. It's called "*The Old Rifle*"² about Montauban, and Dr. Naigre [phonetic] and his clinic operated on me. Now this was at the time when my wife's parents had been taken and she was very concerned, because they went to Drancy, as you know a transit camp.

HS: Oh yes.

KB: And she had a different name, and she sat in the waiting room of the clinic when the nurse called her, Madame Duran, which was my fake name. She didn't react because it wasn't her name. After hearing her name three times, she realized and she went to see me. Now I left the clinic in a taxi. The taxi was driven by wood gas, gas-o-gen, because they didn't have any real petrol oil, gasoline, and as I came to the--this was a little outside of town, to the bord--to the town line, the *Milice*, the French Militia, which was more dreaded than even the S.S. because of their criminal element, did the verification. And the driver drove to the head of the line and said, "I have a man from the hospital, let me go." "You just stay there," and afterwards they searched the taxi, removing the cushions, opening the trunk, opening the hood, and he said, "I'm a taxi." Well, they didn't find anything, and when they came to our identity papers, they looked at me and said, "It's lacking a fiscal stamp. You have to go right away to the town." And I said at that moment, "Now I've had enough. I've come here. I've an operation. You make it difficult for me. You are worse than the Germans," and the people around who were waiting, so they said, "Okay." Now after the liberation I was reincorporated in a, in the 23rd regiment of infantry in this town by Lieutenant Lafitte [phonetic] and he

²"Le Vieux Fusil" directed by Robert Enrico.

asked me to con, to make the convoy of prisoners from the prison to the courts. And I met this man who had controlled me on that day, who was a cheese merchant and the head of the local militia.

HS: And he's the one who wouldn't let you...?

KB: Who first made it difficult.

HS: Yeah, yeah.

KB: And the man didn't know, was he going to live or were they going to shoot him. And I said, "Do you remember that day?" "Why?" "I had a fake card." "Oh no," he said, "I had followed the course for six months to discover and unmask false identities." So the man who was not sure about his own future, Lebaissaux [phonetic], was the name. This wasn't in the [unclear]. I know for a fact that some of these militia, who had been involved in real piracy and in killings, were executed on the order of the local judge, but others got past. Now before, actually before the landing, I had met on the way to the dentist a local lawyer who was the typical southern lawyer who had been friends with everybody, left and right, and he said to me, "Aren't you scared?" And I said, "Maître Buffa," B-U-F-F-A, a well name in the area, "I'm less scared than you, I think." And afterwards, he was examined but they found that he was more of a talker than a doer, and he had not been involved in any crime that the...

HS: Right.

KB: ...resistance could attribute to him.

HS: So now what happened to you, after the Germans left Montauban and how did you...

KB: Well after this...

HS: ...reshape your life?

KB: Well, after this very short period where I was doing this convoy of prisoners, the same lieutenant said, "We are wasting your talents. You'll go to Paris and be an interpreter." And I was delighted. My wife agreed, and I took the train, and, of course, you had to get, dismount from the train several times, the bridges were destroyed, and I got to Paris, and I reported to the Allied commander at the Hotel Majestique, which had been also the Nazi headquarters.

HS: Is that 1945?

[Tape two, side two ended]

Tape three, side one:

HS: This is side one, tape three, of an interview with Professor Konrad Bieber, interviewed by Harold Stern on January the 28, 1998. It is a continuation of an interview of January the 14, 1998.

KB: I was received by an American officer who was extremely kind and said, "We can't employ you here, but I have a notion if you go to the French commandment at the *Gare de-Lyon*," that's the station...

HS: Yes.

KB: "They will want you." And as I left his office, I saw the name of the chaplain, Jewish chaplain of the Army, Rabbi Nadich [phonetic], Yehuda Nadich [phonetic], and I knocked at the door, and he was extremely nice. I only talked with him a few minutes, and he said, "It's nice to see a survivor," and that was it.

HS: And you spoke in English?

KB: In English.

HS: Or French?

KB: In English, yes.

HS: Yeah.

KB: Now I came to this station and was received. My rank was to be sergeant. I had been in 1940 promoted to corporal and then became sergeant.

HS: In the American army?

KB: No, no, no, in the Underground, in the French...

HS: Underground?

KB: Yes.

HS: Attached to the Americans?

KB: No, no, no, there's no connection with Americans. In other words, I was a sergeant in the French army, and many of my friends came when I met them, and I met a number of them in Toulouse and Montauban and Paris; they were captains, colonels, without ever having been officers, and I thought this wasn't my kind of life. I would have been embarrassed.

HS: I can see that.

KB: So I came and I was employed as a translator and interpreter. Actually, we had a major who had lived in Syria for 20 years, and spoke very good English; however, he didn't understand a single word. In December of 1944, when you remember, was the last vicious and vigorous German counterattack in Belgium in the Ardennes with the battle of Bastogne, and material and men were needed. The phone rings. The major picks up the receiver and turns red and calls, "*Sergent, Sergent, Sergeant*, come quickly." I take the, the phone!" and a voice says, "Who is this idiot?" I said, "Who's calling?" "General Eisenhower's headquarters." "What happened?" The French station master at the *Gare de Lyon* had written "Seventh Army" on the blackboard

of the transportation of the train, but he had barred the seven the way the Europeans bar the seven...

HS: He crossed it.

KB: ...and the American station master read this as “French Army” and sent it to the Bourg. In other words, 250 miles south of where they were needed, and of course, a whole train of ammunition and equipment was sorely missed...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...and, of course, they were all traced, and I had to...

HS: It went astray.

KB: And that was an incident. Normally my service was very routine, not monotonous, but routine, and since our outfit, we were six Frenchmen in this service, could not go back to the barracks, the *École Militaire* which was a Métro station, too, they sent us to the American casual mess, which was wonderful, because we hadn't had coffee in years, and I drank coffee as much as I could.

HS: I remember American cafeterias in Australia. Very, very nice.

KB: Anyway, I was billeted in hotel near the *Gare de Lyons* with another soldier who had been a butcher, a very nice fellow, and we were working hard, and at night we were tired, but having had lots of coffee I woke at ten and we had the bare bulb, so I read, and he said, “Can't you stop that damn coffee?” I said, “No I won't do that.” Now in the mess we were sitting at a French table, and when G.I.'s came by, they would say, “You're English, ain't you?” And we said, “No, we're French.” “Okay, they're not British, come on!” So they asked us for, how to get to the *Folies Bergère* and other international...

HS: Yeah, Moulin Rouge.

KB: ...and I tried to help them by printing directions. And one day a very tall man came whom I could barely understand, and he showed me a paper with the name of, the address of a garage and I said, “I have my bicycle here. If you have a jeep, I can take you there.” “Might as well.” And when we got there, he said, and I understood as much, “Listen, I can't thank you. For three days I've been in this blessed Paris and no French police understand me. I'm from Alabama, and the American military police don't understand me, and here you come and show me the place.” Another day I had also befriended a military, in the American army, who was to be an officer a little later, in civilian life an attorney in White Plains, New York. And I was waiting for him outside when, of course, masses of people came in and out.

HS: Yes.

KB: ...and I see a familiar face coming up. And he looks at me and I look at him and say, “The last time I saw you, you had short pants, you had a corduroy jacket, and you played in the French play at our high school, the *Grunewald Gymnasium*. And he said, “Where is Piérot?” Piérot was a very close friend of ours.

HS: Oh?

KB: Piérot Sachs [phonetic].

HS: He recognized you?

KB: He recognized me. I was in the same grade. And this friend, I was later the manager at the, at one of the finest hotels near the Etoile, Royal Morceaux, and I said, "Where is Schnups [phonetic]?" which is the nickname of my closest friend, whose daughter is now our adopted daughter, who lives in Argentina. And he gave me the address in Argentina. My--also, I had received a note from my pre-war porter, the concierge, in the area where I lived with my parents, where I had been to visit, because this man was very, very devoted, these people had saved Jewish tenants, valuables, furniture...

HS: I see.

KB: ...and he and his family were emaciated. They were perhaps the only ones who didn't do black market. And through this address, I got a message from my wife's cousin, who had landed in Normandy and wanted to see me. And I met him in Auteil, which is an area in...

HS: I know.

KB: ...of where I thought we would meet at a café, the café didn't exist anymore. But I met him, and he was very nervous because he didn't have a regular furlough, so I gave him my military coat.

HS: He was an American?

KB: He was an American soldier. I gave him my khaki coat.

HS: Yes.

KB: And I had to tell him when we had a cup of coffee, that his father was very likely no longer alive. He had been arrested, and probably deported to Auschwitz.

HS: What happened to your parents in all these years?

KB: I must have mentioned it. I went to Marseilles to see my parents off...

HS: And they went from Marseilles to America in 1940?

KB: 1940.

HS: With, with Frye?

KB: With Frye, yes.

HS: Mary Frye, very good. Were you in touch with them?

KB: Well, we tried to be in touch. They sent us packages--actually they bought, with the little money they have, they wanted, they had, they wanted to give us something good, and they ordered coffee, but when we opened the package, it was spinach. We sent messages through Switzerland.

HS: I see.

KB: And eventually they would get a message; it was six months old, so they could no longer be sure we were free or alive. So, arriving in Paris, the first thing I did was to send a wire to America saying, "Both alive and well," and that my wife was expecting a child in the spring. And they were, of course, elated. They had received

from the Emergency Rescue Committee, a letter by Eva Levitsky [phonetic] who signed this, that we had been active in the underground, that my wife was the one who was the heroine. I never was.

HS: Was your wife with you in Paris?

KB: No.

HS: When you were transferred?

KB: No, no, she was there, and actually the friend, whom I, whose life I saved as a cook...

HS: Yes.

KB: And who survived, split wood for my wife and for the mother of the future Student Rebell [KB's pronunciation] so that people said, "Is he the father of both these ladies?"

HS: Yes, yes, yes.

KB: Anyway, no, so when this cousin came, I spoke to a soldier whom I knew from his childhood, who happened to be in charge of the C.I.C., Counter Intelligence...

HS: A German refugee?

KB: Yes.

HS: Originally German?

KB: Yes, a German refugee whose father had been a professor in Heidelberg, and his mother was Jewish. And he worked with Allan Dulles,³ and is mentioned in the book by Allan Dulles. I have a copy, Wolf von Eckart [phonetic], and he was in the suburbs of Paris, and I said, "If you ever see the cousin, the only thing I would ask you is to keep him there a couple days, because we expect my wife to come." He sent a wire that he is here--he hasn't seen his cousin for...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...and he said, "I tried to do it, but it's like looking for a needle in the haystack. I don't know if you know that its already--anyway, there are 20,000 people and it changes every day. I said, "Too bad." So when I got the phone call from the cousin that he had to leave abruptly and go to Belgium, I took the last suburban train out, and I was guided by some soldiers from Louisiana who took me to a villa, and there was the cousin, and he said, "It's nice that you come. Guess who is in the upper bunk?" I said, "How could I?" "Your friend." "I don't believe it. How come?" "He saw my name on my knapsack," and he said, "Are you the cousin?" There was a thousand of those soldiers, by chance.

HS: Wonderful.

KB: Then the next, I stayed there overnight since I was in khaki, and the next morning I saw a scene which heartened my life, my heart, because I would know that we

³US Diplomat, director of C.I.A.

would win the war. There was a scene outside, it was cold and snowy and there was one sergeant reading a long roll with three men answer in any tone, "Here," "here," "here," and nobody lifted there nose from the record. Now the Germans, of course, who had been standing there in the cold and freezing...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...rather than taking those. But the cousin tells a different story. He says I was the only soldier he ever saw traveling with pajamas. So much for that.

HS: And you were an interpreter until 1945?

KB: No, no, yes, I actually...

HS: And then left the service?

KB: ...now, I had resumed my legal name, my...

HS: Oh yes.

KB: ...my own identity. And for the officers this meant nothing, but there was a regular army lieutenant, nice man, Brickman [phonetic], and he saw I was born in Germany.

HS: Yes.

KB: And he said, "He's a spy." And the Colonel said, "Well, this is a idiotic! We know the man. He has been here recommended by his outfit." But, so they let me go, and I still have this certification that my service gave no cause for any complaint.

HS: You got an honorable discharge.

KB: An honorable discharge. And I said, "Okay, I've seen enough", and I came back to relieve my friend from splitting the wood, and help my wife in preparation for the baby.

HS: Then your baby was born in Montauban?

KB: Yes, my son was born ten days before the Armistice of 1945. My wife had been born ten days before the Armistice of 1918 in Kiev. Actually, he was born the night that Käthe Kollwitz died [artist, died April 22, 1945]...

HS: Oh.

KB: ...whose daughter is in charge of Jewish Archives in Cologne.

HS: Is she really?

KB: Uta Kollwitz.

HS: Yes.

KB: Whatever the name is.

HS: And was it--and then you went back into the academic life.

KB: Well, yes, I was in Marsac, which is about 20 minutes by train from Montauban, was a big building that the Jewish Boy Scouts, the Exclaireurs Israelite de France...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...had opted for and became offered by the government, and the children that--for instance, my wife had helped by coming on a bicycle and supplying them with

ration cards, more important than money in the different hidings. The young people had flown back, and I was starting to teach in Marsac. On April 1, 1945, we had moved to a nicer apartment, furnished apartment in town, and I got a phone call, "Would you like to teach at Jeanne d'Arc?" "Oh," I said, "Oh, April fool!" and I hanged up the receiver. This was a colleague who was teaching at the local lycée, at the high school...

HS: Yes.

KB: Lycee Ingres; Ingres was a great painter who was born in Montauban, and he said, "No, I take you there. The lady who has taught there for so long has croaked and I will introduce you." After teaching at that Catholic institution, which still had Maison Royale d'Education...

HS: Yes.

KB: ...from the 17th Century, I stayed there and in Marsac for all of '45 and part of '46 and then followed our friends, the conventeds [phonetic] to Normandy where they were in charge of a recently opened home for children who had been gathered in from various hiding, with farmers and people in town. There were about 135 children in a small village. The mayor of the nearest city was later the Prime Minister Mendès-France, was a sponsor, and I became the head counselor and teacher, and we stayed there till we got our visa for the United States in 1947, that's the end of '47.

HS: I suppose you had no problems coming to the United States because your parents were here already.

KB: Oh yes.

HS: Very good.

KB: We came and I just celebrated, on Thanksgiving, my 50th anniversary in this country, Thanksgiving Eve 1947. And, of course, my parents were overjoyed, and my son was two and a half, who adopted them right away. And the neighbor of my parents, the Japanese-American gentleman, sixties, came with this huge turkey for the "lost children," and that of course helped very much.

HS: Professor Bieber, did you receive some help from Jewish organizations, or the Joint [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee], or anybody, as a survivor?

KB: Well, the first thing, I had very poor teeth. I was born in the middle of the First War. My bones are okay, but the teeth always were a problem. So when I came to this country, my mother said, "I have a friend who is a dentist, who's making a special price," and she started on us, and I was toothless when I was offered my first job as a monitor in a Jewish boys camp by the Jewish Child Care Association on Austin Road, and when I taught at City College, but that didn't matter. To pay for my dental bill, actually it was very high, a private Jewish foundation extended the money which eventually I paid back when I was able to do that.

HS: But when you were in France, too, were you, was there any help by the Joint or...

KB: My wife worked in the committee.

HS: ...assistance in any way?

KB: Yeah, she had worked during the war, as I had said earlier, and she worked, she worked after the liberation again, but we, we had enough between the two of us to live and didn't need to. We had actually a woman, who had survived Auschwitz, as a baby helper. She went to South America, Peru later. No, we didn't need it and we were happy to do that.

HS: Had you been in contact with any people who came back from concentration camps into France? I remember Wiesel⁴ got into a chateau somewhere and then he got back to Paris, but he was taken care of originally...

KB: Yeah.

HS: ...quite well...

KB: The OSE.⁵ He was a, was a, actually Mr. Jorque, M. Jorque [phonetic] of the OSE offered me a job, and then because of my family's situation I said, "Sorry, I can't take it now."

HS: I see. And you lived here in this country then with your parents.

KB: As we came, we stayed in the large apartment of my parents. And then my--since I came in the middle of semester, it wasn't easy to find a job. And a friend of my father, my father was a speller, well-known, who was the chair of the German Department of Brooklyn College, John Widen spoke flawless German, said, "I don't have a job for you, but I will take you to Mr. Luria at Romance Language." Mr. Luria said, "Sorry, no job, but do go and see Anna Jacobson at Hunter College on Lexington Avenue." I came there and behind the desk was a little lady, she said, "Do you want a job?" This was 1948. And I said, "Yes." "I need a man to teach veterans Scientific German but it's at the extension in the Bronx." Now it's Lehman College.

HS: What is, what kind of German is it?

KB: Scientific.

HS: Veterans scientific.

KB: No, no, veterans who...

HS: Oh, you want to teach veterans from the war?

KB: Yes.

HS: Scientific German?

KB: Scientific German. Now these...

HS: That's a challenge isn't it?

KB: It would be, but they were not interested in this. They got everything paid. They never opened a book, and one day Miss Jacobsen called and said, "I have to monitor your class. Don't worry, it isn't personal. It's a routine thing." And I entered the class with her, no way to tell the class. And this day they were completely transfixed.

⁴Elie Wiesel, Holocaust author.

⁵*Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (Children's Aid Society)

They had their hand up all the time, they went to the board, not knowing the answer. And when she left, they came to me and said, "We didn't let you down, did we?"

HS: ...education.

KB: My reception in America. Yeah.

HS: Wonderful. Have you any thoughts on the general feeling of the French population regarding refugees coming into their country and their reaction after the German invasion and after liberation. Was there a lot of antisemitism? You experienced very little, I suppose.

KB: Well, in Paris, where people could buy for a song, or get for a song, a Jewish apartment, a Jewish business, and where after the war they had the nerve to calling their association, Association of In Good Faith purchases, there is antisemitism because the Jew came back, "What, you're not dead?" What an idea! Now, the saving of tens of thousands of foreign Jews by the French people would not have been possible in a totally antisemitic atmosphere. But the government of propaganda was so crude and so...

HS: Pervasive?

KB: ...well, awkward, that it didn't catch. On the contrary.

HS: Oh.

KB: Many people were challenged. They felt that as Christians they had the mission, like these people in Le Chambon who were Huguenots but not as perhaps as strongly as they, but people were extremely hospitable. What happened to us, happened to many people. We were very fortunate to be young, to be together.

HS: Yes.

KB: And the lower clergy in Catholic Church, also, it was almost unanimous everywhere. Now, in some places a certain pressure was exercised on the young children to convert. And I know a young man who was in camp with me before, Moser, who became a devout Catholic with his life, but in general nuns and priests were extremely liberal. To tell you another story about our priest who came with the books during the occupation, the Bishop of Montauban and the Archbishop of Toulouse, who was very old, were both arrested for having spoken from the pulpit against Nazis, and they were liberated after liberation. And another priest whom I had been in touch with, L'Abbé Bourignon, the head of the Boys College of St. Eodard [phonetic], came and said, "You know, monsieur has come back and he has had a first reunion with his parish priests, and your friend who was not a parish priest was the first he called."

HS: Oh.

KB: "And what did he say?" And he said, the name of my friend, *Monsieur Chalumot*, "*Oui Monseigneur.*" [Yes, sir.] "I understand you have many Jewish friends." "*Oui, Monseigneur.*" "No conversions?" And the Bishop was the first to laugh out loud, because he knew how this host was my friend, and there are examples of this, all over and...

HS: Yes. Professor Bieber, what do you think of the recent excuse of the clergy for the persecution of the Jews in France?

KB: Well, the higher clergy, unfortunately, for reasons of politics, and being extremely conservative...

HS: Were they Right Wing?

KB: Yes, this is staying in the Right Wing, and they were pleased with this so-called patriotism which was of course, fake. And, they played along and said, "We do the best in a bad situation." So Saliège⁶ in Toulouse was perhaps one of the exceptions, but there were, they had two Catholic clandestine magazines that came out, *Témoignage Chrétien*, Christian witnesses, who were very outspoken and touched a lot of people. And another one, whose title I forget now. And you talked about what the clergy has said, the journal *La Croix*, interestingly has now apologized for sustaining the accusers of Zola, a hundred years later. It's to a point, it's rather ludicrous that this comes so late.

HS: There must have been different factions within the Catholic clergy fighting each other, perhaps?

KB: I don't know if they were fighting. Now what happened, for instance, for this infamous Militia man in Lyon who has killed, many people, has sold them to the Germans, has taken millions. He went, for instance, to blackmail the bank director. He asked that a certain safe be opened, and the bank director said, "I have to call the police commissioner." He immediately asked, arrested the bank director, and took all the money. And this man was in hiding in several monasteries in the South of France until they traced him there, and had been said, for his own safety, to have died. The newspaper announced his death. Then they finally had the trial, and, unfortunately, these people who sided with him were agreeing with him probably to some extent. But he was a common criminal.

HS: Have you any special thoughts about France in general, the population, and that this position to foreigners, to the rest of the world, and whether there have been any changes since you have left? I believe you have been back, and what is the general atmosphere?

KB: It's difficult from here, of course, to judge. Now, my mother who was a very independent and courageous woman would never forgive the French for having interned her in Gurs, which was not a good town.

HS: Oh yes.

KB: But, as my wife reminded her, the French saved her only son, and she accepted that. And there were very few examples, unfortunately one touching my parents-in-law who were betrayed for my mother-in-law's pearls and furs. They were betrayed, they were really sold to the police, for the people took their belongings, but the

⁶Jules-Gérard Saliège (1870-1950) archbishop of Toulouse.

other people were outraged by that. There is one other sad example about the St. Louis, and we talked about the ships, and we had befriended this family, Loeb, he was from Munich and she was from my mother's hometown, and they had a lovely little girl, whom they entrusted to a woman, who was selfless, in the same village. They were arrested and somebody has denounced the woman for having a Jewish child. This is the only example I ever had heard about this. When luckily tens of thousands were saved to the point where now we have this organization called *Enfants Cachés*, Hidden Children.

HS: Oh yeah.

KB: People feel guilt for having survived when so many others died. So, in general, in France, as the recent, or the present trial of this old man, Pappon in Bordeaux illustrates, there are still attempts to correct errors injustice because they have dragged this on under Mitterrand, who was knowledgeable about that. And the echoes from the people in the press are very much, really in the majority of them, overwhelming majority, yes, we have to know, we have to find out. We mustn't judge everybody. Some people couldn't help being implicated in some small extent. But these bigshots, who really helped the Nazis knowing what happened, they should be judged. That's the impression I have, and I have the weekly edition of the *Monde* that I get here and I also listen to radio, so I see a little bit, but I don't have, of course, a complete picture of what all the people say.

HS: Well, some people say that France is an antisemitic country and chauvinistic, and you are painting a very different picture...

KB: Yeah.

HS: ...which is very interesting, and of course, everything is based on... [Tape three, side one ended]

Tape three, side two:

HS: This is side two of tape three of an interview with Professor Konrad Bieber on January 28, 1998, conducted by Harold Stern. It is a continuation of an interview started on January 14, 1998. Professor Bieber, you have given us a most wonderful résumé of your experiences and it will be one of our better interviews, throwing a light on the times of, in France that you experienced. We can not thank you enough for your forthrightness and for coming forward with these interesting episodes and your own way of expressing yourself, and we will always treasure this particular résumé. Thank you very much.

KB: Thank you. Perhaps I can go back to what you said about France.

HS: Professor Bieber will give us another little chat on his thoughts on France.

KB: Now, about French chauvinism, it is difficult to deny that there is a tendency even in left-wing people to be proud of their country and sometimes irrationally. But to call France an antisemitic country, is to feel, to recognize, the mettle of these people, and while their ancestors have helped tens of thousands of Jews, when it was dangerous and risked their own lives, the young people want to find out. And when you see the crowds that go to a memorial like Oradour,⁷ then you wonder how many can be friendly to Germans at all? But the young Germans, too, are in a majority very eager to know outside people, Spain, Italy, France, England, Scandinavia, and in the United States, of course, so there is a hope that very many people in these generations have a sound life, are sort of comfortable in their position, in their skin, as we say, and don't have the grudges that are so oversimplified. Now there are anti-Semites in Paris and there will be some wherever you have contact.

HS: Some people say that the Dreyfus affair was based to some extent on the attitude of the French nation.

KB: Yeah, the Dreyfus affair was really watershed.

HS: Yes.

KB: Because while for the longest time the Church and the Army were entrenched in their rather rigid concept, when the truth became known, it really helped practically every Frenchman to see that. There were discussions on television in the 1970s by survivors of the family. That is, in other words, three generations removed, or four generations, and they couldn't agree, which is natural, but there is no sort of fundamental hatred in the younger people.

HS: I see.

KB: There are people who won't change their mind, no matter what happens.

HS: Yes.

⁷Oradour-sur-Glare, 1944 massacre by Germans.

KB: But if you could see that the immense majority of people are more concerned about their rights, as Catholics who want to go to parochial schools, or as Protestants who want to defend against an overwhelming influence of the Church, and the fact is that for over a century churches were very sparsely attended to. Then in the 1950s and '60s more younger people crowded into churches. And there were--this was a positive development--especially when the church under John the 23rd and then subsequently had a more open idea. And apologized to Galileo⁸ and now, to the Jews. So on balance, of course, it's like any other Western country. People are not all of one opinion, to be sure, and there will always be people who say it's bad weather because the government is at fault. But in in a rational country where a majority of people, even though if they don't vote, have a very firm opinion, which they sometimes change, it sounds like hope for more openness.

HS: We thank you again for this very wonderful exposé, and we hope to see you sometime at the Archives if you want to continue more research.

KB: Yes.

HS: Thank you very much, Professor Bieber.

KB: Thank you, Mr. Stern.

[Tape three, side two ended]

⁸1564-1642 - mathematician, astronomer, physicist, conflict with Church over his support of Copernican theory that planets revolve around sun.

Tape four, side one: [Addendum to Interview]

KB: 1B. We stopped when my father was mentioned as being interned in Françillon. And there he wrote me, I should, under no circumstances, volunteer for the Foreign Legion.⁹ Shortly after that he was liberated for 1939. We were living in this camp, and, in the beginning, the French authorities allowed those Germans married to French women or having French family to be freed, and a number of them were set free a few days after we arrived. Less than a week later, one of those who had been married to a French woman was shot as a spy, and the plans of Eastern French fortifications were found on this person. We were in this camp in the fall of 1939 until weather forced the authorities to transfer us to a more permanent place. By train, they shipped us to a town, which is a very popular family spa on the Atlantic, *Les Sables-d'Olonne*, and we were housed in a disinfected prison,¹⁰ *Maison d'Arrêt et de Correction pour Prisonniers Aliénés*, in other words for crazy people. The beginning was very depressing, as any prison must be. We were five in a cell, although the doors were not closed. But the next day we found that this was not so bad. It is a little bit like in the famous operetta by Strauss, often played at New Year's, *Die Fledermaus*. It was a very merry prison, and within days you could order anything that you wanted to buy, from chocolate to cognac and cigarettes. There were two representatives from the Van Houten Chocolate and Cocoa firm, they were Czechs, and they managed to get any merchandise through the garbage into the prison. The commander of this camp was a retired man who had been the manager of a shoe store, of Batia Shoes. He wore a sky blue uniform which was no longer worn by any other officer in France in the Second World War, and he was, to say the least, a little bit out of it. An interned young man came and applied for medication for diabetes. The commander looked at him one moment and said, "You will die young. Goodbye." Luckily the young man could talk to a sergeant, who was also a priest, L'Abbé Giraud, and who got him medication. The same sergeant was very helpful to me because I had a hub--a skin problem, urticaria, for not having anything fresh, and he allowed me to get lettuce and fruit officially, which was very pleasant. So we were in this camp and not doing anything until the beginning of 1940, when the military administration found it advantageous to detach a small number of us, mostly academics, to another town and build there an airport. We were about 25, lodged in an abandoned farm, where we were lucky to have more comfortable beds because we used the chicken wire as a sort of spring for beds, and we lived on a breakfast of sardines or sausage, and we were not unhappy. Now we were about 25 men, dentists, doctors, lawyers, business people, and myself a student, scratching the earth with our shovels, and we advanced for about a few inches, and this went on for weeks and weeks and weeks, and the airport, of

⁹Lé Étragère, a military corps, mainly of foreign volunteers, in the pay of France.

¹⁰House for the arrest and correction of mentally ill prisoners.

course, wouldn't grow. Finally, the French administration brought one bulldozer in, who in a few hours finished the grounds for the airport. Meantime, my wife was authorized to live in town; the town was called La-Roche-sur-Yon, a foundation by Napoleon the 1st, the capital of Vendée of interesting memory as being the white, that is, the anti-revolutionary center during the revolutionary years. My wife had a small apartment, and for my birthday in the spring, she prepared a cake, and like all French housewives brought it to the baker to be baked. We had two of my camp mates coming for tea, and tea was heated on an alcohol lamp. One of them, a former corporation lawyer, who had been in a concentration camp in Germany right after Hitler came to power, in Oranienburg, and he complained that our camp in France was much less comfortable than this German concentration camp. And he said to Tamara, to my wife, "Did you bake your cake on this alcohol lamp, too?" And she said, "Of course, I did." In the meantime, the screening of our files had been completed, and those of us who were found reliable and loyal were admitted to military service, so in early March of 1940 we were shipped from the La Roche-sur-Yon to Le Mans, which is famous for its car races. And at the *Dépôt d'Artillerie Numero Quatre*, the artillery barracks, we were incorporated into the French army, which promptly detached all of us to the British, who had a division in this area with Indian and other soldiers, and we were put into Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps, A.M.P.C., under Major Watkins, intense, and the beginning was quite tolerable. I got a letter from my wife to whom I had written the address obtained from the barracks, when the Captain who commanded as a liaison officer came and shouted at me, "You are a traitor! We are not supposed to have addresses," and I said, "Monsieur, I got the address from the Colonel." He said, "*J'nai pas à en connaître*," I don't have to take notice of this. Anyway, I got my letter. But as you know, in May, on May the 10th, 1940, the German attacked again, and even a few days later, already streams of refugees from Belgium came by on the road, including the King of the Belgians, Leopold. So the British decided to move us further west, and we were put into a camp, a small camp, near Nantes, famous for its religious history in Western France, between, in a small triangle, between a minor airport, a big ammunition depot, and a very important railroad junction. The first bombs, 25 kilo bombs, fell, and, of course, the alarm was being rung. I was in the ditch. The British sergeant walking by, said to me, "Are you scared?" I said, "Of course, I am." He and I eventually became friends, and I had his home address in London where he was in civilian life a watchmaker. We later corresponded. We were in that camp. The situation deteriorated from day to day and after the fall of Paris order was given to all British units to prepare evacuation. They took their lorries, their trucks, and told us to take all the provisions we wanted and to use some of the lorries to follow them and embark in Saint-Nazaire for England. So I was asked by my comrades in this A.M.P.C. company to contact the nearest company a few miles away, and somebody drove the lorry there, and I met a friend from Paris, a refugee like me, who stood on a truck getting the backpacks for his comrades to follow the British, when the liaison

officer of the French army, a major who had served in the First War, a major of the *Chasseurs Alpins*, the Alpine Troops who didn't understand a thing about the situation, took his pistol and threatened my friend, and said, "I shoot you as a deserter, if you don't come down immediately." And he said, "I want to go with the British." "The British are all deserters." Well, compliments of this not so well informed major, we all became prisoners of war of the Germans. East German troops, the *Panzer-schützen*, the armored troops, were young, enthusiastic and elated by their easy victory. They had no racial or other prejudice. They treated the prisoners with kindness, and we were transported by trucks from this place to another place in the *Département de Deux-Sèvres* near Lyon. And in a small town, we were, for the time being, housed in some stables and barns, not uncomfortably. And from there by other troops, equally correct and not hostile, we were driven farther east to the area of Saumur, the famous wine area in the *Maine-et-Loire Département*, to a huge concentration camp which had been created by the French government for Spanish refugees, Mont Trébilly [phonetic] which the Germans used as a front Stalag, it is a front prisoner camp, front Stalag 181. The commander here was a man who in civilian had a lemon factory. He was hated by his troops, made unprintable jokes on this name. He was unfriendly, I wouldn't say brutal, but hostile, and the sergeant major seemed to be also very, very ferocious. He shouted very loud. He was from Oberschlesien, from Upper Silesia, which is now Poland, Feldwebel Aut, Sergeant Major. After shouting, however, he came close to us and said, "I have to shout for the old men. If you cooperate and work and conduct yourselves in a reasonable way, I will try to improve your lot." And he proved out, proved to be a very decent humane man. Now in the long run, we were put on labor companies and marched out of the camp to help road building and some minor constructions, so we had wheelbarrows with cement on the way out. Meantime, we had been in this camp and we all lost a lot of weight because food was very sparse and bad, and when the wine, when the grapes in the vineyards getting ripe, we had our first break. That allowed us to pick fruit, which we did, of course, it wasn't permissible, and we put it on the wheelbarrows, and the empty cement bags covered the grapes. But, of course, the farmers had witnessed, complained to the commander who ordered to simply to shoot without warning. Now we went out with a man from the Sudeten, the most Nazified area, the one that caused the breakup of Czechoslovakia, a man who was very heavy-set, and he said to us "You go and work, I get myself a couple of chickens." But he didn't get chickens, only he got two bottles of spirits, and on the way back to where we worked, he already had emptied one complete bottle, and it was noticeable. So when we were walked, marched back into the camp, he failed to salute the sergeant major who said to him, under his voice, "Idiot! Salute me!" "I won't even dream of it." "I have to report you." "Go ahead." "I have to report you now." "Do. I will be in the fortress and the war is over for me." The poor man didn't realize that the war was going to last very long and that the Russian planes and snow fields would cover many corpses, probably including his. Now in the camp, we also had

some British civilian interns, people, and 70 white friars, White, les *Frères Blancs* from Canada who had been in Brittany, and had been surprised by the war. They came to our camp, or to the barbed wire fence of our camp, and sometimes managed to throw some bread, which was welcome to us. There also were hundreds of North African auxiliaries of the French army, who were starved as much as we were, and we sometimes managed to share something with them. My friend, who will play a role later, Jakob Offenbacher, had been a soccer player in his hometown of Fürth near Nürnberg, Nuremberg, and when the soldiers heard that, they shared cigarettes with him, and he was the hero. But, after the soldiers, came the *Arbeitsdienst*, the Workers Service, which was the 150% Nazi and they were brutes. One day in August, the very tall muscular intern or prisoner like me, Kauffman, was working with a drill, with the pressure drill, to open the pavement in the heat. He had taken off his shirt, he was hot, when this Nazi shouted at him and insulted him in any way, and he had to repeat the insults. He called him, "Lazy pig, report!" And the man would be silent and work, and it was a very degrading and a very painful situation to watch. The German soldiers were now mostly reservists, and they had to sing. In the mornings they came and had to sing, and we had visit from a general, a medical officer, a general who shouted his head off, and said, "All these people with a flat feet must put in tomorrow aluminum insoles," and it was funny and sad to see these poor soldiers who could barely lift their feet, and could barely sing, you couldn't see marching, but lifting their feet and letting them down. It was a day of misery. The next day when the sold--when the general was gone, of course, you could find all the aluminum inlaid soles in a place which I will not name, which is necessary in any camp. Time went on, and some of the older people got very depressed. One of them said, "I have eaten so many carrots, you can see it on my face," and indeed the complexion changed. Then at the beginning of October, one night, one of the Tunisian soldiers from North Africa came to our camp and said, "We have a train in the night, a train that will take us out to the unoccupied zone. We have room on the train," and, of course, these words, did not, as we say in French, fall on a deaf man's ear. So some of us, quite a few, were able to slip into the train, and the train indeed at four o'clock started and carried us to the unoccupied zone, where we were stopped and then let go. Actually the Nazis, the S.S., who were the convoy guards, were very brutal for any handicapped or older people, they beat them, and we marched as far as we could, the few of us. We were six men, and we tried to get as far away from that borderline into the unoccupied zone. And as night fell and we wanted to be sheltered, we knocked at the door of a farm and asked if we could be using the barn. And they asked us, "Do you smoke? Do you have any matches?" And when we said, "No," they said, "Come in." And we were just about to get settled for the night, when the police, the gendarmes, these farmers were recently immigrants from Italy, and they were afraid that if we were found in their barn they would have trouble. The police took us to the nearby town of La Réole between Bordeaux and Toulouse, and we were depressed to be again in a prison, and this time

uncertain. And a short while after we were put in, the six of us, three other men had been picked up, and they also came. But at that moment appeared a man who looked like a savior to us. He was the postal sergeant, Wagneistre [phonetic], and he said, "I'm Boris Revitch [phonetic]. We cannot possibly keep you in this prison in La Réole. We don't have any food, we have no guards, we must get rid of you as quickly as possible, so tomorrow we will put you on a train between some police and you will be free." So at least we could spend the night without anxiety, and, indeed, in the morning the train came, and we were put on the train, and it went from this place La Réole by Agens to Montauban, where I had never been. We were getting out of the train, of course, all we had were our clothes that we were wearing. And the first thing I did, I went to the railroad station, and there was a train ready to leave for Paris, and a railroad employee was about to board the train, and I asked him, "Can you take a message to my wife in Paris?" He said, "Of course." And I want to give him some money. He said, "No money! This is an honor." So that night, my wife would know that I was free, and that eventually she could join me in Montauban. Now to be in order as a foreigner, an escaped prisoner, I and my fellows, [unclear] escaped prisoners we went to register with the foreign labor company. Also, I had heard that my parents would be ready to go to the United States and they were in Toulouse, the regional metropolis. And I telephoned, and I was told they were no longer there. They had just left for Marseilles, which was a good sign, because it meant that they would reasonably soon be ready to leave France. I went to the office and asked for a furlough, and it was given to me. I took the train to Marseilles, saw my parents, and saw some other friends. Actually went to the American consul, who said yes the visa, which is an emergency visa, says for Hugo Bieber and family, my father and his family, and you and your wife would be entitled to go with them. And I said, "It's too bad, because my wife is still in Paris and I cannot stay here." And he said, "Don't worry, come back." And I took the train back. As I landed, I got off the train; there was my captain, the commander of this labor company, a very wonderful, decent man, *le Capitaine Barnard*, who had served in the First War, but in civilian was an engineer for Michelin, for rubber. And he said, "How did you travel?" And I told him briefly, and he said, "Come to my office, it's nothing negative." And so I came to his office. And he said, "I see you can read and write." I had a *licence des lettres*¹¹ which is like an M.A., Master, and he said, "Would you like to be supply sergeant?" I said, "What does that entail?" He said, "It's a sinecure. Six men take a two-wheel cart from the barracks to the place where you work, and you have to supervise it. It really is no sweat." And it turned out to be exactly like that. So I had food and I had sort of an occupation for the beginning, but I was very depressed because I had a very bad piece of news. A very close friend of mine, who had been the pianist of the

¹¹Actually Bachelor's Degree: Cassell's French Dictionary.

choir in which I sang, the Jewish choir, Wolf Simone, a composer who had T.B. and was deaf, and therefore inept for military service, had been in a camp for inept people, and I had heard for sure that this camp had been bombed after the Armistice, and that everybody had been killed. So that day, my men came, I held the guides of the cart. They unloaded the wine, the cheese, the bread, the salad, and just before they went to take the *plat de résistance* [main dish] my dead friend came about the bend of the road, and I was so taken, I let go and all the tripe, for this was the main dish, went into the street. "Hurray," they shouted, except the ones who liked tripe who picked up on the top. My friend and I embraced, but he didn't stay in this area. He went to Eastern France, to the Rhône Valley, to Valence, where he met a poet, Pierre Emmanuel, who later was to become a member of the French Academy, and who said, "You have no fake identity card. We must get you one." It was called in slang a *bifteck*, and they went to Lyon, and in the Civil Service sector they found the following registry: August 12, 1909, stillborn child, mother died in childbirth, father suicide, and this was entered in pencil, and as Emmanuel said, "This is too good to be true." He filled it in ink, and my friend Simone became Louis Saguet, a name he kept after the liberation, and as which he became quite well known, even famous, as a composer. Now, I met a Belgian priest, *Abbé Sélaine* who helped refugees, and he said, "If you, since you have a diploma, if you are willing to teach four young men of a Belgian refugee family, whose father is in Africa, I have a job for you," and I went to the company and they detached me, that is, they authorized me to be away from the company. In the meantime the company had been in that barracks, and they led a life which was monotonous but not disagreeable, except, of course, restrictions were already in function and there was little to eat. And these doctors and lawyers and dentists and others didn't much like to clean the kettles, but my friend Jacob Offenbacher, *Jacques*, "*Jackel*," as we called him said, "This is food." He had been in Dachau, he was glad to be alive, and he cooked, even with restrictions, very edible soups, so he was a member of the team. The company was then displaced from Montauban to a mountain camp, Septfonds, where Spaniards had been and had continued a bearable routine. They had relatively comfortable dormitories, relatively fairly good food, and the *encadrement*, the officers, were very humane. A friend of mine, the same who had been on the truck and threatened by the liaison officer with his pistol, [unclear] Baer, worked for the American service, defense service, in Montauban, one of the big centers for Spanish refugees, of which there were hundreds of thousands in Southern France, Marseilles, Toulouse, and Montauban were the main centers. And he said one day, "You should come because the teacher in the French school, in the Spanish school, is taken ill. That's a job for you," and so I went and taught these very, very bright youngsters. I wrote, I was a young man, very sure of myself, I wrote on the blackboard, when something like a lobster claw pinched me in the most sensitive part of my anatomy, and a little boy said, "It's such fun." I said, "Fun for you but not for me." The next day the same boy, who was nine, beat a girl. She was eight. Her name was Ruth, and I said

“Unberto, boys never beat girls.” “But she’s my wife,” he said. Whenever I said, in French of course, “Come to the board,” they would say in Spanish, “Don’t go. The teacher doesn’t know any Spanish.” So I traded lessons with a colleague, who had lost an arm in the Civil War, Bastista Trulegella [phonetic] and he learned a little English and I learned a few words of Spanish. When I had six words of Spanish we were friends, and this lasted for quite a while. I taught there, and the pictures of youngsters, I still have one in my collection here, until things became very, very critical. As you know, French police had to round up Jews in Paris in 1942 and thousands were arrested, men, women and even children, and you know what their destiny was. We lived in the unoccupied zone and felt relatively secure, and my wife was then working as a secretary in the Relief Committee of the Joint Distribution Committee. There were hundreds of refugees in the town, which was hospitable, from all over central Europe, and one day the police commissioner came to the office and said, “Madame Bieber, Mrs. Bieber, if you, I mean you and all your friends are home tomorrow night, tomorrow morning at four, regretfully we will have to arrest you. Now I haven’t told you anything.” He was a former Socialist and he felt he had to do something. We had no telephone, no car, but we snowballed the news as best we could, and as far as we knew, most people of the hundreds of refugees were warned. My wife and I decided to go for safety sake to stay with friends who were five miles out of town in a little village in the hills, in a house, very pleasant, without electricity and without a bathroom, but with running water. And the next morning, I was just stripping to take a sponge bath when the neighbor, who was not Jewish, called, “Here come the *gendarme*, here come the police on their motorbike!” My friends already, two men, were running out of the house. I grabbed my pants, went out the window, and followed them into the woods, and this is where we stayed for three weeks in the woods. Les bois de Fosses Reposes [location] in between Montauban and Le Carre van [phonetic] this little hamlet. My wife went to town to find out what was going on, and we were fortunate to get food from a farmer for whom we had worked, who lived nearby. One of us was a chain smoker, and he ran out of cigarettes in two days and had to rely on oak leaves which, of course was a poor substitute. After three weeks, the search was called off, and I still have a certificate which, ironically, reads, “Mr. Bieber Quaker,” which I was never. I had worked for the Quakers. Now during the time we were in the woods and our apartment was empty and the shutters were closed, a greengrocer, that is a farmer who came with a bicycle and a little trailer, and had been becoming friendly with my wife, coming every day having vegetables, fruit, flowers, had talked, and she called us the Parisians because we spoke French a little different from the Southwest. She came, and saw the shutters were closed, in front of the house where we lived legally was a big truck surrounded by police, *gendarme*, and on the truck were some old people and some women with babies. Everybody cried. And she said to the police, “What you do here? What are you doing?” And they wouldn’t answer. And she said, “*Vous êtes pire que le Boche*,” you’re worse than the Germans. They still did not answer. So when we came

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back after three weeks, she embraced us. She said, "I am so relieved but this must never happen to you. I can't sleep at night; you must come to my house," and I said, "Odette, this is all very good and nice, but we can't." "Oh it's not good enough for you." I said, "Of course it's good enough, but there's always the possibility that we are found in your house and you have no idea what may happen to you and your family. Not just arrest, they may torture you," and she said, "I don't care and so does my family. They don't. You must bring some clothes to my house, to be ready to come," and that's what we did. And when the Germans occupied all of France, after the North African capture by the Allies that's where we went and Tamar and I stayed for eighteen months in a room without heat and a bedstead with straw. It was so cold that the water froze in the tooth glass, no indoor facilities, but the warmth of these people who were devoted, and didn't want a penny from us, and this is how we survived. We were young, we were together. Also, I had during my teaching at the Spanish school been asked by the principal of the of novitiate David Chalumot, a Lazarist priest of the Vincent de Paul Society to translate some gardening books about grafting and pruning and we were acquainted and he asked me, I said--he said, "I know you are safe. Can I do something for you?" I said, "Come to think of it, yes, would you care to get me books from the town library?" He said, "Of course I will. I come on my bicycle every other week." And he did come and he said, "*Mon ami*," my friend "You put me to purgatory. You are reading Zola, he is on the index," and we laughed. While he was there, he heard the following conversation between our hostess and the neighbor who had seen my friend coming on his bicycle in the castle. "Odette?" "What is it?" "Is your father dying?" "No," he was 84. "He's out picking beans." "What about the priest?" "He is here for the Parisians." "Oh, how churchy they are, *Q'uest ce que calotins?*" [Are they priests?] And of course, he was delighted to hear that. We stayed there for eighteen months. Now on June 6, 1944, I was standing on a ladder picking sour cherries, when from another tree not very far away, somebody said, "Come down, they've landed." I said, "Leave me alone, I've heard this time and time again." When around us from every village all the church bells were ringing. It was the landing. Of course, the war wasn't over, but we were greatly encouraged by this situation. Now my only active contribution to the resistance was the radio service. As you may know the Germans had jammed all the stations with Italian, French, Spanish and even German texts, and I was able to catch the Dutch and Flemish transmissions, and also I listened to the news at the [unclear] and I got some of the BBC's messages, and could bring the news to various farms in the area. One of the speakers in London, who actually died now in 1998, Boris Schumann, said this very, very moving slogan, "They can erase liberty, freedom, fraternity, equality from our monuments, they will never eradicate it from the heart of Frenchmen." When I came to a farm where people had put their dogs out and somebody to watch for any snooper because it was forbidden to listen to London radio. When they heard this, they would say, "That is so true." Unanimously, every where in every farm, in every place, I would

hear the same opinion. Now after the landing, the Germans were withdrawing the troops from the Spanish border, which was not strategically important, wherever they could. And sometimes of course, the tracks had been removed so that the whole armored train was immobilized, and eventually was captured by Jewish soldiers, in Castres and a friend and I were at the victory banquet for that particular feat of arms. But the last troops, the Germans left behind were called the Mongols, that is they were the [unclear] army, Russian and Soviet troops that had been forced into German service, and they didn't understand any language and they opposed fierce resistance. So one day, long after the landing, while the Germans were in full retreat from this area, I came on my bicycle to bring a message and I had been to the dentist so I was dressed like a city slicker, and as I came close to the farm, I didn't realize early enough that there were many German military vehicles behind the hedges. It was too late to go back, that would have been suspicious, so I walked on, and I came into the kitchen when the German S.S. man in perfect French said, "Is this the farmer too?" And one of the girls said, "It's my uncle." "Oh he is very young. Can I see your identity card?" I had an identity card, and they could of course telephone and find that I was registered as Pierre Durant, born on April 12, 1910, in Marsac, not far from there, and I was a dealer in shoes. And that's what the German read. He said, "Oh dealer in shoes. Here have a seat. Here's a cigar. This is very interesting." I wasn't very comfortable. And he said, "Indeed, we will go there. It's so close." And I was more and more uncomfortable and I said, and this was not a very intelligent question, "Do you have ration cards for clothes and shoes?" And he says, "I don't like your jokes. '*Oswald fahr mal den Wagen*,'" start the car and there was a Mercedes outside. It seemed imminent that something would happen, like in a bad movie I saw. My hoped for fantasy, maybe I could find by miracle the house where I supposed to have a store, talk to the owner, the father and say do anything. But I didn't have time to finish because the officer got up, but the driver came in and said "I don't understand it. I overhauled the car this morning. It's dead." "What do you mean dead?" "Dead. Put in the key, in the ignition, it's absolutely..." "Never mind" said the officer; "We will get the shoes another time." I was still sitting, and I couldn't get up. My knees were absolutely soft. Eventually I got up with the cigar still unsmoked, and walked out as best I could. The next day when the Germans had left, and we found out later, that they did horrors on their way, burning a whole church with people inside in Oradour-sur-Glane which is now a memorial village, and I wanted to find out what happened. Now this farm had a number of Refractaires. These are young Frenchmen refusing to go to compulsory German labor and among them was a young man from Martinique, [unclear] Mestizo, and he hated the Germans as much as I did. I said "You are crazy Guy. You did it in full view of everybody. How did you do it?" He said, "It's very simple. I took off the distributor head." "But you could have been shot on the spot." "Never mind, I saw you in a pickle and it wasn't so bad." This is something I never told my wife. She knew everything else, but I didn't want, even afterwards, to scare her in retrospect. And it is a

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KONRAD BIEBER [4-1-54]

typical situation without any heroism because I'm not a hero. I'm a coward, and it could happen to anyone, and how many times when we walked together towards the city or had our bicycles and a car stopped, we were scared to death. Most of the time they just wanted to find the road, and asked for the way, and of course, we knew that people disappeared within seconds when a car stopped. They were just pulled in, and never seen again. So when after the fierce fighting with the so-called Mongols, finally the town was free after the Germans had been devastating everything, and they hanged 17 young men from the lamppost in that town, who were there for days. After the Germans left and we felt free it was, of course, a different life. [Tape cut off and then stopped]

[Tape four, side one ended; interview and addendum ended.]

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