HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

FRED L. HAMMEL

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Meta Jacoby
Date: May 9, 1995

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FH - Fred L. Hammel [interviewee]
MJ - Meta Jacoby [interviewer]
Date: May 9, 1995

Tape one, side one:

MJ: ...to Mr. Fred Hammel of Philadelphia. Good morning, Fred.

FH: Thank you.

MJ: You don't need to stand. Just sit back, you'll be fine.

FH: Thank you.

MJ: Fred...

FH: I was, yeah, okay.

MJ: Tell me a little bit about your family, your life, what it was like before the war.

FH: First of all, I'd like to mention that I was born on--shortly after midnight on a Friday, the 13 of May, 1921, in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. There is an older sister who is older by six years, who now resides in Switzerland after spending most of her adult life in Mexico City. She is widowed. My father, who rose from very, very, very modest circumstances. He was born on the land in the province of Baden in southern Germany and was the first of his family to receive what I would call a little better than the equivalent of a high school education, from the modest beginning of generations of small trades people he became a very important, very successful, leather goods manufacturer, with a huge factory that is still there in Offenbach, where leather goods were being manufactured for all over the world. And my mother came from a well-to-do family in northwestern Germany. She was the descendant of a long line of people who, in a town that was like a county seat, ran a general store and were prosperous and well-known for years. When I was a kid, my father's success led to our having a very, very comfortable living. When I was six years old we moved from the apartment where I was born into a villa, which had 15 rooms, and there were three maids and a woman who came in once a week to do the washing. So you can imagine, it was a very, very comfortable lifestyle.

MJ: Where was that home?

FH: That was in the southern part of Frankfurt am Main, which is known as Sachsenhausen. The house is still there. However, it is now seven or eight apartments to it. We had it all by ourselves. It was an extremely gracious way of life and my mother saw to it that my sister and I had all the advantages that the wealth my father provided came to us. There were wonderful vacations and the best of years in Switzerland, in these resort hotels, where everybody read your very wish and jumped to attention to take care of them. And there were trips, weekend trips, to the surrounding countryside. It was a very, very gracious way of living that I might mention. It doesn't exist any more in Germany or anywhere else in Europe. There simply is not the money, and in addition to

that, you cannot find the devoted household help that worked for relatively low wages and room and board, that was very easy to find in those days.

MJ: Fred, was your family religious?

FH: My father came from a very strictly Orthodox home. His ancestors, including his father, were the keepers of the *shofar* in their tiny community, Jewish community. And they also blew the *shofar* on the High Holydays. My father found that to make his way he could not get up at three or four in the morning and lay *tefillin*[1] like he was taught and then do a day's work or travel wherever his business took him. He worked himself up in an amazingly short time. But he saw to it that we got religion taught to us. And it was taught in the public schools anyway. And he saw to it that I got the proper instructions for my *Bar Mitzvah*. But religion did not play a great part in our household. We were Jewish and my father often talked about his religious background, but that was about it.

MJ: Did you belong to a synagogue?

FH: Pardon?

MJ: Did you belong to a synagogue?

FH: Yes, we did. Certainly we did. And when I was a teenager until I left Germany I used to go to Friday night and Saturday morning services, although I have to confess one of the attractions was that the girls went too when I was old enough. But people like me will tell you that's the truth. My mother, I would imagine that the fam-, the Ullman family, as their that was their last name, they probably were reasonably religious too. But that sort of also fell by the wayside. They were Jews. They always made sure that everybody knew that they had come from a Jewish household and so did my sister and I, although we did not keep a kosher house-- except when my paternal grandmother used to show up. She retained her deep religious feelings. Then we had to have a very kosher household for the week or two. This was very common because the leading newspaper in Frankfurt was the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. All the nice people read that newspaper. It was world-renowned. And there was a saying in Frankfurt, "What do you keep from your Jewish religion?" And you would say, "*Yom Kippur* and the *Frankfurter Zeitung*."

MJ: Would you describe your family as secular Jews, then?

FH: Probably.

MJ: Mmm hmm.

FH: Probably that. Prob-...

MJ: How were your relations with non-Jewish people?

FH: Well they were there. I grew up in a neighborhood where there were some Jewish families, but it was a very nice upper middle class neighborhood that in fact still

[1]Two black leather boxes, containing scriptural passages, bound by black leather straps, used on the left hand and head, worn in morning services.

is so, remarkably so, a very nice, quiet neighborhood. And the thing I will say is, when I went to school first we were the post-World War I crop. The classes were huge because there was simply no money to build schools like you do here. There were from 50 to 54 kids in every class I ever attended in Frankfurt. It was too much. And where we lived at that time, I would say out of 50-odd kids, six or eight were Jewish. That was about the way it was. There were some schools, especially one *Gymnasium*, the Goethe *Gymnasium.* There it was reversed, because it drew the very promising kids. And there, out of 40, there may have been 25 Jews. That was unusual, very unusual.

MJ: Did you experience any antisemitism in...

FH: Well...

MJ: *Gymnasium*?

FH: …in grammar school, which was four years, you know, you were called a Jew boy and that stuff, but so what? That was just a matter of habit I think. And so you called the kid that cursed you as being a lousy Jew, you cursed him right back. And occasionally there were a few fist fights. This was par for the course. I think that was not unusual. And some of the kids I played with when I was small, and when I was not so small any more, certainly were Gentiles who lived in the neighborhood or who went to school with me. That's how it was.

MJ: Did your parents socialize with gentile people?

FH: A little bit. If my parents invited gentile people to the house on a social basis, or they went to visit Gentiles on a social basis, there could be two reasons for it. My father retained very few friends from where he came from. This was about three, three-and-a-half hours by train away, although there were a couple of his boyfriends from way back whom he was very friendly with. But most of the Gentiles that we had anything to do with socially had to do with my mother's background. Her parents were one of the leading custom tailors to the rich in Frankfurt. They were Jews and Gentiles. And through that my mother had known some people whom they continued to socialize with until the Nazis came. However, the other thing was that of course there were gentile buyers who came to my father's factory, which was about six miles away from where we lived. And they came from Berlin or from foreign countries to buy the line that my father and his partner and associate had designed. And they were invited for dinner. And there was some social contact with them. I remember sometimes the names I heard were from aristocrats who were down on their heels. And a woman or a man became a buyer for an upper class Berlin department store. But as such, socializing in our household meant to a great degree my mother's relatives. She had cousins and what not to whom she was close. And this was a great deal of the socializing that went on there. As far as Gentiles were concerned, well they were there, okay? We were not in any way cut out from that type of life, but they lived on an equal footing like we had, because most of these people who lived in that neighborhood were business people. So there was money around.

MJ: You were in the public school system then.

FH: Absolutely. I began public school, grammar school, a four-year deal, in 1927. And then I was started in a *Gymnasium*, which is like a high school except at a different age level, and it goes all the way to matriculating. And I had lost some time in the third and fourth year due to sickness. Once I was laid up for almost a month with bronchitis and something else. As a result I had not been able to make up what I had lost in school time and after I spent a few weeks in that *Gymnasium,* my mother took me out and sent me-- I didn't do too well with the curriculum-- and my mother sent me to a place in the Taunus mountains not far from Frankfurt. And I repeated the fourth grade, living with a woman who took in boys. And it was a great deal of being outdoors in the country, which was very good for my physical development. And then after that year, in a place called Epstein, I went back to the same *Gymnasium*, the *Wöhler Gymnasium* in the West End of Frankfurt, and there again we had this overcrowding of the classrooms and I was started in that case on the French language. Either you had the humanistic schools where you started with Latin, or the regular ones where you started either French for three years and then had both French and English, or you started English and then had French. Unfortunately, in my case it was French, which turned out to be rather ridiculous in the end. But who had known that? I made friends among gentile kids who came to my house and I was invited sometimes like birthday parties and all. There was a normal sort of thing. But I would say my friends tended to-- my friendships tended to gravitate more to the Jewish end of it, definitely, without being forced to do so. Furthermore, the grammar school, of course, was a mixture of all kinds of levels of society, and this was probably the first time, when I was six years old, that I found out how the other half lived. There were kids from rather poverty stricken homes and as I think of it now, it was a bit cruel, because they kind of, these kids who came from poor homes, they were a little ostracized. This was something that I didn't do, that my friends didn't do, that's how it was. And there was one thing I'd like to mention. A habit--my mother wasn't so bad about that, after all, my mother was more down-to-earth and I had an aunt, my mother's younger sister, who lived near us so was very close to my mother. And my aunt having had no children, she became sort of arrogant. She had an arrogant streak and it used to irk me when a delivery man brought something to their house, where I often was, and a work man or anything, or maybe the household help or in a store. The habit became to talk the Frankfurter dialect to these people to act superior, you know. And I couldn't stand that.

MJ: Yes.

FH: It was an act of arrogance that I always have rebelled against. But it seems to me this was not confined to the Jews. This was how it was. There was a sharp division between the haves and the have nots.

MJ: When did things begin to change for you?

FH: Well, when I came back to that *Wöhler Gymnasium,* it was in, the changes in the class, classes promotion and all that takes place at Easter time, not like here in September. And I started back in that *Wöhler Gymnasium*, and now a year behind the

kids I had started with the year before, of course. And April of 1932, you know, there were-- things were changing. You noticed them very definitely. 1929 was the watershed. After that things changed immensely. Germany was hit very hard by the depression which started before it started in the United States. Because so much investment was taken out of Germany into the New York Stock Exchange. Well after all, instead of collecting dividends and maybe get a pay-off on your investment some years down the road, couldn't you make-- become a multimillionaire over night by putting everything in one nest egg, namely Wall Street? So, there also-- already was a lack of capital to expand.

MJ: Yes.

FH: Or to finance inventory. This was very noticeable, although at the time I hadn't got the foggiest notion about it. I only know that today as I recall, 1929 was the beginning, the subtle beginning of a change. Suddenly you saw unemployed on the streets. And since there was no unemployment compensation, what could they do but knock on your door and look for a handout--which was done not in an aggressive manner, after all we lived in an upscale neighborhood--it was done in a dignified manner. These people were dressed. They did not look like bums. And to alleviate that, when it really got bad by about 1930, '31, '32, my mother used to buy these coupons for a woman who came around and sold them. And you handed one of those coupons to every supplicant who rang your doorbell. And if they had, let's say, 10 of them or whatever--I have no idea now--you could get a bowl of soup from that.

MJ: I see.

FH: Okay? It was better than money that people could spend in a tap room and not having anything for the family. And it got real bad. It was so tremendous. There were six million unemployed by 1932, which meant in a country where traditionally there was only one bread earner--or one breadwinner--10 percent of the population was out on the street. Horrible. Absolutely horrible. And this brought on the Nazis. There were constant elections and constant shifting and shuffling. And there was Adolf Hitler whom I never heard to make a speech until after he became Chancellor. I'll get to that. Suddenly the Nazis were there. And how did we see them at first? In Frankfurt it wasn't so bad. There was some of that. The Nazis had their Storm Troopers, these pot-bellied and sometimes young punks, that tried to break up and broke up political rallies from the opposition or went into bars where it was known that members of other parties were. And there were street fights, and sometimes somebody got killed. And in cities like Munich and Berlin it was constant---deliberate. And the government did nothing about it. Actually, when we first noticed the Nazis, let's say in about 1931 I think, suddenly you saw these horsemen who wore colored uniforms on the street the Storm Troopers. They were getting--they were unemployed men, most of them younger--and they were told, "We'll give you one *Reichsmark* a day if you wear the uniform in public." They had no jobs to lose by being thrown out. They had no jobs. So a *Mark* a few days a week--that meant a few--a little bit

of coinage in your pocket. And then if you were a party member, there were rich industrialists who poured money into the Nazi Party because Hitler promised rearmament, which, of course, the heavy industry was vitally interested in. And before I forget it, I'd like to say when the German industrialists ran out of money to give to Hitler because of the depression--notably Thyssen, Fritz Thyssen, the steel manufacturer--his place was taken by someone else. And it's documented. The man, and I quote an author of a book *Who Financed Hitler?* [by James Pool and Suzanne Pool, Dial Press, 1979]. I know the lady, her name is Pool. It has to do with a Ph.D. dissertation the University of Vermont has published. Who financed Hitler after all the other people went under, or couldn't afford it anymore and kept the Nazi Party from going under financially, was a man who was not a German, who hated Jews with a passion. It was Henry Ford. It is documented.

MJ: Henry Ford?

FH: Henry Ford, this fine, upstanding church-going Christian who hated Jews so much that he received emissary from Adolf Hitler with empty suitcases and sent them back with the suitcases full of dollar bills. It is documented. And no one who denies it is wrong.

MJ: Fred, how were you personally affected in these years--you and your family?

FH: How? I'll come to that as I go along. Henry Ford was the financier, and this money paid for what I'm describing. How people put on this manure-type, manure-colored uniform, and on weekends they brought their wife if any, and their children, if any, to a well-known inn, where they got a meal, and exercised their paramilitary training--the fellows did. So, this was a powerful persuader, or as I like to say: "Love goes through the stomach." It always does. This did not initially affect you. The antisemitism was a little more noticeable, but there was a constitutionally-elected government. And Adolf Hitler, after all, got into the government as a Chancellor legitimately. He had something about him that everything-- he had the-- he was a petty bourgeois. Everything had to be legal. He became Chancellor legally. That's not what happened later. However, once Hitler was inaugurated-- I remember that day very well: my maternal grandmother Rosa Ullman died that morning after a very long illness, and I remember agitated voices in our house. She lingered after suffering a stroke months earlier. And the door opened to my bedroom and then they said, "Grandmother is dead." And later that day, that morning, Hitler was inaugurated.

MJ: 1933?

FH: The 30 of January, 1933. And immediately in this *Wöhler Gymnasium* some of the fellows-- we had sort of suspected in my class and in other classes, who we sort of heard that they were-- their father was a Nazi and the kids believed in this *ra ra ra* nonsense, although they were only about 12 years old. Immediately some of them showed up in these ridiculous looking uniforms of the *Jungvolk*. That was the level of the

Nazi Party membership for boys before they were old enough to join the Hitler Youth I think. The Hitler Youth went from 14 to 18. And then you went into the SA or the SS. So this was how it worked. And immediately they showed up with their silly looking trench knives in their belts. And they went around saluting Hitler. And there was one moron I remember in particular, a real effeminate looking kid, he came with this uniform and he began saluting everybody with a Hitler salute. And when he felt that enough of his buddies were behind him, he would scream when a Jew went by, "Oh, I beat another Kike to death last night. And why don't you do something good and do the same thing?" This is how it started. And eventually--I don't know that the name of this character means anything, it's now documented in a book that has been published about school, what Jews went through in the schools. The names are there. I have two copies of that book at home. And by the way, Harold Stern works on that to translate it into English. He is part of it. Well, there was one kid who came to my class out of turn sort of, in the middle of a semester, shortly after the Nazis came to power. And I remember my homeroom teachers asking a colleague, "Do you know this guy Dellbautz?" And I almost piped up and would have said, "*Herr* Doctor, keep him out of your class. He's bad news." I had known this *Schlimazel* and a dirty little kid, a dirty little kid from a rundown neighborhood. I had known him a little in grammar school. He could never keep up with the curriculum, and his mother changed him from one school to the other. I think she was a widow. And the kid just couldn't keep up with the curriculum. Nobody, if you beat him over the head. He was an idiot. And a sad looking character. And I used to feel sorry for him in grammar school. And here suddenly he was in my class. He was not a party member, but he began to arrange for Jewish kids to be harassed. He harassed me, although he knew me from before and had no enmity toward me. This was how probably his mother instructed him to become a Nazi so he would be promoted into the next grade. Somehow he already had missed a year or two in the school. And he stirred up the whole class and other classes with it. It became a fashion. Here was a school where, it was only a small-- but maybe a-- if out of 50 kids in that school there were maybe 5 Jews in most of the classes. So how big a Jewish group was. And it was nice to pick on the Jews if you wanted to make a name out of yourself.

MJ: Did the school teachers or school authorities do anything about this?

FH: Nothing. Because the first thing the Nazis did when they came to power, and I saw it with my own eyes and I've discussed it at a talk I gave in that school--they asked me three years ago to speak there when I was a guest in Frankfurt. And I spoke about this. The first thing you knew the Nazis were in power was when they started to get rid of people right and left who were known as politically unreliable. This was done on the local trolley transportation company. This was done in the police. This was done in administrative services. How did they do it? All of a sudden, within a few days of Hitler being sworn in, you saw people in the Storm Trooper uniform with an arm band--on one arm the Swastika arm band, on the other it said "*Hilfspolitzei*." That means Auxiliary

Police. They ferreted out the politically unreliables first of all in the police and then the tentacles of that setup you saw these people. You wonder, "What the heck do they need Auxiliary Police?" There were no uprisings. There was nothing going on. The only ones who had caused trouble were the Nazis. So what the dickens did they--and then it sank in, you heard *Herr* So-and-So was ousted from his job as a trolley conductor and *Herr* So-and-So was ousted as a cop. And these people were thrown on the street, because either they said something once that brought some . . .

Tape one, side two:

MJ: This is Frank [Fred] Hammel, interviewer Meta Joy Jacoby. We are on tape one, side two. Would you continue, Fred?

FH: Yes. So, as I was saying before, the Nazis began to infiltrate, very well-organized, and weed out what they considered politically unreliable people. That meant people who were not Nazis. And then they put their Nazi police into these jobs. All of a sudden there was some change among the teachers. Now there was one teacher who jokingly was referred to in his presence as "Dr. So-and-So-We-Know-You're-A-Nazi," you know, when questions were asked about some of the subjects that he was teaching. And I don't think he was antisemitic for that matter. He was typically a man who had been badly wounded in World War I and these people to a man were bitter. They didn't get pensions, because there was no money for them. And they felt their lives had been wasted. And some of them were disfigured faces and what not, or limped, or had a lame arm. And this man was the first one to come into the class in the morning, made the class stand up as you had to anyway when the teacher came in to show your respect, and then he would say, "*Heil Hitler*!" and extend his arm and then you replied, "*Heil Hitler*" and you sat down and the session began. This became standard operating procedure that had to be. And then we had a fantastic math teacher. To this day I remember this man's name. He was an awful good teacher. I presume by his name he came from Bavaria and therefore he was Catholic. And he was such a good teacher on the tables that to this day my head has a computer built in about multiplications. This man was fantastic. And he told us, very sadly, one fine day, "This is my last day with you. I'm sorry. I have been transferred." And he mentioned that he was transferred to some awful backwoods town in the Rhineland. And when one of the kids said, "But *Herr* Doctor, you're such a good teacher. Why that?" he said, "I am not a member of the German Teachers Association." In other words, he refused to become a member and pay dues to the lousy Nazified organization that supposedly represented teachers. And evidently this was standard operating procedure. Very, very fine educators disappeared that way, not to mention the Jews that were thrown out. And the attitude in a few weeks became one of, "Rah Rah Rah *Heil Hitler* this, *Heil Hitler* that." A few Jewish kids who didn't have the brains to keep their mouths shut, and said the wrong thing about Hitler or something, they were beaten to pulp. Usually the operation was one Jewish kid required at least six Nazis to beat him up. They were such heroes. That way two of, or three of them held him down, the others kicked the living daylights out of him. This was typical. Kids you went to school with before to grammar school, who was a decent kid whom you, you know maybe not socialized with but whom you talked to, it was a good fellow in your class. If he was alone and you were alone, and he spotted you on the street after things became a little different, he would wait till you were half a block away, and then he hollered, "Goddamned Jew bastard!" He figured if he had to run or you pursued him, he could get

home first. This was so typical. If you were on a bicycle, if there were two of you, forget it, three of you, nobody bothered you. These kids were heroes from the word go. And there were beatings. As I said, they picked on a kid who may or may not have said something against the new government. And maybe at one time this kid had rightfully beaten up a gentile kid who now was a Nazi and he invoked the right to take his buddies to take that kid and beat him to pulp. This is how it was. People could ring your bell-- it didn't happen in my household, it happened to friends-- here a Jew was owed maybe rent money or something from a purchase. I should know, but this is how it was. Suddenly the debtor would ring the bell with a Nazi uniform and came in and demanded to see the man of the house. And he probably had one or two friends with him. And they would beat up the man and say, "Kike, we won't pay." This was very, very common, until it got into the newspapers in England and France, and it was stopped. In those days the government was a little unsure of its way yet. But gradually, in April I believe, 1933, one fine morning the Jewish kids in the schools were told, "Go home." So we went home. And then we found out that this was the day, the first day of a general boycott of Jewish stores. So, to humiliate us, we were told, "Take your books and take your hat and coat and get the hell home." This is about the size of it.

MJ: For the day?

FH: Right.

MJ: Okay.

FH: Right. The next day you came back, naturally, and faced other threats and petty, petty nonsense. After a while, in fact I wasn't in that school any more by then, for instance there was a very, very, very fine principal in that *Wöhler Gymnasium*. And he didn't like what's going on. And he didn't like some of his staff being booted out to be replaced by incompetent party members. He must have voiced it somewhere and he was-- didn't take a great liking to what was going on in the school yard during intermission. He was booted out and sent into some little nothing town there to linger. What happened to him later, whether they were clapped in a concentration camp or what, I have no idea. But teachers were systematically thrown out of school. And their replacement, believe me, they were no improvement. By September, by the end of September, 1933, when the fall vacations came, my mother realized I had had enough and my mother realized what was going on, and she took me-- she switched me to the *Philanthropin*. This was also a public school, a *Realgymnasium*, a humanistic *Realgymnasium*. And this one was in a very Jewish neighborhood and exclusively catered to Jewish students.

MJ: Did she switch your sister also?

FH: I was just thinking of that. My sister was very close to matriculation, which you get in a *Gymnasium* or yeah, they still do. And my sister is six years older than I. She was in the last level to matriculate. And it had become pretty hectic. There were some girls who became extremely bitchy toward the few Jewish kids in that class. But she stuck it out until she got what's called her *Abitur*, which would mean she had

basically a Bachelor's Degree in whatever she majored in. From there you go directly to a university for a higher level degree. And my sister--there was not any talk of her switching, because she was practically done, so what's the difference?

MJ: Okay, so you then were switched.

FH: Yeah, I was switched to the *Philanthropin*, there to go and have the better end of it. Because as very well-known educators got tossed out of the *Gymnasium*, and out of the universities they came to teach whatever their field was at the *Philanthropin*. And I got a fantastic education. That was the benefit. Of course it had a darker side to it. You were sort of segregated now. And there I made friendships that I retain to this day. I don't see some of these fellows, though. Harold Stern[2], whom you know, went to that same school for a while.

MJ: Oh.

FH: Yes. But later, because he went into the humanistic school where Jews predominated. So they didn't go so fast to get rid of the Jews[3].

MJ: Was there talk in your home of trouble?

FH: Naturally.

MJ: What did you hear?

FH: Well, there came talk about so-and-so has been clapped in a concentration camp. My mother had a cousin in Cologne who had two children, one whom emigrated. The other one was very handsome, very young, very brilliant. He was already a lawyer. And one fine summer he went to a summer camp as a counselor and came back as a dedicated Communist. So they clapped him into a concentration camp. And instead of knowing "you better get out, you're a marked man" and-- after all, at that time you could have gotten out of Germany. Instead he continued his Communist activities and they clapped him into a concentration camp for a second time where he rotted. I mean we never heard of him again. This was not untypical. But maybe it was for petty things that people got tossed into these concentration camps, especially if they were Jews, you know, to make Jews feel uncomfortable. And when you hear it-- a distant relative-- he was accused of having said something nasty about the *Führer*, or who maybe pressured someone to pay off some debts, you know. This is how it was. It became widespread. And this was discussed in our house, especially since they were neighbors or relatives or friends.

MJ: Yes.

FH: They may have come back soon afterwards. You know, they were sprung from their imprisonment. And then they did their best to get out or they had to sign a piece of paper that they would soon emigrate. So that happened. But basically the newspapers were full of fulminations and the speeches on the radio that you couldn't help

[2]Harold Stern is an associate of the interviewer at the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive.
[3]Ten Jewish students out of thirty per class [Harold Stern].

hearing. They even had radios in public where you-- it was all over. Every-- I used to say, "You flush the toilet you hear a speech by Hitler," it was so bad. This became pervasive. And people you had known and who liked you or something, they shied away. The gentile boys didn't want to associate with me anymore, even if they were not wearing the uniform. If they-- the father was a businessman, it was good for the father to say, "Look, Hans, look Walter, don't see Fritz anymore, because," this was my real name of course, originally, "because very simply it is not good for me to have a son who associates with a Jew." This is how it became quite prevalent.

MJ: Was your father's...

FH: Very prevalent.

MJ: …business affected?

FH: My father's business, number one, was very affected by the depression. Business stank. And by 1931 I'd hear talk, people had to be let go. Business was harder. And then, when England left the gold standard, suddenly, the bottom dropped out of doing business abroad. A lot of my father's business was done in Scandinavia and England and France and in Austria, countries like that. And the bottom dropped out. And little by little business slowed down. And then the competition came in the form of farmers who couldn't make it, make a go on their farms, who bought a few hides. And in the basement of their home they put the family to work to make pocketbooks like my father made them except it cost next to nothing. They undercut.

MJ: Was he affected by the antisemitic...

FH: Of course.

MJ: …build-up?

FH: I'm positive that there were...

MJ: How was that?

FH: …department stores that wouldn't allow their buyers to buy...

MJ: Oh I see.

FH: …from a firm named Hammel and Rosenfeld. Let's face it, my father was the 80% owner. My father started to complain, and my father had to lay off the very active sales force he had had that did the exhibits and visited the clientele in Germany and abroad. And my father had to travel a lot to do that work. But business was hampered two ways, three ways: by the depression, by antisemitism, by the currency situation, and the competition from the farmers who couldn't pay their mortgages.

MJ: Okay, now we're in I think 1934?

FH: '34.

MJ: Now how do we continue?

FH: Well, we continue that you became more segregated. It wasn't so bad. You learned that if you had to go anywhere much you always went with a friend, unless you went with an adult to shop or something. This was standard operating procedure, you know. But the field of going places was narrowed because stores and restaurants,

whatnot, would have these signs at the door, these decals at the door, that said, "*Juden unerwünscht,"* "Jews Not Wanted." And to make it even more humiliating, the German writing was done sort of Hebrew letter style.

MJ: Oh.

FH: You know-- an imitation but it was in German. "*Juden sind hier unerwünscht.*[4]*"* There may have been a doctor or two who wanted nothing to do with you. There may have been a seamstress who came to your house to do alterations for your mother and your sister, and she said, "We don't deal with Kikes anymore." This is, you know, *nebish*[5]. Those people who were widows and officially had no income, but they got a few dollars that were thrown their way because these people had originally worked for my grandparents. They were elderly women. So they cut their nose to spite their face, but this is how it worked. Little by little it narrowed down on you, and you knew that there was a place in the city where you had friends, where you would sometimes meet girls, heaven forbid. And you knew there were gangs active in the neighborhood and you knew who the kids were. They knew you by sight and you had to watch. You couldn't go to the swimming pools anymore that were around the river Main. You had-- there was one exclusively for Jews-- sort of in the suburbs. Well, you also had to go there in company and leave in company. Some of these gangs lurked there. And then it got to the point, it was starting in about 1934/'35, where suddenly a friend or a relative came, "I have to say good-bye. We are leaving for England. We're leaving for America. We're leaving for Palestine." You name it. And suddenly your circle of friends, family friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, relatives--it was shrinking for that reason.

MJ: Was there talk in your home of leaving?

FH: Yes, but it wasn't so simple. That I will tell you. Some friends of my father's in the same business opened small branch factories in England and moved gradually, moved their operations and their families there. And then when things got rough in 1938 they said, "So long," and never came back. That was done. It is very true. And some people simply migrated, they got a number on the German quota, as I eventually did, and found their way to America. Now my father still had a business and the property which to this day is his, the only time I got angry about things, three years ago, when I wandered around Frankfurt in the old neighborhoods and I went to Offenbach to see the factory...

MJ: When you went back?

FH: Which is no longer, yeah.

MJ: You went back...

FH: This was...

MJ: Three years ago?

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[4]*Juden* not wanted - Jews not wanted.
[5]Yiddish word but not used properly.

FH: Three years ago.

MJ: Okay.

FH: I only came back once before, very briefly. But three years ago I was invited by the city. But I went to Offenbach and there is that magnificent factory, now owned by an insurance company for investment purposes. It is now offices in the newer part of it, and the older part in back it is apartments for the elderly who are subsidized, I would think. My father and his partner had to liquidate their business at the beginning of 1936. There was nothing to do but to liquidate. And since my father and his partner were eminently honorable people they didn't file for bankruptcy, which was a no-no in Europe. I don't know how it is now. That was before you had *shyster* lawyers urge families to go in bankruptcy. But, however, my father wouldn't go for that, no way. My father's life's work was destroyed so to speak. And some time in 1938, early '38 or late '37, he and his partner were forced to sell that factory building for fish cakes so to s-, you know, for next to nothing, to a grubby little man who wore the Nazi *schmata* [Yiddish: rag] naturally. He wore the Nazi uniform, and then they had to get out. They had to. They couldn't use that building and what tenants they had obtained there to defray the expenses in taxes, some of them said, "You know, I really-- we have to move. We don't want to be in this building that's still owned by god-damned Jews." These things I heard all the time. But...

MJ: They liquidated in '36.

FH: '37. I have documentation of all that.

MJ: '37? Okay. And then they, but were they...

FH: But the business was effectively closed-- no wait a minute, the business was closed at the end of 1935. In early 1936, that's, I'm sorry-- that got away from me. They liquidated the firm formally by signing certain papers.

MJ: Did they do this for economic reasons or because that was the law? Jews...

FH: No.

MJ: Jews may not own...

FH: No, no. That was, in that case at that time, the business had completely gone down the drain.

MJ: Okay.

FH: First of all they could not obtain supplies in some instances, because businesses wouldn't sell to Jews, or wouldn't buy from Jews. So how you gonna do business...

MJ: Okay.

FH: …in this fashion? My father used his expertise and connections to travel for the very people that had put him out of business. These little rural basement manufacturers, he traveled as he did before, in Scandinavia and different places, to make a living.

MJ: Yes.

FH: Okay? Now, then there was talk about getting out of Germany. But I get a little ahead of myself here. Then my sister was sent to Geneva in 1936 to learn a profession. She went to a children's hospital where she became certified as a baby nurse. And she worked at that for a while, until she married her fiancé whom she had been going with for years. He went to Mexico in '37, established himself with a job, and in 1938 he called for my sister to join him. They got married in Mexico. My brother-in-law is a fab- was an SOB, but he was a very-- he was a cheat. Oh, he cheated on my sister like you would go to the bathroom. He was a tremendous-- he was a very smart and charming man, when it suited him. He was a fantastic businessman. And he died in 1978. He left a fortune for my sister, who now lives in Switzerland.

MJ: Now you're, we're back now in '37, '38.

FH: Yeah.

MJ: And you're telling me there's...

FH: Now, I go back to 1936 for a reason. It was decided that since emigration was absolutely-- it had to be-- it was a given, I would leave school at the age of 15, which was later. I took some tests, pretty close to a high school equivalency, because we learned something. In the public schools you learned nothing. You learned racial theory. You marched a lot. You talked to a lot of professional Nazi speakers. The curriculum was shut down and crashed in pieces. Not in the *Philanthropin* anymore. A religious oriented school, the Samson Raphael Hirsch School where Herbie Lindemeyer's[6] wife went to for a while. It was decided I would quit school. And my father, through his connections-- the business was already liquidated-- got me to be an apprentice in a leather tannery in the suburbs.

MJ: To teach you a trade?

FH: To learn a trade. He said to me, "Everybody is a pencil pusher. Everybody learns how to type. Who needs that? You have to have a trade where you can make a living where you have a skill." He was of course 100% right. So I had the wonderful experience that I was yanked out of school, which I did not think was so bad. So I mean, I knew what was going on. I was worried about these things. Here we are in September, 1936. And I was-- my father, as was the custom, signed an agreement with this firm that was then owned by three Jewish partners. And there was one gentile partner in addition. They had to sign this agreement--well, after all, I was not of age-- that they would teach me the various phases and the various shops that are in this factory for three years. That's how long it took, legally, to become a journeyman leather worker. This was fine, except now I-- in the meantime we had moved from this beautiful villa into an apartment in a more Jewish section. And my parents couldn't afford the mortgage payments on that, you know, my father had lost his business. And my father's health was declining for one

[6]Herbert Lindemeyer was a friend and also a volunteer in the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive.

thing. It turns out later he suffered from Parkinson's Syndrome, which was accelerated by his heartaches, okay? This was one of the things. And I came from a very sheltered Jewish home, as all the people you will meet, like Harold, like Herbie. Oh, sheltered Jewish homes, okay? There were certain things that were not discussed in our homes, in our presence. Suddenly, if there was anything that had maybe a sexual connotation, or someone being in trouble with some monkey business, the conversation switched to French or English. Okay? I wasn't used to that. Years later I found out what they were talking about, but okay. Here I come from this place smack dab into the kitchen sink in that factory. I learned a few things about love and marriage or not marriage that my mother never heard of. Take my word for it.

MJ: [chuckles]

FH: Take my word. It, even that part of my education was very valuable to me later on when I was on my own, may I say. First of all, physically, it was brutal work for a 15-year-old. And I wouldn't say that I was a robust person. I was thin. Everybody remembers how thin I was. And suddenly I worked with these critters as a teen. My contribution to their piecework, and hence, their income, and they gave me like a dollar for Christmas and treated me like a dog. But, of course, I had to learn what I had to learn. I had to learn to work first. And I am forever grateful for that crude critter who was the foreman of that shop where they always started you, because he said to me once-- shame I never met him again-- he said, "Fritz, you will always show gratitude in your mind that I taught you what it is like to work." He was right.

MJ: Yes.

FH: I always remember that man. He was a miserable tiger. He was exploiting me, and crude, but he taught me how to work. This is something. Suddenly I find myself in a situation, and of course, we knew enough by that time. There was not only the manager, the plant manager, and the owners. There was a Nazi cell leader in that factory, as in any shop. He represented the party. He collected the dues for the useless German Labor Front magazine that came out twice a week and milked these people for contributions for welfare and all that. And they knuckled under, these workers. They couldn't afford it, but there was nothing to do. Otherwise they would lose their job. And the menu in the concentration camps was not too great. So, here I am. I knew immediately who the bugger was. He was a squalid, lazy, lout who watched me. He would have loved nothing better than my putting my hand on the posterior of these sleazy sluts who worked there. He would have run to the local party boss and had me in a concentration camp. Probably would have been promoted to a higher job in the party, right? I had to walk on eggs there. And some of those girls-- they were not-- they came from low-level homes. They had basic education-- eight years in school. And if they were kept behind because they were stupid, they had less than eight years of education per se. And those girls, most of them, were promiscuous. And I was fairly cute. I had to watch myself. And I never could tell whether this party critter and some of, two, three of his

helpers, whether they didn't ask these girls to try to cotton up to me. It would have been a disaster. I learned. And then I also learned how at this level--shall I say here in Philadelphia, when you live near K and A, near Kensington and Allegheny, you know, these girls get married pregnant in the same dress for a pregnant woman their mother got dressed and married in. These things were arranged by the girls' mother to enable their boyfriend to be home alone with them at the proper time, and then after two months the mother knocked on the boy's door and said, "We have to have a wedding there."

MJ: Right.

FH: I couldn't believe this. I...

Tape two, side one:

MJ: We are talking to Fred Hammel, interviewer Meta Joy Jacoby. This is tape two, side one. Okay, Fred.

FH: Okay. Now, by 1938 the people were leaving in ever larger numbers. In the fall of 1938 there were two things. You asked me about was there talk about leaving Germany. My sister had already left in, I believe, late July 1938. She embarked on her way to Vera**c**ruz and Mexico City to get married. I was still working in the tannery, and my father's health was deteriorating. His motor functions deteriorated. Whether he even could have emigrated under those conditions, I don't know. People in poor health did get out under certain conditions-- but, let's face it, who wanted us? I--my mother and I both--had gotten numbers from the American Consulate in Stuttgart, which was the nearest American Consulate. And I had a number that we deemed would mean probably, it would be before, not before sometime in the early part of 1940, that I could get a visa to the United States under that, under the immigration quota. Then you couldn't tell there would be a war by then but nonetheless I hoped that I would finish my apprenticeship. But lo and behold, the Jewish owners sold out to the one Christian partner. And immediately after, this I heard through my father afterwards, immediately after the papers were signed, sealed and delivered this partner stopped talking to his former partners, who were supposed to be there for a transition period and get paid, whatever. He told them, "Get the hell out." They were removed. This man was a gentleman but a typical Nazi opportunist. In fact, I had hardly seen him the first two years I was there because they had a branch somewhere in France that he happened to run. Now because France slowly but surely became an enemy, he was back in Germany. Not long after this man took over, around the High Holy Days in 1938, my father received a registered letter from the firm that said, "Dear Hammel, because of circumstances you have to be aware of, we are forced to curtail the apprenticeship of your son as of the end of business this coming Friday. We hasten to mention that he is a good worker." Sure I was a good worker. I helped their employees to better their wages for nothing. "And he has caused us no difficulties, no problems. However, we enclose a letter that states in what phases he has been taught and that he has accomplished whatever was asked from [him]." These papers I took with me. This was the basis of my claim for a very lucrative German Social Security claim on a restitution basis that I get every month.

MJ: Oh.

FH: Hundreds of dollars-- yes. Because I took these papers with me. And we saw in *The Exponent* when you could apply for that. In the meantime, my father called the-- some assistant manager. And they said, "Well, Mr. Hammel, we can't do anything." At the end of business on Friday I walked away. I said good-bye to some people and said, "I'll pick up my papers next week," because the office was closed already. Instead they

made sure I wouldn't show up on Monday morning. One of the truck drivers for that concern showed up and brought the whole shebang to our house.

MJ: Yes.

FH: Okay. That was that. I took a few courses and spent a little time learning bookkeeping, by a man who had a private school near us-- a Jewish man. And then came *Kristallnacht*. My father, my uncle, relatives, were incarcerated. I was not, because there were so many Jews to be sent to Buchenwald from Frankfurt and vicinity, they didn't have enough room for them in Buchenwald. So they said, "Only from after 19 to maybe 50 or 55." My grandfather who lived with us--who was in his 80's--he was not affected either. My father was taken to a local precinct, and this is how the Nazis prostituted things. They took university students, graduate students, to pick up the Jews. They were part of it. This is how it was done! You gave somebody a knife and said, "Kill that Jew." And because you felt you were forced to do it you did it. Then they said, "Now you're one of us. Now you do what we tell you, or we rat on you." This is how the system worked. My father reappeared, bedraggled, about six or seven hours later. He never told us what went on in the exhibition hall in Frankfurt where they had the auto exposition and whatnot else. To this day he never told us what went on there. My father walked haltingly because of the progression of Parkinson's disease, and he also, I think, suffered from arteriosclerosis because of everything. And he looked more and more-- my father had started to look more and more like a beaten man. The fact that he lost his business and that he lost his beautiful home, and it weighed heavily on him. And for a man who started with nothing and became quite well-to-do and prosperous and well-known this was something, a bitter, bitter, bitter thing. Although it was something he couldn't help, naturally. All my father said, that the friends and relatives and business friends, who were there from-- came there from the various precinct stations-- they were transported in open trucks of course-- and everybody was told, "You don't have to bring a coat or anything. You'll be back soon." This was to get these people into Buchenwald. And there a lot of them died of pneumonia, you know. This was done deliberately. But my mother had had the foresight to take a coat to the precinct station when she found out where he was being held. And he's back and he says they had to stand all these hours, were not allowed to fall out or anything. And every half, every hour they were made to do exercises under the direction of a army lieutenant in order to keep their muscles supple. So they said-- I mean-- it was humiliation upon humiliation. And then there were a few more who were sent home. A few had the brains to say--not my father's type--had to say that they suffered from a venereal disease. So they were sent home.

MJ: Oh.

FH: Some of them had the brains. Maybe they had been in a concentration camp before and knew the ropes--very possible. How did an honorable, honest man like my father know to say things like that, right? Anyhow, I was kept off the street for weeks at home. I wasn't allowed to go out by my mother because she was worried. My father

took to bed, deteriorated, never really got out of bed, never mentioned of what went on there, never. Whether there were beatings or what, I have no idea. I can't tell. And the only other two persons I could have asked, my uncle-- my mother's brother-in-law-- and a cousin of my mother's, they wouldn't talk either. When they came back from Buchenwald they went mum. Of course the people who were released from Buchenwald gradually, they had their hair shaved off too as a final humiliation. They all came back bald-headed, okay? My father's condition went galloping towards the end. Between the arteriosclerosis, not being able to get a decent doctor to look at him. He used to get physiotherapy treatment at home. None of that anymore. By the middle of December it had reached a stage where my father was a pitiful thing. My mother and the maid we had couldn't take care of him. There was no way. We took him to the Jewish hospital. There were several occasions where out of frustrations my father had spells of screaming and hollering, I mean it was tremendous, tremendous. He had a great deal of a feeling of guilt because I was still in that insane asylum called Germany. He died on the 23rd of December, 1938, never had the age of 57. Once was a sturdy physical specimen, a lovely, lovely man with all his success and charm and good looks. This was a pitifully beaten human being.

MJ: That's terrible.

FH: Beaten, so to speak...

MJ: Your father, did...

FH: Beaten to a pulp in a way.

MJ: Your father was released from the precinct [unclear]?

FH: No, no...

MJ: From the...

FH: From the precinct...

MJ: He went to Buchenwald?

FH: …trucked to the-- no, from the precinct-- like all those people-- trucked to the exhibition center, which, after all is a big-- like the...

MJ: But then...

FH: …like the convention center.

MJ: He was released from there. He did not go to...

FH: From there it was Buchenwald.

MJ: Buchenwald, all right.

FH: No, no.

MJ: So, your father then died.

FH: Relatives, cousins of my mother and my uncle, they were dragged to Buchenwald. I'll get to that, because this was part of my family. We buried my father. We went to see him in the Jewish hospital, and where there was nothing. They had young men who had been released from Buchenwald with pneumonia out on the floors in the corridors.

MJ: It was so crowded, you mean?

FH: Dying like flies. And we buried my father. And I showed that place in that cemetery to my son Mark. Very well understood, on a beautiful June day in 1992. And I said, "Mark, close your eyes and listen to me. Forget about the beautiful landscaping. Forget about the perpetual care here. There was nothing here. This was a new cemetery. The old one had been filled up. This cemetery had only been used for about 8 to 10 years." Okay? And there are still funerals today. There is a Jewish community but not German Jews. So they still use that cemetery. I said, "Mark, there was your grandfather," whom of course my son, none of my sons would ever meet. "There was your grandmother in black and in tears on my arm. I stood there, controlling my anger somehow." I always learned to control my anger mostly. I said, "Behind me, my uncle, who for the rest of his life until he died in 1947 of a heart condition, he picked that heart condition up in Buchenwald. He was never the same again. He was already back from Buchenwald with a shaven head. My aunt, my mother's sister, various relatives, friends. For that time, Christmas Eve of 1938, the conditions, about 60 people were behind us. Unbelievable! You could have expected 10 at the most. My father was that well-known and was that much liked and admired. Believe it or not."

MJ: How wonderful.

FH: There was a vicious snow storm, which is rare at that time, a snow storm that went right through you, with a North wind which is very uncommon there. There was a funeral every 15 minutes of victims of Buchenwald I'll have you know. Every 15 minutes!

MJ: My God.

FH: I said, "Mark, don't ever forget that. Don't ever forget it." And then when we came out of the cemetery, it was the Christmas break, so the Hitler Youth was parading up and down in front of the cemetery with their filthy *schmata* of a flag, trying to force us to say, "*Heil Hitler*," which we didn't. Very typical. He was buried in a grave next to his best friend, who like my father, although he grew up in a suburb of Frankfurt, started with nothing and became a very rich man. But he committed suicide in 1935 because of what was going on. He knew he couldn't be wealthy fleeing Germany. By that time they took everything they could take away from him. Now, I said after a while, afterwards, after this all was said and done--I said to my son Mark, "Now you can open your eyes and I'm going to show you something else. Look at the graves. First of all, the grave my father rests in was meant for the widow of his best friend. She never got out of Germany and was deported to Poland as far as we know. There were no children. Dumped in a ditch, and then they were shot. She knew by that time--I'd say the woman was not too bright, but she knew she was never gonna be buried there. So she said--my father was dying--she called my mother and said, 'Look, they were such good friends. Let him have that grave.'" I said to Mark, "Now walk around, and see what it says on some of these gravestones. There are family members that were buried there, died natural

deaths or whatever-- maybe also from Buchenwald-- and then there are other inscriptions like at my grandmother's grave. A sister, brother, a son, a daughter. "*Umgebracht*," meaning murdered in 1942. "*Verschollen*," meaning missing, 1942. Killed, shot, whatever you want. It's all there." I can take that. I mean, I lived through it. I survived it, and I put these things behind me, and it does not affect me. Maybe it does and maybe it doesn't. But I think I have made the best of this. Mark was very impressed. He was deeply impressed about that. And I said, "I have no idea whether I will ever come there again." Jews, after all, are drawn toward the cemeteries where their forbears are buried. We do that.

MJ: Yes.

FH: This was the second time, and second trip that I came there. In 1967 there was an unexpected shake out of my aunt's estate with restitution, and we used that $5,000, my wife and I, and traveled in style through Europe. And I spent two hours in Frankfurt. I rented a car. That's all I could take there. In '67 a lot of buggers were still alive. And they got away for free. I wanted my wife to see the houses, the *Philanthropin*, the other schools, the cemetery. Because when I left in April, 1939, I swore, in that cemetery when my mother made me go there once more-- there was no gravestone yet just, you know, it was the earth was settling in-- I said to my mother, and I said it at that grave, "There will come a day when I'll be a responsible adult and I'll come back just here." That's what I did, in 1967. But I said to Mark, in 1992, "I'm in my 70's. Don't you and your brother ever forget that man." I made damn sure-- it's on tape, with my children...

MJ: Yes.

FH: Whether any of them ever gets to Frankfurt, I wouldn't know. Whether my older son, who always said he wasn't interested. Now he expects-- he shows an interest. Next time I would visit my sister I should take him along. Now, as soon as the earth was on my father's grave, my mother had found out about the *Kindertransports* by that time. She had a girlfriend whom she met in finishing school in Belgium before World War I. I said my grandparents had a good business.

MJ: Fred, can you pull your chair up a little bit if you can? The tape must be picking this little noise up. Your jacket's rubbing.

FH: Oh, oh.

MJ: Okay.

FH: Yeah, well I...

MJ: I'm sorry to interrupt you.

FH: I move around. I'm sorry.

MJ: No, but it's so sensitive. It'll pick it up.

FH: What happened-- this woman married a mining engineer in Berlin. They raised a family. And this man had had a patent that he took with him that had to do with

disposing of coke or slag from coal-fired marine engines. And he took that with him and gave the-- sold that patent to Babcock and Wilcox in England.

MJ: Oh.

FH: He was a genius. They had become British citizens. And as soon as we came home and people came for a few days, sort of to sit *shiva*-- whatever you do-- my mother wrote to her girlfriend about the *Kindertransports*, and would they sponsor me? Saying that after all I had learned--I had worked for two years. I probably--if my visa could be changed--the visa said you couldn't work, I probably would not be a burden to them. And within days their letter came back, "We had been discussing this matter before you wrote, but why not your son?" I knew these people. They used to visit sometimes. They were my mother's age, my father's age. And the deal was struck. And I was registered with the *Kindertransports*, because it was perfectly clear that it would take at least to spring of 1940 because my quo-- before my quota number would come up. I remember the number: 12756 was the number. And you could tell. People told you what their number was when they got their visa. And you knew how many they could take. Now came another problem: I was approaching my 18th birthday in May. Here it was now early 1939 before the smoke cleared on that deal. And we had understood that the cut-off date for anyone going on a *Kindertransport* was their 18th birthday.

MJ: Yes.

FH: These people were ready to have me in London. That was clear. How to get me out of there fast enough? The Germans are noted for administrative nightmares, offices, paper pushers, pencil pushers, counters of cotter pins. My mother, first of all, had to register every stitch of clothing I was taking with me. After all, you were being robbed here. There was no problem. I owned no property. There was no business, there was nothing. It was just me. But my mother wanted to outfit me halfway decently. I wouldn't have any money to buy decent clothes for a spell. We all knew that. So you had to register every stitch of clothing, shoes you had that you were taking, bring the receipts, and pay that amount in addition to having paid every bill-- that amount to the German government for the kindness of letting you get the hell out. They wanted to be rid of you, but they wanted [you] to pay them off, take every cent you can, right? Beautiful. Now, my mother was a very determined woman. She put her shoulder to the wheel, and she found an inspector of whatever agency that was called, who expedited my papers, got me my passport. Passports only ran for six months for Jews. The one I had, had run out. And she got it all done. And then she found out that the person who was arranging for the *Kindertransports* from Frankfurt, which means kids came from smaller cities, smaller towns, to Frankfurt...

MJ: Yes.

FH: That's how it worked. You probably know that from Eva Abraham-- Eva Podietz[7]. The person who arranged for that was a woman by the name of-- she was a Ph.D., Hartha Wertheimer. She was a single woman. But my sister had taken some courses in philosophy at one time from her, and she liked my sister who was by now in Mexico. My sister got to her and said, "Dr. Wertheimer, this is the brother of Gretelchen. He's got to get on a transport before the middle of May. He's got to." After all, I was not a kid like Eva or somebody, who had to go to school. And they were much younger than I. They had to go to school. And in my case, not so. She got me on a *Kindertransport* on the 19 of April, 1939. This was less than four weeks before my birthday. She got it done.

MJ: You just made it.

FH: She got it done. There was another one two weeks later. Ask Herbie Lindemeyer. His wife was on it. A disaster. They emptied the train at the border and threatened these kids that they could never get out of Germany.

MJ: Oh.

FH: Typical. I was on that *Kindertransport*, by far the oldest in the group. Oh there was a kid who-- a fellow who was in my parallel class in the *Philanthropin* but I think he was almost a year younger than I.

MJ: Can you describe what the trip was like?

FH: The trip was fairly uneventful. Of course, I knew some of the kids who were my age. Well, they were a little younger than I. I knew some girls and boys from school. This one went off without a hitch. My mother got on the train platform and saw me off. And I was quite sure that I would see her again because at that time it was in the works that she would come to Mexico which also involved me. My father, before his health was too lousy to do it, had left a sum of money on a trip, on a sales trip to Stockholm, and that money would be used. He left it with a childhood friend who had already established himself in Stockholm. And I knew of that money. I had those people's address. That would be used by my brother-in-law to finance my mother's trip out. And to come to Mexico was no problem, because everybody is corrupt in Mexico. You *shmeared* [Yiddish: paid off] some lousy customs official, some crook, and you got in. This was nothing. But it extended. We just got her out at the last second. But the trip was fairly uneventful. I have...

MJ: Would you describe...

FH: …complete recall of it.

MJ: Good. What were the--were there very small children? Were there infants?

FH: There were little kids, preschoolers that may have an older sister or something. And there was a captain to that trip. One of those people who had to sign a pledge to come back to Germany after leading a trip to London.

[7]A friend who was on a *Kindertransport* who was also a volunteer at the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive.

MJ: Were there any infants on this trip?

FH: Yes. Eva tells that, so she would love for me to make a bigger deal out of it and I won't. In Cologne a shabbily dressed woman who was not so young got on with an infant. And when they came to the border at Emmerich, the German end of the border, where the customs, the passports had to be inspected, this woman turned to me and said, "My baby is changed. It's been fed. It's no problem. The rocking of the train until the Dutch side, which takes about twelve minutes, will keep it asleep. I have no visa. I have to leave her. And my sister, who resembles me will pick her up-- pick the baby up at the Holland, at the other side. I talked to her by phone this morning. She is there. Could you watch the baby?" There was a girl about my age, so I figured, if that baby starts screeching her motherly instincts can take care of that.

MJ: So you took the baby...

FH: So...

MJ: And this seventeen-year-old...

FH: No, the baby was on a bunch of blankets.

MJ: I see.

FH: You know, and as soon as the train started up the woman gave that child a kiss and disappeared. And when we came to Zevenaar, there was an equally shabbily dressed woman who looked like that person-- resembled that person. And we waved her on and she said, "I know what you want from me. Show me where the baby is. No problem. I have experience with children. My sister has the formula there." Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I always thought this was really a tragic thing. I have never been able through the *Kindertransport* Association to unearth that person-- no idea. I don't even know whether they got off in Holland. I couldn't tell you. Today I know different. I just told Eva about that. It came to my mind. That was a professional job. There were people who took your child, an infant, whatever, and saw them across the border. That woman was paid to do that. She was not young enough to have an infant.

MJ: Oh.

FH: And it was too pat how they both were dressed, you know? I have reason to believe, and I could be dead wrong, but I have good instincts.

MJ: The desperation...

FH: They got a…

MJ: …to get an infant out.

FH: That's all right, to get a small child out, of a woman who may have been put in a concentration camp. Who the heck knows? But this is how it was done. The only incident that happened on that trip--you know there were two coaches where more kids got on in Cologne. That was the only stops they had in that case. It was a regular train that was detached some way in Krefeld or Düsseldorf, or just added the coaches and a baggage coach. We came to the border, showed our papers. And then fortunately, when the train started up again for that little bitty ride . . .

Tape two, side two:

MJ: This is, we are speaking to Fred Hammel, interviewer Meta Joy Jacoby. This is June 6, 1995, and this is tape two, side one. All right, then.

FH: Side two.

MJ: Side, no, did, yes, side two. You are absolutely right.

FH: Side two. Now, what I referred to, on the section of that trip from Emmerich to Zevenaar, the train picked up speed, and we knew immediately when we were out of Germany. The next day was Hitler's 50th birthday, and when the flags stopped flying we knew we were in Holland. We had been told to be quiet, okay? And something attracted my attention and I opened the door to the compartment. And I looked out into the corridor. And there a few feet away were two pot-bellied pigs with a typical pepper and salt suit of [unclear] new uniform. They were trying to discuss things with kids about eight, nine years old. And I knew immediately they tried to inveigle them to say something they could use against their parents. And without thinking, I made two or three big leaps and I screamed at the kids. I said, "Weren't you told that you were supposed to be in your compartment when the train is moving?" And the kids bashfully went into the compartment and slammed the door shut. And there stood these two swine and didn't know what to do.

MJ: Did they say anything to you?

FH: I had taken their fun away. Said nothing. What could they say, okay? They saw almost a grown-up. They got off the train in Zevenaar and we went on. But I know that two weeks later, on the same section of the trip, first of all they didn't allow the parents to go on the platform in Frankfurt. There was some harassment by some uniformed Nazis. And between the border points, one kid said, "Thank God we're out!" And they made the train stop and threatened to back it up. And those kids had to be kept somewhere overnight. Now, as far as my trip, ask Herbie Lindemeyer, whose wife can tell you that story better--I got to London. First of all we went to Hoek van Holland and then at night with a combination cargo/passenger ship, to Harwich. After we landed and everything was done we were taken straight to London to Victoria Station where we were met by whoever was supposed to pick us up. This gentleman, Mr. Schwabert was there, loaded my junk into his little car and drove me off to Golders Green. I stayed with these people for two months. I wasn't very happy about it, because first of all, I was getting charity. Second of all, everybody spoke German, even the shopkeepers knew some German. The place was full of refugees--Hempstead and Golders Green--and I knew I had a year to learn English and it was vital to me. And a phone call from a business associate of my father's--people who had indeed opened the factory, a leather goods factory, in Darlington, Kent-- and they told me, "We can get you a job in a tannery any day. I'm sure you want to work. They will pay you enough to get by modestly." And so I said, "Yeah, but *Herr* Schmidt, how about my visa?" "We'll fix it. That's the least we

can do for your father who was such a good friend of ours." Next thing I know, of course, I met the gentleman to talk to him when he was in London at the Dorchester Hotel. And then he sent me to the Home Office, like the Interior Ministry, where I was sashayed to a very high official who changed my visa right then and there, that on the condition that I was taking no job from an English subject. I could work full-time, but on a limited salary. During my transit in England I had what you called a transit visa.

MJ: You knew you were going to America?

FH: Either I got my visa and left, or as it would turn out later, I could have been interned as an enemy alien. And this didn't happen. And when I met the gentleman who owned no less than three tanneries--a typical pipe-slobbering Englishman, you know, "Bo bo bo bo bo," this type, you know, typical-- and he immediately said to me, "Mr. Hammel,"--it wasn't easy for me to understand English or communicate with him. I had French part of the time. I had a little English. He said, "You can work in any of three of my tanneries. Do you want to stay here in Totenham? Then you can live with the people you're with now." I said, "Not really. I want to learn English. And it's expensive staying in London no matter what I do."

MJ: Yes.

FH: He said, "Well, it so happens the manager of a tannery, near Northampton, is here today to confer with me. I'll bring him in." This was a young hotshot who came in there, a man in his early 30's. And he said, "Ha! I can use you." He spoke a few words of German. He had once traveled in Germany. He said, "We got room for you. We're losing people to the conscription now." Here they were already having conscription again. So that's why they were interested in me. And sure enough, I said to this gentleman who owned the place, I said, "I'd rather go to Northamptonshire under the condition that you can tell me or Mr. Parker here can tell me nobody speaks German there." This is how it was.

MJ: [unclear]

FH: Here I was...

MJ: Have you learned English?

FH: …as young and inexperienced, and it was I who made the decision.

MJ: You knew what you were doing.

FH: And when I got there, I worked long hours for thirty shillings a week, room and board costing-- in a room in a boarding house--in a tiny cubicle of a room. Food wasn't too great, but I had some spending money left, right?

MJ: How long did you work there?

FH: Well, I worked there until the following April when I got a letter from the Consulate, the American Consul. In the meantime I had transferred my quota number to them. And then I gave them my address and then as war loomed more and more, I had my father's cousin in New York, who was born and raised in New York, a businessman, I had him send me the affidavit right away-- so I had it. And then I took a trip to London

practically as war started to deposit it with the Consul General. It was all done, and I had enough brains to think of that all myself.

MJ: You were now 18.

FH: I was--you grew up awful fast.

MJ: Yes.

FH: First in that factory at 15 and now there. And after every evening, after a long day's work, I put on the gas light in that room and bought a paper. And I read an English paper, listened to the BBC, and always walked around with my English-German dictionary. And it got done. When I came to New York in early May 1940, I had the English language all right. Only I had a big accent.

MJ: During this time were you in touch with your mother in Frankfurt?

FH: I couldn't. War. I only knew that in the meantime I had arranged to transfer that money from Stockholm to...

MJ: Mexico?

FH: Yeah, at first I was in touch with her, naturally. My aunt and uncle had reached London. They preceded me to the States by about three weeks.[8] But in the meantime I worked and starting in September of '39, I transferred my lodgings to a family that had a room for me because one son was now serving in the armed services. So they had room. One son was married so there was room, okay? And you know, it was not exactly what I was used to. In the boarding house everybody used the same washing facilities and bathroom, and I had to go down two flights of steps to get there. Here there were two sons still at home, mother and father-- very, very lovely people, and I spoke English constantly. And they had books that I read voraciously. This was good for me. I became a member of the family. They lost two of their four sons.

MJ: Oh.

FH: Terrible. And I just couldn't face corresponding with them after I found out about that.

MJ: Terrible.

FH: It was something I couldn't face, that these foolish, super patriotic people thought it was really a *mitzvah*[9] that they had to have two sons killed because of their Britishness. This is how people were brainwashed then. That Mr. Baldwin sent them down the river. This was a wonderful experience, but my education in love lives, in the tannery in Germany now came into play. I knew how to keep my nose clean. Here I was an attractive boy, not that experienced in the ways of women, but I had learned something that these girls didn't realize that I kept my nose clean. I had-- I took out girls a couple of times here and there, but then I knew after that you would be introduced to

[8]Fred's personal history form indicates that he came to the United States on May 11, 1940.
[9]*Mitzvah* - Hebrew for commandment, popularly understood as "good deed."

the family and then you've had it. I knew to stay away from that. I could have gotten into oodles of trouble with these very aggressive girls.

MJ: You're talking about the pregnant brides back in Frankfurt?

FH: *Yah, yah, yah. Yah, yah, yah*.

MJ: Yeah.

FH: I knew enough. They were very pretty compared to those dogs that worked in the German factory. They were-- knew how to make up and dress and coordinate, but they were very aggressive and they were very willing for me, but I knew to keep my nose clean. The only thing is, when I got back to London to pick up my visa and wait for the boat-- in fact I had to wait two extra weeks. The boat I originally was to be on was used in the Narvik campaign. That was a disaster to the British to...

MJ: Yes.

FH: …move troops to northern Norway. I got involved with a very pretty Jewish girl in London, a very, very pretty girl, a very fantastic girl but a little younger than I. And who knows, under normal times I may have wound up marrying her. But she was still in school. She would have loved her relative to get her to Canada, to evacuate her to Canada. This did not come to be. Instead I came to New York. Eventually I had to call up relatives. I had phone numbers. Nobody knew when boats arrived. This was war now. I called up my father's cousin's house. He was in his weekend home in Long Island, but it was an old uncle of my father's who took the call and he took a taxi and ran down to the pier to get me. In the meantime they brought the--my sponsor, you know...

MJ: Yes.

FH: My father's cousin there. And the next thing they did was take me to--for the weekend, to Long Island. So, here I was put up at Central Park West. It was a change from where I lived in England, I must confess.

MJ: Oh yes.

FH: A little change, like it was a change from a villa in Germany to the boarding house in England and stuff. However, these people were astounded how much English I had. They said, "Most of your friends and people we get in touch, we come across here, they don't know how to talk English. How do you?" Well then, eventually I got a job in a leather place in Massachusetts, where I lost that job. I was laid off. And then I applied for a job in a leather embossing place. And the girl, obviously Jewish, who was the-- worked in the office-- she was deeply impressed when she said, "What's your Social Security number?" In the summer of 1940 who the hell knew his Social Security number? And I barked out, "022-16-8115." She was so impressed that she-- since almost 54 years ago-- she is my wife.

MJ: Ah!

FH: And I'll have you know that this ring she gave me on the occasion of an important birthday has that number.

MJ: Oh isn't that wonderful!

FH: Look inside. That is Hannah. Her parents came from a *shtetl*[Yiddish: little town] in the Ukraine.

MJ: There it is, all engraved on the inside of the ring.

FH: Well I'm kidding you. I just want you to see that.

MJ: Wonderful!

FH: We got married in September of 1940 after going steady for approximately a year. We were married by the rabbi who lived upstairs from my in-laws-- in the in-laws' living room. And see, that can work too, instead of having a fancy wedding and getting divorced six weeks later. But the rabbi came downstairs after *Shabbas* [Shabbat, Jewish day of rest on Saturday] and married us. And I paid him the princely sum of $5.00 for that ceremony. And we went to Boston for three days. And then eventually we had a tiny apartment which we had to break up. In the fall of 1943 I was being drafted. And I was sent to Texas for basic training. Then I was sent to the West Coast for Port of Embarkation. And in the meantime from Texas--my wife spent a few weeks with me in Texas, near Dallas. We went--we had a delay en route. We didn't go back to Massachusetts, where I'd given up the apartment, of course, and stored our furniture. Instead we made a little side trip to Mexico City where my mother was. She preceded me to Mexico by three weeks.

MJ: Wonderful.

FH: She was supposed to leave in the fall of 1939 but the Germans started blowing up ships with these magnetic mines. And she was going to leave through Holland. She did not leave until April 1940. She had to go all the way to Genoa. She got out just...

MJ: That was almost the last, yeah.

FH: …in time. And of course we saw my mother in '44. In later years she came to visit us in '50 and '55. Until she was 77 years old she came to visit us periodically. The kids were very aware of her, you know. And then I saw action with the Seventh Infantry Division in the Philippines in the Battle of Leyte Islands. And later I was in the landings at Okinawa. I was a combat medic. In the Pacific that meant I carried a gun. I was wounded on Okinawa and to this day I have a slightly disfigured left hand. I get a pension, a 40% disability pension.

MJ: When you were married, were you, I'm sorry, a United States citizen?

FH: When you were about to go overseas-- the five years had not expired. You had to be a resident for five years-- I had the Declaration of Intention already in '40.

MJ: I see.

FH: But when they sent you overseas, they damn well had to make you a citizen. If you would be a prisoner of war, can you imagine that mess? You would be a...

MJ: So that's the way you did it?

FH: So, I was naturalized in Sacramento, California, in May of 1944.

MJ: Were you drafted or...

FH: Drafted. I couldn't have enlisted. I...

MJ: They just...

FH: …was not an American citizen.

MJ: They drafted non-citizens, then?

FH: Anybody, as long as the...

MJ: I didn't know that.

FH: …FBI said you were not a spy. And my wife went back to live with her parents. By June of 1945, after being wounded, I had been flown back to the United States. And I was flown back to Lowell General Hospital near Ft. Devens, Massachusetts. And then weekends I spent with my in-laws and my wife until I was discharged. And my mother-in-law by then-- so we had the apartment and my father-in-law lived with us-- not the greatest arrangement. When we had children-- in '46 and '48 my children were born. They had a United States Supreme Court, you know. As I said, one of my children lives in Woodstock, New York. They have a small child. Mark married a school teacher from Belmont, Long Island. Ricky married a local girl. We moved to Philadelphia in early '49. And Rick is a writer. They have two teenagers, a girl in college and a boy in high school and then they live in Pacifica near San Francisco. And my granddaughter in Pacifica, she also works. Well she goes to college in the afternoons. She runs a computer system in a doctor's office. She needs the money.

MJ: How many of your family, I know of course your [unclear], your mother...

FH: My mother lived to the age of 91.

MJ: No, of the family in Germany, how many of those survived?

FH: Well my aunt and uncle got out.

MJ: They did.

FH: I have an aunt and uncle, my father's sister, aunt and uncle and cousin. They were too ignorant to do something. Besides, it was a rather broken home. They vanished without a trace. My mother had a number of cousins, there were two cousins who blew their brains out in 1942. They didn't wait for the transports to take them east. My grandfather--whom we tried, but this was almost impossible, a man in his 80's to be brought out. My aunt didn't try hard enough. She--he perished in Theresienstadt at the age of 86 years. He starved to death. He was picked up and taken there in the fall of 1942. We have the dates and everything. And he starved to death by the spring of 1943. And he wrote to us before he was taken away that he was in good health, through the Red Cross. So some--on his side of the twin gravestone, *Gestorben* [died] in Theresienstadt. That's my grandmother's grave.

MJ: Yes.

FH: And look, we have three grandchildren. We have the kids in California, and Mark in Shokan, that's near Woodstock, New York. And he has a practice of his own. He's a psychologist.

MJ: That's the good part of these stories.

FH: Oh.

MJ: When you see the generations...

FH: And I tell you, when you go back...

MJ: It's wonderful that...

FH: When you go back, I went back without enmity and I got very, very close corresponding with teachers I met there, school teachers, Gentiles. And I've helped them a lot to publicize what went on, because German curriculum doesn't mention too much. I even corresponded with school officials.

MJ: And the teachers were interested in doing that?

FH: Oh yes.

MJ: Good.

FH: They go into the musty basement and find the records the Nazis always told them weren't there. And it's a little, a little ambivalence when you go back. You see that beautiful house and the beautiful neighborhood, and you say, "Yeah." And then you realize you got away and you have a beautiful family of yourself and a good wife and you lived a decent, hard life. I always had to work hard. When I retired I was a superintendent in the post office, and I had to sue the post office because when the Civil Rights laws became active, they didn't promote Jews anymore. Except I differed and I dragged the post office into federal court and eventually I got an out-of-court settlement and a promotion of three pay grades after I retired. And this place in Philly has never been the same.

MJ: You've been a fighter all your life.

FH: The Catholic Church now and the *Shvartzes* [Yiddish: Blacks] have to share the promotions with Jews.

MJ: [chuckles]

FH: Promotions of Jews stopped when the Civil Rights laws came in. I could not see that. And I'm not well-liked there.

MJ: You've been a fighter all your life.

FH: I dragged them, dragged them into federal court, my dear.

MJ: Fred, this is a wonderful interview and...

FH: So I won't be on the front of that...[unclear]

MJ: …we so appreciate it.

FH: But I say I'm alive.

MJ: You are very alive.

FH: Although I have some aches and pains at the golden age, of course you...

MJ: We-- this will be a valuable addition to the Archive.

FH: I hope so.

MJ: Thank you.

FH: And you do not have to keep it.