HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

KURT SIMON

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Deborah Feingold
Date: July 10, 1989

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KS - Kurt Simon [interviewee]
DF - Deborah Feingold [interviewer]
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Tape one, side one:

DF: The date is July 10, 1989. My name is Deborah Feingold and I am interviewing Mr. Kurt Simon. This is tape one, side one. Mr. Simon, can you please tell me where you were born, when, and a little bit about your family?

KS: Very well. I was born on the 19th of April 1922, in the town of Luedenscheid, spelled L-U-E-D-E-N-S-C-H-E-I-D. Luedenscheid is located, let's say, about 2½ hours by car from Cologne, northeast of Cologne, really. It was, and still is, I guess, an industrial town, manufacture metal -- of metal items, belt buckles and snaps, and things of that nature. However, it had its moments in the early 1900s, when the man interested in building the first dirigible, Count Zeppelin by name, came to Philadelphia to get one of the local manufacturers to start working on the inner makings, steel, etc., etc., and this comes to mind because my father always told about it. My father also was born in Luedenscheid, in 1884, and so it stands to reason that by 1900, 1901, he was in his late teens. And at the time, so he recalled for me many times, he boasted of it, he was active as a swimmer and he certainly palled around with the local boys, beer drinking and such, even in those days. As a matter of fact, he may well have been in that type of endeavor, he may have been the only Jew, because, you know, there was a very small Jewish population, and I must tell you that my early years were certainly not very Jewish, as to orientation. Now, my father apparently came from a very Orthodox home. Alas, his mother died of cancer in her 30's. This may have been late in 1800 or early 1900 and when he got his stepmother, who later became my grandmother, on my father's side. She was nothing at all as to religion, quite neutral and so her husband, my father's father, also dropped the matter, apparently, so I was really brought up in my early years without any Jewish orientation. This started somewhat later. Now, the earliest years were in this fashion. My parents were still -- this was in post-war Germany, this was -- they got married in 1919, remember the first World War ceased in 1918. So they got married, my mother having been born in Cologne and there having taken place a certain matchmaking actually through families. My mother decided, she was the only child also, decided reluctantly to go from a rather large city to this little provincial town. My father from the first was rather well known because his father, Leopold Simon, had had years *the* store for men and women's fashions, located in the very heart of town at an important intersection near the market square, just by coincidence, I suppose, and as such the family -- my father's family was well known as ah, The Simons, and apparently, that was my perception, it got to his head a little bit, but that's, you know, me talking now. They were very musically oriented; my father having played the violin and my mother actually having studied with a rather famous piano teacher

in Cologne. She was nearing concert stage degree of finish, but her temperament was not suitable for the part at all. Anyway, they continued doing chamber music at home among other people, with other people in Luedenscheid also very much into this. Now, my mother, I recall, from earliest times when I was playing under her feet, veritably so, as she was doing some Brahms Intermezzi rhapsodies, and I remember being turned off as a child because this didn't sound so good to my ears, but that was what I was being brought up with, I'm not saying it to brag, but this was it and needless to say, this was the grand piano, a German make by the name of Bechstein, a very famous, less known in this country, but a famous name, second of course to Steinway. Now this petered off a little bit as I got to be five or six years of age, but also childhood remembrance, a friend of my mother's, school friend of my mother's, she just passed away a few months ago, she recalled that six months into my -- or a few months into my life in 1922, when she first visited with my mother in Luedenscheid, my mother still was too scared to carry me down the steps from the bedroom to the living room and she insisted that her friend do it. And I've been told many times since, "Look, I carried you down, don't forget!"

DF: So you were the first born then?

KS: And the only born one, there were never any others. Now in 1928, when I turned six, I recall 'cause the major move was a move from the original apartment to a somewhat larger apartment closer to the store. Now about 1928, my grandfather's, Leopold Simon's store, had been sold by my father who was by then in charge because in 1928 my grandfather also died of stomach cancer. Again, through relatives and much, well, politicking perhaps, internal, in a [unclear] benign kind, my father was appointed the Chief Executive of the branch of a famous department store chain by name Leonard Tietz, T-I-E-T-Z with stores throughout Germany, the headquarters in Cologne. You see, we can always get the relationship, Luedenscheid and Cologne in this case. And though he under -- had to undergo training for this administrative position, I recall, and this I really recall in my mind's eye, the opening ceremonies when this new building was opened in 1928 with what my father will always refer to as were American ways of merchandising, to wit balloons were let go with little lottery tickets to be turned in by finders, pigeons were let go, and there was a big to-do when, of course, there were the multitude. After all the location was right across from the market square, so it was not bad. And I remembered I was standing at a distance, I was only six years old please, but I remember this visually and it was a big deal all told. Now at the same time, we got a new maid. There had always apparently been a sleep-in maid. This was more customary in Germany than in this country, certainly among the fairly well-to-do. And I suppose my parents should be considered fairly well-to-do at the time. So we had a sleep-in maid who became a real friend and a major force in my life, as it were, gentile, because this is the point. Came Christmas in those years toward the age of 33, there would be a big celebration. Chanukah was not mentioned. I suppose in part because of her presence, I'm not sure. Anyway, it was a big deal for Christmas and both she and I were given all the presents with much

ceremony and so this was a lingering thing, of course, a very real thing. Now in school, of course, I started in 1928 at age six. I was surrounded by neighbor's kids and others, all gentile. I don't recall a single Jewish person.

DF: So what would you say the percentage of Jews was in, in Luedenscheid?

KS: …very small, very small, and to all intents and purposes it seemed to work quite well. Now, whatever may have gone on behind the scenes, one, in fact, incident was told to me later by the maid with whom contact was retained until she died in 1978 incidentally. She said at one birthday party, that one or two of the kids told her, "I don't want to sit next to the Jew," in our own house yet. And of course, I didn't know, she withheld that from me. So all seemed to go fairly well. The normal, normal daily routine, and even though, obviously, it must have been very difficult from the economical point of view because let's face it, in 1929 in this country, catastrophe. This was shielded, I never heard about any of this, and I'm sure there were repercussions in Germany, I'm sure, because there was unrest and so forth, I was too small. But anyway, school went on. There was I think, at that point, sure, as part of school -- the daily school schedule there was maybe once or twice a week one or two hours were allotted to religion, as a subject. This is not elective now, these are all mandatory courses and for that, the Jewish community must have been very small, furnished the services of a teacher, a religious instructor. That I think is where I got my earliest Hebrew knowledge, as a matter of fact. Now this was perhaps a little awkward because the others were kept in their classroom for their Protestant or Catholic, whatever religion studies, while yours truly had to go on an exodus to another room. This in itself was a bit awkward, but not much was made of it. But by I suppose '32 [1932], even in '31, I remember there were starting to come into play certain moments of unrest, political unrest. By '32, especially at night, in the dark, we could see from our windows up the next street corner, people battling out with each other, Communists versus the Nazis and the big danger apparently was Communism please even then. And of course it -- I didn't -- of course, I was too small, I didn't know what to make of any of this. My father was not very happy about the matter and so it went, but all too soon in 1933, by the last day of January, Hitler came to power. It was very awkward as to well, how should we act. And I recall early on, we're still talking -- maybe that was January, February -- March a torch light parade was supposed to be conducted by the school celebrating and the question was what do we do? We consulted with our maid as well, and so forth, and it was decided to let me participate. So I recall carrying one of these torches myself in the parade, feeling mighty ill-at-ease because I realized, "Wait a minute, I'm not really meant to be here," but nothing happened, mercifully.

DF: Do you remember anything about the parade?

KS: The parade was the school kids and the teachers, you know and, nothing else, it was like a demonstration to show solidarity.

DF: I see.

KS: But all too soon came the first attack, national attack against Jewish stores. Now because my father was so well known, there was ample warning given even by the Police Chief himself, behind the scenes, not officially of course, so that my father knew. There was in fact some window smashing, protests, the people protesting.

DF: And this was April 1st?

KS: We're talking about April, roughly April 1933, the very earliest instance. And my mother at home, frantic, of course, we didn't know what was going to happen to my father. He was the prominent man, he was *the* man in that store, but it came and went. I mean there was some damage done and I don't mean *only* physically. I mean it the other way because my father put two and two together and he thought and decided it best to retire from the post. He thought if he did it this early, that early, it might mean he could do so on better terms. This was accomplished with much crying and serious, somber festivities, flowers, offerings, and fruit baskets coming to the house, and speech making and what not. It was as if somebody had died, practically.

DF: And this was…?

KS: This was towards the – later in '33.

DF: Right. And this was the gentile community?

KS: Of course, of course. I heard very little of the Jewish community. My parents had some acquaintances, some friends and, of course, I had apparently, as I know now, I had -- there was a son, somewhat younger than I, in one of the families that my parents knew. But I didn't get along too well because age difference makes quite a difference.

DF: Sure.

KS: Anyway, but juxtaposing that for a moment with another, a gentile friend, the son of what also became the first or second year primary school teacher, I often went to his house to play and there were two older sisters, ten years age difference. So I paid very little attention, when you're six, somebody sixteen, who cares. However, it is these sisters with whom I am in constant contact. Amazing. And they discovered after the death of this, my one-time chum, who died as a German soldier in Romania during the war, the second World War, they discovered when I was there in 1979, they discovered a little diary he had kept and he had marked in it my birthday when he was six years old. I had done no such thing for him, but I mean it was very touching.

DF: Sure.

KS: And so there was this kind of thing, much more than in the Jewish way. It's not a matter of pride incidentally, I'm quite unhappy about it, but these are facts. And so this is a reflection of life the way it was.

DF: Right.

KS: So my father then, late in '33 or early certainly in '34 decided it would be much safer to move oneself from so small a community and sort of get submerged in a larger, like Cologne, and this move was accomplished with much tear-flowing, etc.,

especially on the part of our live-in maid and my mother. I mean it was a real relationship, it was really interesting. Okay, that was the end, I believe, of the time in Luedenscheid, so I spent twelve years in Luedenscheid.

DF: Okay, now can you recall -- you had mentioned the experience of antisemitism that the maid later told you. Was there any other example or situation of antisemitism that you can recall during those years?

KS: Actually, I must tell you I cannot recall. I cannot recall. Now some of it may have been because I was not considered looking terribly Jewish at the time. I mean there were lots of other Germans that had black hair. I mean, unfortunately, one has to come down to this always, but that was one reason, I imagine. And the other is well, I guess I was shielded from it because these were all people that my father had known, most, or many Catholics incidentally, so that I knew more about Advent and Christmas actually in those days than about Chanukah. What is this thing Chanukah? Never heard of it. So -- okay, go on.

DF: I was going to ask, then your family -- did your family belong to any organized Jewish…?

KS: Unfortunately, my father was never oriented in that direction and I don't know that there were many organizations in my hometown anyway. Beyond the community, he hardly ever attended services. There were services, certainly in the High Holy Days, and once or twice I was taken, not understanding much, but at least the religious teacher was there so you know, he could guide a little. But I do recall this, my father did have hang-ups about the matter. On the Day of Atonement, which we don't -- didn't really keep or any other holidays, he would forego smoking. To him this, cigar smoking, to him this was the ultimate sacrifice and he bore the facial expression all day as if he had been sentenced to life in prison and he made such a sour face. And when I, once in my innocence, started maybe cutting a paper he really got outrageously mad, "How dare you, this is the Day of Atonement!" Yes, sure, if he had explained it, but you see he hadn't, he had it within him, but he never communicated this stuff. It was awful. I felt that was the worst day in one's life, this Day of Atonement, because I hardly dared breathe and I didn't know why. Okay, very difficult and awkward, but that would probably be the end of that phase. Now we move to Cologne, which was not an easy thing to do because, bear in mind, my father was without a job. Sure, he must have gotten some money as a resignation good-will gesture, of course. But it was now felt, certainly my mother got that message across to me, look from now on we shall have to tighten our belts. And what did I react in response like? I said, "Fine, so from now on we will not buy the weekly illustrated Journal," which was fully 20 cents at the time, as a gesture of showing "no, we have to save". And if she never got any other message across, she did that we must be frugal and I can tell you even to this day, what a vital message it is, really. Anyway, it has nothing to do with Judaism as such. But, so here we were in Cologne, living with -- in the apartment of, my grandmother, that is to say, my mother's mother, totally un-Jewish, never had heard much

about it. She knew she was Jewish, that's all. And even going so far in her conversation -- she has a high position in my life incidentally, she was a great influence -- she was even squeamish about using Jewish expressions, 'tis unseemly, she thought.

DF: That would be Yiddish?

KS: Yiddish is not known in Germany. Yiddish is not known as a language in Germany, this is the Polish influence.

DF: I see, so when she said Jewish expressions…?

KS: …yes, she meant -- you see, many expressions had gotten into the German language as such. The word *schlemiel* [a klutz] is very much a German word, and I hear it even now on the German shortwave. Sometimes these matters, not *schlemiel*, but some other things come up, but surprisingly it jolts me practically, but yes, this is not unusual. Alright, so here we were, very much constrained economically obviously with my father frequently at loggerheads actually with my grandmother, the mother-in-law as it were, but over ideas, not because they didn't like each other no, ideas. My father was so dead set in his ways and my grandmother had better, more outgoing ideas about me and what I should be doing. She was elated that I had been removed from this little hick town. She was thinking, "Well, he's going to be a real provincial *nudnik* [pain in the neck]," and so it was all to the good that here I was finally exposed to worldly ways. And she was instrumental in the '30s, we're talking '34 to '39 now, contributing opera seats and while I was still too young she would donate for one other to accompany me, usually it was my father who sacrificed himself to go to the opera, but I must tell you, there was one instance I suppose, it was the new year, the first day of the new year, 19 -- either '35 or '36 for the opera, it might have been "*Tannhäuser*" it might have been the "*Meistersinger*" I don't know which, at the Cologne Opera, with incidentally, scenery still by one very famous Jewish stage designer, Walter Felsenstein, who ultimately wound up in East Berlin and died only a few years ago as a very famous man in East Berlin. In other words, he was oriented towards that, but that has nothing to do with it. Even in those days his name no longer appeared on the program, as if the design had fallen from the heavens, ready made, okay? It was -- you know, Jews were being eliminated. Well anyway, we went, but my father was ready to jump and leave because my grandmother's generous deed had accomplished it. We were seated in the front row, my father right in back of the conductor, as it were, so you could see it was dead center. In marches this conductor, and stands up and makes all stand up and render the German Hitler salute. And so one had to endure it and the Horst Wessel song which came first, and then the national -- German national anthem, and we didn't know what to do. I don't think we rendered the salute, we just stood expecting the worst. Nothing happened, but my father said, "I can't stay here, this is impossible." And I said, "Please, now that we're here, let's." I enjoyed the opera. He was deadly afraid every moment of it and we're talking in Wagner we're talking about four to five hours, please. Anyway, that's one memory. It was a physical hardship to be in so small an apartment with my grandmother and eventually we moved to another location, larger, so she had her

own room, I had my room, and my parents etc, and by then we had had to leave behind of course, the grand piano in Luedenscheid anyway, and so we had a small upright piano. This was wrought with danger because it turned out on our floor it was us, the Simons. Below us were the Simons, with an "s" at the end and they were Gentile and Nazis and this was most awkward because we hardly dared played the piano because we thought they were going to jump at us, but nothing happened. And this, incidentally, is an interesting point to make. The name Simon in Germany did not necessarily mean Jewish at all. In this country, as soon as I got here I was told, "Well, why don't you consider changing the name." I said, "Why?" "Because it's Jewish." Enough said. I still have it.

DF: I wanted to ask you to go back when you said you didn't look Jewish, and I've been thinking what -- if you could explain what that meant.

KS: Well, to Germans, the ideal of the German outlook on it from those days was blonde and blue-eyed and tall, no question. But allowances were having to be made because not everybody was and so black-haired Germans there were too, and well, then one had become attuned to the caricature of the Jew, thanks to this famous newspaper, "The Sturmer," which was very antisemitic.

DF: And was that a paper that you got…?

KS: …the paper, the party paper that was posted on bulletin boards with caricatures, the typical Jew with a big nose, etc., etc. And, okay, now, while I was then attending high school, one of two Jews in the class as of 1934. It was not the easiest one, approached the whole thing with mixed feelings and one did not make too many friends. I certainly don't recall a single one. We again had separate religious instruction, interestingly enough by a religious teacher who finally then became my instructor for Bar Mitzvah, whom I certainly visited again in this country, in New York and with whose son, who is five years older than I, I'm still in communication. In those days the age difference again was too great and so we paid no attention to each other. But in Cologne then, there were certainly inroads made towards a somewhat more Jewish existence and I had said, I think, in 1933, while still in Luedenscheid, where as part of Christmas we had had Christmas trees, live Christmas trees the last time around, I said, "Look, I don't think this is for us. I don't think it is meant for us to be in this business, from now on, let's not have Christmas, let's switch to Chanukah," I had said. And my parents had agreed and it was easy because we moved to Cologne and then it was easy and then I made it into a vengeance. It might not be the kind of Chanukah celebration that was written about in the book, but I make a stage production out of it and this and that and the other. But we did light the *menorah* [Chanukah candelabra] and I had fashioned it from cardboard because we apparently couldn't afford to buy one. Please. Anyway, my mother was always in tears about these matters because I had gotten the piano teacher to transcribe the *Maoz Tzur*[1] tune so that my

[1] "*Maoz Tzur"*, "Oh Mighty Rock", is a song typically sung after lighting Chanukah candles.

mother could play the piano and my father and I would sing it and my mother could hardly play because she was flowing away from being so moved by it. She didn't know what…

[End of tape one, side one.]

Tape one, side two:

DF: Tape one, side two interviewing Mr. Kurt Simon. Getting back to your family's participation in the Jewish community, did your family belong to any Jewish organizations or to a synagogue before the Nazis took power?

KS: Not in Luedenscheid except, I suppose, they were members even if not active, or at least they supported the small community -- the Jewish community which after all had a little chapel you might say, a room in some building in the backyard. I remember you had to get up a number of steps even to reach it, very primitive as I recall. That's it, there was nothing else. Now in Cologne, however, this was a different story. In Cologne there were a number of very well-to-do and well, large sized communities, not just one. One Orthodox that I never went to, and the -- what they considered the Liberal, which is slightly different from our Conservative in this country. Anyway, there is a different type of approach, however. You did not do this so voluntarily, that is to say being a member. You were taxed by authority in conjunction with the municipal authorities. I have never run it down completely, but this is how it worked. You were assessed and you paid taxes for -- specifically for the Jewish community. This is -- this was the support of the synagogue.

DF: Okay.

KS: And yes, we certainly were members if only for the sake of my becoming Bar Mitzvahed in that particular synagogue. And we are really speaking of an edifice, beautiful architecture in the Moorish tradition, which was rampant, running rampant in Germany in the late 1800s. There are pictures of these synagogues, once you've seen one, at least you get an idea of what they are and this, now this I keep stressing to my Rabbi, this too, typical. While the women sat upstairs and the men downstairs, there was nonetheless an organ and a choir and the Cantor was also an opera singer. So it was a very beautiful, melodious affair, but never was there an announcement as to what page we were on except the students, the few Jewish students, we surrounded the instructor who was associated with the synagogue, of course, and he would announce in an all too loud voice, page so and so, page so and so, which I found embarrassing because it announced to all the world, "Look here, these stupid kids, they don't know anything." And I mean, I thought there was a certain tactlessness, but he thought he has to show his power, you know, big deal. Anyway, there was instruction with piano accompaniment because the man was musical at his own home and I recall -- this is not all to the good -- I was then tested by the Rabbi and he asked questions that had never been covered and I felt so stupid and I certainly didn't know the answer. He would ask what Jewish month does a certain festival fall into, good grief, I'd never heard of that before, I'm not so sure now! Anyway, he finally sighed, this Rabbi, and said, "I suppose we shall have to let you pass." Oh, I felt so awful! Alright, so all that was going on in '35, 1935 in April, when I became Bar Mitzvahed. Now, in the meantime, things were slowly but surely developing, restrictions were coming to the fore, to wit, especially the one that was initiated by the Nazis, supposedly for the purification of

the German purity of the race, to wit, there had been much accusation of sexual business going on with Jewish males and gentile females, especially in households and this was spelled out I mean, so I found out early I mean – you were then, I was then 13 years old. For those days, that was not ideally the time to hear about all these distortions, but anyway, this was part of it. And it became a very meaningful thing because young German girls below the age of 45 were no longer permitted to be in households, simple.

DF: This was part of the Nuremberg laws?

KS: I believe so, I believe so, I believe so, if not certainly a close precursor and so the repercussions were that one had to rely on older women who could hardly do the job, and so we had such people, certainly, because we needed them, we were a large family. It was my mother, my father, my grandmother, and I.

DF: I was wondering, did you say that your father had gotten a job in Cologne?

KS: Thank you for reminding me. He managed to find himself a job as a traveling salesman, not necessarily in women's fashions. At times that was true, we had women's fashions, it meant taking the car and being away sometimes overnight. He was good at it, but it was not very successful and he certainly didn't amount to much, certainly not in comparison to what he had been, albeit he had been this executive for only five years, which is not such an eternity, you see. But it had been his high point in his life as it turns out, this was really it, he never achieved that much again. And he did not take it too kindly. He was rather upright, very strict, very disciplined, the typical German, never mind Jew, the typical German, and it had its reflections on me too, as you hear so often a mother's son, it was a much closer relationship than father to son. And I would give one other example, when I turned what 15, 16, he said, "Well, it's about time you start smoking." He had in mind cigarettes, he was an avid cigar smoker, as I mentioned, and I tried one and certainly didn't like it, and I suppose as a way of rebellion almost, I turned down, I said, "No, I won't, so what, so I'm not a man," because he said, "Well, you're not a man unless you do." Well, alright, I never did smoke, I'm grateful.

DF: Do you think that closeness between mother and son was particularly German?

KS: It's hard to tell, that I cannot generalize, but his own behavior was much more typical. It was not easy for him to show emotion and let's not forget he had all these pressures on him and he had to assert himself, vis-à-vis his mother-in-law, who was a very powerful woman in her own right. And she meant well, but he had his way and she wanted hers, and this led to serious conflict with my mother who was in the middle, and there were times when it was decided that even we should be living separately. But anyway, in those years that we're now talking about, that kind of thing had been resolved up to a point and it was kept this way, I mean relations were always rather good, at least to the outside world. These were very internal and everything was really headed towards my well-being. Now, while I was still going, of course, to school -- we are now getting into 1936, and including swimming, which was part of sports once or twice a week, there came a time when it was

not easy for me to participate in that anymore because they didn't want me there. And there came a moment in 1936 when egged on really by one of the younger instructors who was still only in a learning situation, but already teaching, he was spreading unfortunate news, antisemitic type, including posting things on the bulletin board right in the classroom, when one day they chased me out before a class started. I was still in the hallway when another instructor came and said, "What are you doing out here?" "Well, they didn't want me," and he said, "Come on in," but they decided they didn't want me in their midst anymore. But then I was the only Jew left. My father, having gone through the first World War as an officer, which was quite unusual, atop a horse yet, cavalry, went with his little medal that he had retained, it was not first class it was second class, first class would have been better but we didn't have it. So he went to the principal and the principal admitted that there was very little that he could do, he understood the difficulties and he regretted everything, but he thought it best if I were to disappear from the scene.

DF: This was from…?

KS: 1936, from the school when it was still mandatory for people going to school at that age, okay? What was left? I was -- overnight I was without school. My father was frantic because he couldn't see a boy my age with no school. I mean, remember, he was so disciplined, I mean, this was unheard of. So the alternative was to be admitted to the only other Jewish high school and this became a real problem because it had such a higher level, academically speaking, that I was found to be wanting on all subjects, particularly in Hebrew, where it was -- and then it came one of these unfortunate moments, I recall, when during one of the Hebrew instruction periods I dared raise a question with a very pious teacher, something to do with religion, in all innocence, and he said, "This is an unacceptable question, how dare you ask this?" "Well, if I can't ask it here, where, I mean, school is to learn." Anyway, it got so bad my grades dipping instead of rising, and it would have meant having tutors for all subjects and my father decided no. At that point I was pulled out and that was the end of my official formal schooling. By then, politically, things were, of course, getting stricter, and there were encroachments all the way. I recall certainly by then it was almost difficult -- certainly you could no longer go to movies but we are still short of 1938 when this got worse, but in those years, 1936, 1937, there was what was freely translated as the Jewish Cultural League, really in Germany *Jüdische Kulturbund*, but the translation isn't bad. There again, in -- completely inadequate hall in the hinterland, somewhere in some backyard auditorium, make-believe auditorium, there were concerts given and recitals by Jewish artists that were allowed to travel from city to city. This was the cultural aspect and occasionally my father would forego going, they had two seats, my mother and my father, so he would let me go instead. By then you could no longer go to the opera, like I had described earlier. Alright, now I was without job, without school in 1936, we're getting into 1937. My father remembered, made contact and succeeded in getting me an apprentice job in a manufacturing plant for again -- for clothing, women's dresses, because the man in charge -- Jewish, this is still Jewish -- the man in

charge had once been an apprentice at my father's father's in Luedenscheid. Reciprocity it's called I believe. And so I was made the lowly apprentice. It's a famous arrangement in Germany, at least at the time. The manufacturer agrees to pay you wages to teach you and he must agree to let you go twice a week to a special school to enhance what is being taught on the job, and this was done. So, again I found myself in school, albeit the hinterway [backdoor] through the back alleys, as it were, and it was awkward, it was quite awkward, intense, and I certainly made no contact with anyone. Into that era falls then the news that the Nazis had walked into the Rhineland. Big deal, we were in Cologne. So, I was hearing it in one spot in Cologne as to what was happening at the bridges at the other end of town, the army was taking over, freeing once for all -- because you see there was still the stigma as if it had been under French occupation from the first World War. Big deal, there were no French people there at all anymore, not when I was around. Anyway, that's passé. And so here we were, I was going to the school still and by the end -- I believe by the end of '37, the manufacturing plant had to be Aryanized, forcefully sold by the Jewish owners, much regret. Even the chiefs, the gentile chiefs came to me and said we are very sorry, blah, blah, blah, but you can't go on. If you want to stay on a few more weeks, fine, but out again, end of that.

DF: Did you feel that was sincere, that kind of…?

KS: Up to a point, up to a point. It -- people weren't that bad, individuals weren't that bad, I mean, one had one's guard up anyway. My whole approach to this day if I meet Germans is, wait a minute, they first have to prove themselves. This is not a good way, but that remains. Once they prove themselves then it's okay, as far as I'm concerned. Anyway, then came the thought what to do with this boy, I was by then, 1937, I was 15, 16, 17 years old. Okay, it was decided since possibly one was going to go somewhere else and not stay in Germany, it would be well to prepare for it since I seem to be having some talent towards drawing and that kind of thing, off to a school by myself in Berlin. The George Hausdorf Schule, that's the name, Hausdorf School for Poster Art, Advertising Art. Jewish, very Jewish.

DF: Do you want to spell that?

KS: Hausdorf?

DF: The, what was the first…

KS: *George*, George.

DF: Okay.

KS: And Hausdorf, H-A-U-S-D-O-R-F. The man himself an artist, he was frequently heard to say, "People, I am a great artist." I mean, how could one keep straight? Anyway, I learned to do posters, these large-sized posters which are certainly out of fashion in this country. They may have been in fashion in the '30s, which I -- however I discovered much to my dismay and amusement in Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem in 1984, '85, where they're certainly being used in front of theaters, movie theaters, large, colorful. Oh brother, I thought, in fact in my own slide show I say, well, these remind me of an era of bygone days

and I meant precisely what I said to you. Anyway, I learned this is the period between April and December 1938. Mark the year, because by November, we got into this famous *Kristallnacht*, the night of the smashed glass. I was in Berlin in a boarding house, Jewish boarding house, my parents in Cologne. We had no idea what was happening, so that morning in all my innocence, I take off to walk to school and on the way find a lot of display windows in Jewish stores, it didn't dawn on me they were Jewish stores, smashed. Again, I thought it was a little strange that there were so many and as I got to school right away one was told, "No, no, no, don't even show up, we can't, we can't, it's dangerous, go home, go home." Alright, at home, there was much consternation because news apparently was being developed that there had been raids, that people were being taken in, so the few Jewish males in the boarding house decided it would be well for them to disappear. So they took all day and all night trips to a nearby very, very large equivalent to Fairmount Park in Berlin, Grünwald [phonetic] it was called, where you can easily get lost for a while if you needed to. There was much anxiety as to me, was I the age or wasn't I the age that they might be interested in. And it turned out, in many cases they were not, in some they were, there was no telling. Mercifully they never showed, the Nazis never did, Gestapo never showed I don't think in our place. And in all my innocence, in the afternoon I took a walk, what did I know, I took a walk and I soon found myself nearing the famous synagogue, only to be facing thousands of people and from a distance, a great distance as it were, I could see smoke at least, if not flames, coming from that synagogue building. Again, I wonder what's going on? But I knew enough to keep away.

DF: Which synagogue is that?

KS: I think it was the synagogue on Fasanenstrasse, I think, I'm not quite sure, I think. I think if was off -- certainly it was off Kurfürstendamm the famous thoroughfare that you still hear about. And the long and short of it is that I was protected and nothing happened. The anxiety was indescribable. If we would talk on the phone, my parents and I more or less in coded, guarded tongues, because one fully expected to be overheard. It's not such a new idea nowadays when we think we're being watched, you know, there was much precedent. And a number of people, even among acquaintances of the boarding house, tenants, were pulled into concentration camps. And we -- when I went back to school a little bit later, it became very restricted, and by the end of December it was decided, for me at least, to go home, back to Cologne.

DF: Let me just -- getting back to the night. What were your parents' experiences?

KS: Again, they were lucky, nothing happened and worst of all again, in his innocence, my father surrendered what he had kept from the first World War, a whatever some ornamental weapon which he had always treasured, a memento, but the orders had been that these things must be turned in to the police. And so my father, not really realizing that he was walking into the lion's den, he walked in, in all good faith, they took it, and they were very nice and said nothing and that was it. Later on he thought, "Good heavens,

what did I do!" you know. So, no, we were all lucky, nothing more happened, but one heard all kinds of horrible stories, of course, there was no question about it. And it was at that point that my grandmother became outraged and said, "Now, look, so far," to my father, "You have been unwilling to move or to do anything, but you cannot let the boy stay here. If you and your wife want to stay that's your business, but you must allow him to leave."

DF: So she had…

KS: she was instrumental.

DF: She had been talking about moving before that?

KS: Yes, she meant for us to leave the country for my sake. She was the seer in this, my father refused because my father was so thick headed. I must tell you as an aside that in 1936, when his brother, a doctor and his family decided to scram and go to America, my father accused him of a captain leaving a sinking ship. Outrageous.

DF: So he had a very strong German identity?

KS: Oh, better than what was good for anybody. My mother -- my grandmother became very, very active. She discovered that one of the Warburg women in New York City was a distant relative of hers and they had corresponded, kind of corresponded once a year maybe, over the centuries, but here she really got going and the ultimate letter received finally was, "Well, alright in God's name, I will furnish the affidavits." I mean, even the tone of the letter I wasn't overcome by, but it was better than nothing. Fine. By then, however, the quota system was in effect as to visas for America and our particular office was Stuttgart, the nearest Consul. One didn't go, one corresponded, but since there were so many waiting, a system of numbers had been established and by the time my father applied, we got away with a number which would have spelled a three-year waiting period. Because my father, again being so upstanding and honest, had said he wouldn't dare go and approach for an application unless he had first gotten the affidavit when everyone else was saying, "Wait a minute, you use the waiting period to work up. There is not dishonestly in this." He never saw it that way. Anyway, so here we were with three-year waiting period before us. Again, my grandmother getting a hold of her two brothers, one for long years even prior to first World War in France, and the other in Lausanne in Switzerland long before the first World War, citizens in those countries. She begged and they were both fairly well off, one in particular deposited funds of his, in our behalf, in London with the Jewish Family Service or whatever it was called at the time. And with that premise, the British authorities were willing to let us come in with the understanding we would not work, we would simply await our visa receipt in London, presumably for three years' waiting. What was deposited in terms of value was barely enough for three years, so you can imagine the economic straits we were in because we obviously, in all honesty, we left everything behind. Yes, sure, we had suitcases, so what, with clothing that turned out subsequently to be quite unsuitable certainly for summer's heat in Philadelphia. But the worldly goods as such, furniture, everything else was of course left behind. Behind indeed

but crated up, ready for export, gone past German customs and stored in a harbor that was supposed to be neutral, part of Germany but neutral beyond customs, ready for shipment calling up to New York City, okay? Well, later on it turned out that that had been auctioned off for the benefit of the German people, ha, ha, ha, so we never saw it.

DF: Right.

KS: And I always say, good riddance, it wouldn't have been suitable, the furniture wouldn't have been that suitable here anyway. Anyway, here we were now in London.

DF: When was this [unclear]…?

KS: …this was now in June or July 1939, and remember on the 3rd of September in 1939, war broke out. So we left Cologne as I say in June or July, and there was no more except my father having to leave behind all his money, much of it was taken up by taxation, penalty tax, because of the murder of Vom Rath, in the Consulate in Paris that led to the 9th of November business in the first place. And so what was left was insignificant, but what he took with him were documents attesting to all of this. And in subsequent years, finally in the '6s, indeed with the help of a representative in Germany, gentile, things started to happen and my father certainly received to his death, restitution which made it possible first for us for a few glorious years to own a house and after that made it possible to live fairly comfortably at York House because in conjunction with the minimal Social Security and what was coming in from overseas, it just held its balance. I mean I would have been ready of course to jump into the breach. We always shared everything anyway, but so it was a happy ending. Now I must say something, jumping ahead perhaps to our entrance into the United States, if we can go over briefly the period in London which was under economic straits, of course, but we were surrounded in the boarding house by other refugees, mostly Austrian Jewish people, and it was a whole new world because temperamentally, Austrians are slightly different, but I mean, we had lots of common ideas of course and interestingly enough, the English landlady, the British landlady, at first approached us as if we were aliens, enemy aliens as a matter of fact, she didn't trust us because this Jewish element bit was rather strange to them. The British of those days were terribly insular and they would refer to Germany and the other countries, "uh, that's the Continent." You know, completely isolated from reality, but gentle and nice in their own way, the few British people that we met because ultimately, let's face it, I tried my darndest to learn English by going to the movies with my parents' permission because they certainly couldn't afford it and no work was possible. And so we…

[End of tape one, side two.]

Tape two, side one:

DF: Side one, interviewing Kurt Simon.

KS: Now while in England, as I said, I was trying my best to study English by going to movies occasionally and certainly in reading magazines that were of some interest, that is to say, photography in particular because that way it was much easier to understand the language because you knew what this was all about in the first place. Alright now, we're talking early months in September, October, November in 1939 when obviously not much of the war was being felt, rationing, yes, and so forth and so on, but eventually, much later on in 1940 in summer, I suppose, there did start the very real nightly mess of German planes coming over methodically and not only that, Lord Haw-haw, a traitor, Englishman working for the Nazis broadcasting in German announced over the radio exactly where the bombers were going to go and he knew about Hempstead, where all the German refugees had found refuge and all this was spelled out on the air yet, "Watch out tonight, blah, blah," and he was right, and they did show up and it became a nightmare every night. Now, this made us feel psychologically persecuted again because apparently it seemed that there was no escaping the Nazis no matter where you were, but beyond that there came also this awful sensation that even the British were turning against us because we were all placed before a tribunal, as they called it, to determine as to one would be considered friendly or enemy alien. Luckily my parents and I were considered friendly aliens. To this day, we have never been able to figure out what made some of us enemy and others friendly.

DF: What happened with the…?

KS: Well, many of the enemy aliens were subsequently picked up and put into camps. I certainly wouldn't call them concentration camps, but there was again this separation of husband and wife, family separation and many apparently were shipped to Australia, if only from the British point of view, to get them out of England where they were considered, perhaps, a menace. Horrible ideas, and so, to that extent, when one was constantly thinking in terms of, "There is no rest for the weary, we're being unwanted, we're being persecuted even here." Well, anyway, it finally -- we were successful in getting reservations because our visa finally was granted, not in three years, but mercifully in one year, because as people were being reached, their papers weren't ready, and they were dropped while ours in the meantime mercifully were ready, so we were ready. And there was much agonizing over early space on board ship. That became a premium fright almost, because it became a money matter. We had only so little money left, even after one year instead of the three, and we spent every last nickel on it because we saw we cannot possibly stay with the bombings nightly, and so we spent every last nickel we had winding up on first class, which was certainly not what we wanted, but we got away and it worked. And so on the 3rd of October 1940, Atonement Day, we arrived in New York City. I was overwhelmed by sudden -- this carelessness having all the lights on at night when, in London of course, everything was dark and I said, "How can you be so careless?" Anyway,

and then we wound up finally several months later in Philadelphia, and in Philadelphia we were helped so beautifully by the Jewish Family Service. This cannot be stressed enough. They guided, they provided the money, of course, these were minimum requirements indeed, but that's not the issue. The issue is that we had nothing and even our -- my father's brother, the doctor that had preceded with his family, he claimed he was not in much position to help financially, so all's well that ends well because certainly we had a wonderful time. But one amusing touch, and then I'll finish up, was in -- while in New York, in the hands of Jewish authorities there, we were told in no uncertain terms, "Look, you cannot possibly stay in New York City and expect to be helped. You must be willing to go." "What choice do we have?" "Yes, you can go to Harford, Connecticut, or Philadelphia." We -- my mother and I looked at each other and said, "Philadelphia, ah the orchestra," and this is what it was. My father had no part in that, apparently. So there we are.

DF: Wonderful, thank you. I want to now go back and just try to pick up any missing pieces.

KS: Sure, sure.

DF: You talked about the early days when Hitler came to power and the boycott. Do you remember any other kinds of reactions to when Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January of '33?

KS: First of all, in my hometown considering my, what, 11 years, I certainly at the time wasn't reading newspapers, and I recall only that there had been this terrible political struggle, Nazis versus Communists, physically dashing it out, dishing it out to each other, which finally then came to an end. And subsequently I saw the Brown Shirts which then came into play marching and parading and so forth, but beyond that politically, I could overhear my father's comments. He could see nothing good, although I guess he figured well, this would come and go. How else could he have rationalized his stance, who should leave the country so quickly, and yet there were people who were smart enough to leave very early, especially those in banking had much more an overview, for example.

DF: Right. Okay. You mentioned the Jewish Cultural…

KS: [unclear] mhmm.

DF: the Council of German Jews the *Reichsvertretung*?

KS: *Reichsvertretung*, okay, yes, what about that?

DF: Do you have anything to say about that? I think, am I…

KS: Well, there was I can remember, certainly, the paper, the official paper I think, I believe it was called "*Central-Verein*[2]" I'm not quite sure anymore which I started reading with some interest. Yes indeed, but well, that was the official representation.

DF: I understand that was a kind of unifying…

[2]The *Central-Verein Zeitung* was a publication of the Central Union of German Citizens of Jewish Faith, one of the main movements in the *Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden* (Representative Council of Jews in Germany), established in 1933.

KS: Unifying, possibly. You see, I was not aware of any fractionalism of any kind. It must have gone on, obviously, it's a human trait, one group against the other and so forth. You see, mine was a very shielded, I'm quite sure shielded one-sided, one-dimensional childhood, I imagine, and let's face it, many things were considered unsuitable for discussion. For one thing, I realize now my parents were not at ease greatly with discussing things. It was always the edict, my father would issue the edict and my mother would definitely agree, so it's not the free flowing kind of democratic business. I'm saying it and I sound as if I were complaining and perhaps I am, hindsight now, but that is what it was.

DF: Mhmm, sure. Okay. You mentioned, what was it that I asked if that was part of the Nuremburg laws?

KS: Yes, the maid situation…

DF: …right…

KS: …45 and up.

DF: Right, were there any other -- do you recall any other, or being affected by the Nuremburg laws?

KS: Manifestations really, well, some had to do, and this was not personal experience, had to do with medicine, the doctors no longer practicing except for Jews and not called doctors anymore. Lawyers the same thing, they were only assistants, they were no longer the full-fledged lawyers, I suppose, and so forth. But this I cannot tell from personal experience. And in the case of my uncle, who was a doctor, of course, he removed himself from the scene in '36. This was before or on the verge of the Nuremburg business. He may have started to feel it, but he decided, well, that was it. Now, but on thinking back to Berlin during that period in '38, especially after November when I would stumble across benches in parks marked with lettering, Jews -- "No Jews" and definitely poster outside movie theaters, "No Jews" and even stores, "No Jews." And a matter of fact, in Cologne, preparatory to our leaving, photography as I had said was my interest, we tried to buy photographic equipment to take. Purposely we bought second-hand because the Nazis were onto it, that you wanted to use high-priced equipment to transfer funds, really, for resale abroad. And so we bought second-hand but good, and the store we really wanted to go to had a sign out, "No Jews" and we discovered a branch of that store in another location, so we went there. Sickening, sickening.

DF: Okay, we covered a lot of things. You mentioned that your father served in the army, the question is, did any men in your family serve in the national army, was there anything else you wanted to say about that?

KS: There was no one else, wait a minute, I'm not sure about my uncle, the doctor, or whether he was merely a student in those days, that's not clear because my father did this voluntarily. He was still in school and you -- this could be done in 1913, whatever, and so he decided on this. He was the oldest of the family anyway, and he achieved fairly good rapport with people. And it was most unusual for a Jew to be an officer. He was also

good in French and he recalled that while they were then in France as the occupying people or the warring people, at least he made contact with the local population in French. I'm sure it was very German French, but he claimed it was good.

DF: You talked about your grandmother, she was the one who talked about leaving…

KS: …the driving force.

DF: The question is, during the earlier period from '33, the next couple of years, did anyone was she talking that early about leaving or was anyone else?

KS: No, no, no, I'm quite sure of it, no, this came later. She was fuming politically, she was fuming every time she heard Hitler's speech. It was unsafe for her to be anywhere because she was quite audible about her feelings about the matter, but that was so much hot air.

DF: The German invasion of Poland and -- that was also in '38?

KS: This was in '39.

DF: That was in '39.

KS: So, '39, indeed, that was at the beginning of the war, that's how it started.

DF: Okay, so you had already…?

KS: We were in London, we heard this in London, we heard this on the radio, right.

DF: I guess then we're -- there's a question about when you first heard that Jews were being murdered in large numbers, that that would have been after you had…

KS: Only in this country, nothing there at all. One did know about people being hauled into concentration camps there was no question about it, but these were not death camps, these were concentration camps to supposedly this was protective custody, protection from what one wonders.

DF: And that was as early as when?

KS: This was as early as 1933, but there was release except for political prisoners who, even in those days, were probably done in, but not the Jewish, not the Jewish aspect methodically followed through production-line ways the way it was done later. This was a late accomplishment in the forties.

DF: Right.

KS: As a matter of fact, in '38, an acquaintance was caught in a raid in Frankfurt, was put in a concentration camp and to this day he retains certain physical difficulties. He was threatened with either he was to leave as early as, as soon as possible, leave Germany or else. So of course, he made it his point and he left Germany as soon as he was released in 1938. He is still alive.

DF: So that in terms of your family, everyone…

KS: We were extremely lucky at all times. We were really shielded. We experienced none of the outrageous manifestations.

DF: Sounds like you went through some difficult times.

KS: Well, emotional, psychological and so forth indeed, and economic, but you know, in retrospect now you have to be grateful. Because of -- there were situations were definitely so much worse.

DF: Well, I guess that I don't have any more questions, do you have anything that you want to add?

KS: No, I can only say I enjoyed doing the interview and I hope it's going to help and fill in some possible gaps for people and that people at least be tolerant enough to understand what went on and make an effort at least to be wide awake, to be on guard for the future. That's a tall order.

DF: Well, I'm sure it will be very helpful and thank you so much for taking the time.

KS: You're welcome.

[End of tape two, side one; end of interview.]