HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HANS THALHEIMER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Susan Bailis
Date: April 21, 1985

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HT - Hans Thalheimer [interviewee]
SB - Susan Bailis [interviewer]
Date: April 21, 1985

Tape one, side one:

SB: This is an interview with Hans Thalheimer taped at the Philadelphia Gathering of Survivors[1] by Susan Bailis. I'd like to begin by asking you a little bit about where you were born, and about your family.

HT: I was born in Stuttgart, Germany. We had a very large family. I mean, there were many cousins. My grandparents had nine children. My grandfather had nine children by his first wife and two children by his second wife. So while we were in Germany, I remember we had a great many cousins and aunts and uncles. We all lived pretty close to that proximity at the time. Gradually, we moved away from Stuttgart, Germany when I was about, it must have been 1926, '27, when I was about five, six years old. I...

SB: So you were born in 1922?

HT: '21.

SB: Born, okay.

HT: '21.

SB: And how many children in your family?

HT: Well, I have two sisters, younger sisters.

SB: Okay.

HT: One was born still in Stuttgart, the other one was born in Tübingen where we moved to. I don't remember exactly, probably in 1926, '27. Grammar school I attended in Tübingen and we lived in Tübingen till 1933.

SB: How about your life there, before the war?

HT: Well, before the war...

SB: What was it like?

HT: Before the war, actually we were, the city of Tübingen was about, during the winter when the university students were there, the inhabitants were about 25,000. During the summer when there were no students there I would say there were about 20,000. There were approximately 5,000 students that attended. Tübingen used to be a relatively well-known university, a medical school and some other theological seminaries there and some other. And Tübingen had approximately 25 Jewish families. As I recall, we were maybe seven Jewish children in the city out of the 25,000.

[1]Recorded at the 1985 American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, PA.

SB: And how were you treated as Jews?

HT: Well, we had constant problems. I mean, I wouldn't say we were bodily molested but we were mentally molested. I remember that my bicycle was stolen and that we were constantly named "Damn Jews" and so on and so forth. It was hard to make friends with the-- in the neighborhood, you know. And that's how we grew up. I mean it became sort of a good ol' German antisemitism, you know, it, which we lived with and...

SB: Right.

HT: Everybody more or less accepted it.

SB: Did those families, those seven families bound together? Or...

HT: We were more than seven families.

SB: I'm sorry.

HT: Seven children.

SB: Seven children.

HT: I said we were about 25.

SB: I see.

HT: We had a synagogue in Tübingen, a small synagogue. The rabbi, Dr. Wuchenmark [phonetic], his son went to school with me. In fact I am in contact with him now. He is, lives in San Francisco. And during the high holy days there were some other Jews came into the city of Tübingen from other small surrounding towns. And we had, always had services. We had religious school. We had once a week on a Wednesday. And it was really ironic. We were supposed to meet in one schoolroom in one of the public schools. Many times when we got there, either the room was not open or they couldn't find the janitor or you know how it is. There were three children in that class. His son, there was a girl by the name of Lette Lemle [phonetic] and myself. The three kids, we went, we were the school at that time. And that's how the Germans-- German antisemitism does not go back to Hitler. It goes long, long before that.

SB: Was there a *kehillah* or any kind of Jewish governing body in that city? Nothing.

HT: [unclear]. There were a few prominent people. We had a couple of doctors in that community.

SB: Right.

HT: We had a couple, probably a couple attorneys as I remember. I was pretty young. But there were some people who were prominent people in the city.

SB: What did your father do?

HT: My father was a sales manager for a manufacturing company that manufactured Turkish toweling and cloth. The company still exists, Württenbergiche Frottierweberei Lustnau. It was a small town in-- by the way, there is a book published, *The Jews of Tübingen*, which demonstrates, it goes back when the university was established. It's quite an interesting book. It's going back into the history of Tübingen. Tübingen was made *Judenrein*, free of Jews, when they started the university. They

didn't want to have any Jews. That's how far, it goes back maybe to sixt-...

SB: How far was that?

HT: 16th century, something like that I imagine. I don't know the dates exactly, but I read the book. But they cleaned out all the Jews in Tübingen, just to keep the univ-, just to establish the university. That's how far back the antisemitism was there.

SB: What took your family there?

HT: Well, my father's job. He had a job, he lived in Stuttgart and then he got a job in Tübingen with this company. And...

SB: How was he treated...

HT: Well, my father...

SB: …by the non-Jews?

HT: My father was a very, an unusual person. I mentioned this here before. My father was a national hero for the German Army during World War I. My father, I have his medals at home. I kept them. He was a battlefield commissioned officer as a Jew, which was in itself a very unusual thing. My father was respected solely for his military record, not as a Jew. And I'm sure that eventually they would have found some reasons even to incarcerate him. They had a very difficult time with him because they couldn't say that he was a coward. They couldn't even tell him that he wasn't a German. I mean his service record was such that it was, it's just unbelievable. [unclear] in the First World War. So he had a very dif-, they had a very difficult time with him.

SB: How did they treat him? Or the whole family? The whole family?

HT: They treated him with reserved respect. You know, "You're a Jew, but -" You know, this kind of thing. And...

SB: Yeah.

HT: And that's why, in getting a little ahead of myself, when he wanted to leave Germany in 1933 when we, when, in 1932 actually we moved away from Tübingen into the city of Zittau, which is in Saxony. Saxony was perhaps the most antisemitic state in Germany.

SB: And you moved there for what reason?

HT: Well, again, my father had a job with another, a similar manufacturing company. And as I said, Saxony was the most antisemitic state I would say in all of Germany. You couldn't have any kosher meat. It was difficult to even, your observances were constantly scrutinized as Jews. Most of the kosher, those who wanted to have kosher at home, the meat came from Breslau, some, from another state, which goes back in my memory. After all, we were out of Germany since '33, so, but I remember. In, yeah, go ahead. I'm sorry.

SB: So from '32 to '33 you were in Saxony.

HT: We were.

SB: And what...

HT: …well...

SB: …prompted you at that point to leave Germany?

HT: Well, two things prompted me. My father was an ardent reader. My father also was sort of a follower of history. He read Hitler's *Mein Kampf* from cover to cover. In fact, we brought this book along because-- I still have that book at home, the original book that my father read. And my father said to us, "If half of the things can come true that he writes in his book, I don't want to remain in Germany, even though our family is traceable to Germany for close to 300 years." My father never lived outside of Germany. Our family never lived, my grandfather never moved away from his village where he was born, maybe 20, 30 miles, in all his life. So, these people were entrenched in Germany completely. I mean there was no, there was nothing else. And he said that he wants to leave Germany. So, my father, from his business connection had some connections in Belgrade in Yugoslavia, and he felt that Belgrade, there was a big future in this field because Yugoslavia was 95% agricultural. They needed some industry there. And when we applied, which was a rarity to leave Germany in '33, we probably could leave Germany almost unmolested. We took most of our belongings with us. In fact, I remember, it sounds incredible that they put an official into the house to watch us pack, from the German financial, you know, from the, that's true. They set somebody, the door was locked, and he said, "Look, pack anything you want. If you want to put money in there, just do it." As again, they didn't know what the heck to do with my father, because of his-- and so we left Germany in '33 and we moved to Yugoslavia, because my father could not consciously remain in Germany.

SB: So he was already seeing the future, or things were...

HT: Well, he could...

SB: Actually happening that he was seeing?

HT: Well, he could, my father had the unusual capability...

SB: Yeah, he sounds like an unusual man.

HT: … of coming to a dec-, coming-- oh, you will hear the rest of the story -- to coming to a decision and live with it, and evaluated what was going on. And take the opportunity, right or wrong, he could decide. He was never sitting on the fence. He was a very unusual person. And he decided to get out of Germany with the whole family. This huge family of ours, who lived in Germany, mostly in southern Germany at the time, they thought he was going nuts. They thought he was going crazy. "How can you?" In '33, in spite of the fact that we had considerable harassment in Zittau – they rounded up all the Jewish businessmen, threw them in jail, shaved their heads, and let them go again, and smashed some of their windows-- it was long before *Kristallnacht*, you know-- they constantly harassed them, even though they didn't, I wouldn't say they, their life was not threatened in those days, but...

SB: This was when? In what...

HT: In 1933.

SB: In '33.

HT: Yeah.

SB: Before *Kristallnacht*.

HT: Bef-, oh *Kristallnacht* was in 1938.

SB: Okay, right.

HT: I mean...

SB: Okay.

HT: But they constantly harassed the people.

SB: Right.

HT: There were signs in Zittau, in 1933, "Jews and Dogs Not Permitted." I went to regular school. They brought in a bench. There was another fellow and I in Zittau, and they moved, put a separate bench in our classroom where we had to sit. We were totally ignored from that point on, you know. We couldn't go to gym any more. We couldn't go to any exercises. Yet, yet, the Germans were not that efficient. I have something funny to tell you. Baldur von Schirach who we, was the *Reichs* Youth *Führer*, you know, I have a diploma from him, signed by him. You know, it didn't, they were not as I-- can you imagine that?

SB: [chuckling]

HT: Can you imagine that? I have this thing at home! Very-- so this was an interesting life, anyway.

SB: Right. So in '33...

HT: In '33 my father decided...

SB: You left. And you could take your stuff?

HT: Pretty much. In '33 you had very little, you had to pay a certain amount of money, an exit tax or, you know, to leave Germany. But it was really not that tremendous. And the Germans were not that viciously organized in '33 that, you know, I mean, we had problems but it was not terrible, you know. So we left, as I said, Germany in 1933. In 1934 in the spring, we stayed a few months in, travelling through Europe, my family, because it took some time for our furniture to get there. So we took our time. We stayed a few weeks in Switzerland, and a couple of weeks in France. And from there we went to...

SB: So in '34 you were...

HT: To Belgrade.

SB: Belgrade.

HT: In '3-, the beginning of '34 we were in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

SB: And what was life like there?

HT: Well, Belgrade was the capital of Yugoslavia. It was more or less in the center of the Serbian country. The Serbs were not antisemitic, okay. Other parts of Yugoslavia were antisemitic. We had very little trouble. I mean, the freedom that the Jews had in Belgrade, compared to Germany, was unbelievable. They had Jewish, what would I say, like Boy Scout troops. They could wear a type of uniform with a Jewish star.

They were not harassed in those days, in ‘34. Also, the community in Belgrade was much greater than that what we experienced in Germany. We were, we had very small towns. I mean the one town had 25 families, the other one had 45 families.

SB: Right.

HT: Okay?

SB: Yeah.

HT: One thing I want to go back to Germany is in Zittau, already in 1933 the Germans screened out quarter Jews, half Jews, one eighth Jews, and the only gathering place towards the end even to the end of ‘33 were the synagogues. And I still remember that we all knew each other. All of a sudden there were people showing up that we had never seen in our lives, half Jews, quarter Jews. The only place they could go to in Germany were the synagogues. And they didn’t belong to us and they didn’t belong to the gentile community. It was, for them in the beginning I believe it was even the most horrible experience, you know. We had people in the synagogue, all of a sudden who, you know, we are asking, “Who is this?” They said, “This is so-and-so.” Some people didn’t even know in those days that they were half Jewish, because some of their people, their parents probably didn’t even tell them. But the German research, you know, uncovered that he is Jewish. The German...

SB: Did the Germans send them to the synagogue or...

HT: No, they didn’t.

SB: Did they come on their own?

HT: They had no other choice.

SB: Okay. Right.

HT: They had no other choice. Because they were afraid to go anywhere else, you know.

SB: How did you receive them?

HT: Well, with great-- again, I was only a child-- with great skepticism, with great, and they really didn’t want to be there. They were not Jewish...

SB: Right.

HT: And they also were not Gentile in that sense. And as I said before, we left in ‘33. I still remember when we left Germany. My father got a, in the synagogue, a farewell, what should I say, program or at a Shabbat service, of the likes you cannot imagine.

SB: Hmm?

HT: The likes you cannot imagine what these people did to say good-bye to him and to us. I mean, mainly to him. So...

SB: Were you sad to leave Germany, as a child?

HT: I really...

SB: Or were you feeling...

HT: I really, I, no, I would not say I was sad, because we had such an

enormous confidence in my father, in my parents as such, that we would go to, would have gone anywhere. Of course I was only then 11.

SB: You were 11 when you left?

HT: Yeah, *Bar Mitzvah*, I was already in Belgrade when I was 13, you know, in the synagogue. We had a...

SB: Yeah, right, yeah.

HT: *Bar Mitzvah*. We were there maybe a year or so when I became *Bar Mitzvah*, in Belgrade. And there is another experience. I mean, the language of Yugoslavia is Serbian, which is a type of Slavic language, something similar to Russian. The whole alphabet and everything else is different. The rabbi who was, most people in Yugoslavia, the educated people, spoke two, three, four, five languages. It was not uncommon for a person to speak five languages. Most of them spoke first their native language. They spoke German. They spoke French. Most of them spoke Hungarian because of the connection with the Austria-Hungarian Empire. So, and the rabbi announced in his services, "Due to the fact that the family was such a short time in Yugoslavia, that the service, the sermon, and everything else, would be in German." Which was, you know, because we couldn't, my parents couldn't speak well enough in those days. Later on they spoke. It's a hard language to learn.

SB: Yeah. So you were welcomed into the community.

HT: Oh yeah. I mean, they had two synagogues there. As I, Yugoslav-, Belgrade had two pretty good sized congregations. I don't remember, probably, I would say probably 10, 15,000 Jews who were, lived in Belgrade, in a city of about close to half a million, which was a large congregation. They had a Sephardic synagogue, because there were quite a few Sephardic Jews there. And Ashkenazic Jews, which is German and Polish, you know. We belonged of course to the Ashkenazic synagogue. And, life in Yugoslavia was, as a Jew, was not unpleasant. I mean really without any...

SB: Was it or was there a governing body or a Jewish communal body in Belgrade?

HT: I doubt it very much.

SB: Or any major Jewish organizations that your family...

HT: Well, we had...

SB: … was connected to besides the synagogue?

HT: The major, you know, in those days we had the major Zionist organizations.

SB: Yeah.

HT: I mean, you know. We also had the organization that prepared young people to go to Palestine, even then, you know.

SB: Did your family belong to any of those? Support those?

HT: No, not really very strongly, because we lived in the suburbs of Belgrade and where my father had this little factory, which was quite a distance away. I mean, I

say Belgrade. Actually we lived in a little town called Chukariza [phonetic] which was probably a good 45 minutes to an hour by trolley car away from the main city. And we did not go to synagogue that frequently, through the high holidays and maybe two, three, four times during the year, yes, we did go. But we were not that close to, the only synagogue that we had access to. You know, it was not like here in the city that, Philadelphia where you can have, within five blocks you can have two or three synagogues or something like that.

SB: Right.

HT: There was only one, you know.

SB: And how did your family get along with the non-Jews in this community?

HT: We had no problems.

SB: No problems.

HT: We had no problems at all. The, as I said, the Serbs per se were not antisemitic as of course, not like the Germans. They were absolutely not. We, I said here before that the expression of the Jewish community was there. It was not hidden. The people, the Jews were visible. They were not afraid to close their stores if they wanted to close on Saturday, you know, as Jews.

SB: Right.

HT: Which was a little difficult in Germany at times, you know. And we really had no problems in Belgrade, till the pressure of the Germans in 1938, they moved into Austria. They were then in the Austrian border. And Mr. Stojadinović[2] who was the Prime Minister in, was a, pretty much a Hitler sympathizer-- whether he did it out of fear, or whether he did it out of real sympathy, I really don't know-- nevertheless, he-- I know Göring was in Belgrade. And I think Stojadinović was in Berlin. And it was said that for two Mercedes automobiles he made an agreement to push all the non-Yugoslav citizen Jews on the Austrian border eventually out. And this was done. In 1933 my father was, fortunately he knew some people in the Ministry of Interior, because it's not like in the United States, because you had to have always two permits to live there, one permit to work and the other one to reside. And if they wanted to give you a hard time they either would revoke one or the other. So there was a constant, constant, constant battle. I think it took, in those days, if you wanted to become a citizen of Yugoslavia, it probably took 15 years of residency. That's the-- you know. So, we didn't even try. Because we were only there from 1934, let's say three, till, approximately six years. We didn't even apply because we didn't even have the-- but Stojadinović made the agreement with the Nazis to push the non-Yugoslav, they couldn't push their own citizens on the border. They couldn't do it, couldn't turn, but they turned over the foreign Jews, Austrian, German Jews, whoever came, on the Austrian border. And this Minister of the Interior warned my father to look out for another source to get out of Yugoslavia.

[2]Milan Stojadinović, Yugoslav Radical Union, 1935 – 1939.

SB: Well, before he warned him, were, was the family picking, I mean were things changing in terms of the climate?

HT: No, the, no, no, no. What happened there was this. A propaganda campaign started in Yugoslavia. Never mentioned the word Jews. The Jew, the word "Jew" would have not influenced the Yugoslavs one way or the other because they were not antisemitic. What was happening in there was this, that a big campaign, that our industry is dominated by foreigners. We have too many foreigners in our country. We must get rid of the foreigners. We, the foreigners must generate local people, you know, to take over and integrate them into their businesses. And, with this scenario they grabbed mostly, all, only Jews, and pushed them on, you know, out from there. And the Yugoslavs to say agreed with the idea because Yugoslavia was dominated by foreign interests. I mean the mining industry was French. The textile industry was either German or Czechoslovakian. There, the heavy industry was partially from the Škoda Works either in Czechoslovakia or somebody ran those, because they didn't have the people. Yugoslavia was 95%, they were training people but they were very, very, very far behind from the rest of Europe. I would say Yugoslavia was, when we moved in there in '33, maybe like the interior of Mexico is today. I mean, very poor, extremely poor. Poor roads, poor health, malaria was prevalent. Tuberculosis was very prevalent in Yugoslavia in these days. And the houses were built out of adobe bricks, out of straw and mud the villages were built up. It's, you would have to see it to believe it. The cities were nice. Belgrade was nice. Zagreb was nice. Some of the other cities were modern, were nice. The quality of the houses were not that great. I mean I remember the apartments were, the doors would not close too well and some of the plumbing wouldn't work too well, but it was a very modern-looking city. Paved streets, clean. You know.

SB: Did you hear what was going on in Germany or in other parts of Europe?

HT: Oh we knew. We knew. We knew. We knew, because...

SB: How did you know?

HT: We knew, because first of all, we read. My father, again, we had, we got, especially foreign papers, Swiss papers, Austrian papers, till the Germans moved in there of course and then the propaganda took over and you couldn't. But, we had...

SB: Until when were you getting the foreign papers about?

HT: I would say till '38, I would say.

SB: Till '38.

HT: And we had a good idea that, and my father took his life in his hand, in 1936 and '38, he traveled back into Germany-- can you imagine that-- to tell my relatives to get out. And some of them would not get out. We lost quite a few because they could not part from Germany. They arrested my father in 1936, I remember, on the German border, and again, due to his service record, they called the Embassy in Belgrade, the German Embassy. The Embassy told them to let him go. They had him arrested already. It's true [unclear]. To make things even worse...

SB: He was a brave man.

HT: He had a cousin, a first cousin, the same name, by the name of Max Thalheimer, who was on the most wanted list of the Germans because he took his money out of Germany. He left and took his money out. So then Max Thalheimer was a known name on the German border.

SB: Yeah.

HT: They arrested my father immediately when he went back to Germany.

SB: This was in '36?

HT: '36. He went back...

SB: And he went back again in...

HT: He went back...

SB: '38!

HT: In '38.

SB: So he was a very brave man.

HT: He was a, my father was an extremely brave man.

SB: Yeah, right.

HT: I mean, I mention this in...

SB: Did you know when he went, each time he went did you personally know...

HT: Oh we knew. Sure we knew.

SB: The risk he was [unclear]?

HT: My mother, you can imagine my mother didn't sleep even for nights. Because the...

SB: Yeah, I wonder what that was like...

HT: Chances, oh...

SB: For the rest of you.

HT: See, this is the way my father was. My father, even during the war, for the Germans, he took certain risks. He was willing to take these risks. He was known to be a very brave person. And he went back twice to Germany, to tell my relatives to get out. And there were some...

SB: And some of them did? Or some of them...

HT: Some of them did, but...

SB: Most of them didn't?

HT: We lost a good many people.

SB: Mmm hmm.

HT: I have, from my father's side we lost three or four people that I know. From my mother's side I know my Aunt Emma was killed in a concentration camp eventually. My Aunt Alexa, her husband and one child were killed. My Aunt Hannaleh and her husband and two children got killed. And there were some other cousins and other people that in our family. I mean, the immediate family was all right, others were

also, never survived in Germany. They had a opportunity to get out. They had the opportunity to get out. So to go back to Belgrade and when this Minister of the Interior told my father to look for a way out because, "We're gonna push you on the Austrian border."

SB: This is in '38 now?

HT: This was in '39.

SB: '39...

HT: This was in...

SB: He's telling him to get out?

HT: This was in '39.

SB: Yeah?

HT: And again I say they pushed only German Jews, foreign Jews, on the German border. The Germans gladly, you know...

SB: Mmm hmm.

HT: So my father went to the Swiss Consulate, and I have a card at home. I wish I could show you the card. This Swiss Consulate gave my father a totally illegal visa. He says, "Maybe they will let you into Switzerland." I have this man's card, and that man wrote on the back of that card in German, "People like you will never go under." Some day if you, if I can show you this card...

SB: I would like to see it.

HT: Written, yeah, I save these things.

SB: Yes.

HT: I have many things from Europe.

SB: Yes.

HT: He saved our lives. He gave my father a totally illegal visa. So my father-- we packed up. We left everything behind. All our furniture, everything. We packed up two or three suitcases, went on the train, and we went to the border in 1939, on the Italian border, in Rakek, Yugoslavia. And there through channels, there was a fellow, a Serb-- I forget his name-- who, for money took people across the Italian border. He knew the certain times, certain crossing guards, and he took this family across the border. Now, I'll explain to you what the family consisted of. It was my parents, my two sisters, myself, my uncle, a very sick grandfather who was in his eighties, and a woman who took care of him because he had a urinary problem-- he had to be catheterized all the time, my father's partner by the name of Eugene Solomon [phonetic], his wife, and his son. We all ended up on the border of Rakek in Yugoslavia. We didn't want to travel as a family into Italy, so my father and myself, my uncle, and I don't remember, I think my grandfather and that woman, that nurse, we split up and left my mother in, with the other part. Because we didn't, if things go wrong, we didn't want to fall into the-- you know, one never knows.

SB: You didn't want to fall into...

HT: We didn't, well, we never knew that we could get across the border. Maybe they wouldn't let us. Maybe they would push us on the German border. Okay?

SB: How old were you by now?

HT: Well, I was born...

SB: This is '39. You were born in '21...

HT: '21. Well, I was born late, you can figure '22, so I was about 16, 17 years old. Okay? We ended up in Milano, and we waited for the rest of the group to come. And how it, that was customary in Europe when you go to any hotel, you have to present your passport. The Italians were very nice. They came after three to four days, and they said to us, "I don't care where you go. We are not gonna harass you. But, I want you to leave within five days." So then, we got the group together again.

SB: You found your...

HT: Well...

SB: The rest of your family?

HT: The family, we all made it across the border from Yugoslavia into...

SB: Right.

HT: Into Italy. And we were there in Milano, I still remember, and Milano was a fabulous city in, you know, for us. We couldn't speak Italian, but, in any case, we, so in order to get-- so my father got in contact with this same man from Yugoslavia. I think his name is Goykovitch [phonetic] or something, some Serbian name. He came back into Milano, and my father said, "Let's try and use that visa that we have." I told you, from this Consul...

SB: Right, the Swiss...

HT: In Belgrade.

SB: Right.

HT: Which was totally illegal.

SB: Right, oh...

HT: In fact all...

SB: In order to get across the border you didn't have to use that visa?

HT: We didn't, no, the Swiss visa, no, no.

SB: You, what did you do, sneak over the border?

HT: We sneaked over the border. The crossing guards where this man, the, he...

SB: How did you learn to sneak though? I mean how did they...

HT: Well he, we went in a, we were in a car. And he had friends in that, on the border.

SB: Who had friends?

HT: This driver.

SB: Okay.

HT: This man who owned the car. He did, that was his business. That was his

business. Okay, and the Italians were not, you know, they were not gunning for the Jews.

SB: Right.

HT: Yeah, so, there were certain guards at certain times at night or whenever...

SB: And you could do it.

HT: And we stopped at the border and they let us go across [unclear].

SB: Right.

HT: So we ended up in Milano. In Milano my father summoned that guy back from, all the way from Yugoslavia, that driver. And we split up again. No, I don't think, we didn't split up this time. This time we were all together in that one car, including my grandfather, yes. I remember distinctly because when we came on the Italian border to go into Switzerland, I still remember, they stripped us down completely I mean they search you from head to foot. And I still remember my old grandfather, who didn't understand the situation too well anymore. He says, "Well, they want to find out whether I am healthy or not." So, he says that. So, we got to this...

SB: Now who was this who was doing this? The Italians?

HT: The, no, no.

SB: No?

HT: The Italians stripped us. We came, well, there are like two borders. The Italian border, and then you go a few hundred feet, and then come, so it's like you have in Canada, you know.

SB: Right.

HT: Two borders.

SB: Okay.

HT: So we came across to the Swiss, and I still remember. My father got out of the car. And he, the Swiss guy said, "Where are you going with this?" The car was loaded. We were sitting on each other's lap. So my father said to the guy, "We're going to America." And this-

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

HT: Now to go back. It was...

SB: Yes.

HT: As I said, it was the luckiest break in our lifetime, because if it hadn't been for that Swiss Consul in Belgrade, and that Swiss guard who let us through, I don't believe we would be here today. In all truthfulness. We wouldn't be here today. So, as I said to you in the beginning, are you a survivor or aren't you a survivor? We were not in a camp. We were not, but, the times were sometimes very hazardous even for us, even though we were not in a camp.

SB: That's right.

HT: And we lost, I mean in Belgrade we lost everything.

SB: You lost everything.

HT: We lost everything.

SB: That's right.

HT: We left the house, completely furnished. We just walked out of there one night and climbed on the train and went to Slovenia, to the Italian and Yugoslavian border. Didn't tell anybody, because had they known....

SB: Right.

HT: I don't know if they would have possibly, the Yugoslavs, you know, they grabbed these people and stuck them in a under guard and turned them all over to the Germans on the Austrian border.

SB: Do you remember having a sense of the urgency of it?

HT: Oh yeah! Oh yes! Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I mean, I did all the financial transaction in Belgrade. Let me explain to you how this was done. When we got into trouble, to send money out of the country is an impossibility. There are certain countries today where you cannot free a transfer of finances or a transfer. What we did is the following thing: my father and I, we went into town and bought up dollar bills, dollar checks, that people, for any amount of money. It didn't matter any more. I remember that the currency in 1939 was about 50 *dinars* to the dollar. I think towards the end we paid 150 and 200 for, you know, for the dollar. It didn't matter. We took those checks and those dollar bills, we took them and glued them, loosely, into magazines, rolled the magazines together with the paper bands, and sent them fourth class mail to Switzerland. We had family in Switzerland. Not one, not one magazine was missing. We got all the money. Whatever little money we got out. If they had caught you doing this, the penalty for doing this in Europe, I cannot, I...

SB: No.

HT: And I was the youngest kid, and I went to the post office all the time to mail those packages. Of course we did not mail one magazine. We mailed two or three.

SB: Right.

HT: Some of them had money in it. Some didn't have any. Other people bought stamps in those days and mailed them out the same way. It's the only way you could get money out. If they caught you going across the border with money, they would have arrested you immediately. I mean you have the same thing today, probably in Russia or I think in Hungary or wherever you're going.

SB: Were you aware of any resistance groups and any connection...

HT: Not in…

SB: Nothing.

HT: There was no war. I mean, in '39 there was no resistance.

SB: Right.

HT: The Germans didn't move into Belgrade till 1941. There was no, in fact, the war started officially in September, 1939, and the Yugoslavs were training. I remember the armies were training. They had all kinds of air raid precautions. But their army was so inferior, and so ill equipped. Some of them, and they, they were, still had mules that carried submachine, I mean machine guns. And I saw on the train because we lived in the suburbs and there were wide open spaces. And they were no match for anyone, any modern army, you know, the huge fighter planes that they had. The airport in Zemun that was, it was just, but they were training, they were preparing also. I mean sure they, the government had a certain feeling that something was going on. I'm pretty sure [unclear]. So, once we were in Switzerland of course, I mean, it was a different life. There is no--, you know, and we did get our visa in Zurich. Our family in the United States they sent us, send the affidavit into Switzerland. And from there on in there was no, you know, we were...

SB: How long were you in Switzerland?

HT: We were in Switzerland about three to four months, to wait for our papers.

SB: So it was still '39 when you got to...

HT: It was '39, yes.

SB: The United States.

HT: Yeah. We came here, I came to Philadelphia, in May. I think we arrived in either March or April in 1939 we came to the United States. So much more I cannot tell you.

SB: What was it like for you once you got here, hearing what was going on in Germany?

HT: Well, here again, we tried, and we worked through certain agencies to get the relatives out of Germany. I mean I know our father took many trips to New York to HIAS in those days and the...

SB: To New York did you...

HT: To New York.

SB: Yeah.

HT: To the Hebrew shelter[3]. And we worked with the Council of Jewish Women, I remember, to get, I didn't do that much because personally, but I know the family did as much as they could. And they were, as I said we had a huge family from my mother's side. My great grandmother had 13 children. So you can imagine on my father's side this huge family.

SB: Yeah, right.

HT: And my...

SB: Right.

HT: Yeah, I told you my on my mother's side there were nine children from the first wife and two from the second. He had 11 children.

SB: Yeah.

HT: So there were, we have family all over the world. Literally all over the world. I mean, at one time we have still a great many people in Australia. We have some in New Zealand. We had some in South America in Chile, where they since left, you know since that problem and so. But we literally had people, in Cuba. We had family in Spanish Morocco. I mean it's, emigrated to England. So, this family has...

SB: They're all over the world.

HT: Is spread all over the world.

SB: Right, right. Most of them got out early?

HT: No, my uncle fled, that's a story in itself. I had, my mother's brother, Uncle Isidore, his name is Isidore Epstein. He lived in Aschaffenburg. He was a bachelor, maybe the only person in our family that had any money. He was, he had a clothing factory, men's clothing. And he built himself a house in 1938 in Germany. When the house was finished, the *Gauleiter* of Aschaffenburg said, "Mr. Epstein, this is a nice house," he says, "I'm going to move in it." Okay? And, he escaped, okay? He ended up in England. They pushed him on the French border and he ended up in England, bone poor, without any money. And he, the Jewish agencies or whoever was there, they took care of him and got him a job and they kept him busy during the war. And he ended up in Chicago finally, I would say, after the war. And he married in Chicago. He was an older person then already. So, that's one case. Others didn't get out at all. The ones that did get out, we did quite well in the United States. We were quite satisfied.

SB: The ones who didn't get out, were there in your generation, in other words, were they your first cousins...

HT: Oh yes. Oh yes.

SB: Who didn't get out?

HT: My uncles and aunts and first cousins, yes. I mean I knew, some of them I knew. Some of them I didn't know. I mean my cousins Kerry and Fritz I knew. The other, from my, the child of Alexa, I didn't know, because that child was born after '33,

[3]Through HIAS, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

because we were out of Germany. So I didn't know. But she was younger. She was from the second wife of my grandfather. Of course I knew my Aunt Lena. I knew my Aunt Emma. I knew them. They were the older sisters of my...

SB: How do you feel this shaped your life here, or influenced it...

HT: Well...

SB: …would you say?

HT: It is, once you are a person who is sort of persecuted, you always, you never really overcome it. You don't have to be really in a camp. I cannot compare myself to those who were in concentration camp. But, it never leaves you. It never leaves you. When you became sort of a person in second grade and you were pushed around and haunted. I know my wife, who came from a similar background, it will stay with you for the rest of your life. There's no question about it.

SB: Yeah, I'm sure.

HT: You cannot overcome it.

SB: Right.

HT: You have a certain inferiority complex, somehow, somewhere, which, it does haunt you. It does haunt you, especially when you're a child and only once you're separated and they say, "You're a God damned Jew and you cannot do this 'cause," you cannot really wipe this out, ever. As long as you're in the United States and you're free and all, it will never really, seriously, I mean it, it will never...

SB: I believe you.

HT: It will never, that's why, you know, to go back in my history, in 1942 I was drafted, okay? I spent from 1942 to 1946 in the United States Army. I did go back to Germany. I pushed as hard as I could not to end up in the Pacific and I was lucky enough. I was with the military government in Berlin for a year. And we were...

SB: Because you wanted to be or...

HT: Yes, because I wanted to be, because I speak German. Okay? And so I was back in Germany. I was back, and I could show you letter after letter of people that we helped contact their relatives. In fact, I recently put this all in order. I have dozens of letters from all over the world, for people, for us to try, in Berlin, to try to contact their relatives who came back out of the concentration camps. We helped a great number of people, in the United States Army, who survived Berlin. You wouldn't be surpri-, you would be surprised, not many, but how many there were, who were hidden by the Germans in Berlin. I know of four families that I worked with that were hidden by the Germans.

SB: What was your role in...

HT: I was military intelligence.

SB: Military intelligence.

HT: A-1, A-1 military government in Berlin. We moved in to Berlin with the 82nd Airborne in 1945. And I was the...

SB: And you were there from ‘42 to ‘44 did you say?

HT: No, no, no.

SB: Oh, I’m sorry.

HT: I was there, I was in the army from ‘42 to ‘46.

SB: Right. And in...

HT: We moved in in ‘45...

SB: Okay.

HT: We moved into Berlin with the 82nd Airborne, and we were part of the A-1 Able military government group in Berlin. And we were with the Public Safety Division, sort of military intelligence. We tried to screen out Nazi elements. We tried to screen people to put them back in the civil service in Berlin, and they spoke German. We were also the group who went down to the Reich Chancellery and got all the questionnaires out of the bunkers there, our group. And we dried them and we cleaned them and we alphabetized them. And, to have sort of a counter check against the questionnaires that the Germans filled out, once we you know, we got there. What they call a German *Fragebogen*, you know. And many times we confronted some of these people that never had any Nazi affiliation. We says, “Hey, how come you filled out in 1939 and ‘42? Is this your signature?” And you should have seen how some of these people -- that’s what we did. We were there with Colonel Howley, who later on became General Howley[4]. And he was our commanding officer. In fact, his name is mentioned in his book, [unclear] *Armageddon*. His name is in there.

SB: Oh yeah? Mmm hmm. So from ‘42 to ‘45 where were you in...

HT: I was with the, in the Air Force.

SB: In the Air Force.

HT: The Air Force. In the United States.

SB: In the United States.

HT: Yes, yes, that’s right.

SB: But you managed to get to Germany in ‘45.

HT: Well, I, yeah, we, there was a camp during the war by the name of Camp Ritchie in Maryland, which was a military intelligence training center. And many of foreign speaking personnel, not only Jews, German Jews, there were Russians there, we went through a partial training program. And, because the war was coming to an end. It was already ‘45 and they sent us to Europe, then to Germany. We were interpreters and this kind of stuff. So that’s what we did.

SB: Let me ask you...

HT: Yeah?

SB: Is there anything else that you want to say...

HT: Well...

[4]Frank L. Howley, U. S. Army Brigadier General

SB: To, this, you're a part of history when you do this. And...

HT: All I can say, you know, I work a little bit with Allied Jewish Appeal, and I work a little bit with American-born Jews who can never believe that anything like this could happen to the Jews of the United States. I hope it will never happen, of course. But the indications are there that giving history a chance like we've seen Jewish history over the many, many hundreds and thousands of years, that sooner or later it seems to me, and it always seems to me like in those countries where the Jews had become the most assimilated, something happens. In Spain, in Germany, and that is what I tell my children. And it is very difficult sometimes to be a Jew first and an American second. And unfortunately we have to look at it that way. We have to look at it that way, going back to the history that we've gone through. Because anything else, I think we're just kidding ourselves. When you look at the vote in the United Sta-, Nations, they say they are not antisemitic, they are just politically against, anti-Israel. I don't believe it. Basically, people who vote against, anti-Israel, are basically antisemitic, anti-Jewish. And if you look at it truly and realistically, I think you will agree that that's, that's the world is. And I sometimes wonder. We have today a program by which we bring foreign people into this country, in the United States. There are 20,000 Cubans coming into this country, many from, and I have no objection to that. I mean, that's how we came to this country. Sometimes I talk to my wife, I said, "Supposing in Chile or somewhere there was 10,000 Jews that had to get out because, and they come here on a boat, a ship. Would they let them in? Would they let them in?" And that's my, that is my gripe, that because between Australia and Canada and the United States, what would have been a 200, 500, half a million Jews? There were some friends of mine that they are here today. In fact I saw them today. They were on some ships that were pushed back to Europe, 5-, 600 souls, that would not be allowed to land. They wouldn't even give them food. You know the stories. I don't have to tell it.

SB: Were you aware of that as it was happening here?

HT: Oh yeah. We were aware. My wife came with a group which, she was, there was 1,000 refugees that came to Oswego NY. If you read the book, *Haven*, she is in that book. One thousand refugees came here officially sanctioned by the government, Roosevelt, and so on. And if it hadn't been for, what was the Secretary's, Ickes? And a couple other people, they wouldn't even let those, you know. And they were supposed, they were destined to be rehabilitated, you know. It took an act of Congress to finally in 1946 to shove them into Canada and bring them here. One thousand souls! They were not ev-, and out of this group, if you could see the value of [unclear]. The United States could only gain by this because out of this group-- and I'm not exaggerating -- there is a fellow by the name of Margulis, who is maybe the highest authority, biggest authority in radiation today. He treated the Shah of Iran. I have a close relative who is today a top notch engineer for General Dynamics. There are many doctors and scientists in this group, out of this thousand. Many, many of them, I would say 50 percent of them, are

college educated and have contributed greatly to this country. And there were many, many thousands that could have done the same thing.

SB: Mmm hmm.

HT: So that is, that's my only, and I tell my children to be on the lookout. I can't, you know, we don't live forever. It hurts me when I see today the same errors that people don't learn from other people and from history, that they say, they are the same way as the Jews were in Germany. "We are Germans first and Jews is our religion." And you have the same thing here. And it just does not work. It doesn't work. Not if you want to become Jewish and remain Jewish.

SB: Is that..

HT: And it...

SB: Is that why you agreed to tell your story here?

HT: To a certain degree, yes. And, I mean, my story is not, I cannot, again, I cannot compare myself to the survivor of a concentration camp.

SB: Right.

HT: My grandmother survived three years in Theresienstadt. I have documentation of Theresienstadt. She gave me some money that is very rare, some Theresienstadt money which they had there, and other stories that I have. And, I think as a family, not even individual, we know what it was like to, we know. I saw my grandmother when I was in Stuttgart in 1945 through the, it was amazing how news traveled how people survived. And somebody told me that my grandmother has come back from Theresienstadt. And I went back to Stuttgart. She had just been there maybe, she must have been there a month. And I also met some other people that I remembered from my childhood, who came back from various places, just unbelievable. You know. So we know. We know the stories. You don't have to, again I cannot compare myself to the people who were in the concentration camps. I mean, we were in Germany as I told you before. We had a whole group in Wiesbaden that we fed out of concentration camps. I have, I could show you pictures and letters that they wrote to me after they were established in Israel. I was with the Jewish Brigade in Belgium and I had some contact with those during the war. So I, but I didn't see or hear a lot. We knew what was going on.

SB: Yeah.

HT: So...

SB: Okay. I wanted to thank you...

HT: What more can I tell you?

SB: …very much...

HT: …I hope...

SB: …for doing this.

HT: Yeah, I hope that it will be helpful...

SB: And that there will...

HT: To whoever records this.

SB: It will be. It's Gratz, Gratz College is recording this.

HT: Fine. I appreciate the...

SB: Thank you.

HT: …opportunity. And maybe my children will hear the tape. If we have the tape it will be good for them. By the way, I want to say one thing. Eight years ago I took one of my sons, and we went on a roots trip to Germany where my grandfathers lived. We went through my grandfather's house. We inspected the apartment where we lived in Tübingen. We went to the Jewish cemeteries where my grandmother is buried in Germany, and in Stuttgart. And I think at least one of my sons knows today where his family lived, and what it was like. Okay. Thank you very much.

[Tape one, side two ended. Interview ended.]