

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Cappel, Francis

Date of interview: 5/10/2000

Summary: Francis Cappel (Franz Erwin Cappel) was born on June 2, 1916 in Cologne, Germany to Dr. Paul H. and Meta Cappel (nee Braunschweig). He grew up in an apartment flat near a synagogue in a mixed (Jewish and non-Jewish) neighborhood. For elementary school, he went to a very strict, mostly Jewish school. In his later years, he attended high school, where he was a part of minority of about 15% Jews (in the school itself - in Cologne, Jews only comprised about 4% of the population of 700,000 people). Francis' father, Paul, was one of the city's top lawyers, previously a W.W. I soldier and after he immigrated to the U.S., he became a bookkeeper. Francis' mother (somewhat unsure of her name) was a good lady, mainly a housewife, but she was very strict when it came to raising her son. He also has a sister named Ruth (stepsister I believe, but he kept mentioning her as his "sister") who was also born in Cologne.

He experienced early forms of anti-Semitism. In April 1933, Nazis got a group of hooligans in the court where they disrupted proceedings. His father stepped out with his files, the Nazis ambushed him because he was a Jewish lawyer, and they beat him up badly. The SA (Brownshirts) were watching over their house, on their lawn, "Nothing happened here," they claimed. After the Nazi boycott of the Jewish business, they were defaced signs everywhere. Francis cleaned up the mess.

Later that year, October 13, 1933, Francis was kicked out of his house at the age of 16 and moved to France to work for his uncle's textile manufacturing business. He worked for a Jewish family in a loom company, and he made polo shirts out of experimentation one day. Francis Cappel invented the polo shirt and he made a good deal of money off of that. Throughout France, he was mistaken for being a French-speaking Swiss man. He concealed his Jewish origins as best he could, always carrying French or English newspapers with him. These traits got him to meet a friend who was so impressed with his French speaking skills, that he was brought to the German Reich secret headquarters where he got to see rare German stamps (he was an avid stamp collector).

In 1939, he moved to England and served as a corporal in the British Army up until April 1946. Francis got his father out of Dachau by obtaining transit visas to Britain for him and his mom. So he was able to save his father's life. Francis was also able to cross borders most of the time by just walking across, so no one used to check his passport, which had the "J" in it. At one point, he was in a car, and he got shot at by Nazis, but he escaped and was fine. On March 26, 1944, he was married to his wife Margo. After Francis' time in the army, he went back to London to his wife, and worked on getting his wife, kids, and parents to the United States. He came to San Francisco with only \$10.25 in his pocket. He has been retired since 1981.

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