

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Cohn, Hans

Date of interview: 8/11/1999

Summary: Cantor Hans Cohn was born in Berlin, Germany on May 31, 1926. He was an only child. His parents are not named on the tape. His father was born in Posen in 1877. His mother, also not named, was born in Upper Silesia, Germany. Father was a small businessman. He had a women's apparel store. Mother also worked in the business. In 1929 the recession hurt business. Hans started in public school in 1932. There were about 30 kids in his class, about 15% Jewish. After the Nuremberg laws, Jews were not allowed to go to public school and were transferred to a Jewish school. Hans was 9 years old. He understood that he was Jewish and he had to. He remembers that the Jews were persecuted, segregated and discriminated against. They couldn't keep kosher at home because of the slaughter laws. He remembers anti-Jewish propaganda from the radio and being called a dirty Jew at school. He knew he wasn't wanted and different. Things were whispered about at home. The Jews were blamed for the economic situation and unemployment.

Hans's personal experience during these times included getting into fights, being called names, being segregated from classmates in gymnastics, had to listen to lessons where they talked about races and Jews being inferior. He felt left out in 1934-1935 because he couldn't participate in the Hitler Youth program. They had uniforms, wore an insignia and had a dagger at their sides. Hans attended 1 or 2 Olympic games in 1936. Hitler's persecution subsided a bit. It would not have gone over well in the press. Signs forbidding Jews were taken down during this time but went right back up again when the games were over. Hans's family listened to Hitler's speeches on the radio. They were concerned but could not imagine the 'final solution'. The event that made them want to leave was Kristallnacht, November 9, 1939. When Hans went to school that day at the beautiful new synagogue built in 1932 he saw that it was completely in flames. The windows of the Jewish stores were smashed and desecrated.

His father registered for a U.S. visa under the Polish quota. It was a bad quota to be on because it had so many Jews. There was a 10-year wait. There was only one place in the world that you didn't need a visa and that was Shanghai. Hans describes his journey.

When they got to Shanghai, Hans was 12 years old. They were loaded on to transport trucks like cargo, taken to register and then to a camp for a week. His parents sold some of their things and they were able to get a small apartment. They were there for 10 days when Hans came down with Scarlet Fever. People with the disease were quarantined and nobody died. They basically had one meal a day. A committee of wealthier Jews subsidized those who didn't have money.

Hans's parents opened a restaurant. In Berlin during hard times his mother cooked for people who came for lunch at their house. His mother came down

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with dysentery and died at the age of 53. After his mother died, his father put Hans in the kitchen of the restaurant and that is where he learned to cook. Once his father closed the restaurant, Hans worked in other restaurants and sold bread at night for a bakery. He was hungry and that was the way he kept himself fed. He dropped out of school and never finished high school.

Most Jews in Shanghai, who died, died of communicable diseases or malnutrition. The Germans did not know how to treat them. Later, when Hans's father got dysentery, Hans took him to a Chinese hospital. They treated him with rice water. He became well.

In 1942 the Japanese government said that all stateless Germans had to go into the Shanghai ghetto of Hongkew. Once they left Germany all of them were stateless. Many were living in the Hongkew ghetto anyways. In the ghetto they had a symphony orchestra, education and a theater.

Temporary passes were issued to work outside the ghetto, these were granted arbitrarily. A Japanese officer named Ghoya, who called himself the "King of the Jews", sadistically controlled passes required to leave the ghetto. Hans's father had one of these passes. They had radios. They got news from Russia. They didn't know about the extermination camps.

In the spring of 1945 there were air raids and explosions over the ghetto. The Japanese had a radio station and warehouse in the ghetto on purpose, in order that the Americans wouldn't bomb it. But on July 17th, it was bombed by mistake. About 300 Jews were injured and about 30 died. The building Hans was in was partially destroyed. The Jews welcomed the Americans.

In 1946, Hans was 19 years old and impatient to get out. He and his father were both stuck on long quota lists. His German, his father's Polish. He snuck onto a ship to Hong Kong. From there he stowed aboard a ship to Australia. He was caught when they counted 51 refugees in the cafeteria instead of 50. Up until then he was even leading the Friday night services. He tells his story about making his way as an illegal in Australia trying to get to America. He supported himself by working in restaurants, mainly as a cook and singing in the synagogue choir when he had the opportunity.

Eventually with the help of a cousin of his father's who gave him an affidavit and the Jewish Welfare Board he made it to America where he continued to work in restaurants and took singing lessons. In 1948 America started having trouble with the Russians and he had to register for the draft. He was drafted and sent to Fort Ord, CA for basic training. He went to the chaplain and told him that he could sing, has a Jewish education and does he need an assistant? He became the Chaplain's assistant. He got his drivers license and took Jewish soldiers to Salinas for services. He met his wife, Eva, in Salinas.

After he left the service he opened up his own restaurant – Le Coq d'Or - in Carmel, but wasn't happy. He had been volunteering as a cantor at Temple Beth Sholom in San Francisco on the High Holidays. He decided to go to New York and auditioned and was accepted to Hebrew Union College. He got a BA in music and a Cantorial Diploma. He spent 5 years in New York. During his school years he worked as well. In the summers he worked as a singing waiter in the Borsht Belt. Tips were about \$200 a week. He also worked as a Headwaiter at

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the UN, substitute Cantor and taught Hebrew.

His father went to England because he couldn't immediately come to the United States due to the quota system. Hans sent him money and supported him. In 1952 he came to America.

About 1992 Hans was diagnosed with cancer. He had a lesion on his tongue. Half his tongue was removed but he still sang and taught. Two years later he had a recurrence. His jawbone was removed and replaced with a titanium jawbone. He had to learn to speak and sing again. He now has a speech defect but never wanted to give up.

His religion has given him faith that there is much good in life. He wants to have a positive attitude, a sense of humor and to be happy. He has accepted life the way it is and is thankful to be here. While his life in Shanghai was difficult he feels that he is lucky, for so many suffered worse fates. He thinks that something akin to the holocaust can happen again even in America if people are hungry, out of work and desperate.