

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Deutsch, Henry

Date of interview: 11/21/1991

Summary: Henry Deutsch was born in Vienna, Austria on May 28, 1919 under the name Heinrich Yuri Deutsch. He lived in a wealthy family with a mother and three brothers—Arthur, Vera, and Herbert. His father was an heir to a textile business that had been passed on in his family for several generations. Henry took responsibility for the business when his father died, long before Hitler came into power. His mother, Vilma, was an owner of a club that featured the card game of bridge, since his mother was a very good bridge player. Unlike his grandparents on his mother's side, Henry and his family were secular Jews—they practiced the Jewish faith, but were not too religiously inclined. Henry did not even learn to speak Yiddish until he escaped to Panama. Above all else, Henry and his family were Austrians, proud Austrians.

Mr. Deutsch was at first very emotional towards speaking about the Holocaust. He made it clear, nonetheless, that the reason why he is doing this interview was to primarily spread the knowledge of a tragedy that would hopefully never happen again. He began his story talking about his childhood experiences and the presence of anti-Semitism in them. As a boy, Henry was a boy scout. Although the club was composed 90% of Jews, he was still ridiculed on the basis of his origin by the gentile scouts, as they jokingly labeled him "The Reserved Moses." In school, the professor would mock the Yiddish language and picked on him personally. This was as a result of a gentile classmate of Henry's pointing him out as a Jew in front of the whole class. In spite of the presence of anti-Semitism, Henry commented that he did have gentile friends, but it was still his Jewish friends who were closer to him.

Henry made the distinction between patriotism and nationalism. He said that patriotism was a good thing—it expressed a person's pride in living in a country. Nationalism, on the other hand, was dangerous. It goes beyond patriotism and taps the aspects of race and the need for exclusivity—that is, people become too aggressive, too consumed in their pride that rationality takes the back seat. Henry further commented that he was a patriot, and not a nationalist; and because of his patriotism, he had a strong desire for his country to remain independent. This desire fueled him to partake in several violent protests in support of Austria's freedom from the Nazi regime. He said that in such protests, the passion is so strong that one loses his sense of self and becomes one with the other protesters. Together, they formed not merely a group of people, but a loud message. Despite his efforts to keep his country independent, Hitler eventually assumed control of Austria. It was in March of 1938 that Henry finally dreaded for his life, feeling helpless and not knowing where to go or what to do. Anti-Semitism became more open, more accepted, and more dominant in Vienna. For instance, it was considered normal for Jews to be beaten up in public; his cousin, for instance, was forced to clean the shoes of

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a Nazi soldier. He describes one instance when he was at a friend's house, inside a second-story apartment, when Hitler was having his parade right outside. Peeking through his window, he saw Hitler pass by, and he wanted to throw a flowerpot in hopes of hitting Hitler's head and knocking him unconscious, maybe for dead. However, he did not have any flowerpots at hand, and even if he did, it might have made things worse for him.

There was one instance when Henry, his brothers, and his uncle were having dinner at his house. Two SS guards knocked on the door and made their way in. They ransacked the house, breaking and turning furniture over. Henry's brother took their mother's jewelry from a secret hiding spot and handed them to the Nazi troops. It was only then, that the Nazis left Henry's home.

Henry decided he wanted to escape. He and his mother attempted to go to Hungary, but were rejected. The same went for their attempts to go to the United States and Uruguay. Henry and his mother finally decided to book a ticket to a transport ship called the *Vegillio* (?), which they were able to get on, thanks to a friend's help in acquiring visas for them. During this point, his two siblings, Arthur and Vera, had already been captured and sent to concentration camps. The *Vegillio* headed for Panama, and he was lucky to have had his papers fixed that he was able to stay there. Other Jews were rejected and returned. Henry, being more fortunate than most Jews, was able to stay in Panama, get a job, and make a decent living—at least more decent than what many Jews were facing during that time. Henry's mother was able to start a restaurant there. He described the Panamanians as very kind and hospitable. Henry eventually learned to speak Spanish, and befriended several locals. When the war ended, he made his way to Chicago, where he met up with his surviving brother, Arthur, and finally went to California.