

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Barasch, Werner

Date of interview: 11/14/2001

Summary: Werner Barasch was born into a wealthy Jewish family in May of 1919 in Breslau, Germany. His businessman father, Arthur, had founded the first mass merchandising firm in Eastern Germany and, although he lost money and a few of his stores after World War I, the Barasch family still managed to do very well. When Werner was only two years old, the family moved to Berlin, where they lived in a beautiful house and Werner was afforded all the best chances at an education. Arthur always insisted on a top academic performance from his son and could be quite the disciplinarian in that respect. Werner's education extended beyond the traditional schoolroom -- not only did his mother spend time in Switzerland to find him a French nanny, but Werner also benefited from the kind of schooling provided by the Jewish boy scout organization, which he said was important for his "physical and emotional development." Werner remembered celebrating Jewish holidays with his extended family and occasionally attending synagogue, but, on the whole, he said that his family was far from religious. He instead called his father, "liberal", "free thinking" and very German.

A year after Hitler came to power in 1933, Werner went to Italy in order to continue his education (his elder sister, Elsie, had gone to school in England two years prior). At his school in Italy, Werner spent one semester of each year at a campus in the Alps and the other semester at a campus by the Mediterranean Sea. Werner recalled having a wonderful time in Italy with his classmates and Italian host family. Right after he graduated, in 1938, however, Hitler came into Italy and on his command, Italian soldiers began arresting Jews. Because his German passport was still valid (it was not yet stamped with a "J"), Werner managed to get aboard a train for Switzerland. At this point, his mother and sister were already in the United States, but his father was still living in Berlin.

When Werner arrived in Switzerland, the Swiss stamped his passport with a "J" and told him he had to leave the country. Eventually, he did just that and went to Paris in 1939, just two months before the war broke out. In Paris, Werner passed a Teacher's Certificate course. Once the war began, the French began checking people for German papers. To avoid being labeled as an enemy, Werner fled on a train out of Paris. He was arrested and sent to Camp Cor du Ruchard for six months. This camp was liquidated once the Germans entered Paris and everyone in the camp (prisoners and guards alike) fled together to the south of France. Werner went to Marseille in the hopes of getting a visa, but he was rounded up by the Germans, who confiscated his passport and sold it.

The Germans took Werner to Les Milles, where they were planning on holding Jews until they could be transferred to Gurs. When Werner heard that the camp

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was being sent to Gurs, he decided he had to escape, so he climbed over a wall while the guards were sleeping. Once outside of the camp's walls, Werner bought a bike and crossed the border into Switzerland. He was re-arrested in Geneva and extradited to France. The French officials who received him in France wanted to return him to the camp from which he escaped, but Werner refused to tell them which camp he had come from. Eventually, the officers decided to send him to Argeles, a camp in the South of France near the Pyrenees Mountains. Werner managed to escape from Argeles and climb over the Pyrenees into Spain, where he was arrested again. The Spanish sent him to prison for 100 days before placing him in Camp Miranda.

Werner spent two years in Camp Miranda. He described it as a very strict place, imprisoning Jews, stranded Allied soldiers, Belgians, and Spanish Republicans from the Civil War. Werner worked many jobs in Miranda, eventually in the censorship office, where he was able to feed information to the British.

Around 1943, when Franco changed his alliances in the war, Werner was released from Miranda on parole. While working in an office organizing papers for prisoners, Werner tried to get his visa for the United States. He was refused many times because his story was not credible and he ended up staying in Spain for two years after his release from Miranda. Finally, Werner was able to secure his visa and sail from Lisbon to the United States in 1945. He landed in Philadelphia on VE day, and went to stay with his mother. His sister was living in California (she became a psychiatrist). The family discovered that Arthur had been killed in Sachsenhausen in 1945.

Werner went to UC Berkeley to get his BA in chemistry and then received his MA from MIT and his PhD from Colorado University. After he finished school, he moved to California where he worked as a chemist (primarily in research), while his mother got a teaching job. Werner never married, but remained close to his mother until her death at the age of 92.

Werner credits his survival throughout the war to his attitude of never giving up and not accepting being a victim. He also emphasizes his lack of emotional attachment to his experiences (he was able to approach situations rationally instead of emotionally) and his fluency in German, English, Italian, French and Spanish. His father's demand that he do his best also guided him throughout the war years.

Werner wrote a book based upon his experiences in all of the different countries, camps and prisons, and the interview ends with photographs from his book.