

OK, Mr. Hankin, before we go further would you please say the full names of your parents, your uncle, your brother and sister?

My father's name was Hersh Hankin. My mother's name was Charlotta Hankin nee Rothschild. From the poor was Rothschilds, not the rich ones. My brother's name was Alfred and my sister's name, Vera. My brother and my sister live in America, both married.

I would like to know how many times a day did you eat in Dachau, and what did you eat?

As far as I recollect, I think we had coffee in the morning with a piece of bread. In the afternoon we had something, I don't know what. And at night, at 6 o'clock, we had something else. Very little.

What was it? Do you remember?

Can't remember a thing. I know coffee and bread. That's all I remember. And soup.

Do you remember feeling hungry? Can't remember. I have no idea. Such a long time ago.

During your six weeks, did you lose weight?

I looked very skinny. I always, even in England during the war, I looked skinny. You know the fleshpots of America got me big and fat.

[LAUGHING]

Yeah.

Let's see, you said when you got into Dachau you realized that the bunks had been prepared in advance. What was it that made you understand that the bunks had been prepared in advance and made you understand that it had been prepared for a roundup of Jewish prisoners? What is it that made you understand that?

Well, first of all the inmates explained it to us. They said something big is going to happen. We knew, but we couldn't tell what's going to happen, why we put the bunks up. Now we know why we did, because you coming in so many Jews. And some of these guys came from the hometown where we lived. They knew my father was very well-known in town. So that's why. So this burning of the synagogue was really systematically, methodically thought out by the Germans, by the SS or Hitler. And it had nothing to do with the anger of the German [SPEAKING GERMAN] they said. A bunch of malarkey. The liars. They've been lying all through history.

Did the prisoners tell you how many weeks or months before this point they had prepared the barracks?

Oh yeah. They said, we prepared for months ahead of time. We done that a long time ago we prepared. We just finished, they just finished by the time we came.

And the prisoners who were from your hometown and knew your father, what were they in prison for already?

Communist.

For political activism?

Yeah, political, all political. My father was the secretary of the soccer club, and so he was well known. Soccer in Germany was it. And they knew him, so then they met and said, your name is Hankin? Is that so-and-so? I said, yeah. And my father is right there. Oh, yeah. They knew it.

You mentioned that there were some suicides by people who were taken to die Dachau. You referred to a man drowning. Can you explain to me how someone drowned in Dachau? Was this something you witnessed or heard?

No, I heard, more or less. Yeah, I couldn't see. I didn't see it.

But it was certainly a suicide.

Oh yeah. There was two suicides I recollect the people mentioned it. One hung himself and one drowned. How he done it, I don't know. But you didn't witness either one.

No, no, no.

Let me ask you also. At the very beginning of the interview, before we started, you said you weren't going to hold back in the interview. And I wondered did you have one or two or three incidents in mind that you were referring to that you could tell us?

Oh, no. Not that way. I'm looking more at history, what happened to the Jews in Germany. Through the crusades and things like that, and the Inquisition in Spain. That's what I was referring to. Because all these years where anything bad happened they blamed the Jews. And that's a very sad situation. When the crusaders went to liberate Jerusalem, they killed thousands of Jews.

Petlura in Russia and the pogrom, killed thousands of Jews. Then Petlura came to I think it was in Paris. Schwartzbard a young man, caught him on the street and shot him, killed in. He got free. French let him go free. That was the biggest-- I was a kid when I read about it in '25 or so, 1925. That was a big thing the guy got free killing this guy. People don't know these things. The Russians now, there's no difference from the Russians was when the czar was on. They have now, they have palmyat or whatever they call it and they blame everything on the Jews now. Even the communism they blame on the Jews.

So you're released from Dachau and put on the train by the Jews who were waiting for you on your platform.

Yeah.

And you go back to your home and do you then prepare very quickly to leave Germany?

Oh yeah.

Describe what you do and how that happened.

I had to get all my clothes together, make sure I got the right clothes, and went to the doctor for an exam and they make sure everything was right. And on the 26th of January I left and came to England. Then the committee met me at the train in England.

How did you leave? Go through that.

I left on a train through Holland to Hook van Holland and from Hook van Holland we took little boat across the Channel. The worst storm in the Channel in years. Oh, I never forget that. That's the only time in life I really pray to the dear Lord let me die. Really. So bad you couldn't believe it. The little ship, oh, it was terrible. My head was only on the sink the whole crossing. So bad. It was terrible. Then we landed in Harwich. The committee got you and put you on a train to London. And they got you in London again and took you to a hostel until you got--

The name of the committee?

A Jewish committee. A joint committee from Americans. But mostly Zionist young men were there. And then the next day they took us to the train and we went to Surrey in England where the estate of the king was located. And we worked

in the garden for the king, a big estate. Oh my God, you have never seen anything like it. He had about 20 gardeners. who knows what.

The name of it? Do you remember? Do you remember the name?

The Earl of Athol. The Earl of Athol, A-T-H-O-L, a cousin of the king. He visited us. Yeah, oh yeah. One time he with to the committee. It was a joint from British and American. They supplied the money and everything. You know we had no money. But my father had a good friend in London who was well established. He sent me stamps and money. I was never short of anything because he was my brother's best friend.

And then after a year or so later, I went up to Manchester, as I mentioned, and worked in non-essential making raincoats for the army. I met my wife. I met her in June. We married next January. On the 26th of January we were married.

You had been in England about not yet a year when war broke out.

Yeah.

Do you recall what you were thinking and feeling when Germany invaded Poland in September of 1939? Yeah. I remember it. I said to the English people, it's the beginning of the end. Don't worry. We will win the war. With nothing. They had nothing. They weren't prepared. Do you know, people don't know that, they put the English Channel, they put hollow trees out there that looked like guns so the Germans saw there were big guns. They were hollowed trees out there. They weren't prepared.

As a matter of fact, they called us German Jews warmongers because we told the committee, we said, they're prepared for war. Where I live they're making airports under ground. They put the airplanes under the ground so you can't see them. I saw with my own eyes. You German Jews are warmongers. In the beginning, in January and February. And I couldn't talk English very well, unfortunately.

And then when the war broke out, we went on trial, a tribunal. I was declared a friendly alien because my father was Russian. So the judge said if I could, I would inter you. You know me, I always have an answer. I said, your honor you can't. I said to myself, you so-and-so. I could hardly speak English. Now explain stateless to an Englishman. That's the eighth wonder of the world. They don't understand what it means. We had what we called a Nansen passport. Ever heard about the Nansen passport? You know. So explain in broken English to judge in a hick town what a Nansen passport is with broken English. It's tough.

On the question of the hearing you had, were all aliens submitted to--

Oh yes, the same questions. Most of them were interned. My friends where we work together? Some to Canada, some to South Africa, some to Australia. They were shipped out. And some of them were interned on the Isle of Man. And then later on I heard some of the-- Now I talk to the people here in America I meet. They were in what they call the Pioneer Corps. They drove to tractors and the cranes and all that. They had a special corps for Jewish people in England. They didn't give them the English nationality.

Were some of them declared unfriendly?

Oh yeah. They were. my wife was non friendly. She had to leave. She lived in Liverpool. She was working in a household as a maid. And when the war broke out, she was German and she had to-- No, wait a minute. She had no J, and they got suspicious because all the German Jews had a J in their passport. And she didn't. And she spoke English fluently. And oh boy, the judge, he said she was a spy. Suspicious because why no J? She says, well, I left in '38. There was no J in the beginning of '38. And then they all shipped them to Manchester because that was in the Midlands. And she could get a job where I worked making raincoats for the army. That's how I met my wife.

So once you were declared a friendly alien--

I could travel but I had to have a permit.

And you could work, is that correct? There was no restriction.

The only restriction you had was that you had to get a permit in order to work.

And another thing is they didn't want to let you work in very high classified stuff. They want to be careful because they didn't know whether I was a German, Jew, or stateless. They didn't know. They were confused, utterly confused. And that day my wife came to Manchester, the Germans sunk the Prince of Wales and who knows, and the Hood got blown up. And my wife said, how can you win a war-- Don't worry. We will win the war. And I couldn't figure out how they're going to win this war. I couldn't figure it out. I still can't figure it out. But they done it, thank God.

In that first year when things looked very bleak for the Allies, Germany was winning everywhere, did you still have relatives in Germany or even Russia for that matter?

No, in Russia we don't know. The Russian relatives, this is a dark side that we don't know from nothing really. My mother had a sister and my uncle was left. That's all I know.

Were you in touch with them during at all?

After the war I sent some goods to my aunt.

They survived the war.

Yeah. I think my aunt died of a natural death. My uncle I have no idea what happened to him. Because I had a friend who was in the American Army and he came to the town we lived later on. And we played soccer together and he stayed with us over night. And he told me, I saw your aunt. His mother and my mother were distant cousins, so we had a little relationship we kept all these years. He knew our children when they were babies. And he lived here in Chicago. And we've been together all these contact.

But it was very tough to live in England and to have the fear over your head that Hitler will come in any day. That would be curtains for us. But the English survived thanks to the RAF, to these young men in the Air Force. People don't realize that these young men saved the world. They went up-- We made instruments for that aircraft. The Spitfire Hurricane was a very famous airplane, a single-engine airplane that time, the most famous. They went up sometimes and pressed the button to get the ammunition out to shoot, there was nothing in there left, so they rammed the German airplanes. They rammed them like a kamikaze pilot.

Then later the English, the air ministry invented a little instrument. We made the instrument, a clock. You wound it up, and when you press the button on the machine gun the clock went down. When the clock went to zero, you turned around and refilled. So it saved many lives and many airplanes. And it was highly skilled work. And my brother's friend was the manager of the company. And his uncle was the owner. And he called me-- I was in Manchester and he was down south-- he called me one day said we can use a man like you. Why didn't you come here. I take care. I got cleared, everything, no muss, no fuss. I started work.

And this was classified work.

Oh yes, highly classified work. Secret.

About what year would that be?

'42.

Fairly early. I started '42 down there. Yeah.

Do you recall when Germany attacked and overwhelmed Belgium, France, Norway?

Oh yeah, very well.

And were you living basically out in the city or not compelled to live in a special barracks?

No, no, no, no, no, no. They didn't. The English treated us very well. I mean, in that respect you have to give them credit. We got the same rations. We had two children, little children. They gave us rations like English. We had so much tea. You know English tea. I mean they leave their wife for a cup of tea, you know. And they had tea and my next-door neighbor, his brother was on the farm. We gave him tea, he gave us chicken and eggs and butter. So we lived. I mean, we didn't get fat. We were on a steady diet.

You were a young man, was there ever a possibility that you would be conscripted into the army or navy?

No. No way. They couldn't do it. There was no way they could do it. First, I was married, had children. And secondly I worked very, very highly classified work. So there was no way.

And you were not a British citizen.

No. I could have become a British citizen if I wanted to. But I left for America in 1947.

You were living in or near Manchester at the time of the Blitz.

Yeah. Oh yeah. We had raids on Manchester.

Did the German planes come over?

Yeah, we used to go at night to bed in clothes, have your clothes on and no shoes. Just went to bed without shoes and jackets. Just in case the alarm goes. But you know the English weren't prepared. They made air raid shelter. No roof on the air raid shelter. They weren't prepared.

Did you have to go to the shelter?

Oh yea. You must. It's a must. But see in England they have a cellar, so we went down the cellar. Sometimes they say you had to go to the air raid shelter. But the cellar was pretty safe. And mostly in Manchester was incendiary, firebombs. See you can't imagine if you haven't lived through-- A bomb blast is so funny, you wouldn't believe it. I saw a house completely destroyed except one wall. The wall had one mirror hanging and a bathtub. Now you figure out how a bomb can do. The mirror was still hanging on the wall and the bathtub. Everything else was obliterated. So you never know when it's going to hit. This is fate. So you know it's tough.

And were there any close calls?

Oh yeah, we had close. Yeah, very close calls in Manchester.

You and your family.

But later on then we went down south, Aylesbury. That's between London and Oxford. Right in the middle. Nobody knows Aylesbury. A little town nobody knows. A sleepy little town. Nobody knows what's going on here. But I found out after the war there was the biggest depot of gasoline under ground in Aylesbury, in the neighborhood. Aylesbury had a gasoline reserve. We didn't know. One bomb we would have gone like a rocket.

As the war in Germany, not in Germany but elsewhere, Hitler attack Russia.

Yeah I remember. I listen to that on the radio.

What were your feelings about that?

That's the end of Hitler.

Did you talk to--

My wife. I said, that's the end of him, Russia. We're going to get him.

What did your father think? Were you in touch with your father during that time?

Well--

He was a Russian citizen.

No, he wasn't Russian. Not that time because we could hardly-- It was tough to write letters because they were censored. Everything you wrote you had to be careful. You couldn't write politics or things like that because they screen every letter.

Were civilian letters censored?

Oh sure. Everything was censored. You couldn't. But I figured that was the end of Hitler because Napoleon went into Russia and he couldn't do it. Hitler couldn't do it either. Nobody can do it. You can't beat Russia in Russia. No way. He made the same mistake. He should have learned from Napoleon. Thank God we had Hitler for that, because his generals didn't want to go. He wanted to go.

Do you recall, as a Jew living in England, when you first learned about places like Auschwitz and Treblinka and those other places? Do you recall when you first learned about such things?

I cannot recall how I learned it, but we knew about it.

Before the war was over?

Yeah, we knew about it. But vaguely. We really didn't know for sure. After the war we found out when we met friends in America, especially in America. And saw the tattoos, the numbers. Then we really got to know.

So you don't feel that you really understood what was happening to the Jews of Europe during the war.

Well, we had a feeling. And some news trickled through that there were murders. My wife's father was in Auschwitz. He was in Theresienstadt first. Then with the last transport they sent him to Auschwitz and gassed him. We found that out through the Red Cross. But after the war you really got the real story.

Do you recall when the British forces, you might have heard this being in England, liberated Bergen-Belsen?

Yeah. We heard about it over the radio.

Did you ever see newsreels, like movies?

I think they showed. Yeah. But after the war things came out in the open more. During the war it was hard. They wouldn't say too much. They didn't want to rock the boat yet. But after the war, naturally then the stories came all over. Especially here in America. You had more in America than in England.

While living in England and during the war, were you in touch with other Jews who were also there in England? Did you associate with them?

Oh yeah, sure. Where we lived in Aylesbury was quite a few Jews worked for the company. The boss was a Jew and the manager was a Jew, and he had his brother-in-law working. There was quite a few. And a friend of mine who lived in the same house in Germany like me who worked in that factory. So there were quite a few.

The boss was a British citizen.

No, he was a Polish Jew, as a matter of fact. He was a Polish Jew who lived in Germany. He got his British citizenship now. I would have had my British citizenship if I wanted to. Oh sure. You had to be a homeowner and had four witnesses. That's all. I was a homeowner. I owned my home and had four people to vouch for me easy. I could have been British. But I figured I'd go to America, why go through all that process?

So you're employed by this company that is engaged in secret war work making these instruments--

For the Air Force.

--for the Air Force. Would you have heard anything then about bombing raids and activities, Air Corps activities?

Oh yeah, we knew that. That they gave out, because when they invaded the Normandy, the British and the Americans, the sky was black from airplanes. I've never seen so many airplanes coming over our house. And during the war we knew right away. Next day I said, they're going to my hometown now. They're going to get it. When they came over this way I said, they're going to South of Germany. And next day they bomb so-and-so and so-and-so. Oh yeah, we knew. We could tell when they came over that house.

Did you ever hear anybody among your fellow Jews say, well, why don't they bomb Auschwitz to stop all this?

No.

Anything like that?

No, no. Not that time. After, here, why didn't-- Now it came out that's the big thing about that why didn't they? Should they have? That's no here or there now. Now it's too late.

You lived in Germany as a citizen, almost a citizen before you had to leave. Did you have any feelings at all about these airplanes that were going over there to bomb your homeland Germany?

Germany wasn't my home. I just lived there.

But you lived there a while.

Yeah.

But it wasn't your homeland.

Not to me. Because when I worked here, I had a young man talking to me one day said-- 6-foot-4, big guy, a German fellow-- aren't you proud to be a German? I said, what are you talking about? I'm an American Jew. What are you talking about Germany? I said, look, don't talk to me about Germany. I said, the good Germans are six feet under like your father, your uncle, and all your relatives. These bastards should be buried. He never talk to me again. I said big deal.

Through the time you lived in England, what was the attitude of British people towards you as a Jew from Germany before the war broke out, during the war, and then after the war?

They treated us perfect. The English, you must give them credit. They treated you well, they fed you well. Their foreign

policy stunk for Palestine. That had nothing to do with the English people. That was their foreign policy. But we had rationing the same as English people. They did not discriminate. England was the only country who took in refugees without asking questions.

The general population, your neighbors for example, or people you met in the store, on the street--

To them I was a German because I spoke with a German accent so they wouldn't know any different. They wouldn't even know what a Jew is. They think we have horns on. They never saw-- These children got, with the evacuation they send them up in Scotland, they never saw a Jew. They didn't even know what a Jew is. No idea.