

Keep it rolling. In about five seconds, you can identify the folks and begin at your convenience.

Today is Thursday, August 23, 1990. And my name is Barbara Barer. I'm interviewing Mr. Hank Arons in San Francisco. Mr. Arons, how old are you now?

How old?

Yes.

I am 75.

When were you born?

In Hanover, Germany.

In what year?

September 1, 1914.

1914. And tell me, what did your father do?

My father, he was a lawyer-- attorney or a lawyer in Germany.

And how many children were in your family?

I'm the only one.

The only one. And can you tell me a little bit about what your life was like? Where you went to school and what your family was like?

My mother died when I was four years old, in 1918. And I went to my grandparents, in a small town in northern part of Germany. Weener, Ostfriesland. My grandparents were very religious. And I went to school there, in different kind of schools.

And then my occupation was, I became a gardener. And I studied in the Israelitic horticultural school near Hanover, Ahlem, from 1931 to 1934. The Nazis were already there. And in 1934 I passed my examination by the Nazi agriculture commission as a full fledged gardener.

But I couldn't get a job as a gardener. Nobody would hire a Jew at that time. Then I went to a small place in Pomoranen, the name is Jastrow, where I worked on a farm for a Catholic. There were many Jews because they were boycotted in their businesses in the small towns by the Nazis. And they worked also on this farm.

Before the High Holy Days in 1936 the SS, Nazis, came around and rounded us up and brought us to the police station in Jastrow. One day later, we were transported by train to the concentration camp, Buchenwald, where I was about seven months. Then I became sick. And there is no hospital in this particular concentration camp.

I was transported to another one, Sachsenhausen, near Berlin, where I stayed the full time. And I got well. And I had to do gardening work. I worked outside with several other Jewish young people outside the camp, with a guard, to do gardening work. And then after that, we finished it. I went into the potato kitchen to peel potato for the potato soup-- potato pea soup that we got. So this was an experience.

Then in the concentration camp, every day there were certain other things. We had to march and singing certain songs. And then there were certain other things that were torturous. When you did something wrong you were put on a gallows

by hanging. But we were not hanged. We were strapped up to a pole. Then were released after several hours. And you had great pains.

Did that happen to you?

No. I was not tortured at all. Then there was another torture over the-- I cannot explain it exactly, but a bench where they put you up. And they strapped you up there. And one of the kapos, they took a swing and hit you several times very hard.

You saw this happening?

It was very painful.

You saw this happening to people?

Ye-- I did not see it directly. But I know about it. And the other thing, where they did not have toilets on this camp. They had a big pit with some shark in it or something. And when you were sitting there and some of these-- you didn't watch that and somebody or the Nazis came in the back and pulled you over in this dirt and you drowned in it, in the mess. This was another thing. They died in it. So this was several things.

Another thing which I saw is that in the morning, in the appell, to stand in line, some of the elderly people that lost their nerves, and they run into the electric wire. And they was burned up. They died. This is one of the things which I know.

I was released on the 14th of December, 1938, after the 9th of November, which was a terrible day for everybody. It was the day of the Crystal Night-- Kristallnacht. Kristallnacht, so to say. There are many people came in, elderly people and children-- everybody-- on the 9th of November, 1938. It's always a terrible day for us. I mean, I was already several-- quite a while in the concentration camp.

After that, I was released, as I said before, on December the 14th, 1938, because my stepmother she went out in Berlin to get some travel tickets to get out of Germany, one for me to go to China, Shanghai, and my parents went to Cuba, Havana. That all has happened of the end of 1938.

OK, let me-- that's a really-- you've given me a good overview from beginning to end of what happened to you. I'd like to go back and go into some more detail about events that happened to you. First you were sent-- was it your father's parents or your mother's parents that you went to, your grand--

My, the parents of my grandparents. My father was the son of my grandparents.

So it was your father's parents that you went to?

Yes.

And you went to school there. And then you said when you graduated from the gardening school, it was the Nazi school at that time?

That was not the Nazi school, no. This particular school became, in 1942, a transportation camp for the Nazis in Hanover, for the whole region of Hildesheim and Hanover, where many of the population of the province of Hanover been caught by the Nazis and transported to the death camps.

But that was long after you were finished school?

I finished in 1934.

You finished in 1934.

That's right.

And you found that you could not get a job because you were Jewish?

Correct. So what did they do with you then? I was then-- I wanted, actually, I want to add this to it, to go to Palestine, because of my occupation.

What did you know about Palestine at that time?

At that time, I was a Zionist at that time already.

How did you become a Zionist?

There were several groups in Hanover and also where my parents lived in Berlin. I was involved in this Zionist organization.

Did you go to a public school or a Jewish school?

I went to Jewish school at first, and then I went to a Gymnasium-- college-- a college, and graduated from there. And then I went to this horticultural school.

And how did you become a Zionist at that time? Well, they talked about Palestine and maybe that Palestine, that area, becomes a state. But it's now the state of Israel.

And what prevented you from going there then? You wanted to go to Palestine?

Yes.

And why is it that you didn't or couldn't?

My father did not want me to leave Germany. My father was a veteran of the First World War. And he said that Hitler is not doing anything to the Jews. It's just, this was a mistake. So I did not go to Palestine. So I said before, I worked for a farm in west Germany, Pomoranen, for a Catholic.

And there were many Jews working there?

That's correct.

So when did you first become aware of problems as a Jew?

The problems started already very early. Some of them started already in the latest twenty years. But when I thought about 1928, '29, in that time.

What was going on in your life at that time?

At that time, well, there were groups of Jewish schools or other groups. They hated the Jews. And they shouted against the Jews, and so forth. But actually, there was nothing done at that time, until--

What kinds of things did they shout at you?

Pardon me?

What kinds of things did they shout at you?

Mel, a dirty Jew, or certain other words, you know, and so forth. But we all know. This is what has happened. So anyway, this is in 1933, after Hitler became the chancellor of Germany, the Third Reich. It became very difficult.

Difficult in what way? What was different?

In jobs, in businesses, and so forth. And then it started over and over again. It got worse after the 9th of November, in 1938. It was very, very bad.

How did you come to Buchenwald at first? Did they come to the farm where you were or--

The SS had a group over there in a small town, the name is Jastrow where they came to the farm, which they know that there were several Jews. You, as a Jew in Germany, you registered by the police. And that's why they know where you were. And they rounded us up. And that's what happened.

Those were all young men working on the farm?

Not all. But they were all elderly people working.

And they rounded you up, and what did they do with you?

They start walking us fast to the police station. They had motorcycles or bicycles with which they came. And we had to go very fast to the police station-- was several miles.

And what happened when you got to the police station?

Well, they put us in the cellar. They searched us. They put us against the wall and searched us. And then we had to sleep that night on the floor. There was straw or something on the floor. And the next day they transported us to the station, the railway station, and transported us to Buchenwald.

Were you with friends? Were you with--

There was several of these groups.

And what happened when you got to Buchenwald?

Well, we had to get out of our clothes, and our jewelry, or whatever we had. And then they put us in prison garb, as you have seen it in several pictures-- striped garbs with the number and something like that.

They tattooed on the arm. I don't have it anymore. And I tell you why. When I went into the United States Army I had it taken off. They took it off here from my side, here. You can still feel it here. There's a scar here in the side. I had it. So anyway--

So you got-- did you start to work in Buchenwald?

They worked you, yeah. Very hard.

What kind of work did you do?

You had to chip rocks. You had to carry cement bags and bricks. And that was it.

And you said you got sick then?

Yes.

What kind of illness?

Well I had kind of a heavy flu or something. And they did not had a hospital there. What they call a lazaret. And they sent me Sachsenhausen.

Why did they just not let you die?

Well, that they didn't do at that time. And they sent me to Sachsenhausen. And I was treated there. And when I was well again, the commander asked me what kind of occupation I have. I said I've studied the gardener. And he said, a Jew gardener. It's impossible. You cannot use a shovel. I said I can prove it to you. And I got better. So then I was tried out.

Was it unusual for a Jew to study horticulture?

It was not-- well, yes, in one way or the other, yes. But there were many Jews. They studied horticulture. They came from different countries to this particular school-- from Poland, from France, even from Palestine.

I have a good friend in Palestine who lives in Israel-- he was born there. And he was also at this school. He came once to San Francisco and visited us.

Isn't that interesting?

And this is what it is. So anyway, this has happened.

So Sachsenhausen is another concentration camp?

I didn't get you.

After Buchenwald, you went to another concentration camp?

Yes, as I said, to Sachsenhausen.

Sachsenhausen?

Yes.

And what was it like there?

Well, it's the same thing. All the same.

I don't know what the same thing means, exactly.

Same thing. Same thing.

Like what did you-- you got up in the morning, what did you do?

You got up in the morning and you got into the-- you have to stand in line. And then you get your orders. And you had to march. And you have to go to work. And then you get your lot, whatever you get.

Like what do you get?

Black coffee and bread, that's all. In the evening you get your potato soup. Potato pea soup.

Did you have lunch?

Pardon me?

Did you have lunch? Did you have lunch in the middle of the day? Just breakfast and the evening?

Nothing, nothing.

Nothing in between.

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Nothing in between. And how did they feed you? Did you stand in line and you sat at tables, or--

Oh, you got to-- you got one of those army cups, you know, what you have seen. And they fill that in. They gave you a piece of bread in your hand. And that was it.

And where did you sit?

Where you sit. You sit-- there were some wooden benches. Sometimes you sit on a rock. And you sit in the barracks. You sit on your side, there. That's all.

And you worked every day, seven days a week?

Every day.

Every single day.

Every day.

What did you do in the evening?

In the evening we go to sleep. There was nothing to do. You could not play cards. You didn't do nothing. You cannot smoke. You can't do this-- nothing.

And did you grow up in a religious upbringing, a religious household? Were your grandparents Orthodox?

Not directly, ortho-- conservative.

Conservative. So when you were in the camps, did you pray? Did you have faith, or--

Well, I said several Jewish prayers for myself. But there was nothing. No. Otherwise, there were no religious things going in the camp. Nothing.

So can you tell me some stories from the camp? Did you ever talk to the Nazi soldiers or the SS troops?

No. You didn't talk to them.

Did they ever harm you?

They didn't harm me, they harmed others. They hit them with the rifle bat and something like that. And put them on the floor and clubbed them and something like that.

And then you say your stepmother was able to get you out?

Yes.

From there?

My parents, as I said before, they lived in Berlin. And my stepmother went out to get some tickets to get out of Germany. So as I said, before she got a ticket for me to go to China, Shanghai. And my parents went to Cuba, Havana.

How were they able to get out?

Well, my stepmother went to the Gestapo in Berlin, and showed the photostatic things, which mine went to the commander in Sachsenhausen, where I was released. And then when I was released, I went to Berlin from Sachsenhausen-- was not very far-- to get my stuff together. I had to get the passport to get out of Germany. I had to go to the place where I was working for the Catholic farm. And from the police station I get my passport.

This was in 1930--

Pardon me?

This was in 1938?

That's correct.

I've never heard of anyone getting out of a concentration camp. Was that very unusual?

At that time, before the war started, in 1939, and people had money, and they showed that they want to leave Germany, they could get out. So that's was the [? other ?] case.

Because your father was a lawyer and had an important position?

Later on he was not a lawyer. He did something else in Berlin. He was, what you can say, in more money business. What you say, like--

I know what you mean.

OK. Anyway, then I left on the 25th of December, 1938, Berlin, to go to Italy. And from there on we boarded the ship to go to the Suez Canal to Shanghai.

How is it that you couldn't go to Cuba with your parents-- that you went one place and they went somewhere else?

My knowledge is that they couldn't get more tickets together. So we had to split it up. I was eight years in Shanghai. In 1941 my parents came to New York, and they sent me the affidavit to come to the United States. But in December 1941, as we all know, on the 7th of December, that Pearl Harbor has started. And the ships did not go from Shanghai to United States or back and forth. So I had to stay another five years in Shanghai.

What were you doing in Shanghai?

In Shanghai I worked for the Jewish Community Federation, or what it's called-- JDC or something. Yes. And in the kitchen-- they had a big out spice kitchen. And I worked as a cook there.

What did you know about cooking?

I learned it there. I learned it there.

Were there many Jews in Shanghai?

There were 15,000 refugees.

All from Germany, or where?

Not all from Germany-- from Austria, from the Netherlands or Holland, also some of France, and from Germany, mostly. And then beside that point, there were many, many Polish Jews too.

Why did Shanghai take the Jews?

Because you didn't need a visa. Chiang Kai-shek, at that time, allowed that these immigrants could come into Shanghai or China.

And so you left Shanghai?

The end of 1947.

And came to New York?

San Francisco, also in November 1947.

What brought you to San Francisco? Why San Francisco?

Because the ship came here.

And your parents were in New York?

They were in New York. I visited them several times. But I stayed to do my profession in San Francisco.

And what did you do in San Francisco?

Well, in the first time, I did not get a job in San Francisco. I was sent by the Jewish Federation here to Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I worked there because I could not get a good job there. I worked on a chicken farm for several months. Then I went downtown, and I worked as a stock clerk in a pharmacy.

And I was living in a YMCA. And next door there was a recruiting sergeant from the army. Recruiting sergeant became a friend of mine. And we went out to the movies and to the bars. But I'm not a drinker. So he asked me if I like to join the army. I said, I'm in the army? I don't know.

Well, we went out again. We came together again. Then several other times he asked me again, would you like to join the army now? I said, OK. I go into the army. The reason why I went into the army, first of all you get your medical, you get your clothing, you get your money.

And I made my IQ test with the natives of the United States, the Indians, in Albuquerque. And we went to Fort Ord, California, for basic training. And after the basic training I went to Korea. I was 16 months on the line in Korea. Then I went after that to Hawaii, to the Schofield barracks. I stayed there about a year. Then I came to the Presidio in San Francisco, where I was discharged as a staff sergeant.

And then I started to live in San Francisco. I met my wife in San Francisco. She was from Berlin. And we married here in Temple Beth Israel on Geary Street, and the Rabbi Bernstein, in 1950. And I was still in the army. And then we made our home here in San Francisco. We live now in the Sunset. And we have no children.

And I worked then. I made an application at the city hall as gardener for the Golden Gate Park. I worked 14 years for the Golden Gate Park, eight years in the conservatory, two years in the arboretum, and then I had to quit because I had



some back troubles.

And I worked, then, at the wholesale flower market. I became a partner. I was 12 years in partnership on the wholesale flower market. Then I was a retired.

What happened to your grandparents in Germany?

My grandparents were taken out of the home in 1938, and my aunt too, the sister of my father. She lived with my grandparents. She took care of my grandparents. They were evacuated to Berlin. And they died. My grandparents died in Berlin. And my aunt was sent to a death camp. I don't to which one.

What's your most vivid memory? What's the most vivid memory of being in the concentration camp?

The vivid memory was that we did not know at that time. I was very young at that time still, and didn't know what's going to happen to us. If we were released, or we die-- we did not know either way. So that we could not-- we lived from day to day. We did not know what the Nazis will do with us at that time.

And that's pretty scary?

Yes.

Did you know what was going on in other parts of the country? Did you have communication?

No.

No?

No.

Do you have any other people who survived from those days that--

Yes. Yes.

How did they survive?

Well, some came out of concentration camp too, like I am. And I live here in San Francisco. Some live in New York. And some live in Israel, or that time, Palestine. I have many friends, they were in concentration camps, in different kinds. I know only one, he died. He was with me in the concentration camp. He lived in Yonkers, New York. His brother lives still in Palm Beach, Florida.

Do you know what happened to your mother's family?

My mother's family, they died in Berlin. First of all, my mother was half Jewish. And her mother was not Jewish. Her father was Jewish. But he died a long time before. My parents, they lived in New York. My mother died in New York. And my father died in Switzerland.

Did your father have other children after you?

No.

No. How did you hear about Kristallnacht?

Well, the Crystal Night was actually the name I learned after the concentration camp. Later they called the Kristallnacht. I did not know anything before, only that I know, in the concentration camp where I was on the 9th of November, that,

as I said before, that they brought in older people, women, and children into the concentration camp. That I realized.

Did you have any communication with--

No. We didn't have any communication whatever.

They didn't bring any men in?

No.

What did they do with the men?

Well, they separated from the women and the children too. I don't know about the small children, the real small children. If they stay with the mother, I have no idea.

Had there have been women in the camp with you before?

No.

It was all men before?

Only men. In the beginning, there were only men. Only men.

And then all of a sudden, one night, there's women and children brought in.

That's correct.

What else can you tell me about what it was like in the concentration camp?

Well, the day went by. Every day was the same. We had to do the work. We got--

What time did you get up?

Very early in the morning. And then you were finished by daybreak. I mean, by the evening. And then you get your spare food, as I said before. And that was it.

What kinds of things did you--

And you went down on the straw. Or later on maybe got a bunk in straw and maybe a blanket. That's what I got because I was working as a gardener outside on the camp with some other group of Jewish young people. These people actually came from a Hachsharah.

What's that?

Hachsharah is a group, they wanted to go to Palestine, but they didn't make it. I don't know if they came out or what happened to them. But we worked on this particular group together. I taught them, as I learned gardening, what to do. It was outside the camp, to do the gardening work, with guards around us. This was it.

Did you have any communication with your father during that time?

No. But they found out, where, I do not know, to something, that I was in the concentration camp. And my stepmother went, as I said, to the Gestapo in Berlin to show them the photostatic copies of the tickets to get out of Germany.

Do you think she had to give the Gestapo money to find you?

No. She did not give them money. I don't think so. My father, naturally, had to pay high finance taxes to the Third Reich. This was it. They had to give everything up that they had. Like I went out with two suitcases, with 10 mark-- 10 German mark in my pocket-- that was all. So to say, with my toothbrush in my hand.

Right. Tell me about the day that you left the camp. The day you got out.

Well, the morning when I got out, the kapo came to my bunk and told me, you are released. You have to get up quick and get your stuff.

What stuff did you have?

I had a suit, it was all crumpled up-- dark pants and jacket.

That you carried with you, or?

When I went into the concentration camp, yeah. They took it. They took it from me. Then they gave it back to me, and I had to change in that. And then the commander of the camp had us lined up and told us that if you go out under this concentration camp, and you tell outside what you have seen-- or your own things, what happened to you, you tell to others-- we have a long arm to reach you. We take you back into the concentration camp. That's what they warned us.

How many of you were released?

I couldn't tell you-- about 15, something like that.

Had anyone been released before?

I think so.

Did you know that some days, somebody came in the morning and people got out?

No. No.

So that morning, you got up, and you thought you were going to work.

Yes. They told me to get dressed, and get started in line, and so forth.

What did you think was going to happen?

I don't know. So we went out to the gate in Sachsenhausen. There was a group of men and women from one or several Jewish organizations in Berlin. They handed us some money-- we didn't have no money-- to take the streetcar or the tram to go to your place where you live. That they give us.

How far were you from where you lived?

Not very far. Not too far.

And your parents were still in the home?

They were there. Yes.

What was it like?

Well everything was packed up to get out.

What was it like--

My things were standing there. And I saw the big lifts going to Cuba. I saw that all. Was all finished. My parents told me, or my father told me in particular, that they couldn't get any tickets to get me with them to Cuba. I had to go to Shanghai, China.

You'd never met your stepmother before, had you?

Yes. I met her before I came to the concentration camp. I met her in Berlin.

Oh.

I visited my parents when I worked outside. I traveled to Berlin with the train to go to my parents in Berlin and visit them.

What was it like when you came in and saw your father for the first time?

From the concentration camp? We kissed each other. Everybody, like a reunion. That he was still alive. My father was not in the concentration camp because he was operated-- he had troubles-- by a Nazi professor in Berlin.

What do you mean?

Well, he had the hernia trouble or something. And he was operated by a Nazi doctor. And they told him not to get out on the street, otherwise they catch him and take him out to the concentration camp. That's what they told me.

So the Nazi doctor protected your father?

Yes he did.

What have I not asked you that I should know about your experiences?

I didn't get you.

What else can you tell me?

About my parents?

About your experiences?

My experience was, at that time, in Shanghai. And I went to Shanghai. I had a very good time in Shanghai. I met some many friends in Shanghai, which also were here in San Francisco. And I had a communication by letters with my parents, my father. And this was all I can tell you.

How do you think your life was affected by having been in the concentration camp?

My wife?

Your life.

My life. Oh. My life being affected in the concentration camp-- well, in the beginning, it was kind of a different thing, you know, when you get out of the concentration camp. What the world is like. What's going to happen? What's go to happen to us? We did not know.

So when I then was in Shanghai, it was a different life. All the Jewish people there became friends. We ate together. We met together. We had a synagogue there together. They built up the synagogue there. I mean, they didn't build a synagogue, but they started the Jewish--

Community, or--

--community. What it's called-- the Shanghai Jewish Community, the Jewish German Jewish Community. And they built a place. There was a synagogue, which they got into the synagogue in Shanghai, where we lived. And the rabbi of the synagogue, then, was also from Berlin. He was an elderly man.

And they started the conservative-- what is now, here in San Francisco, B'nai Emunah on Taraval Street with Rabbi Theodore Alexander. He was also in Shanghai. But I didn't know him. I didn't know him at that time. And his father and his family.

Did you go to synagogue as a little boy?

Yes.

And you were bar mitzvahed in Berlin?

In Shanghai?

No, in Berlin?

Not in Berlin. In the small town where my grandparents lived, I became bar mitzvahed.

What kind of Jewish life do you have now?

Jewish life now is very good, which we belong to Ner Tamid on Quintara. And we go several times to the synagogue on Shabbat, Friday evenings, especially to the High Holy Days. And this is what it is.

My best friend of synagogue is Rabbi William Dalin. He's the emeritus rabbi of the congregation Tamid. And he was a chaplain in the army. When I was in Presidio here, I met him. And we became friends.

Good friends?

Yes.

Have you talked very often about your experiences in the war?

In the war?

Have you talked about being in Buchenwald? And have you told anyone--

No. We don't talk about it too many times.

Why not?

Well, I will tell you. As so many things goes on, I am appointed by the Jewish War Veterans. I belong to-- the Holocaust Chairman. I'm the Holocaust Chairman of the Jewish War Veterans. We had, recently, the National Convention in San Diego. We came yesterday back from it.

And they had a program on the Holocaust, on the Kristallnacht and everything we talk about. They asked me certain questions. And I had a little booklet here-- about 10 or 11 booklets-- from the Holocaust Center in San Francisco. The

Kristallnacht, you know that little booklet? I gave it to them. And this is going to probably to go to schools or to different things to take care, in the schools, what happened in the Holocaust.

To educate the children.

For education. The other thing I'd like to mention, in 1988 my wife and I-- or I am, very personally, was invited to the small town where my grandparents lived, from the working circle and the mayor of the city-- over 50 years after the burning of the synagogue.

And they invited people, they grew up with me, 50 years ago, from Argentina, from Peru, from the Netherlands, from Israel, and from the United States. There were 43 of my people where I grew up with.

Jewish people?

Jewish people. They're from the Jewish community there. That was the reunion, I can tell you.

How did they find you?

How they find me? I had correspondence. One of my school colleagues, a Gentile, he found out where I lived. He sent a letter to me and invited me for a reunion of the school class in this particular little town, in 1981 already. But we did not go. In 1983, I got another letter. But we couldn't make it.

In 1986, my wife received from the city of Berlin an invitation. And I'm from Hanover. So we went. We went to Berlin first, then to Hanover. I went to the cemetery in Hanover, where my mother is buried. She died in 1918 in Hanover. We went there. We found the graveyard. That cemetery is in very good condition.

And I went to the caretaker's house. They had a booklet. And in this booklet, the lady showed me the name of my mother on top of it. Where always, where my mother's laid to rest. This was it. So we went there.

What was your mother's name?

Rachel-- Rachel Peltz Arons. So this what is. Or [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. So anyway, this was it, which I noticed. It was very nice and so forth. Then I went to that school where I went to horticultural school, which is a different name now. Somebody bought the land. There was another school in the neighborhood but not Jewish. And these people bought this particular Israeli horticultural school. And I visited it. And I saw the old places and everything.

The horticulture school was all Jewish?

It's not Jewish now.

But it was when you went? It was all Jewish students?

My wife?

When you were a student there, was it all Jewish students?

Yes. Yes.

It was? It was Israeli?

Jewish young boys and girls too. And this was it. So I saw this school again. There were several places which I remembered. And I spoke to new director there, from that particular school. And I had several other visits-- interviews. Had different kind of interviews, like you interview me here, in Germany. One was from the [? Ashif ?] in Hanover. And the other one was from another thing.

What's the [? Ashif? ?]

[? Ashif ?] of Hanover is a-- this particular person is not Jewish, doing the work of the Jews in Hanover. They put out booklets. I have a booklet.

What did he want to know? What kind--

They wanted to know what I know about Hanover and about the Jews and Hanover at my time. But at that time, I was very young. I had several friends in Hanover. And then, naturally, I was an alum, I knew a little bit more of it. This was it.

Then we went to another-- he had different things to do. He was very much interested in Israel, in the state of Israel-- not Jewish. And he asked me a different kind of questions too.

What kinds of things did you tell them?

Well, I told them all about what I'm telling you. And where I went to. He wanted to know of me, what happened to my folks, and so forth.

What was the reunion like in 1988?

In 1988, the reunion with all these Jewish people. They grew up with me. It was tremendous, tremendous. I can't tell you what-- you cannot explain it to you in just words.

You can't put it into words?

No. It was tremendous.

And those are the Jewish students who survived?

Yes. Yes. Some live here in Los Angeles. And some live in New York. And the others live in Holland. And the others live in Argentina and Peru.

They found them all?

Yes. They got the addresses from something. They invited them.

What proportion survived? What about those who didn't live? How many--

Nothing. Nothing. Can't talk about it.

How many of you were at the reunion? In 1988, how many of you got together?

Got together?

Yeah.

I said, about 43, we were. 43.

Must have been something.

Yes. 43, but that was-- I must say to this, that was also the man and the women. But some men and some women were not from this particular area. They married. Married an Argentina. They married in Israel. And they married in the

United States, in Peru, and in Holland.

There was something you said you wanted to read. At the beginning, there was something you said you wanted to read that you brought with you.

Yes.

Do you want to read that now?

No. I don't want to read this because this is the same thing, which I was already all interviewed in 19--

Oh, '84.

--'84. This is about the same. It's all about the same thing, which I tell you today. It's all I can tell you.

Let me ask-- what have I not asked?

Let's see. Yeah, Hans, this is April Lee who is training to be one of our interviewers. She may have a few questions to ask you, if that would be all right.

Yes. You have to come forward because I cannot--

Why don't you sit in that little chair on the right there, April?

Thank you.

What is your name. My name is April Lee.

Leed?

Lee.

Lee?

Yes. Yes. And what is your full name? My name is Hans Arons.

Hans Arons. There are three kinds of questions I'd like to ask you. One is about your experiences in Shanghai, and another is about your friends, and another is about your family. Those are three kinds of questions.

OK.

The first one, about Shanghai, you were there during the war years, during the revolution. You had a Jewish community. Did you in any ways get involved with the Chinese community? And what effect did that have on you?

Not too much. Not too much. No. No. We, for instance, I had a Chinese barber, where I had my hair done. And he invited us for the Chinese New Year. That was very nice of him. Was very social, the Chinese.

But otherwise we did not-- I mean, I am, personally-- or many others, I don't know. They may have gathered with other Chinese together. But this was the only thing I have been with Chinese family or something like that.

So that you were basically in a Jewish community, as you said before.

Yes. We lived in a camp, which was the Ward Road, 138, which was [INAUDIBLE] by the Jewish Community Federation, or what they called it at that time. American Joint Jewish Community, you know-- federation.



I see.

So anyway, where we got the food and where we got our room where we sleep and everything else. And later on, they built this hospital there, where many of the doctors came from Germany or from Europe. One of the doctors here is Eddie Tenenbaum, if you know the name-- Eddie Tenenbaum. He is a retired doctor now. And he was also in Shanghai with us. I knew him from Shanghai already.

So in some ways it was a transplanted European community for you?

That's right.

Now let me ask you a little bit about your wife. You say you met her in San Francisco. But she was German and from Berlin?

My wife?

Yeah. Did I hear correctly, your wife was from Berlin originally?

That's correct.

Right. Now, did your wife experience Nazi terror?

No. No. She came out and she came directly to the United States. She was in Holland. She studied also horticulture in Holland. And she came directly, in 1938, to the East Coast. And she had a scholarship in Groton, Massachusetts, in lady's landscape architecture.

And then when her parents came from England, her parents came from England to San Rafael. She came also to San Francisco. And she lived in San Francisco. And I had somebody. She knew my wife, and she told me about her. And then we got together, and we married, as I said before, in Beth Israel, and the Rabbi Bernstein, again.

Did she continue doing landscape work while you were working for Golden Gate Park?

No. No. She, during the war here, when the men went to war, she worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad as a draftsman-- map reading and something like that. And she's writing descriptions. And she's doing it now, again. After she was retired, they called her back. And she's doing it now.

She must have been very good at it, then.

That's right.

You mentioned that you did not have children. Had you thought of having children at any time? You chose not to.

No. Pardon me?

You chose not to have children, is that--

No.

Could you tell me a little bit about why?

We don't have them. Why? There's no question why.

You don't have to--

Don't have them.

And my final question takes you back to the camp a little bit. You described the sameness of the day after day and the endless work. Did you make any friends at all in the camp in the course of the work or among--

No. No. As I said before, I met one man-- one man. He was also from my town where my grandparents lived, a son of a young man. And he was in the camp in Sachsenhausen. And we met once there, only once. He saw us. And that was all. And he died last year in Yonkers by New York.

But other than this man, no ties were formed with other people there?

No. No. No.

Thank you very much.

You're welcome.

Yes, I have a few questions, if I could ask. When you were in Shanghai, could you tell us what a typical day was like for you in Shanghai-- when you got up in the morning, what time you got up, and exactly what you did, and when you ate, and where you went to eat, and when you worked, and when you finished working, and what you did in the evening after work? Could you describe a typical day for us, please.

Yes. In the morning, we got up very early. We lived in a camp together in a place where several people lived. And then we had breakfast in a special room. We had breakfast cereal or whatever. And this was strictly kosher by a Ashkenazi, Rabbi Ashkenazi in Shanghai. And served with the Sassoon. They took care of these things in Shanghai for the Jewish refugees.

The Sassoon family?

Pardon me?

The Sassoon family?

Sassoon family. Served with the Sassoon. Sassoon family. Well, they took care of this particular issue on the kosher line. So the meat was kosher, and everything else. Things were strictly under kosher.

Was your family kosher in Germany?

My grandparents, where I lived in? Yes. They were kosher. Yes. And all this happened. Then we had to go to the kitchen to cook the meal in big kettles with rice and sometimes with this meat, which was cut up by the butchers there. We had the butchers from our people. It was buffalo meat-- Chinese buffalo meat. And, OK, or water buffaloes, better to say.

And this was cooked in a separate kettle, not with the rice. And then we had a kettle with vegetables. And this was taken out in different things, when it was finished, to the counter. There was a counter. It was a big thing with the bamboo and something like that. It was opened by some things, and the people stand in line to had the different dishes. And you gave them the scoops, whatever you want to give them.

And they were, some people, I am standing there to give out the meat, this stuff. And I knew some people, and gave them a little extra. But we had to watch this. So this was it. In the evening, in the camp, we had the same meal. We got our meal in the kitchen. We sat on the big tables, wooden tables and something like that. And we ate the same meal what we cooked.

And later on, I was transferred to the-- and they had a hospital-- to the hospital kitchen, diet kitchen, better, I say. There was a lady from Vienna, she was from the Rothschild Hospital in Vienna. And she taught us how to prepare the diet for these people in the hospital, also for these people, like ladies, they had births and something others-- special diets and something what we had to prepare.

This was my other things what I learned. So I know to cook at home too. So anyway, we had very good food there. And the treatments in the camps was-- usually we went to a room where we could play cards. We had tennis.

Badminton?

Ping pong. Ping pong, tennis, and something like that. And we had exercises. And we could go out. We could go out in the streets. We could go out with the train to the other city in Shanghai. We had a very good life in Shanghai.

What kind of work were the other people doing?

Other people, they went out. They had business. A lot of people they had also a little bit money, which they brought into Shanghai. They opened up some business like delicatessen, like other things. So they did quite a bit in Shanghai.

Was it like a ghetto?

Not in the beginning. But when the Japanese got into the war with America, they came up and boarded up with guns. They stood with guns in front of the camps of the Jewish camps. And they had a refugee center with the Japanese in there. They were very strict. You had to get a pass to get out of this ghetto.

So does that mean after the Japanese came, then you were much more restricted to the camp?

When the Japanese came, we were restricted.

So it was very difficult to leave the camp at that time.

That's correct. You had to go through this office, to the refugee office, to the Shanghai refugee office where there a Japanese was sitting. And he was very strict to give passes. He asked you several questions and he could refuse it, whether he liked you or he didn't like you.

Why did the Japanese do that?

I don't know. I couldn't tell you why they did it.

Were the Japanese antisemitic in their behavior, the way the Nazis were?

I will not say they were antisemitic. But they had the strict thing to do at the refugee camp, to have these people go out in the other side of the city of Shanghai to do business. You could not do business outside without the pass of this camp.

When the Japanese arrived in Shanghai, were there any German Nazis who came to Shanghai?

That's correct. There was a Nazi office.

Can you tell us, did the Nazi office have any relationship with the Jewish camp, and--

Yes. Yes.

--can you tell us about those issues?

They asked the Jewish people in Shanghai, they came from Europe, especially from Germany, like me. There was a

committee, Komor committee, to give the passes to the German consulate. And after several weeks, you received a notice from this particular committee to get your pass back, your old German pass, which is invalid.

And we have to go there. I was called up too. And we went there. They asked you several questions. And I had a fear. They were tricky. They could take you in again.

What kinds of questions?

They asked you, from the concentration camp-- and certainly, if you give a different answer which they didn't like, they could take you. In front of the consulate they had the Nazi German standing there with the steel helmet and the guns in their hands.

Did they take anybody that you knew?

I don't think so. But they could have done that, because if you give a different question, If they didn't like it-- and I was afraid of it. And I gave my colleagues-- they were with me-- I know them-- gave him a push in the arm and I said, forget about the passport. Get out. Get out. Forget about that passport. It's not valid anymore.

So we ran out before they got any more different kind of questions to say you were illegal, out of Germany, or you escaped Germany, or something like that.

What were the Nazis doing in Shanghai?

What they were doing? Well, they had an office there like all others, German--

Like an embassy, you mean?

Yeah. Like an embassy, that there was. So we were afraid that they did something to us. I gave my partner a push in the side, and said, let's get out. So we went out.

It was like a nightmare coming back again?

Yeah.

Why did you go to the Nazi office in the first place?

Well, we were called to get our passport back.

But you left before you got your passport back?

Yes. We didn't get our passports. They gave it back to the committee later. And the committee, this particular committee, they gave it back to us.

How did they have your passports? How did the Nazis get your passports?

Through this committee. They asked for it.

Oh, I see.

You had to send it in. You had to send it in.

Was there any fear that the Nazis would create some kind of death camp or attempt--

Yes.

--to execute people?

Yes. Yes.

Can you tell us about those issues?

They told the Japanese, they brought the high officer-- his name was Weidermeyer-- he came to Japan and then they came to Shanghai. And they told the Japanese to build some concentration camp on the other side of the river, Huangpu. And this was happened. They really started this.

They started to build a camp?

Yes, and take us all into the concentration camps there-- do away with us. Now, one of the Jewish guys, I don't know if he was Jewish or not, he was married to a Japanese girl. I don't know what kind of things she had with these things to do. But she intervened with some high Jewish people in Shanghai. They were involved in the-- not from our people, but they were from the Arabic Jews, like Victor Sassoon or others.

Like the Moroccan Jews?

Or others. They were had a conference about this. And they were getting some interviews and something like that with these people. And they went to the Japanese and said, forget about it. And the officer, when they had this refugee office with the Japanese in there, they forgot it. They did nothing to take--

That was the influence of the Sassoons?

Yes they did nothing to send the Jewish people to this concentration camp. Nothing was done.

But did they build the camp?

Yes.

Was the camp completed?

I don't know.

Did you ever see the camp?

No. That's what they did.

Did you mix with other Europeans in Shanghai?

Other Jewish people?

Other Europeans in Shanghai?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

I mean, not everyone in Shanghai was a refugee?

Not everybody, no.

There were European businesses?

Right. Right. This was, for instance, also with our people, some had a mixed marriage. The wife was not Jewish, and the man was Jewish, or the other way. There were quite a number. They also came with their people to Shanghai. They left Germany, because they were half Jewish or mixed marriage.

Did people have children there? Were there any children?

Yes. Yes.

Children born in Shanghai?

They were born in Shanghai.

How many people lived in the camp that you worked in?

Well, I cannot tell you exactly how many. There were several camps. They were different kind of camps. I cannot tell you exactly how many people lived in one or the other camps. They were different--

What would be your guess?

--larger camps and smaller camps.

OK. In your camp, could you guess how many people were in your camp? Was it 100? 500?

Oh, there were more than that.

More than 500 in your camp?

Yes, about 500 at least.

Did your camp, have a name?

The camp of the name?

Did your camp have a name? What was the name of your camp in Shanghai?

Where I was?

Yes.

Ward Road Camp. Ward Road. W-

Ward Road? Ward Road Camp.

I see, because it was on Ward Road?

I didn't get you.

Was Ward Road the name of the road that the camp was on?

That's correct.

I see. OK. When you were in Shanghai, were you able to practice your religious practices as much as you wanted to?

Absolutely.

No restrictions?

We had in the camp also a type of a synagogue which we set up with the Torah. And we had some people, they could read the Torah. And they could preach or something-- a sermon.

Where did the Torahs come from?

I don't know. They came probably from Shanghai. They had several synagogues. Maybe they lent one.

Let me ask another question, going back to Germany. Forgive me if I'm repeating information you've already talked about. But when you were first picked up and taken to Buchenwald, why were you picked up?

Why?

Yes.

Because I was a Jew.

But your father was not picked up?

No.

Why did they pick you particularly? That's what I'm trying to understand.

Because I was on this particular farm with many other Jews. I was on this farm, working on this Catholic farm. There were many Jews, were working there. And later, when I came back to pick up my passport, to get out of Germany in 1938, I went to the police station, and I asked the people. And they told me that these people have died. I found out later they'd been killed by the Nazis, the Catholics.

Which people? Oh, the family.

The Catholics. Because they hire Jews.

Was the Catholic farm a private farm, or was that run by the Catholic Church?

No.

It was run by--

No. Private. Private. Private.

By a private family that happened to be Catholic?

Yes.

Just by coincidence?

No, not by coincidence. These people were in this particular community nearby, they were very much inclined with the Jewish people. And that's why they hired them. And I went also there.

Explain to me more of what you mean by that, that they were inclined to the Jewish people. What do you mean?

Well, they were more social with Jewish people, you know, than others. He was not a Nazi. He was a very gentle

people. They were very gentle to the Jewish people. And that's why. I cannot explain that directly to you.

Can you tell me what his name was?

Yes, Albert Dahms.

And what town was this farm located in?

Jastrow. Jastrow, West Germany

What big town is that near? What's the nearest large city?

Near Schneidemuhl. It's a little bit farther out than Berlin.

And what sort of work were you doing on this farm before you left?

I had a team of horses, and was plowing, and this and that. I did all kinds of work.

How many acres did the farm have and what did they grow?

I couldn't tell you how many acres. It was a big farm.

And what products did they grow?

Pardon me?

What products did they produce on this farm?

They produced potatoes and vegetable. And they had cows, and milk, and something like that. It was a big farm, I can tell you.

Can you tell me what is your earliest memory of antisemitism. The first time you had an experience.

Well, I said, when I went to school, some of these fellow schoolmates in 1927, '28, or something like that, they came up with the different kind of words-- schmutzy Jude, or the dirty Jew, in English, or certain other antisemitic words. They had, Jews should get out of Germany, and something like that.

And so that's when you were about 13 years old or 14 years old?

No. No. I-- yes. Yes, about 14, 15. Yes.

And in this school, what percentage of the students in the school were Jewish, and what percentage of the students were not Jewish in this school, roughly?

Well, at that particular-- as I can tell you, there were only 40 Jewish families. And the town, at that time, had 5,000 inhabitants. That was all. It was a small town-- small city.

So when you were younger than 14 years old, did you ever have any problem with antisemitism with other kids?

Not at that time, no.

No? Is there anything else that you want to be sure to say to people so that they know?

No. Not at all. This is about it, I can tell you.



Anybody else have questions?

My life, is very good here in San Francisco. A good life, as I say. So this is all I can tell you.

You want to ask me something?

I think I asked you before, you mentioned that your mother was half Jewish?

My stepmother.

Your stepmother was half Jewish.

My stepmother.

Your mother was full Jewish?

My mother was full Jewish.

And your stepmother was half Jewish?

That's correct.

Did the fact that-- what was the other half? Protestant or Catholic? What was the other half? She was half Jewish. And the other half, what religion was the other--

I couldn't tell you.

You don't know whether it was Protestant--

I don't know anything about that. I don't know. I didn't go into this.

Right. Do you think that that in any way affected her ability to have the Gestapo issue a release for you?

Gestapo?

Yeah, when she went to the Gestapo--

An influence for me?

--and she got you out of the camp.

Well, she went to the Gestapo because she had to go because she had to show them the photostatic copies of the travel tickets that they want to leave Germany, and they want me out of the concentration camp to leave also Germany. And that's why she went to the Gestapo.

Yeah, I understand. I was wondering if the fact that she was able, effectively, to get what she wanted had anything to do with the fact that she was half Jewish, or is that irrelevant?

Yeah, she was able to get what she wanted. That's what she wanted. She wanted to get-- that we get the passports to get out of Germany. That's all.

Yeah, I'm asking that out of my ignorance of-- I guess, as you mentioned before, it's unusual for people to have gotten out of the camp. So this was earlier. And so I'm just raising a question which may be irrelevant, but I wondered if she

had a little more influence because she was half Jewish only.

I couldn't tell you that. I don't know. I don't know. That I couldn't tell you.

And just one other question. You have a good life in San Francisco. And you're living in the Sunset area, and you go to the synagogue on Taraval.

That's right. Not on Taraval.

On Quintara.

Quintara.

Quintara, yes.

We belong to Quintara. I used to belong to the B'nai Emunah on Taraval. But we moved away from there to go to Ner Tamid.

So you're nearer Ner Tamid on Quintara.

Do you still keep a kosher home?

Kosher home?

Yes.

Well, we have not directly a kosher home. But we don't eat any treif. That's all I can tell you.

You've been very good and very patient with us.

May I ask one more question?

Yes.

Do you think another Holocaust could happen?

I don't know what's going on in the world. Do you see what's going on now? If you have another Holocaust, or we have a destruction in Israel, which this crazy guy of Iraq. I couldn't tell you. I don't know what's going to be. It's all I can tell you.

What do you think we should do? What do you think the United States should do in the current situation in the Middle East in regards to Iraq?

Well, I think they're doing everything what they can do right now. But we have to wait and see what this Assat Hussein of Iraq is going to do. If he goes to go in Saudi Arabia, maybe he takes over Jordan, and then he pushes into Israel, who knows what he has in mind.

But if the United States with their allies getting into this particular thing, I think the Iraqi leader is not going too far. I hope not. That's all I can tell you.

You've done a good job. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much.

Do you want some water?

Thank you so much--

Nice to meet you.

--you've been just wonderful.