

About eight seconds you'll hear the cue. OK, any time.

My name is Patricia Kalman, and I'm with Ron Greene today for the San Francisco Holocaust Oral History Project interview Hans J. Arons. John Angell Grant is the producer, and today is October 16, 1991. Mr. Arons, can you tell me when and where you were born?

I was born on the 1st of September, 1914 in Hanover, Germany.

Can you tell me about your childhood?

Pardon me?

Can you tell me about your childhood?

My childhood? Well, in Hanover, I was a young boy. I cannot remember that too much. My mother passed away in 1918 on the flu epidemic when I was four years, and I went to my grandparents' in Weener, Ostfriesland, Germany.

And your father?

My father moved to Berlin, and in 1929, he married again. He married again.

Did you move in with your--

No.

You stayed with--

I stayed with my grandparents, and I was raised there until I was 16 years old. I went to Jewish school and I went to gymnasium, and I went in 1931 to Hanover alum to the Israelitic horticultural school to learn the trade of becoming a horticulturist and gardener or gardener.

In 1934, I made the examination under the Nazi agriculture commission in Hanover and became a full fledged gardener. And this time, I wanted to have a job, but there was no job available because they didn't hire any Jews. I wanted to go then, as I was 20 years of age. I wanted to go to Palestine, but my father said, I don't give you any money because you are not 21 years of age. You had to be maturing that you can go to Palestine,

So I went out in the country in Germany to a place near Berlin, Cottbus [PLACE NAME], where they had a settlement for First World War Jews, and the First World War Jews of Germany. And there they had a gardening, big plants and something for raising agriculture, things like strawberries, asparagus, salad, anything.

And I worked for one of these people, and in 1935, the Nazis came around and said, you have to leave this place. This is German property. It doesn't belong to the Jews. You have to move. So many of these people went to Argentina and also to Palestine.

But I didn't go with them. I went with one of the settlers to a place, Jastrow, Posen, province of Posen. And they had agriculture and also a grocery store. I worked for them, the Jewish people, and in 1935, the Nazis came around and boycotted it, so I had to move.

I moved out into the country and I found a place on a big farm. They were Catholics. That hired some Jewish people also from the town, elderly people, I was a young man that time, to herding sheep and cattle, and I had to do some other scores as plowing the land and something.

In September 1936, the SS Nazi troopers came around. Then every Jew has to be registered in Germany where they

work and where they stay. They came around at that time shortly before the high holidays to round us up and brought us to the police station in Jastrow, Posen, province of Posen.

They were very rough with us, and they had us lay on straw in the cellar and also they treated us very badly. The next day, they transported us to the rail station, but not these cattle trains, it was regular trains, to bring us to Buchenwald, concentration Buchenwald. But at that time it was not open, but we had to start it to build it up.

I'm sorry, what year was this?

Pardon me?

What year was this?

1936.

And how old were you at this time?

Pardon me?

How old were you?

I was 21 at that time, 1935, '36. I was 20 about that time, yeah. Also then we had to build up some tents and stuff like that and to bring in cement and bricks and stuff and hard work, labor, and we had to build certain other things. We had to ship some rocks for street, to make some streets, and then they treated us very, very bad.

We didn't get very much to eat. We had potato pea soup. As I said, sometimes before, black coffee and black bread and something like that. Nothing much too, but we have to keep up our energy and do what we could do.

Do you remember--

So-- pardon me?

Do you remember what a typical day like-- do you remember at that time what a typical day in Buchenwald was like?

What were your days like in Buchenwald?

How many days?

No, what was a typical day like? What did you typically do?

A day was hard work. From the morning until the late afternoon, you had to do hard work, and then we were marched into the tents or the camp grounds or something like that to take our little meal and then go to sleep on the straw or on a bunk, what we had then already, something like that, but that was it.

Can you--

We had no games, no nothing, no entertainment, no nothing.

You say you were arrested and brought to Buchenwald?

I was never arrested in Buchenwald. I was arrested in Jastrow.

And taken to Buchenwald?

Yes, with many other Jews.

How many?

Oh, there were about from that town and that farm, there were about 20, I would say.

And how many in Buchenwald? How many people when you were there?

Oh, I don't know exactly how many there were. They came in every day, some transport came in every day. Now, the other thing, I got sick. I had something with my influenza or something. Kidneys also, they didn't work right. But they didn't have a hospital in Buchenwald. They transferred me by truck to Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg near Berlin, where I stayed in the hospital for a while.

How long were you in Buchenwald before you got sick?

About half a year. Then I was transferred to Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg near Berlin, concentration camp, and was then in the hospital, where they treated me. How I can say how they treated me? Fairly good or not very good, but I got well again.

The commander of this particular concentration camp came to me and asked me when I got better, what is your profession? I said, I have studied horticulture. I have studied gardening. And he shouted up, a Jew, a gardener? He cannot even lift a shovel!

And I said, sir, or commander, I can prove it. Oh, you want to prove it? I try to teach you and takes you for your word. So the day came that I got better, and really, they came with the kapos, with a truck of young men, and these young men were from Berlin and different other places.

They wanted to go to Palestine on an Aliyah, but not happened. They were caught. They were brought also into the concentration camp. So the guards on this truck were Austrians. They were the means ones I ever have seen of any guard we had in the concentration camp. The Austrians were really mean.

So, anyway, we processed to these grounds outside the camp to the houses of these SS troopers or Nazis and started to work on the gardening, and we did. They bought us everything what I wanted. Plants, sand, peat moss, you name it. Tools, whatever I ordered, they got for me.

So, anyway, this was not too bad. It was a good job. And the women from this house just came out when they saw us in this garb, and see us working very hard. They brought us some milk and some bread, and this was very nice.

These were local women?

That we could not take anything into the camp in the evening. That was not allowed. So we had to eat it all up, and we were hungry and we did. They also gave me some cigarettes, but I was not a big smoker. But anyway, nothing I could take to the camp.

But anyway, we finished the job, and it was in December when the winter came in 1930-- what was it, 1937? Yeah, 1937. So I had to work. I was transferred to an easy job, not to an outside hard job, to peel potatoes for the potato peel soup. So I did that. I sat there, I peeled potatoes every day, day out, day in.

So after this, we had to march to different things in the morning. To the woods and chop some woods, do this, and to any other things what it was necessary to do.

I was in the concentration camp of the 9th of November, 1938. This was the day during the Crystal Night, and that was a bad day for us all. They brought in women, old men, old ladies, and small children, whatever. This was very, very bad.

Well, you could nothing do. I met some people there, which I knew. He died just recently. He lived in Yonkers, New York, and he was also in that concentration camp. I do not how long.

But on the 14th of December, 1938, I had a dream, and the dream was something about-- I can't really remember really what it was, but I think it was to get into another world or see something. So in the morning, when I woke up, the kapo of our compound came to my bunk, I had a bunk with some straw and a blanket, and he said to me, you are free. You're going home.

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe what I heard. And all the other prisoners, Jewish people or others, which there were from the Bible readers, Catholics, whatever, came to my bunk and congratulated me and said, you go home. So I jumped off my bunk, and the kapo bought me my clothes, and I had to get dressed very quickly.

And then we had to stand in line outside. There were many of us who were released at that day. And the commander said, the Gestapo has a long, long arm. Whatever you tell people outside of this place, of the concentration camp, what you have done, what you have seen, we can have you again and bring you back. That's what he said.

Can you explain why people were being released at this time?

Pardon me?

Can you explain why people were being released?

Yeah, I tell you why. I was released because, and many others the same way, my stepmother went in Berlin to buy some cancelled travel tickets. My parents went to Cuba, Havana, and for me they had a ticket to go to Shanghai.

And your grandparents?

No, my parents.

No, what happened to your grandparents? Did they leave?

My grandparents, that was in 1936. They were still in that place where they were. I'll tell you that later.

So I went out of the concentration camp with many others the same way. And there were a group of Jewish people outside the gate in 1936. In '38, 1938. Excuse me. This date is wrong. 1938. The 14th of December, 1938.

And I went out, and there were people outside of the street. I didn't have no money in Berlin when I came out of this place. There were organization, and they came up to me and asked me when you have to go. I said, to Berlin then and there. You have any money? No.

They gave me some money to take the tram to go to my parents. Not to my grandparents, to my parents in Berlin. And so I arrived there, and everything what I saw when they opened the door, my mother's mother, she was not Jewish. She opened the door and said, hey, Hans is here. So my father came running, my mother, my stepmother.

So I saw already everything was in lifts and everything was packed in suitcases, and my father told me, we have to leave. You have to go to Shanghai, he told me, and we go to Cuba, Havana. So they could not get a ticket with me to go also to go to Cuba, Havana, so I had to go.

So I had to get my passport from this place where I was arrested, Jastrow, in Posen from the police station. There they took everything away what I had, releases from the concentration camp, and I did not have any evidence that I was released from the concentration camp because they gave me my passport.

They took a photo for me and they gave me my passport, the German photo, passport. I still have it at home. I should have bring it with me. Too bad. And this is what it is.

So I went back to Berlin. Oh, first I asked about these people from this farm, and they said, they're not alive anymore. They killed them because they hired Jews, I understood later. So, well, anyway, so I went back to Berlin, and on the 25th of December, 1938, my father brought me to the station, train station in Berlin, Anhalter Bahnhof, which was destroyed during the war, and he bought me a big newspaper.

This was the day when the Nazis went on vacation, and I went on the train and in my-- how I can say this? My department of the train, there were higher officers of the Nazis, and I had-- my hairs were all shored up. I was almost bald headed. Only a little stubbles. And so one of these German officers started talking to me.

So I took the paper down and I said-- he said, you go on vacation? I said, yes, I go on vacation. Where you go? To Munich. Oh, that is a very nice place. I didn't tell him where I went.

So, OK, the conversation ended. So you have a good time, I said to him. You have a good time. You have nice holidays and so forth. Finished. The conversation was finished.

So anyway, we came to the border of Rosenbach, and Germany between the Switzerland-- or whatever it is. It's Italy or Yugoslavia, I better say. So the Yugoslavian officers came on the train, so we went to Trieste, where the Jewish community received us in Italy. We had a good time there. We got something good to eat and everything was fine.

So a few days later, we went to the pier to take the ship, the Conte Verde Lloyd-Triestino, to go to Shanghai. First of all, we went to Port Said and stopped in Port Said, where I went off the boat for a little while to went to Arab-Jewish place via [INAUDIBLE]. Or Egyptian, I'd better say, Jewish place. To go to Palestine. I want to jump the ship to go to Palestine.

He said, no way. You go back to your ship. The British takes you in. The British didn't want that. So we went further on to the Suez Canal, to Aden. I did the same thing at night. We went with a small boat over to Aden to also a Jewish place. They had some-- and one of the men, he gave me a yamaka and he gave me the siddur, and he said, can you read this? The Shema Yisrael. I said, sure I can read that.

So, read it. OK, I read it. So, OK, we just want to see if you are Jewish. I said, I'm sure I'm Jewish. Have you been in concentration camp? I said, yes, I just got out. I go to Shanghai. I want to go to Palestine from here. No. So they packed up some boxes with [INAUDIBLE] shirts and and everything. So I went back to the ship to go to Shanghai.

On the 29th of January, we came to Shanghai, and we had to stay in the place which we had to build up. It was a camp. A Chinese family--

Excuse me, when you got to Shanghai, what was your impression? Were there people there to meet you?

Well, we had nothing much to say there because it is a big city, and we were treated by the Joint Distribution Committee, which they had an office already there. And then we had to go to a place. It was outside of the main city. It was an American section, Hong Chu. Hong Chu. Where we stayed, we had to do all the work there, to build this up with the beds, with everything, kitchen.

At this point, though, in time, were you essentially free? You were not at this point under anyone's orders or you were not arrested. You were free at this point.

Yeah.

Once you got to Shanghai.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So anyway, so we were treated very nicely. We were greeted by this committee, I told you, and we were brought to this former Chinese school, big school, big building surrounding, with a garden, with everything. But we had to build it up. We had to build up kitchens, auspice kitchens and everything.

Were these the refugee camps that you're speaking about?

Yes, the refugee camps. It was one of them.

One.

They started more. It was one of the first ones in 1939 when I got there. So I started to work for them, for the Joint, and I had also my bed there, and the rooms were large rooms with stacked up beds. And, well, anyway, after it was finished, it was a very nice surrounding.

Later on, they built the hospital there, which I worked later. I worked for [INAUDIBLE] in the big kitchen for the auspice of many thousands of refugees. It was also under the auspice of Rabbi Ashkenazi of the Jewish people, Russian Jewish people in Shanghai, under strict law, kosher. It had to be kosher.

So there were not only the European Jews, Austria, from Germany, from France, from Holland, you name it, there were also many, many Polish Jews, and the Russian Jews, they lived there already before. After the revolution of 1917, 1918, '19, '18, the revolution. They came to Shanghai, to Harbin, and then to Shanghai. They had business and so forth.

Now, before I go on, before I worked--