

Mr. Arons, can we go back for a moment to your early childhood in Germany, and particularly when you began to realize that something was going on involving the Jews and the Germans? And could you give us some examples of those early days as you discovered that the Jews were being singled out and how that affected you?

Right. At my time when I went to the gymnasium in another city, some of these young people or college students, they were very nasty. They talked to me, you dirty Jew, something like that. [GERMAN] and other things you know. Why don't you get out and go to Palestine or something like that. Get out of Germany, something, these words. They were starting to get nasty. And this was particularly in the beginning of the Nazi time, you know.

And Hitler became Chancellor of the German Reich. This is all I can tell you. I had no physical or any interaction with any of these boys. No.

I wonder if this was all the young boys or just some of the young boys? And did you continue to have nice relations with other Germans while you were beginning to have problems with some Germans?

Not directly, no. No. Not that I know of. I didn't had any problem. Only in that particular school they shouted about the dirty Jew or something there. And get out, go to Palestine. We don't need you here in Germany.

But there were Gentiles that treated you decently?

Pardon me?

There were Gentiles who treated you well at the same time you were being mistreated?

Yeah, this was all.

After the war, did you ever consider moving to Israel?

Yes, I considered it. I have visited Israel five times in recent years with my wife. My wife had two cousins in Israel. One, the husband of my wife's cousin, and she passed away, and she has just a letter for very high holidays from another one, cousin, he lives in Haifa. And he has two boys and they live in America and he lives in Haifa on Carmel. Very nice people. They came once to San Francisco and visited us. This is all I can tell you.

I have a lot of friends from Shanghai in Israel. A lot of them. They're still there. Some passed away, some still there, some others. So I visited Israel because I like it. I like it very much. But in my age I do not want to go there anymore.

After the war, why did you come to America instead of going to Israel?

Because I had an affidavit from some friends through my parents to come to the United States. And that's what I wanted, to see my parents. I visited New York several times to see my parents. And I came back to San Francisco because of my job, my profession. And that's what it is. I stayed in California.

Your parents were able to join you in the United States, is that correct? Your parents were able to leave Cuba and come to the United States after the war? Did you then link up with your parents?

They came 1941 to New York.

They came that early.

1941 they came. In September 1941 they came to America, to New York, and they stayed in Rego Park in Queens. And they sent me the affidavit at that time from some friends they had in New York. They could not provide any money to help me if I get sick. I was sponsored by these people under the Truman law, under the DP law that you have to have a sponsor. You have an affidavit that they take care if you get ill. You have no job and no money, they take care of you.

At the time you left for Shanghai and your parents left for Cuba, were there any other places that Jewish immigrants were allowed to go?

No. There was only the Philippines, Manila, and there was nothing else. I think after the war several left for Israel and for England. And some others had to go back to Germany after the war because they were ill, had tuberculosis, could not enter the United States.

At that time, did you wonder why the United States wasn't allowing Jews in or why some of the other countries were not allowing Jews in?

I don't know. I couldn't tell you why. Because the government has quotas, you know. Shanghai did not have a-- China and Chiang Kai-shek had not a quota. We didn't need a visa. So all other countries, the United States, had the quota of so many Jews. Germany had the highest quota, the other quotas, but there was nothing. Other countries I don't know about. England and the other countries I don't know.

When you were in Shanghai, did people know what was going on in Germany? Did they know what was happening to the Jews?

Yes.

They knew they were being exterminated.

Yes.

And how did you know? Because some letters came to the attention of-- I'll show you a letter here. It was executed by the Nazis for my aunt from Berlin. And some others they got some mail also through that. So they found out some things that was going on.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

No.

Before you went to Shanghai, did you have any idea what China would be like?

No. Not at all.

Did you learn any Chinese or Japanese or English when you were in Shanghai?

When I was in Shanghai I met some, yes.

No, did you learn Chinese or Japanese?

Only a few words of Chinese. Not much.

So you spoke English?

Yes.

And you learned English in Germany? Yes.

You mentioned that the Germans wanted the Japanese to begin to exterminate the Jews in Shanghai and that a particular woman was able to change that.

Yes.

Could you say more about that, because that seems like a remarkable thing for one woman to be able to do.

Well, this woman was Japanese and she was married to a Jew. And this Jew was also a refugee, one of us. He told her what happened and she heard about it. And she went to the higher officers and told them that is impossible to do anything to exterminate the Jewish people that live here in Shanghai. And so it was quiet. Nobody heard anything about anymore.

Do you remember her name or his name? Do you remember any of the names involved?

No, I knew it but I can't remember.

It was a long time ago.

Yeah.

Have you gone back to Shanghai?

No.

Have you been back to Germany?

Yes, twice.

I just have sort of a general question. As you look back over those years, are there any specific memories or any lessons to be learned? Anything you'd want to say to us and our listeners?

About Nazi Germany?

As you look back, just as you reflect over those years that you spent in Germany, your early years in Germany and then in Shanghai.

I think about it sometimes, but it is past. It has passed.

You don't spend much time thinking about it now.

No. The other thing I'd like to tell you. In 1981, I received a letter from a school colleague, a Gentile from Germany, here in San Francisco to my home that they wanted to invite me for a reunion of the class, real gymnasium. 1981. I wrote him back that I cannot make it, I'm sorry, and I didn't want to go in the beginning. And I got another letter several years again from another gentleman. In 1986 I received another one.

In 1986, my wife received an invitation from the Mayor of Berlin, and there were many others invited, so as a spouse I was invited too. So I wrote to Hanover and I got the same thing from that Mayor of Hanover because I was born in Hanover even I left earlier. They didn't have much records of me, but anyway I got the invitation also from Hanover for 14 days to come to Hanover. So we combined this. My wife and I, we went to Berlin, we went to Hanover, and then to the small place where I had a reunion of my school colleagues. There were many of them. Many I went to school with are Gentiles. Wherever they were Nazis or not, I cannot tell you.

One man told me he was in the war and was in the Marines, German Marines, and he was caught by the Americans and he was here in Pennsylvania in prison camp. And I asked him, how they treated you in America? Very good, he said. And where you went after the war was ended? They shifted them over to France and they got hit very badly. They didn't like them there. So anyway, I heard several other stories from other men they were also in the Nazis in the East, in Russia. They were almost frozen to death. So anyway, it was not very good.

So anyway, the reception of this particular reunion was very nice. There's some pictures in there in the album. And I went to the cemetery where my grandparents laid to rest. Not my grandparents, my other ancestors laid to rest. And this particular cemetery was completely destroyed. There were only a couple of stones laying around and nothing much of it. So we took some pictures and we left again. We stayed in a hotel there where we were greeted very nicely and otherwise it was quite pleasant. One of the fellows, they were neighbors of mine with my grandparents where we lived. He came around and hugged me. And OK, I took it for granted, but it shook me up later on again.

So in 1988-- We left again Germany. In 1988 we've got an invitation. We did not go to Berlin but we went to Hanover again. I had another coming up 14 days from Hanover from the Mayor of Hanover, so we stayed in the same hotel, a very nice hotel and so on. And had a good time in Hanover. So anyway we went to the small place where my grandparents lived. We had the workman's circle, or better in German [GERMAN] and the city officials made this reunion after 50 years of the synagogue fire, after 50 years of the burning of the synagogue.

So they invited 36 Jewish people, they grew up with me. They came from Argentina, from Peru, from Israel, from Holland, and from the United States. They all grew up with me. It was like a reunion. I haven't seen them for 50 years. Only one or two I have seen here because one of the fellows he has a sister living in San Francisco. She didn't come to that. She's an elderly lady. And this was a reunion where the mayor spoke very highly we cannot forget what has happened, but we also do not want to make any controversy of these things. So we do not forget and we do not want things like this.

And a man from our people, he lives in Los Angeles, he said the same thing. We do not want to make any statements against you and we do not want anything. What happened has happened and we cannot forget it. So we want to live in peace and this is it. So it was a very, very, very nice reunion and we went to the whole thing and something that a lot of pictures in this album whatever. This was a tremendous, tremendous issue which these people did.

And after that, we went to the States to the place where the rabbinical house or the teacher's house of the Jewish community are supporting Jewish families lived. My grandfather was the president of the Jewish community or synagogue for 36 years. And they tear down this place. The synagogue was burned down. But in the middle of this place there was one house standing. This was our Jewish school, and it's still standing there.

Now, in the front of the place where the clinic or the community house was, the whole thing was bought by the German bank, Deutsche Bank. They paid it on to the Jewish province of Hanover. It was all paid to this particular issue to the province, which is a great thing in Hanover now which the provincial rabbinical thing is in Hanover now over this particular province. And they took the money saying that this particular house where we had the school in,

I went in there, I was, I want to see it. I went in the bank and I asked these people, I'd like to see this, I'm Jewish. They knew all about this whole thing. And I went in there and it's the computer room now, renovated and it's the computer room. All nice, painted, everything. Only the wall in there where the entrance was is with bricks cemented in where the door was where we stepped into the school. What these people did, the mayor and the particular working circle, they had somebody they made a flag out of bronze with some scripts on it. It's also there, I show you the pictures later.

And they had somebody put up a menorah out of bronze or what it is I do not know. I haven't seen it, I got only the pictures from there. And built a menorah and set it right in the middle where the entrance was of the Jewish school with some engravings. And what it says in Hebrew and also in German. And it was planted with some nice shrubs and flowers and that what it is now. It's symbolic of the Jewish for the people to see what it was that there was at a time from 1800 over so and so the Jewish community in 1938. This was it. So they did that. They had a march on the Kristallnacht to this particular place, and they did everything they could do, everything. And they spoke highly about the Jewish people and that nobody wants to go back, nobody.

I have one second cousin, he is the mayor of Leeuwarden in Holland His father had a store of bicycles and motorcycles and sewing machines and other things. And he was treated very, very badly in Westerbork in a concentration camp. They tortured him to death. He was one of my so-called cousins of my mother. And this is the son, so-called the second cousin of me. He is in Leeuwarden now. His other brother died in Switzerland. He was in my age.

And this is all I can tell you. There were many, many, many more people there which I grew up with and my same age, except one lady she lives in New York. She married and some other people. It was a tremendous reunion if you can believe that. If you see these people after 50 years again when you were a young man, these were young people, and we all go up and older people now. Any other questions?

I actually have one last question. I had read the transcript of the other interview you did. And when you were in Buchenwald, you were building something. You were laying bricks.

What?

When you were in Buchenwald, were you working on building some barracks or--

Buildings?

Yes.

No.

Or the ovens or something?

No. As I found out as I tell you this, the bricks and the cement we carried, this was for building up the ovens.

So that was the work that you did when you were there.

We didn't know it before. They didn't tell us This is all I can tell you. That's it.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

The pictures I'd like to show you here.