

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Bates, Helmut

Date of interview: 12/27/1995

Summary: Kurt Helmut Bachwitz (later Helmut Bates) came from an affluent, educated, non-religious Jewish family in Berlin with three-hundred-year old roots in Germany. His mother died when he was 12, and his father raised him and his brother, in a highly literate family (he described his father as a "doctor of music and psychology" who knew Thomas Mann and Einstein.) The great-great-grandparents were religious, and he describes his grandparents as "millionaires." His family never intermarried, nor did they hide being Jewish, yet he did not see his family as religious, other than celebrating Passover. Helmut says he wanted to get out of Germany at age 14 because of its "unhealthy atmosphere," but he couldn't convince his father to do so. Helmut's father resisted leaving Germany at first, even though he had \$100,000 in Swiss banks, and had been warned by a teacher of Helmut's school, Oldenburg Schule, to get the kids out of Germany. This school, incidentally, had 31 Jewish students in his class, out of 33. Helmut seemed aware of Nazi racism as early as at age 16, when his first boss in Hamburg, a Jew, had to leave Germany for having a non-Jewish girlfriend (the law against this intermixing was called "Rassenschande"). Similarly, Helmut says he could never have dated a Christian girl in Germany during his youth because it would have gotten him or the girl into trouble. However, Helmut's family did not pay much attention to the Nazi threat until Kristallnacht, after which the family, like many Jews, tried to leave. Helmut took up agriculture and the family tried to go to Australia, or to Palestine via Sweden, or anywhere they could legally immigrate, since they wanted to get out of Germany. One cousin converted to Catholicism and was able to immigrate to the US with the support of the Church.

The family, in fact, immigrated to Kobe, Japan, via London on April 3, 1939. They were only allowed two trunks out of Germany, although they had the wealth of a grand piano and jewelry. In Kobe the Russian Jews were the majority Jewish population, unlike Tokyo which had German Jews. Because Japan highly limited Jewish immigration, most of the refugees went to Shanghai, China, which was much more receptive to immigration. Most who immigrated to Japan were business people who lived there for years; few were refugees. At first Japan and Germany were friendly. When Japan became friendly with Russia, the Jews were identified as Jews, no longer as Germans. However, to most Japanese the Jewishness meant nothing, other than that they knew the Jews were not liked in Germany. He felt safe in Japan; he claims there was a lot of Secret Service around. The Japanese were friendly to the Germans at first, but Japanese were not happy with Germans after the invasion of Poland, although he experienced no personal ill will. He had an aunt who became the first foreign woman to run a business in Japan. There was a committee in Kobe to bring émigrés from

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Germany into Kobe. Helmut went to China and sold whiskey and cameras on the black market to get enough money to get to the U.S.

Helmut's father got to the U.S. on Dec. 9, 1940, and Helmut was drafted at Tacoma, Washington into the U.S. Army Signal Corps almost immediately after they arrived (he was 21 and registered as a "classified enemy alien"). He mentioned being pulled out of overseas service and that none of this company came back alive. He was required to round up Japanese aliens and Japanese-American citizens in Washington for internment camps. Later he was shipped to Africa where he guarded German soldiers, an ironic situation. He also guarded what were, ostensibly, German soldiers in Seattle, but they actually turned out to have been Russian POWs who were dressed in German uniforms (he had been confused why they did not understand German at first.) He alludes to some discrimination in the Army: his birth name, Bauchwitz caused him to have Kitchen Patrol (KP) duty, but when he changed it to "Bates," he received better treatment. He also describes his own fears while in the Army of identifying himself as German-born. He answered he was born in Berlin, Pennsylvania when asked by an Army physician. He also mentions actually guarding President FDR several times, and suggests the FBI would not have allowed it if they had known where he was born.

Helmut describes at length his father's difficulties in the U.S., including changing his surname to Bates. His father was actually supported by money he and his brother saved, so that his father could enroll, as an adult, at Columbia U. to get a degree to work for the US Ministry of Information. His father also was a writer, publishing a book called "The Living" that was banned by the Catholic Church. His father remarried a woman named Hilda, who eventually divorced him in order to marry a successful businessman who promised to get her father out of Theresienstadt if she married him. Unfortunately, he failed on this promise.

Eventually Helmut married a Jewish woman from Shanghai in San Francisco. They have two sons, one of whom lives in Israel. He became a unionized laborer in California and worked for one firm until retirement.