

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Berlin, Herbert

Date of interview: 8/9/1990

Summary: (Deceased 1999)

Herbert Berlin was born on May 14, 1918 in Hamburg, Germany. His father was a prominent stone mason and a conservative Jew who ran a business and carved tombstones in Hamburg. His father's business was passed on to Herbert's brother Ernst in 1935 when his father died. The Berlin family name can be traced back in history to 1600, as proven by Herbert's uncle, who engaged in genealogical research.

Herbert was a member of a reform temple in Hamburg, and while there was a Jewish school for children, Herbert did not attend. His family felt it was more important that he receive a broad education, so they sent him to a different school. He then received training as a brick layer and was attending an engineering school in Hamburg when Hitler first affected his life. On November 11th 1939, Herbert was told that he had to leave, and that he was no longer welcome at the school. Within hours of arriving home he was sent to a camp at Sachsenhausen, where he suffered and worked for approximately three months. Hamburg was different than other German cities; it was more cosmopolitan. There were no ghettos and it did not become as bad as quickly as other parts of Germany.

This was in 1938, in January of 1939 Herbert immigrated to England, where he was classified as a friendly alien and worked in an internment camp near Kent. He worked in several camps in England throughout his stay there, but he fails to name them explicitly in any way that I could understand. His Jewish youth group in Germany sponsored Herbert's escape to England. Since Jews could not participate in normal sports clubs, youth groups were very important. The head of his youth group, who was around nineteen at the time, helped Herbert obtain the necessary papers to leave Germany and immigrate to England.

In England Herbert was shuffled through several locations, first he was put in an internment camp. He lived in England for approximately twelve years and there he met his wife. He then immigrated to America with the help of some of his wife's relatives. He lived in New York for a while, and eventually made his way to San Francisco where he was residing at the time of the interview.

Herbert Berlin's family is a different story, his mother and sister never made it out of Germany, although Herbert received letters from his mother through 1940, with the institution of the Nuremberg laws, however, writing policy became stricter and the letters stopped coming. His brother and brother-in-law escaped Germany to Shanghai, after Herbert's father's business was confiscated. They had every intention of taking Herbert's sister and mother with them, but could not. These two eventually made their way to America, after the Japanese government took over Shanghai and imposed laws similar to those in Germany on the Jewish population.

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At the close of the interview Herbert discusses his trips back to Germany after the war, a tradition he continues every two years. He says that he does not hold the acts of Germany against the young people of Germany now, but that he has a hard time dealing with older people there due to their complicity in the war.