

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Dreike, Ralph

Date of interview: 2/6/2003

Summary: Ralph was born Rolf August Dreifuss in Augsburg, Germany on June 16, 1922. An only child, Ralph lived in relative comfort with his parents, Ludwig, a prominent attorney, and Amalie, a seamstress. His father was Jewish and his mother was Catholic, and Ralph was raised Catholic. Ralph attended grammar school and gymnasium in Augsburg, but ran into some problems with a teacher whom he termed a "rabid Nazi." This teacher flunked Ralph in his second year, in 1934. Around this time, Ralph's father was taken into custody by the local Nazi government. The jail was next door to his school, and other students often teased Ralph for his father's imprisonment.

After the second year at gymnasium, Ralph transferred to a Catholic boarding school. He said he did quite well there, and enjoyed a few years of peace. Not many people knew that his father was Jewish, and he was not teased or harassed by classmates. While Ralph was at boarding school, his father was released from prison. Though he would be picked up occasionally over the next few years, his life wasn't heavily disrupted, but he was forced to separate from his Christian law partner and to eventually relinquish all but his Jewish clients.

In about 1936 the Marist Brothers were forced to give up the boarding school, and a group of Nazi teachers and administrators took over. Shortly thereafter, Ralph said students found out that he was half Jewish, and started to harass him, going so far as to beat him up, exclude him from school events, and prevent him from using the swimming pool. His mother pulled him out of the school and tried unsuccessfully to enter him in high schools in Augsburg. When it became evident that his half-Jewish background would prevent him from continuing his education, Ralph's parents decided to send him to America.

In April of 1938 Ralph boarded the cruise ship Manhattan for the voyage to New York. He was sponsored by a cousin of his father's. He met several refugees, many of them his age, and they quickly became friends. He said he was relieved to be leaving Germany, and thrilled when his father told him that because the Manhattan was an American ship, he couldn't be harmed.

Ralph spent a few weeks in New York with friends of his parents before boarding a train for San Francisco. He stayed at Homewood Terrace upon his arrival in the city, and forged close friendships with the other émigrés living there. Because Ralph wasn't Jewish, he couldn't remain there for the duration of the war, and per his parent's instructions was placed with a Catholic foster family, probably through Boy's Town though he wasn't completely clear about that.

He lived with the Povey family in the Richmond District for several years

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beginning in 1938, and attended Washington High School. His closest friends were other German refugees.

Ralph graduated from high school and was taking classes at UC Berkeley to become a pharmacist and working in a shipyard when the war started in 1941. He immediately fell under laws enacted for enemy aliens, and was required to abide by a curfew, though he was still allowed to work on U.S. military ships at the shipyard. He wanted to enlist in the military right after Pearl Harbor, but was told that because he wasn't a citizen he had to wait for the draft. He was drafted into the Army and became a citizen shortly before shipping out to the Pacific theater. He changed his name upon becoming a citizen for fear of being sent to Germany and facing reprisals from Nazi troops. While stationed in the Pacific, he received correspondence through the military's counterintelligence corps saying that his mother had been found in hiding in a convent and the military was trying to liberate his father from a concentration camp.

Ralph remained in the reserves, but finished active duty after the war ended. He met his wife, Ruth, at a New Year's Eve party, and they were married in 1952. Ruth was Jewish, but converted to Catholicism after they married. They have six children and several grandchildren.

Ralph's file includes several documents and the second tape contains photos of his family and life in the U.S. He spoke clearly and with incredible detail of his experiences in school and feeling like he didn't belong in either Catholic or Jewish circles in Germany.