

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Ehrlich, William

Date of interview: 7/24/1996

Summary: William Ehrlich was born 9/19/1929, as the only child of Sophie (born 1893 in Sholankan, Eastern Germany) and father Richard Ehrlich (born 1888 in Jogazen and then moved to Berlin). Father owned a printing and stationary shop and mother was the bookkeeper for the store. Previously, father served in the German army in WW1. His parents met in Berlin, married, and lived in an apartment in the same building as the printing shop. The family was not very religious but his father went to temple on big religious holidays. William Ehrlich went to public schools. He remembers being beaten up in 1937 for being Jewish. In his last year of high school he went to a private Jewish high school. His father, a veteran, was a powerful influence in the community. The neighborhood the Ehrlichs lived in was middle class, a non-religious Jewish neighborhood. William felt like he was spoiled since he was the only child and also was less harshly disciplined than other children. He remembers one friend, a boy that lived next door, but who joined the Hitler Youth; after that, he had no contact with this boy.

He remembers anti-Semitism in large parts of the communities and cities surrounding the country. He recalls the time his father was forced to paint his name on the window of his shop, which made it a target for vandalism during Kristallnacht. The morning after Kristallnacht, the family heard reports of stores looted and vandalized, and also that people were being arrested for nothing and taken away. The family discussed how they would escape if things got worse.

When the time to escape arrived, only William could leave Berlin, and the family had to separate. William, along with other children, boarded the train to Sweden via Hamburg. He was given to Frank Austin and his wife in South Hampton, England where Austin owned a furniture store Austin's children did not like William and beat him up for being Jewish. He was sent to Cyborn School, a religious school. He was sent to live with the Harris family in Donmoe, England after complaining that he was not satisfied with the accommodations with the Austins. William sent a message through the Red Cross to his father and mother in Theresienstadt. His father's status as a German army veteran had enabled them to get to this, the "best" of the ghettos. He later moved to Cholmsford and ended up passing through 15-17 different households. He says that most families took in children only for the money, although he also states that the Harris's never did it for the money. He maintained contact with Frank Austin, who gave him an allowance to spend if needed. Went to a grammar school and then to a trade school, but he passed the grammar exams and went to the University of London. Cholmsford was bombed many times due to the factories that supported the allied war effort.

After being accepted to the University of London, he found out that his parents

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were liberated by the Russians and sent to a DP camp in Dengendorf. His parents survived an outbreak of typhus, and they came to Boston, MA in 1946. William was to follow them immediately, but his visa was delayed. His father wrote to his friend Albert Einstein, asking him as a favor to get his son's visa expedited. Einstein wrote to the ambassador saying that William Ehrlich would be "a useful citizen to this country." The next day, William received his visa and met up with his family in January 1947.

William was drafted in the U.S. army in 1951 into a tank battalion. He was stationed in Texas during the Korean War. He saw California and wanted to move there with a friend after the war. William was discharged from the army in December 1952 and moved to San Francisco with his friend. He was 25 at the time. William worked for Remington Rand, a company that sold office furniture and filing system equipment. He then worked for the federal government in the Department of the Army for 39 years in Oakland, CA. After this, he worked in the Office of Economic Opportunity in the anti-poverty program, which later became the Social Security Administration. His parents lived in the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the aging and William met his wife at a cocktail party and married her in 1969 at the age of 40.