

This interview was audio-recorded and simultaneously stenographically recorded on Sunday, March 26, 1989 for the Oral History Committee of the Holocaust Library and Research Center of San Francisco.

INTERVIEWEE: HARRY THALHEIMER

INTERVIEWER: DAVID SOKOLSKY

MR. SOKOLSKY: Q. Today is Sunday, March 26, 1989. My name is David Sokolsky. I'm an interviewer with the Holocaust Survivors Oral History Project, and I'm interviewing a survivor from Germany named Harry Thalheimer.

Harry, can you tell me when you were born and in what town.

A. I was born in September 30, 1922 in a city called Darmstadt, approximately 15 miles south of Frankfurt.

Q. What are your parents' names?

A. My father's name is Joseph and my mother's name is Frieda.

Q. Do you have brothers and sisters?

A. I have two sisters. One is living here in San Francisco, and the other one perished in the Holocaust.

Q. What are your sisters' names?

A. My sister who lives is Lottie, and my sister who was killed name is Hilda.

Q. And are they older or younger than you?

A. Both my sisters are younger than I am.

Q. And how many people lived in Darmstadt?

A. The population at that time was 95,000, and there were approximately -- at the height of the population of Jews there were about 5,000 there.

Q. And did you and your family attend a synagogue?

A. Yes, we belonged -- there were three synagogues. We belonged to the Orthodox shul.

Q. What was it's name?

A. The names in Germany -- they didn't have names like here. This was just called the New Orthodox Shul because the building was not quite as old as the conservative temple there.

Q. And your family was Orthodox?

A. Well, we more or less lived Orthodox. We were strictly kosher until Hitler forbade kosher killing, you know, and then my dad, thinking he had three children to feed, he didn't want to deprive us of meat, so we ate what they called at that time "new kosher," where the animal was anesthetized and then it was killed through the kosher style. That was the law in Germany, what you had to do then.

Q. What did your father do for a living?

A. My father worked for his cousins. He was like an accountant for his three cousins. He went to work for them after the First World War, which my

father was a veteran of. He was wounded twice. And he worked for them for 18 years, until the place was closed down because of the Nazis.

Q. And when was that?

A. In 1938.

Q. Oh, '38. Okay.

Was there a Jewish community in the city?
Did all the Jews live in one area?

A. No, no, they were scattered all over town. There was no such thing as a typical Jewish ghetto. The only Jewish ghetto at that time was perhaps that people who came -- migrated from Poland and Lithuania and so they usually lived in the older part of town because it was the cheapest place for them to live, and they were just starting out, you know.

Q. And what part of town did you live in?

A. We lived in -- we were -- I would say middle class people, not even higher middle class. My dad had a job. And most of my remembrances is from the Depression that was worldwide at that time, and we were just happy that he had a job and that he could feed us, you know. We were comfortable, but we were not wealthy in any way.

Q. And you all spoke German?

A. All spoke German, right.

Q. Did you speak Yiddish?

A. No, that wasn't our...

Q. And what about Hebrew?

A. Yeah, we went to Hebrew school like everybody else, and I never was too good in Hebrew because my eyesight was never so good that I could follow the text too well, so I -- I could read Hebrew, of course. We learned that in Hebrew school.

Q. And did you regularly go to synagogue on Saturday?

A. Oh, yeah, in my younger days I went every Saturday. Every Friday night and every Saturday.

Q. And you were bar-mitvahed?

A. And my bar-mitvah was there in the Orthodox shul, where at that time it was traditional for the bar-mitvah boy to say the whole portion for that Sabbath. However my bar mitvah was on a special day. It was Shabbos T'Shuvoh, between Rosh Hashona and Yom Kippur and I was not allowed at that time, which I didn't know before that, not allowed to say the haftorah. According to the Orthodox, a married man with children should say it on that day.

Q. Your public school that you went to was a regular German public school?

A. Yes, I went to a regular German school six days a week, and on Sundays we had to go to Hebrew school.

Q. So you went to German school on Saturday?

A. Saturday for a half a day, and the kids -- the Jewish kids would come with their shabbos clothes to school and were allowed -- had permission not to carry any books or pencils. We just took ourselves there without anything. The school was only half a day.

Q. And it was in the afternoon?

A. No, it was in the morning. The school was in the morning.

Q. Before synagogue or --

A. No -- well, synagogue was -- how should I say? School, I think, was until ten o'clock, I remember. Ten or ten thirty on Saturdays. So we could go to shul afterwards.

Q. I see. How many Jews were in the school? Was it a large percentage?

A. No, no, not too many. In the school that I was in there was very Jews, and this was the first time -- It may be interesting to note how important it is that religion and state are separated. In Germany, you know, they're not. So that whenever the priests from the Christian children would come into the school to teach their children the various religious beliefs, the Jewish children -- there was only, I think, another Jewish boy in the school I was in. We had to go outside and sit out in the playground in summertime. In wintertime we'd sit somewhere in the stoops, because we were not -- we

didn't have any religious instruction in school. There was not enough children there. So we already felt very strange and segregated because of that. So that when we talk about here separation of school and church, it's very -- I mean school -- church and state, it's very important.

Q. And did you experience anti-Semitism in school from the kids?

A. Yes, absolutely.

Q. Can you describe some of those experiences.

A. The experiences usually were that they would gang up on you, and they would of course besides calling you "dirty Jew" and "Jewish swine" or something like that, they would sometimes pin you against the wall and they'd tell you, "Say Jesus" or something like that, you know. Now I must say there were other kids too who didn't do that, but there was always a certain group who were very anti-Semitic.

Q. And did your family experience any anti-Semitic problems in the house or at the store, things like that?

A. Well, I think -- you know, as a Jew in Germany in those days you knew what your limitations were. We were -- I can say that we -- my dad was very popular in Germany, a very respected man. As a matter of fact, he was president of the Jewish War

Veterans organization that was only for Jewish soldiers who served in the front lines. He was the president for 18 years, and he was very active politically in some deomocratice party over there. And he was very well-respected. So sure there was anti-Semetism. You knew that a Jew couldn't become a judge, a Jew couldn't become certain things in government. You knew all that. So we didn't -- but other than that, we lived fairly normal lives. I even belonoged to a sports club that haad -- was a non-Jewish sports club, but later on, when Hitler came, that was denied.

Q. So Hitler came to power in 1933?

A. Right.

Q. You were 11 years old?

A. Right.

Q. Do you remember that?

A. Oh, I remember that. I remember even before when I used to see -- as a small boy I used to see hunger marches down the street, you know. The communists would march down the street and the Nazis would march down the Street, and the Nazis would kind of meet them and beat them up, and I sometimes observed that, and also I remember at one time very vividly that I must have been about eight or nine years old, and there were about three or four brownshirts who marched in front of our house to a meeting or wherever they were going, and my

mother looked out the window and she called me over and she pointed to them and said, you know, "If they ever get to power, they're going to kill us all." I never forgot that. But there was naturally -- after Hitler there was -- first of all, there was the anti-Semitism that was forced upon the people. There were several kinds. One was, for instance, that every store after a few -- after a year or so had to have a sign on their door "Jews Not Wanted." That simply meant you went in the store anyway. You had to do business. The only store you didn't go in, it said "Jews Forbidden." For instance, in our public swimming pool there was a sign on there, "Dogs and Jews Not Allowed." So you can imagine -- and then of course later on as a child it was very -- you couldn't go to a movie, which was a terrible punishment for a young boy.

Q. Sure.

A. But of course we formed in our own clubs. We had our own sports club. We our own -- I belonged to Agudath Israel at that time, which was an Orthodox youth club. So we had our own good times, but we didn't mingle anymore with non-Jews. That was just impossible. As a matter of fact, I did have some good non-Jewish friends, but as soon as he came to power, that was the end of that friendship. They wouldn't see my anymore. They would be afraid to see me.

Q. When you were bar-mitzvahed in 1935 --

A. Right.

Q. This was after Hitler was in power.

A. Right.

Q. Were there any problems with attending the service and having bar-mitvah parties, that kind of thing?

A. Yeah, there was a problem. One thing was the day before my bar mitvah, I never forgot. Some kids were waiting for me and we started to fight and I wound up with a fat lip, so I remember in shul I had to sing with a fat lip, and the next day -- the bar mitvah in those days was held in your house. I mean, the celebration. You know, the people came and went all day long. You served them something and as soon as the house was full, other people would come and other people would leave, and I remember on that day I don't know how they knew that I had a bar mitvah. Nazis stood in front of our house -- it was an apartment building, it was not a private home -- with a Nazi flag, and I don't know what they tried to accomplish. People came anyway because they were Jews anyway. So that was one of the things. Otherwise I had a very nice bar mitzvah. I got the usual presents and -- so I was not deprived of anything at that time.

Q. Were the synagogues closed down at one point before the war?

A. No. The only time the synagogues were closed is when they were burned down.

Q. Kristallnacht?

A. Yes, right.

Q. And that was in 1938.

A. '38.

Q. And -- well, can you just describe what you remember from Kristallnacht. You were about 16 years old?

A. I was 16 years old and I was -- at that time I was an apprentice in Frankfurt, and I came home every Wednesday and I left back to my job every Thursday.

Q. Excuse me, but you were an apprentice doing what?

A. I was trying to learn the restaurant business in a Jewish restaurant in Frankfurt.

Q. A kosher restaurant?

A. Yeah. No, I don't -- it may not have been kosher anymore. It was probably what they called new kosher, right. It wasn't strictly kosher anymore. But in any event, when I went back on Thursday morning to the -- to the train depot I saw the skies were really bright, you know, but I didn't know what was going on. So I went to the train depot, and as soon as I walked in I was arrested, and my father took me -- went with me, because he was afraid something was going to happen

because the German attache was murdered the day before in Paris. I don't remember -- you know the story.

Q. Yes.

A. That's what brought on Kristallnacht.

Q. Right.

A. And we knew something was going to happen if this man dies. He wasn't dead yet; he was just wounded at that time. So I told my dad to wait outside the depot, not go in there with me, so he did, and he said, If you're not out from there in five minutes, I'll get you. But as soon as I walked in the depot, and my dad was still watching me, I was arrested. So I waved my dad to get away from there, which he did. And then they let me go again because I had legitimate business to go someplace, but then I decided not to go and I wanted to go back home.

And on the way back home I was -- I met the rabbi's son on the way home, and he told me that the synagogues are burning. So I ran -- we ran to our Orthodox shul, and as I got there, there were some young men already and they're friends of mine. That particular temple wasn't burning yet. The only thing we saw when we came in there were huge mattresses in there, and I think they were soaked with gasoline or some oily stuff. They hadn't started to burn it yet, so we went in there to

rescue some torahs, and as we came out of the synagogue we were arrested -- I was arrested again. There was a Gestapo there already. They wanted to make sure nobody goes in there anymore.

So anyway they let us -- let me go again.

Q. With torahs?

A. No. The torahs, some were rescued, only a few. Most of them burned up. And then after we left they must have burned the temple down, and then I went home, and when I got home the Gestapo came to our house and was actually looking for my father, but my father had just left five minutes before to see if his cousins were all right, because they were quite a bit older than my father, and they asked my mother if my father was home, and she said no, and then they started searching, and they saw me sitting there, and they said, "Who are you?" and I told them, and they said "Get your coat and come with us." And that was it. And they said to my father to report when he comes home, and my father did and he begged them to please let me go, but they told him -- tried to make him feel good. They told him "Nothing will happen to him," and they said, "By the way, you must have recently had a severe operation," and my dad said, "No, I didn't have," and they said, "Think that over for a few minutes and I'll come back again." He wanted to give him an excuse to let him go home, because I think they had the quota

at that time, because I think they took about a hundred from our town.

So he went home, and I was put into a basement of the Gestapo headquarters, which I told you before this tape started is now a synagogue, you know, but you want to get into that later. This was a Gestapo headquarters, and we stayed there all day, about 25, 30 other people, a huge cell it was, and in the evening we then were transported with -- some with private cars and some with trucks to Buchenwald. I was put into a private car with another man that I knew, and the funny thing of it is that the driver of the car was our baker. Well, not all of our baked goods, but we used to patronize him. The man in the back of us -- he was in SA uniform. The man in the back who was watching the other fellow in the back, he was an SS man and he was a butcher's, a neighbor's, son.

Q. So everybody knew everybody.

A. I knew them absolutely. I knew what happened to one of them after the war. They made him -- put him on hard labor. The baker. And the other one, I think, got killed in the war.

Q. Wait a minute. They put the baker in hard labor?

A. After the war.

Q. Oh, because he was --

A. The Americans.

Q. He was arrested as being a Nazi?

A. Right.

So that -- and we arrived in Buchenwald I think it was something like midnight, and then the real terror started of course, you know, as a 16-year-old, and I was scared to death of course, and it was cold already.

Q. Excuse me, but I just wanted to ask you a few questions before you got to Buchenwald.

A. Okay.

Q. You were in this holding cell in the Gestapo headquarters.

A. Right.

Q. This was the day after Kristallnacht.

A. That's right.

Q. What was the building before it was the Gestapo headquarters?

A. That I have no idea. It looked like some kind of a mansion of some kind. They -- evidently the jail cells were put in much later, you know.

Q. Do you remember -- you said you were in the cell with 25 or 30 other Jewish people.

A. Right.

Q. What were the discussions going on then?

A. I think practically nothing. I think we just sat there in silence.

Q. Was it mostly men or --

A. Men, only men.

Q. And you were the youngest man?

A. Yes.

Q. And everybody sat around in silence?

A. I don't think they said much. I think they brought in food one time. Some kind of a watery something. And I think nobody touched it. Nobody.

Q. Was there any praying, davenning or anything?

A. I don't remember that. I'm sure there must have been because there were very Orthodox Jews there. I remember that the shamus was there. I don't know if he was in the cell. But later on in Buchenwald he organized services right away. I mean, he was not the only one of them. There were many of them. And he was a tremendous -- a poor schnook in Germany, but he was a giant in the concentration camp.

Q. Okay. The ride in the truck to Buchenwald, you mentioned --

A. Yes.

Q. -- how long was that?

A. Several hours. I don't exactly know. It seemed like forever. It was probably four, five hours.

Q. And were you --

A. Because they marched in a column, you know. There was about 30 cars or 25 cars and a

couple of, three, trucks.

Q. So you were part of a contingency from other towns?

A. No, this was -- I believe the only ones in this column was from our town. I'm almost sure.

Q. But it was more than just the 25 people from the cell that went?

A. Oh, yes. I don't know where the others were held. I never -- I'm not sure of that.

Q. Was that an uncomfortable trip?

A. No. The cars was all right. There was also silence. Nobody said anything. I think the only thing one time one of the -- I don't know whether it was the butcher's son or baker who said -- he said, "Don't worry" or something like that.

Q. But this was one of the Nazi guards?

A. Of course.

Q. "Don't worry."

Q. So you were riding to Buchenwald. Had you heard of Buchenwald before?

A. Oh, yes. We had people -- we had neighbors, Jewish people, who had been there.

Q. That's right outside of Munich, correct?

A. Near Weimar in Bavaria. Yeah, it's a few miles from Weimar.

Q. How do you spell Weimar?

A. W E I M A R. The Weimar Republic.

Q. Were you processed into the camp?

A. We went in there, and we were lined up and somebody asked questions. Some were not -- I know this fellow who was in the car with me. They asked him, "What's your profession?" He was maybe a man in his late late 50s, early 60s, and he said, "I'm a financial advisor," and right away he hit him. He was actually a retired schoolteacher, but since he wasn't in the German -- excuse me. He couldn't teach anymore and he took another profession. And the guy hit him in the face and said, "Oh, you helped those Jews take the money out of Germany," you know, and a few other things like that. I personally was not hit or anything.

And then after that we were put into a barracks. I can't describe it. It's a huge barracks. But it was not quite yet finished, because they had built these barracks for us, evidently, in a real hurry. They were half-finished. And this was not finished at all. There was no floor yet. And I remember they told us -- there must have been hundreds in there, how many I don't know -- we we have to lie down on the floor, and there wasn't even enough room to lie down, and they said if anybody raises their head we're going to shoot them. So I remember once or twice a night they would ask you if somebody wanted to go to the bathroom. They could only take ten at a time. So only -- and then one time I did hear a shot fired in

there, that somebody must have gotten up or something. I don't know. I don't think he was hit or anything, but I didn't dare lift my head.

Q. So this was every night you had --

A. No, this was the only night. This was the first night.

Q. I see.

A. And the next night -- the next day we were assigned to another barracks. Actually it was a camp within a camp where we were. There was a wire around our camp besides the regular concentration camp. And we were put into a camp and I'm sure that people have seen these pictures where there was just layers, boards, one, two, three, where you had to lie. It was just like you put away merchandise on a shelf. That's where you had to crawl in. And these hundreds of people would crawl in there, and every night some piece of barracks would collapse, you know, because of the sheer weight.

Q. And this was just wood, no mattresses.

A. Nothing, just plain boards. And we had to sleep here, and you would sleep so tight that you couldn't even sleep on your back. You had to sleep side to side most of the time. And of course the first three days we didn't get anything to eat, which was not bad at all, but the water -- there was no water. It was terrible.

Q. You didn't eat for three days but it didn't bother you?

A. Didn't bother me at all. First of all, I was so nervous and so scared that I don't think I could have eaten anything. It didn't bother me at all. I did want water. And that was -- I don't think we got any water for the first two or three days. The only thing that happened was it rained and I think I had some kind of a tin. I would stand outside in front of the roof and catch the rain water and there was a friend of my dad who was in the barracks with me, and he asked me if I could bring him some water. He was evidently too sick to get out of his barracks. It was at night, and I didn't know at the time that he couldn't even hold the pan of water that I gave him in his hand, he was shaking so badly, and I didn't know -- he told me he had diabetes, which I had never known, and he needed water very badly, so I gave him water. So we helped each other, you know.

And of course not to go into all the details -- I've said this many times -- in a concentration camp you learn what real human beings really are. You know, when you are stripped away of all your worldly goods, and you're just left there with your naked self, you find out what a good or bad human being you really are. I have met people who couldn't take the pressure, who completely went

crazy there. There was Jews there unfortunately who stole from other Jews. You wouldn't dare take your shoes off at night because somebody might steel your shoes, so you kind of were careful.

But on the other hand, at one time the Nazis took out all the lawyers in our barracks and brought them to the middle of the barracks. I didn't see it myself. I was -- I didn't want to get too close. They took boards, some kind of 2x4s, whatever you call them, and hit them over -- in the legs and broke their legs, one leg, and the doctors who were in the barracks were told if they would treat anybody with a broken leg they would kill them, it's a death penalty for them, and these doctors took underwear, took boards, took anything they could get to make splints for these broken -- people with broken bones, and other people were watching that nobody would come in and see them do it, and they were heroic, I must say.

Q. Why did they break the lawyers' legs?

A. Who knows? They hated the lawyers, the Jewish lawyers. So that was one thing. And the scream -- if you ever heard a person scream when he gets his leg broken, I guess -- I could not describe it to you, you know, but that's what I'm saying, that you really get to know good people and bad people and it's an unfortunate thing, and that's why I said this shamus who was with us, he was a real

hero. He organized religious services three times a day, and when the people complained, they said you can't bring in this dirty, filthy barracks -- where are you going to wash your hands, he knew right away something in the Bible that you can also take your hands and rub it on wood and consider yourself clean. So there were these kinds of people too.

Q. How many people were in your barracks?

A. I wouldn't know for sure, but I'd say a couple of thousand. Between two and three thousand, at least. It was a huge barracks.

Q. And this one shamus had this service --

A. He was not the only one.

Q. There were several services going on throughout the barracks?

A. Several. And he was in charge like in our barracks, I would say. Every barracks had their own services three times a day.

Q. Did people have yarmulkes?

A. Well, they all had hats. Yarmulkes, they didn't have.

Q. But you had hats.

A. Or they would use handkerchiefs or something.

Q. Did you have prayer books?

A. No.

Q. So --

A. I don't think so.

Q. So everybody knew the service by heart?

A. Right.

Q. And you didn't have torahs.

A. Didn't have what?

Q. Did you have torahs?

A. No, nothing. Nothing like that.

Q. But you did the best you could.

A. I don't think they even allowed us officially to have services there.

Q. I wouldn't think so.

A. They did it on the sly. And also there was one adventure I had while I was in there. They decided after I was in there a few days or a week or so that all those under a certain age -- I don't remember anymore -- I think it was under 40 had to report for work camp. They're going to put them to work, put us to work. So I reported naturally with the others.

Q. Excuse me, but how long was this after you were incarcerated?

A. About a week. About a week. And they took us -- they told us to report at a certain gate, which I did, with many others, and they took us into the regular concentration camp. They took my closeby and they put me in these -- the first time I had these striped uniforms on that you must have seen in pictures.

Q. Yes.

A. And I really felt like a prisoner now, and then I was brought into the barracks where there was no Jews in there. I don't know. There may have been a couple, but there was not my people. Let's put it that way.

Q. Who was in there?

A. There was regular prisoners from the concentration camp. And you could always also tell why they were in there. A Jew had a Mogen David. If they were a Jew, half the star was yellow. If they were criminals the other half of the star would be green. If they were communists, the other half of the star would be red. And the other identifying marks for a prisoner -- if they were not Jews, they wore a triangle, which was green for a criminal and red for a communist and the purple was -- what do you call it?

Q. Gays?

A. Jehovah's Witnesses.

Q. Oh, Jehovah's Witnesses.

A. Then you knew right away why they were in. So I was in the barracks and --

Q. Excuse me. The tape is down.

Q. We'll run this for a few seconds.

Okay. The last thing you said was that the purple triangle indicated a Jehovah's Witness.

A. Right.

Q. And that you knew right away why people

were in the camp.

A. Right. You just had on look at the their triangle. There were no Jews, but if they were a Jew, they just made a Mogen David out of the other triangle. So anyway, I came to this barracks and there was a leader of the barracks who was also a prisoner. I think later on I understand they were called kapos.

Q. Yes.

A. But we didn't -- I didn't even know that name at that time. He was called a barracks elder. Okay. And he was the absolute dictator in there. I was told right away. He can kill you on the spot if he feels like it. If you do anything wrong he can deny you things. He's absolutely the king of the barracks, so you better stay away from him. They warned me right away. And I noticed that his privilege was -- he had a little frying pan and there was a stove going, because it was already cold, and he fried himself some potatoes. I guess that was the privilege of being the barracks elder.

Q. And what was he in for?

A. That I don't remember.

Q. What was his color?

A. He was a -- he was not a Jew. No, no, he was a regular -- and I remember that was the first night and only night I was there, which I'll explain later, that I slept on a straw mattress. And we had

to get up five o'clock in the morning or before and go to work. So the next morning, I got outside with the rest of the barracks and we stood there until everybody was lined up, and always somebody talked over the loudspeaker and he said in German of course that he had found out that among the prisoners in here was a punk of 16. I want him to stand -- take one step forward. Well, I knew I was 16. So I took a step forward. This SS commander came with his riding britches and his swagger stick, and he came over to me and he looked at me and he told me to get out. So they took me back to the place where I changed my clothes, gave me my old clothes back and sent me back to the -- to my friends, to the people from my city. And I already felt better when that happened because I didn't want to stay there.

Q. What month was this?

A. November.

Q. Kristlnacht was in November.

A. Yes. And I was then back in the camp and they did make some -- a couple of improvements. Once a week or so there was a canteen where you could buy things. And since I didn't have any money -- and it was very peculiar the way they treated -- in some cities they took everybody away from you. In other cities they kept their money.

So a friend of mine had some money. He gave me some money so I could buy something and I

found out that the canteen was run by some Jewish inmates and some of the guards there, so -- and you could buy a little cake of soap or I think some kind of candy. And that's the only luxury they had there. But then later on during the war, it was still scarce. They built that camp so fast they didn't bring the water in yet, so they used to bring buckets of water. And I remember that somebody got the water and they were selling it for all the money they could get. So there was always something going on. But other than than that, the only other thing I remember then in the barracks was a very close friend of my father went crazy, went out of his mind, and I guess he tried to kill himself and he pushed his hand through a glass window. So then the Nazis came and picked him up and they put him in what was called the water chamber. We understood they were supposed to have put a hose of water in their mouth. I never saw that. I couldn't tell you that. To either kill them or to make them unconscious. So all I can tell you is that this man came back from this -- which was already a miracle -- from this water barracks, and after that he never said another word. He was absolutely mentally crazy. And the funny thing was I told you in the 50th reunion that we attended this year -- last year, I saw his son, who was a hero in the Second World War for the American army. He marched

into our home town with the American army, and he didn't know anything about that either.

Q. So this man would have come to America before the war?

A. No, the father, did not make it. He was....

Q. Oh, but the family did?

A. The son. I don't know if he had any brothers or sisters. I think he had a sister. So that -- but these kinds of tragedies, you know, they happened to everybody. For instance a very close friend of my father's died there, and they brought the ashes to his wife's apartment and the man knocked on the door and he said, "I have here your husband's ashes. Do you want them here, or do you want us to take care of it?" Naturally the woman fainted right in front of the man. That's the way they -- Of course, who knows whose ashes they were, right? So these things happened. There was of course in our town quite a few who died there. Nobody knows exactly from what. If you were sick, there was no way they could take care of you.

Q. Died in the town or died in the barracks?

A. In the barracks.

Q. Buchenwald.

A. I don't know how many exactly, but quite a few died. And other than that -- I mean, I never got any personal -- I was never hit or had any

corporal punish against me personally. I did see quite a bit, you know, for any reason at all. But other than that, we just -- the most important thing is when you're in a situation like this, is the uncertainty, because you don't know. Because every day there were rumors of how we were going to get out, the American -- I remember one rumor was the American investment company of Kuhn & Loeb of New York gave everybody in the camp an affidavit and we're all getting out in a few days. Those rumors were going on constantly. Where they came from, nobody knows.

Q. What did you do all day?

A. Not a heck of a lot. If we weren't -- if it was raining, we looked for water. If not there were always people standing around and talking. And of course what nobody wanted to talk about is the worst thing in the camp, like the sanitary facilities, which is almost non-existent, you know. In other words, I was there five weeks and I never took a bath or anything. I mean, there was absolutely no way to do this, and bathrooms were all outside. They were just ditches. And I saw a few people for instance who couldn't take it anymore. They threw themselves in the electric wired fences that were around the camp, you know. So you get very desperate in a situation like this. It's only -- I can't compare my story to the people who were

in the other camps such as Auschwitz where they stood there for years, you know. But it's the uncertainty which is the worst in these situations.

Q. Were there roll calls every morning?

A. Every day, yes.

Q. Can you describe what they were like.

A. Well, it depended on the man who took the roll call. He may have you stand out there for two hours sometimes at strict attention and sometimes it would be over fairly soon. And of course I remember also one day which you may be interested in, which was quite interesting. One Sunday -- that was the day that this German attache in Paris -- his name was Von Rath. He was the one who was murdered by this Jewish fellow Greenspan in Paris. On the day of his funeral they made us all sit on the ground in the camp there, and I remember there was these white stones we had to sit on. It was very difficult to sit on these. And they brought us the food there, and the man who was sitting next to me was the man I told you about who had diabetes who was one of my father's closest friends, and all of a sudden someone comes and dishes out food and he looks at his eyes and he sees that's his nephew. He had emigrated to Israel, at that time Palestine, and he said, "What are you doing here?" So he told him that while he was in Palestine he stole a car, and the English threw him out of Palestine. He wound up in

Czechoslovakia, and when the Germans moved into the Sudanland, the Czechs turned him over to the Germans, and here from Palestine he was in a concentration camp. Whatever happened to him, I have no idea.

Q. What happened to the man with the diabetes?

A. As a matter of fact, he came to Oakland.

Q. California?

A. He had to have had a bad experience after he left the concentration camp. The following winter, in 1940, they took all the Jews in our town and they had to shovel snow, but if you had a visa to get out you were able to get out, and he was able to get out by way of Russia, Siberia, Japan and then to California. But they had relatives in Oakland. That's where they live. As a matter of fact, the daughter -- one daughter still lives there. He had passed away in 1947, I believe. He died a natural death here.

Q. Well, it's amazing --

A. I don't know how old he was. He must have been in his early 60s.

Q. It's amazing that he could survive without medication.

A. Of course I don't know how severe he had it. One of them is constant thirst, and I guess he was in there only a few weeks like I was. We

weren't in that long. So anyway, that was -- some of the -- some of them that came out were all right.

When I -- I don't know if you want to know when I got out. We were told the night before that we were going to be released, and what they did was they took us all into an examination room. That's the first time we saw a doctor or dentist. And you had to strip completely naked and if you had one little spot on your body they would not release you. A blue mark or any kind of a mark, they would not release you.

Q. Like a mark from a beating?

A. Could be, or could be when you fell down, if you had a blue spot, because they didn't want anybody to go out and say, "This is what they did to me." So they examined us, and I had one tooth missing, I remember, and he complained about that. He asked how I'm missing it. I said, "As you can see, it's been out there a long time." Not fresh, you could tell. Then we spent the last night in the camp, and then the next day --

Q. Excuse me. Before you get into when you left, in the roll calls were there ever people that didn't answer, like either missing or died or tried escape, that kind of thing?

A. No, I think it was almost -- it was impossible to escape there. There were watch towers, you know, with guards in there with machine

guns, and there were lights on at night, searchlights, you know, and then they had barbed wire and electrically charged wires, you know, so there was -- if you wanted to escape, you got killed.

Q. But were there a lot of people who died overnight?

A. I had never found out exactly what the percentage was, but there was quite a number. I remember one time a man passed away, and they couldn't identify him. Why it was so important to them, I don't know. And everybody in camp had to pass by that man and see if they knew him. And I was so scared. This was the first time I ever saw a body, you know. So I had to pass by there. Of course I didn't know the man. And -- I don't know what the percentage was that were killed. It was quite a few. And those who were discharged after me were even worse, because I understand right after we left there it got bitter cold and some of them died from the extreme cold weather.

When I left, it wasn't quite that bitter cold. It was cold, you know.

Q. So five weeks after you entered, you left.

A. Right.

Q. And you were about to describe the day that you left.

A. Yeah. Well, you went out through the main camp and you went to the Gestapo headquarters and you had to wait there and they told you that we had -- we had to take a train to Weimar -- in Weimar and we were not allowed to take express trains. Only local trains. And that we had to walk to Weimar. There's a few taxis for those who can't walk. They sent for taxis. And so I knew I was going to walk. I didn't care. So I was walking and as I was walking towards Weimar, a taxi passed me, and there was a seat vacant, and he stopped for me and he said, "Hop in." And I said, "No, I can't hop in. I was told to walk." He says, "Come on in anyway." So I did go with a taxi.

Q. Did you have your street clothes from --

A. The same clothes I wore when I got there, just smelling filthy and everything. And we got to the depot in Weimar and immediately while -- when we walked in -- because they already knew what we looked like, the Jewish ladies from the Jewish Aid Society came and they told us that we should go in the third class dining room where you only get snacks to eat and that they will take care of tickets for us. If we don't have the money they will pay for them, and then we can reimburse them later if we want to. So you sit down and order whatever you want. We pay for it, if you don't have any money. And we sit down while the lady went and

got us tickets and told us when the trains were going and so on. So when I got on the first train, I got on the train early in the morning, and there was a train which was full of blue color workers. I don't know where they were going to. Real old-fashioned train car. So I went in this and I sat down and all these guys were looking at me and one came over and said to me, "I know where you come from. Don't say a word. Those dirty dogs," he said. That's all he said to me.

Q. This was a Jewish man?

A. No, no, it was not a Jewish man. He was German. He was a worker who was going to his job, you know, and he knew where I was coming from because he comes from that neighborhood and he probably saw that practically every day or so, you know. So then I had to change trains again and the conductor wanted to me put me onto the express train, and I said, "No, I cannot go on the express train. I have explicit orders not to take that," and he said, "I'm ordering you to take an express train," which I did.

I know I came home early in the morning -- I mean, in the morning and it was still dark, and I had no keys to get in, and I know my dad had disconnected all the bells because the Nazis would put matchsticks in the bells to aggravate us. So we had disconnected our bells. And I didn't know how

to get ahold of him but I knew where my parents' bedroom was, and so I went into the front yard and there were little rocks in this, and I threw them at the shades, and finally my dad answered after a while, who it is, or what is it, and he heard my voice. I never in my life heard my dad scream like he did when he saw me.

All I know is I had lost 50 pounds. I know that.

Q. In five weeks?

A. German pounds, which is actually 55 American pounds.

Q. How much did you weigh?

A. I was -- I don't know how much I weighed then. I must have been maybe 170 pounds when I got there, and I came home -- I was real skinny.

By then I had -- according to the law, they told us we have to report to the police department that we're back, you know, and I had a very peculiar situation. I was working in Frankfurt and I lived there during the week, so actually my residence was Frankfurt, so I had to go to Frankfurt. They told me -- I had to go to Gestapo headquarters to report back -- excuse me -- and the man, when I reported back to him, he said, okay -- he said, "Okay. You've you've got until December 31 to get out Germany or we're going to put you back." So I had no place to go. So in the last desperate

moment my dad and I decided that I would ask the Gestapo in Frankfurt to transfer me back to my home city because I had no job there anymore, so I went back there, and I told them exactly that I'm not living -- I don't live here any longer, and I want to go back to my home town, and they said, "Okay. You can do that, but your deadline still exists."

Q. December 31?

A. Yes.

Q. And that was, what, about three weeks away?

A. Right. So I went back and I reported to my headquarters, the Gestapo, and I told them -- I said, "I may as well tell you what they told me in Frankfurt, that I have to leave here by December 31," and he said, "Well, we cannot enforce that. Of course you don't have to leave by December 31. I would however advise you to get out as soon as possible." Well, I knew that. So at least -- see, each city was a little different. There was no -- evidently no firm rule all over the country. So about two or three weeks later or maybe a month later I got a call to report to the Gestapo headquarters, and I thought now the death penalty has been passed upon me, you know.

Q. This is in Darmstadt?

A. In Darmstadt, right. So my dad said, I'm going with you and you go in there and if you're not

out in five minutes I'll go get you. So I went to the Gestapo headquarters and I gave my name and they said, "Wait here a minute." So they came back in about two or three minutes later with an envelope, and he said to me, "Here's the things that we took away from you when we arrested you." That's what they call me up there for. Of course I didn't know that. I said "Thank you very much," and he said, "No, no, open it up and see that everything is there." Well, I wouldn't have told them anything else, so I took the stuff and I went out of there. So this is the scares you got, you know.

Q. Yes.

A. And then we didn't leave actually Germany for another year, you know.

Q. And they didn't come after you for another year?

A. No, they did not.

Q. So what did you do for that year?

A. For that year, not very much. We -- things were getting very bad. You know, there was one crisis after the other. First there was -- there was the threat -- we knew the war was going to come. I mean, the preparation. You could see, you know, and so we -- we finally got our papers together, which is a story in itself. How we ever got out was a miracle.

Q. Before you get into that, was your father

still working?

A. No, no, he was not working anymore.

Q. He wasn't working.

A. No. And we didn't have much money either. The only way we stayed afloat was that my father's cousins supported us while we were there.

Q. Were they working?

A. No. They had some money saved, you know.

Q. Okay. So they had basically supported themselves plus you.

A. Yes.

Q. So their savings --

A. Well, for a little while. I wouldn't say there was -- they actually supported us. I would say technically speaking they owed my dad the money because my dad never had a vacation in 18 years while he worked for them. So I think they owed him something, and they knew that. They told him they would take care of him.

Q. Did you and your two sisters go to school during this year?

A. There was no more school at that time.

Q. No more public school?

A. No. The Jewish school was still going. I was already out of there because you went to school until 14 in Germany.

Q. To Jewish school or public school?

A. Remember public school was to 16 and then

you either went to -- I was already in the high school before Hitler. It's called the gymnasium. And at the gymnasium I was kicked out after one year in '34.

Q. Why were you kicked out?

A. Because of being a Jew. As a matter of fact, I was supposed to have been kicked out already in '33, but they said anybody whose father served in the First World War in the front lines could stay, but that was revoked the following year. So I actually -- I did go to Frankfurt -- I believe it was that -- to Frankfurt, and I went to a Jewish cooking school. And I went there for six weeks for a training course, something like that. And in the meantime we were working very feverishly to get out, you know. We already had our call for the American consulate somewhere around April or May of '39, and until we got all the papers it took us until November, and the war started in September.

Q. September 1st?

A. Yes.

Q. Where was the American consulate? Was that in Darmstadt?

A. No, in Stuttgart.

Q. And how far away from Darmstadt is that?

A. It's about, I would say, a hundred miles.

Q. Did you have to travel to Stuttgart?

A. By train.

Q. Very often did you do that --

A. Just one. As a matter of fact, I had to go twice. I'm sorry. Because they didn't want to let me in this country because of my eyesight and they needed a special affidavit from our guarantor, which I got, and then I had to go the second time to get our visas.

Q. Who was your guarantor?

A. The guarantor was a multimillionaire from Richmond, Virginia by the name of Thalheimer who owned big department stores. They're now part of the Carter Hawley Hale chain. There were two brothers who owned these stores, plus other things, an insurance company, movie houses. They were not related to us. But we got their name and they gave us an affidavit. They have a have charitable -- evidently they had settled, I think, somewhere around a hundred Jewish families in the South near Richmond on farms, but to us they told to us come here to San Francisco.

Q. To San Francisco?

A. Right. They said the climate would be better for us and so on. Which we did. But we traveled by way of Holland because the rest -- you know, you couldn't leave from Germany anymore.

Q. Did your whole family leave?

A. Well, except for my youngest sister.

Q. And what happened to her?

A. My youngest sister was born in '34. She was a premature baby and at birth, her vocal cords were not completely grown properly and -- so she was backwards in her speech. When she went to the consulate in Stuttgart they asked little girls to talk or say something, and she couldn't do it, so they rejected her. And there's nothing we could do about it. And my dad went to -- I know he consulted with a rabbi, what should he do? He says, You must go. You've got two other children. And who would have thought in 1939 that they would -- we took her to a Jewish children's home in Frankfurt. That they would kill children. Nobody thought that's possible in 1939. We just didn't think that. And the worst we figured could happen they'd take them to another country or something, you know.

Q. And that you'd hook up after the war?

A. No, we were hoping -- well, at that time the United States was not at war yet.

Q. Yes.

A. We didn't know that either. We were working right away to get her from Frankfurt to come to the United States, but we found out after the war that she was killed in November 1942.

Q. And you found that out after the war?

A. In Bergen Belsen. She died the same place where Anne Frank died. So we found out that children as a matter of fact were the first ones who

were killed.

Q. How were you informed of that?

A. I was in the Army, and while I still was in the service and the war in Europe was over I went to the Red Cross and the Red Cross got in touch with the Swedish Red Cross, and it took them about three months, I'd say, or something like that, to send a telegram that exactly what happened to her. They knew the date and everything. And we had it reconfirmed a year later through another source. So we know that's what happened as far as -- I mean, that's what we know.

Q. So you received the telegram.

A. Yes.

Q. And then you had to inform your parents?

A. Yes. Naturally, when my dad got that telegram he was -- when I informed him, he was absolutely besides himself. He was absolutely in terrible shape for a long time.

Q. Were your parents in San Francisco?

A. Yes.

Q. And you were in the Pacific?

A. No, I was -- I had poor eyesight, you know, so they put me on limited service. I was only in the United States during the war.

Q. Oh, were you in San Francisco also?

A. No, I was stationed mostly in South Carolina, and I was stationed in Pennsylvania and

Alabama. That's the places I went to.

Q. Before we get into the reunion, were there are other experiences you'd like to describe about the war?

A. Well, of course the sad part was that when we left my sister there, then my wife -- my father had a sister-in-law. She was a widowed lady from my father's brother. And she also lived in Frankfurt, and she told us us faithfully that she would visit her, and she did write to us, even sending us a picture at one time that she had visited her in the home, and then all of a sudden of course all those letters stopped, and we found out that -- I found out later through a book I was reading -- I read all the Books on Tape here -- that she was probably sent to Lodz ghetto with all the Jews of Frankfurt at that time, but I don't know that for sure. We never heard from her again. But as far as my mother is concerned, my mother must have lost a lot of family in the Holocaust because she came from a huge family. Her mother was one of 18 children, and I know she had dozens and dozens of cousins, and we know for sure that quite of few of them were lost during the war. My father had a very small family. And also one peculiar thing is Jews in the province of Baden Karlsruhe and some of the other towns, these Jews were taken out of Baden, and they were all transported, I believe in 194 --

late '41 or early '42, and they were sent to unoccupied France. I don't know if you heard this before. There was a concentration camp built for them by the French on orders of Germans, I'm pretty sure, right on the French-Spanish border, Gueras, and my grandfather who lived there and my aunt and uncle were sent to that camp, and my aunt and uncle -- here comes my wife.

My aunt and uncle --

(Mrs. Thalheimer enters the room.)

MR. SOKOLSKY: Q. We were at the point where your grandfather was sent to the camp.

A. With my aunt and uncle to a camp.

Q. This was near the Spanish-French border.

A. In the Pyrennes. And coincidentally we had an uncle and aunt living in France, in the unoccupied part. They were left there right after Hitler. So they tried to help them a little bit. But anyway, the make a very long story short, my aunt and uncle got out. You could get out if you had a visa. They got out and they came finally to the United States in 1942, the early part, and landed in New York by way of Portugal, and my grandfather was granted to leave the camp and to be with my -- with his other daughter and son-in-law, and he died on the way out. They carried him out on a stretcher. He was so sick. And he died on his way out. So he never had any freedom at all. But

he was 79 at the time.

And I don't know what else you want to know.

Q. Well, just if there's any experiences or remembrances you have.

A. From over there? I'm sure when you leave I can think of something.

Q. Okay. Why don't you just describe the reunion.

A. Okay. Well, my wife and I, we were invited by the city of Darmstadt to come to a reunion on the 50th anniversary of the Kristallnacht.

Q. Now how did they know how to contact you?

A. Well, I have a friend over there that I went to school with, a German fellow, and we had been in contact over the years. They had visited us and we had visited them and through him I knew, and they had our names they had many names from former residents, you know, Jewish residents of the city, and they notified them by mail or in any way they could. And there's a German-Jewish newspaper called "Aufbau," which means "reconstruction." Of course it's a dying newspaper now, but they had it written in this paper, and a lot of these German-Jewish people read this paper. And so they had -- like I said, they invited 200-some people, and they all came, and they put us up in a hotel and they had

many, many affairs for us. They had brought in an orchestra from Israel, and they played, and a German choir sang with them. They had Jewish -- what did they have? Civic receptions, two of them, big ones, and they even had two strictly kosher dinners.

There is a Jewish community now of 130 people. They got a rabbi. They got a cantor. And it's mostly the people that live there. There are quite a few Israelis, there are Iranian Jews, some that I met there. So all in all, they have 130 people who have -- two or three, I think that were born there that lived there.

Q. But they're not all elderly?

A. They have -- as a matter of fact, in the opening of the temple, they had a Jewish children's choir with 12 children. They sang beautiful Jewish and Israeli songs, and I think that these children are mostly from Israelis. They have an important technical high school there which even -- as a matter of fact Chaim Weitzman went there in the early part of the century. He went to that technical high school. And they have a lot of these people from Israel study there, and some of them live there, and they have businesses and they work there.

As a matter of fact, the president of the shul is a Czech Jew whose name is Frankel. He lives partly in Miami and partly there. And the

vice president of the shul, he was born evidently right after the war. His name a Neiman (ph.), and he is kind of the main macher in the temple. A very fine fellow. And he also belongs to a musical group there which played for us, and we even have a tape here from them, if you ever want to hear it. They call themselves "Simchas." They put on a beautiful musical evening for us, and the temple itself is a gorgeous building that, like I said, was constructed at the former headquarters of the Gestapo, where I wass a prisoner 50 years before.

Sitting on that spot again after 50 years was an experience that is very difficult to describe.

Q. It's a different building? They tore --

A. They made a park out of it before and -- partly park and partly parking lot, as I understand. The building was not there. This is a new building. It was built by a Jewish -- a Jewish architect, who has his offices ini Frankfurt and a Jewish artist designed the windows. He lives in England. And they did a marvelous job. It's a 16 million mark building, which is around ten million dollars, for a little Jewish congregation like that. And when we came there for the opening there was tremendous security. You couldn't get in there unless you had all kinds of papers that we had before, invitations, and we had to show our passport. And there were so

many people there that they used video cameras, T.V. cameras, and put the other people in another room. The temple is built Orthodox. The women sit upstairs. I don't know why, but that's what it is. It's a small temple. It holds about two hundred people, a hundred men and a hundred woman. And we wanted to donate something for the temple, so we donated a complete torah outfit, which was very prominently displayed when they brought in the -- when they opened the torah.

The chief cantor of Berlin was there. He sang beautifully at the opening. I had never been to the opening of a temple, and this ceremony was completely new to me. And it was, like I said, a very emotional experience for us, and especially for me, and seeing my school comrades after some of them I had not seen in 50 years and some of them I had seen once or twice since we left. And it was a one-time experience and I'm glad that I went.

Q. Did you visit your old apartment?

A. Well, I've seen it before. It's a house, yeah, right. But it's still standing there.

Incidentally, that city was about 70 percent destroyed in late September of '44, so that I didn't recognize most of the city anymore. It was completely rebuilt. The city that was -- the part of the city that was destroyed was the old town, the medieval town. That was completely destroyed. So

they rebuilt it now in modern style, and the mayor that is there now, his father was the first mayor.

Incidentally, my cousin, who was a major in the American Army Intelligence, he marched into our town, and he appointed the government there. And he appointed him -- his father, the mayor, who was an anti-Nazi already years ago, and now his son is the mayor there. And like I said, they couldn't do enough for us, and I also might say there was a lot of people there who were strictly kosher who brought their own food along because they only guaranteed them a couple of kosher meals. They are not set up for kosher meals there.

Q. There's no Jewish butchers in the town.

A. Not that I know. In Frankfurt I think there are. I know in Frankfurt there is. And there are some who I'm sure are kosher, but there's no kosher store there. There's no Jewish store there at all, I don't think.

Q. Does that about do it?

A. I think so.

MR. SOKOLSKY: Thank you.