

R. GABRIELE SILTEN



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INTERVIEW WITH: R. GABRIELE SILTEN
INTERVIEWER: KEN ROTHSCHILD
DATE: APRIL 13th, 1983
PLACE: THE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS CONVENTION
TRANSCRIBER: SANDRA L. WONSIDLER, R.P.R.

Q. This is Ken Rothschild interviewing Gabriele Silten at the Holocaust Survivors Convention. Today is April 13th, 1983.

Why don't you begin by explaining to me what was your first indication-- you were living in Berlin?

A. As a child.

Q. As a child? What was --

A. As a very young child.

Q. Okay, I'd like you to tell me just a little bit about that early experience, your age, but I'm also very interested in what was in your head. What were the feelings around that; what could you sense from your family or other people that something was going wrong?

A. In Berlin, as such, I really couldn't sense anything. We left in 1938 and the first thing I really remember of leaving is going on a boat and going to Holland, which was supposed to be a way station. I didn't know that then, of course; I know that now.

1 My father was trying to get visa, a visa for Argentina,
2 but it did not come through in time. The Germans attacked
3 Holland first, and it's really only after that that I picked
4 up anything at all from the family or school or the general
5 situation.

6 Q. Okay, what was your age at that time?

7 A. In '38 when we left, I was five. I was born in May.
8 We left about that time; I was just five, and the Germans
9 attacked Holland in May of 1940, just before my seventh
10 birthday.

11 Q. All right, tell me what you can remember in terms of
12 feelings, conversations with your father. What did your
13 father tell you about what was going on; I mean, you must
14 have realized that something was disturbing the regular
15 routine of life and your family was trying to get away from
16 Germany and there were reasons. Tell me what was going on
17 in your head at such a very young age, and what you were
18 thinking about.

19 A. Okay, the first thing that I needed an explanation
20 for was the fact that soldiers were marching through the
21 streets. This we could see from the windows. But my parents,
22 both my parents, explained these were enemy soldiers, people
23 that wished us not well, and that we would have to be care-
24 ful. And that's really all in the beginning.

25 But then, as time went on and there were various

1 commands, such as we had to wear the Jewish star and we
2 children had to go to Jewish schools, obviously then it
3 became clearer that things were very bad.

4 In the Jewish school, for example, and, as I say,
5 I was just seven so I was in second grade, they had started
6 already taking people away to concentration camps. Now, that
7 I did not know, but what we did know, what I knew, what all
8 of us knew, were that our friends disappeared and didn't come
9 back, we changed teachers on a regular basis; they didn't
10 come back; they were just not there, and we had to very often
11 go to a friend's house and find out whether that friend was
12 ill or whether the whole family had left. And, of course,
13 under the circumstances one found out pretty quickly that
14 they had left not voluntarily.

15 In addition to which, at home we had sort of a "ruck-
16 sack" ready and what was then called a bread -- a "brotsache,"
17 a bread sack, which was a sort of a canvas bag, if you like,
18 for food, but we also could carry clothes in. Both of these
19 were meant to take along when we were picked up, and those
20 were always ready and things were being changed in there,
21 whatever clothes, according to the season.

22 And so one knew; I even as a child knew, that some-
23 thing that wasn't normal was going on.

24 Q. What kind of lifestyle -- what was your father doing
25 in Berlin; how did you live in Berlin before this all happened?

1 A. Okay, my grandfather was a pharmacist and had his own
2 pharmacy. My father followed in his footsteps and also, of
3 course, worked in the pharmacy which was meant to be for the
4 family. My mother did not work.

5 How did we live? Well, I was kind of young to remem-
6 ber, but I remember that we had a maid who was at the same
7 time supposed to look after me, and she took me out when we
8 went to the park. I spent time with my grandparents, both
9 grandparents from my father's side and a grandmother from
10 my mother's side, spent time at their house, walked the dog
11 and so on, went to kindergarten, although that's hearsay;
12 I don't remember it, but my parents tell me that I did.

13 Q. What happened to the pharmacy and what happened to
14 the business and what happened to the wealth of your family?

15 A. The pharmacy was in what is now East Berlin. It was
16 taken over, a forced sale in the war. I don't know the exact
17 date.

18 My grandfather, when the Nazis came knocking on the
19 door, committed suicide. My grandmother had come to Holland
20 in '38, just shortly after we had arrived in Holland, and
21 eventually in the concentration camp in Holland, in Westerbork,
22 also committed suicide.

23 The pharmacy, as I said, was -- it was a forced sale
24 to somebody, a pharmaceutical firm, and after the war instead
25 of giving it back, arrangements were made for certain payments.

1 So the house where the pharmacy was, I don't know
2 whether it still stands or not. I have no idea.

3 Q. Now, you went to Holland in 1938?

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. The Germans invaded and what happened then; what was
6 the experience of yourself and your family at that time?

7 A. I can really only speak for myself, of course, what
8 I knew as a child, and that is that I could not play with
9 Christian friends. That didn't mean I didn't, of course,
10 it only meant I wasn't allowed to. My best friend lived
11 above us. We lived on the second floor, they on the third,
12 and there was a through-way on the attic, so we did get
13 together and could get together illegally.

14 We had to go to Jewish schools, we could not go
15 shopping except between three and five, we had to wear the
16 Jewish star. All of the things of course affected me as
17 a child just as much as they affected the grown-ups. I
18 could no longer play in the street -- we all played in the
19 street not having any gardens or yards -- but that was out;
20 I wasn't supposed to play with Christians so I couldn't
21 play in the street anymore.

22 Q. What happened to your -- were you hiding out or were
23 you just under strict regulation and control?

24 A. We were under strict regulation and control. My family
25 did not hide. My father apparently had had the idea, then

1 decided against it because it would have meant splitting up
2 the family; that was, my father, my mother, my grandmother
3 and myself, and we would have had to go to four different
4 places. And my father decided, I assume together with my
5 mother, that it would be better to either live or die
6 together rather than be split up and possibly not see each
7 other ever again. So we did not hide and eventually were
8 picked up in '43 to be taken to the concentration camp, all
9 four of us.

10 Q. Okay, now, we'll get to the period of 1943, but before
11 1943, give me any strong memories that you have of very sig-
12 nificant events, emotional feelings that you had, just general
13 experiences, things that stand out in your mind before you
14 were picked up.

15 A. Things that stand out. Well, again, soldiers and
16 tanks in the streets and us children running for cover when-
17 ever we saw them; the fact that any green uniform meant
18 automatically a German soldier and you ran, whereas a black
19 uniform was a Dutch policeman and you didn't run; the fact
20 that we did have to wear the star and that when we got to
21 school in the morning the first thing the teacher did was
22 check whether everybody had a star, and the second thing we
23 did was to be put through our paces: we learned to lie, and
24 I'm putting that in quotes although it's literally true.

25 We were not supposed to have certain food like, say,

1 fruit, so the teacher would say, "Well, what do you say if
2 the German asks you how the fruit tasted," and we were taught
3 to say that we, of course, weren't supposed to have any fruit,
4 so obviously we didn't know how the fruit tasted. And that
5 very often was a strict lie; Christians could get us the food
6 and very often did, but, of course, we weren't supposed to
7 say so.

8 Q. Were there times when you were interrogated in the
9 way in which you just mentioned where a German soldier or
10 somebody would ask you what you're doing or question you or
11 stop you?

12 A. Oh, yes, they came to the classroom once that I can
13 remember and I was stopped on the street once for this type
14 of thing. Once I was stopped to ask -- they asked me for
15 an address, I believe.

16 Q. Was there any physical abuse or any problems with the
17 Germans before you were picked up?

18 A. Not to my family or me and I do not remember seeing it.
19 That doesn't mean it wasn't there, I just did not see it.

20 Q. Okay, what happened after 1943 or in 1943 when you
21 were picked up?

22 A. Okay, the first time we were picked up, they came in
23 the night and took us to the municipal theater in Amsterdam
24 which was the general pick-up place; however, we went back
25 home.

1 The second time was a very large, very general pick-up,
2 which we called "razzia," R-A-Z-Z-I-A, in those days, and they
3 went from house to house. This was in June of '43, June 10th,
4 I believe, very warm day which stands out in my mind because
5 Holland doesn't have very many warm days. And we were picked
6 up, neighbors looking out the window or standing on the street
7 and crying and yelling and carrying on and not wanting us to
8 go but not being able to do anything.

9 We were put in trucks like soldiers are normally trans-
10 ported in with canvas covers which were closed and we were
11 taken to another square in Amsterdam where was again a general
12 pick-up place, and there we stayed for what seemed like a very
13 long time.

14 Then we were taken to the central station, the biggest
15 train station in Amsterdam, and were put on the cattle cars
16 and taken to Westerbork, which was a camp in Amsterdam that's
17 spelled W-E-S-T-E-R-B-O-R-K, and there we stayed from June,
18 '43 till January, '44.

19 Q. Okay, '43, what age are you in '43?

20 A. I had just turned ten. This was in June; my birthday
21 is in May, so I just turned ten.

22 Q. What was the trip like on a cattle car? Can you de-
23 scribe some of that experience?

24 A. Well, it was very full, people packed like sardines. I
25 remember straw or something like that on the floor; I remember

1 sitting down; I remember the doors being open about, oh, the
2 width of a hand, maybe, a child's hand, not enough for any-
3 body to get out, enough to let some air in. No food or water,
4 but the trip was not all that long. It seemed like a long
5 time. It shouldn't have taken longer than about two hours,
6 knowing the distance nowadays. It probably took longer than
7 that. But lots of people, and everybody being very afraid,
8 of course. We didn't know where we were going and what was
9 happening.

10 Q. What did people talk about during a trip like that?

11 A. Frankly, I don't remember.

12 Q. Okay, all right, so 1943 to 1945 you were where?

13 A. 1943 to '44, June, '43 to January, '44, we were in
14 the Dutch camp in Westerbork. Then, in January, '44, we were
15 transported to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. It's near
16 Prague, about thirty miles out of Prague.

17 Q. What was your first experience in the concentration
18 camps, in the first one you were in?

19 A. Okay, the very first was the same evening we arrived
20 we had to register, and these were very long, low, wooden
21 barracks-types buildings, about the same type building that
22 temporary buildings are like here in the States. And my
23 parents went in to register and left me on a chair outside,
24 and after about a half an hour I remember being extremely
25 afraid that I would never see them again; I had no idea

1 what happened to them, so I cried rather a long time. And
2 apparently somebody eventually got my mother because she came
3 out to get me.

4 And after all this registration was over, we were then
5 quartered in one of that same type of building in bunk beds;
6 there were the three of us, my mother and my grandmother and
7 myself, on the women's side. The buildings were split in
8 half with one half dormitory-style for the women and the
9 other half dormitory-style for the men, and on the end of
10 each was a long bathroom for all the women or on the other
11 side for all the men. And there were bunk beds, three high,
12 and we were assigned to the middle bunk bed of a set of three,
13 the three of us in two beds.

14 Q. I'm terrible on names. What was the name of the camp
15 you were in?

16 A. Westerbork, W-E-S-T-E-R-B-O-R-K. That's in Holland.

17 Q. And how long were you there?

18 A. Six months.

19 Q. Can you describe to me any very strong memories you
20 have of that period?

21 A. Yes. Next to our barracks was what they then called
22 the "S-barracks", and in German was called "straff barracks",
23 the punishment barracks from their "S," and they were
24 treated -- the men in there, they were apparently only men
25 that were in there, and they were treated much worse than

1 we were. They were whipped and treated in general much worse.
2 They wore the blue and white striped punishment uniform, where
3 we wore our own clothes.

4 And the other thing I remember is it was a very, what
5 seemed then like a desolate kind of a landscape. It was out
6 in the country. Holland is very flat and this was very, very
7 sandy and nothing else. There was just sand.

8 Q. What kind of a diet did you have; do you remember?

9 A. In Westerbork all I remember is bread, although we did
10 have warm food. In the next camp, in Theresienstadt, we also
11 had what they called potato soup, which looked like dishwater
12 with some potato skins in, and various concoctions of which
13 I have forgotten the name, none of which were particularly
14 nourishing.

15 Q. What did you do; how did a day pass; tell me what
16 would happen from getting up in the morning and how you would
17 spend your time.

18 A. In Westerbork my mother worked and I more or less kept
19 busy with the children until after one time when I had the
20 measles, and then I went with my mother. And she was a --
21 well, a sort of a kindergarten teacher, taking care of the
22 little children, and I went with her and we spent the day
23 with them.

24 In Theresienstadt afterwards we all worked, including
25 me, as children as of ten years old had to work, and I worked

1 as what they then called an ordinance, which is a message-
2 taker. They gave me messages which I had to take to the
3 pharmacy or take to somebody else, as well as working
4 occasionally in -- outside of the crematorium. They did
5 cremate, not from having gassed people but people who had
6 died, either natural death or starvation or torture, what-
7 ever. But, in any event, they got rid of the bodies by
8 cremating. And the children formed sort of a living chain
9 passing on the boxes with ashes to a truck that then took
10 them away; I don't know where to.

11 Q. How about emotionally, what can you remember emotion-
12 ally about that period of time?

13 A. Mostly being afraid and being hungry. You never quite
14 knew whether in coming home your parents would still be there
15 or for that matter one parent, or in what shape they would be
16 in or whether -- whether they were going to come for you at
17 night or the next day or whether your name was going to be
18 on a list and you had to be transported. So you really never
19 knew what was going to happen from one minute to the next.

20 Q. Your family was still together at this period of time?

21 A. My parents and I were together all the time. My grand-
22 mother, who had been with us in the first camp, had committed
23 suicide in that camp and was no longer with us, therefore, in
24 the second.

25 Q. All right, then you say the second camp you went to

1 was in Czechoslovakia and that was in -- what was the date
2 again on that?

3 A. We went there in January in 1944.

4 Q. Okay, could you describe to me some of the experiences
5 that you can recall from that camp?

6 A. Okay, there again Theresienstadt was originally meant
7 as a soldier's training town, training camp-type thing, and
8 the barracks were built in squares with a courtyard in the
9 middle. Everybody was quartered in these barracks which the
10 Germans had renamed German names, and the nationalities were
11 kept together. So I was with the Dutch, the Czechs were kept
12 together, the Poles were together and so on.

13 And the Dutch were quartered, to begin with, in what
14 was then called the Hamburg barracks, again, in the beginning,
15 dormitory-style, my father with the men and my mother and I
16 with the women. Again, bunk beds, large rooms, even up to
17 in the attics. Everything was quarters. Again, same type
18 bathrooms with long, long sinks and faucets, say, about every
19 three, four feet, something like that. Cold water, of course,
20 only.

21 And within the confines of the barracks we could pretty
22 much go where we wanted; not outside, of course.

23 My father again worked, first as a street cleaner, then
24 as a pharmacist which is what he was. My mother first worked
25 as a cleaning woman, then worked in the mica factory. They

1 had to split mica for the German war industry. And I, as I
2 said, was an ordinance and worked in a crematorium because
3 that gave you extra food rations.

4 Q. Did you or anybody in your family or anybody you knew
5 get sick during this period of time?

6 A. Oh, we all got sick.

7 Q. What happened?

8 A. Well, we were lucky in that we did not get any of the
9 real bad sicknesses, such as typhus. Theresienstadt was
10 liberated by the Russians and when they came, a typhus epi-
11 demic had just broken out and we were lucky we did not get
12 any of that.

13 But I, as a child, had the regular children's diseases:
14 I had the measles; I had German measles, you know, that type
15 of thing. We had all sorts of eczema; we had lice; we had
16 fleas, and I suppose we had the usual colds and flus, and
17 anything that goes together with undernourishment of course
18 one had, and my parents, of course, had the same things.

19 Q. Were you or your family marked with numbers?

20 A. No, they did not mark numbers either in Westerbork
21 or in Theresienstadt.

22 Q. What about relationships with other people in the
23 camps; what were they like?

24 A. My parents had friends. I remember their going out
25 in the evening, meaning going to another room to talk with

1 friends, and, of course, I had friends. We eventually had a
2 room to ourselves which we, after a very short time, shared
3 with a lady and her young son who was maybe two years younger
4 than I am. And he and I became best friends. I remember two
5 other boys I was friends with and various girls. We worked
6 together or played together, and in Theresienstadt they had
7 a boys' orphanage and a girls' orphanage, and they, of course,
8 were friends.

9 We also had illegal school, underground schools, and
10 we made friends there and got together and played in as far
11 as we could still find the people. People were being sent
12 on to the East from there. The East was the euphemism for
13 Auschwitz.

14 Q. This was the last camp you were in; you were not in
15 any other camps?

16 A. No, I was not in any other camps.

17 Q. How would you compare the treatment you received with
18 stories you've heard from other people that you may have
19 compared their situations with yours?

20 A. Well, stories from say Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz
21 and Mauthausen and places like that, they were much, much
22 worse without any doubt whatsoever. They had far less to
23 eat even; we didn't have a lot, but they had far less. They
24 worked considerably harder, they were much more mistreated
25 in the way of beatings and experimentation and so on. There

1 was, as far as I know, no experimentation in our camp. There
2 was a place called "The Little Fortress" where people were
3 tortured either because they were leaders of the Jewish com-
4 munity, or they'd been caught escaping or they'd been caught
5 with writings or paintings or whatever that they weren't
6 allowed, but there were no dogs set on us as there might have
7 been, say, in Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen or something like
8 that.

9 Q. Do you know of -- tell me about some of the things like
10 people painting and writing and plotting things. What sort
11 of things went on of that nature?

12 A. Okay, what I'm going to say is strictly hearsay because
13 I did not see it myself, but children and adults both painted
14 and drew scenes from the life there that were saved and have
15 been published. I did not; for one thing I can't draw, for
16 another thing I did have no paper, but they were done. They
17 also wrote either poetry or prose and these things were either
18 smuggled out or saved, and also at least part, if not all of
19 it, has been published. So I did not see it. I have read
20 some of the things; I've seen some of the artistry, but I did
21 not see it there.

22 Q. You were in a Czech camp at the end of the war?

23 A. Yes, I was.

24 Q. Describe the end and how you were finally liberated
25 from the camp.

1 A. It's the Russians that liberated us. They came into
2 the camp -- actually the first I remember was we had by then
3 moved to what used to be a private house in the prewar days
4 of that particular city, and that private house was located
5 next to the railroad tracks and they -- the Russian army came
6 marching in.

7 And the first thing they did is they threw open all
8 the doors and told everybody, "You're free to go where you
9 want," including the people who had been quarantined because
10 of typhus. So the second thing that happened is we had to
11 round them all back up again; this I know because my father
12 was in the pharmacy, and put them back in their quarantine
13 because that was not the idea that they would go and give
14 their typhus to everybody else. Then the Russians, of course,
15 had not seen any women for a long time. There were a certain
16 number of rapes and I remember waking up one night and seeing
17 my father rising from the bed -- my father was a very tall
18 man -- and here was this very tall man rising from the bed,
19 and I turned around and there was a Russian looking in through
20 the window who very soon turned around and ran away when he
21 saw the very tall man. So nothing happened to us but it did
22 happen to some other people.

23 And the next thing was that the Germans, the German
24 soldiers in there that had been guarding us, the commandant
25 and so on, got their heads shaved and had their uniforms

1 taken away and wore a sort of a punishment uniform, if you
2 like, with the Nazi cross painted on the back. And they had
3 to do the work instead of us doing the work.

4 Q. Who was this, which guards, what nationality were they?

5 A. The Germans. And the Russians made them do the work
6 that we had been doing before and shaved their heads rather
7 than ours.

8 Q. How about in either of these camps, were there local
9 people; were there any Czechs that worked in the concentration
10 camps?

11 A. Yes, in as far as they were Czech Jews. The Jews
12 worked, of course, in the camps. The Czech Jews that were
13 with us worked there as did the German Jews, Dutch Jews,
14 Austrian Jews, et cetera.

15 Q. I'm talking about more like non-Jews, Dutch non-Jews
16 and Czech non-Jews helping to run the camps.

17 A. Not that I remember. As far as I know they were all
18 Germans.

19 Q. Okay, could you describe some of your experiences after
20 the liberation -- and you're in California now, you're located
21 in California -- describe your moving around, your migration
22 and how you ended up in California, and your life between then
23 and now.

24 A. Okay, we got back -- we were liberated in May, '45,
25 and we stayed there for a while. They had to lay on planes

1 and trains and so on to get us out of there which was done by
2 the Red Cross, actually, and we went home first in army planes,
3 then in trains, went back to Amsterdam and were transported
4 to Eindhoven to the Phillips factories where we were quartered
5 for many -- about no longer than a week. And then back by
6 train to Amsterdam where we, meaning my parents and I, found
7 out that the same people that had been our upstairs neighbors
8 before the war had put in a call that if we came back at all
9 we should go straight to them and they would put us up, which
10 we did. And they put us up for three months until we, as it
11 happens, got our own apartment back.

12 And then, of course, after that things slowly went back
13 to normal. I had to go back to school. Things were rationed.
14 There was absolutely nothing in Holland at that point. There
15 was no food; there was no clothing; there was nothing. So
16 everything was rationed and within the availability of things,
17 we got them, very little, but better than what we'd had.

18 And my father tried to go back to work. He got a loan
19 from the bank. They remembered him from before the war. He
20 set up shop again, and I went back to school. I was behind,
21 naturally, as were many other children. So the fifth grade
22 I went into consisted of children anywhere from, say, about
23 twelve, which was my age, to sixteen and a few younger than
24 myself, all of who had missed schooling during the war.

25 Then about, oh, just about as we got back they were

1 celebrating the liberation. We came back to a very decorated
2 Amsterdam and everybody was celebrating as much as possible,
3 again, within the limits of what was available.

4 And within the next few years, then, there was a lot
5 of rebuilding, a lot of regrowing of food stuffs and so on.
6 The Germans, before leaving Holland, had broken the dikes,
7 and that meant that salt water had ruined the fields. In
8 order to get the fields back to normal it takes about five
9 years; you have to get the salt out; you have to leach that
10 out, and you have to make the soil fertile again. So it took
11 about until 1950 until things were off rationing coupons but
12 by then we were pretty much back to normal, normal meaning
13 food pretty much what you wanted in limited quantities,
14 schools relatively back to normal.

15 Q. What date is that?

16 A. About 1950.

17 When I went to high school in '47 we still had that
18 same kind of odd groupment. High school in Holland usually
19 starts at twelve; I was fourteen by that time, and we had
20 people in the class anywhere between eleven and sixteen, all
21 of whom, of course, had missed schooling and were trying to
22 catch up.

23 Q. Okay, then when did you come to the United States?

24 A. Not till February, '59, so after my schooling, well
25 after my schooling.

1 Q. How has this whole experience affected your life, what
2 -- how has it affected your feeling about people, about God,
3 about human nature?

4 A. Well, I wasn't brought up in a religious household so
5 in that sense, as far as God is concerned, it hasn't affected
6 me. I did not believe then and I don't now.

7 As far as human nature is concerned, it made it very
8 difficult, more directly after the war than now, to trust
9 anybody very quickly. It makes me, anyway, wonder what
10 hidden motives are when people talk to you. It made me for
11 a long time come right out and tell people I was Jewish in
12 case they didn't want to know me, then they could go away
13 and leave me alone before I got hurt, you know, this type of
14 thing. So, as the years pass, of course, that becomes less
15 but it was very much there; it's there to a degree now.

16 Q. Are there any afterthoughts or any thoughts that you
17 have that you'd like to express before we end the interview?

18 A. Only really what everybody has been saying in this
19 convention: it should not be forgotten; it should never
20 happen again.

21 THE INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much, Gabriele.

22 MS. SILTEN: Thank you very much for giving me
23 the opportunity.

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(Interview concluded)

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CERTIFICATE

It is hereby certified that the foregoing transcript contains fully and accurately the verbal statement provided to me for this purpose.

Sandra L. Wonsidler

SANDRA L. WONSIDLER
Registered Professional Reporter
and Notary Public

SANDRA L. WONSIDLER
Notary Public, Solebury Twp., Bucks Co.
My Commission Expires on 03/23, 1996