United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Max and Hanne Leibmann
June 2, 1998
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Max and Hanne Leibermann, conducted by Joe Richmond on June 2, 1998 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Queens, NY and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

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Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is tape one of an interview with Hanne Leibmann in her home in Bayside, Queens, for the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum. And the interviewer is Joe Richmond. Let's start -- let's start going all the way back, just talking about your family a little bit. Just tell me briefly who was in your family, your --

Hanne Leibmann: In my family at what time? At what point of time?

Q: Before the war, when you were growing up.

HL: When I was growing up, okay, how far do we go back?

Q: As far as you want to go back.

HL: Well, I was born in 1924 and you have that on some of the tapes already. And at the time I was born, I obviously had a mother. I had a father, I had a brother three and a half years older. However, my father died in 1925, about three months after I was born, so I grew up in a one parent household, okay? My fath -- my mother maintained my father's business, which was a photo studio, okay. At the time my father passed away, we still had an art gallery as well, which my mother gave up around 1926, because she could not maintain a business and an art gallery and two children and everything else. Besides, at that point in Germany, after the inflation, the art business was not the hottest item anyway. So I grew up like any other child, okay. My mother had several sisters. She had three that lived in the city where I was born. She had a -- equally a brother who lived in

Karlsruhe. She had a sister in Switzerland, she had a sister in Czechoslovakia. On my father's side, I had an uncle who lived in Munich, who was a photographer and auctioneer. I -- and a brother who lived in Berlin. He was an agent for artists for movies, opera, concerts, that was his business.

Q: Did you mention your brothers and sisters?

HL: My brother -- I had only one brother, three and a half years older, as I said and well, we grew up like all children do, I suppose. I remember the rise of Hitler, I remember the street fights in the 20's. Our place was next to a left wing newspaper and there were a lot of street fights and shootings and flag burnings. And these are some of my earliest childhood memories. Included in that is the people who came begging for food to our apartment door. Carts going through the street, horse drawn carts going through the street, collecting clothes for the poor. It was a very, very bad time in Germany. Hitler came to power, I remember April one is the boycott. I remember that very well. Went to school, public school. There was some harassment, obviously there was harassment of a -- of us kids in the street. I did not have Gentile girlfriends, probably, after 1935, because it became too dangerous for them, as well as for us. And my mother had Gentile friends t-to the very end. Til the day we were deported, we had Gentile friends who came to our house at night, in the dark, when it was, you know, what do you call it? Brown out here? Black-out? Black-out, really. And school, of course, for us Jewish kids, we had to leave public school in 1936 and go to an all Jewish school. Many of the larger cities already had established Jewish schools -- long established Jewish schools. Karlsruhe did not, so we had to start a Jewish school. I do not remember how many children we were, probably two - 300, I would say, at the beginning. And with parents emigrating, it became, of course, a smaller and smaller school. We were first located in a public school building, actually. We had one or two floors in that public school building. The other floors were for retarded children. And eventually we had to get out of there, too and have the school in community -- in the community building. I remember No-November 10th very well. I remember the synagogue being vandalized and whatever. Actually, a friend and I went into the synagogue a couple of days later to see what we could save. And since the community building was adjacent to the synagogue, we literally watched the destruction of the synagogue as it was being torn down. The community sold the real estate where the synagogue was standing on, because they needed that money to feed the families who no longer could make a living. Things became very, very tough and we had a lot of Jewish people who no longer could afford to feed themselves, so the community had a soup kitchen. And they needed this money to feed all these people and take care of whatever needed to be done. 1940, I was for [inaudible] June, July -- five months in the area of Hannover, in the north of Germany, in a place called Arlem. It had a Jewish agricultural school, and -- long established school, as a matter of fact. This school did not only teach agriculture, it also taught homemaking and all sorts of other things. And since my mother didn't know what to do with me and I was hanging around the house, she sent me up there for several months. Beginning of 1939, actually, the three sisters of my mother moved in with us, because end of '38 we could not have businesses any more. We were deprived of our livelihood and in order to save funds, we all moved together. It also meant that no other Jewish family could be moved in with you if you had a lot of -- if you had a large apartment. They had a large apartment, we had a large apartment, so it was -- also my grandmoth-mother had moved in with us. She was a very elderly lady of 90, maybe she was only 80 - 89 when she moved in with us, whatever. So that the household consisted actually of six women. My brother left Germany in 19 -- s-summer of 1937, to come here to America. He was first with a half brother of our father. That didn't work out too well, then he was down in Atlanta, at the university to study whatever. I think he studied radio technology or something like that. He got a -- a scholarship. And actually, when he left in '37 was the last time I saw my brother. He eventually joined the American army and was killed in the Battle of the Bulge in January of 1945. We ourselves were deported in Oc --

Q: Let me sto -- w-what was your brother's name?

HL: My brother's name was Alex. His full name was Alexander. Okay, but he was referred to as Alex.

Q: And your maiden name was Hiss -- Hiss --

HL: Hirsch, yeah. October 22nd we were deported. We were the second deportation out of Germany, the first one having been from Stettin to Lublin in February of 1940. Of course, previously, in '38, the Polish - Jewish people who had lived in Germany had been deported to Poland. And that was this miserable situation, they did not have a qua -- they didn't have -- they had not acquired German citizenship and the Polish government said, "No, we don't take them back," and so on and so forth, which by the way, was the official reason for the pogrom in 19 -- on November 10th. The German took this incident in Paris, where this young fellow, Grynszpan, murdered miss -- consular employee vom Rath, because he was so angry that his parents had been deported out of Germany. This is the official story. I know a book has been written about it. I have not read the book. There might have been other reasons for the shooting, but this was the official version. And this brought about the government organized pogrom of November 10th, what you call here Crystal Night, or Kristallnacht. It was a frightful time. In any case, we were deported in October of 1940. We were deported to France. French did not know who we were, or whatever and simply sent us in the unoccupied zone of France. Or the Germans actually sent us in the unoccupied zone of France. And the French sent us all the way down south -- southwest, to Gurs, a camp called Gurs, it's spelled G-u-r-s. It's very close to the Spanish border, only about 40 kilometers to the Pyranees in the Spanish border, and here we were in a camp. Not a nice place to be, it was awful. The trip was awful. My grandmother, at this point over 91 years old, lost her mind on the train. On this paper here, you have the name of Weil? This Mr. Weil was with us in the same car when we were deported. He also was a very elderly man and he as well, lost his mind, as did my grandmother. Became totally confused, was totally out. Okay, so we had two in one car, it was -- it was a horrible situation.

Q: Did you know at that point on the train, did you know -- did you know --

HL: Where we were going?

Q: Where you were going, what was happening, [indecipherable] be?

HL: Not at all. Most people did not know. My mother and I knew that we were going to the south of France. And we knew, because the morning of the deportation, my mother sent me to a Mrs. Fite, okay? These were very decent people. And my mother was friendly with them to the very last. And she told me to bring them certain items from our household which they very much liked. It was Bohemian glass, it was very -- a crystal, it was very beautiful stuff. And she said, “Go over there, bring it to them and come right back.” And so I did and when I came to Mrs. Fite, she told me, “My husband said you will be going to the south of France.” But of course we didn’t know, what does it mean the south of France? Where were we going to be, right? And I came home and told my mother and she said, “You crazy.” Okay? Because she fully expect to be -- expected to be taken to a concentration camp in Germany or even to Poland, because we knew already from the people who had been deported from Stettin, that they were taken to Lublin. So our expectations were not the south of France and my mother said, “You’re [indecipherable].” We did go to France, but what was going to happen to us -- I mean it was very obvious once the train went, you know, was set in motion and we were going west, that we were not going to go -- let’s say Dachau, which is in Germany or any of the other camps, right? And indeed, we were taken to France. And on the train we were allowed to take with us 100 marks. Our money was changed into French francs. We got 2000 French francs for the 100 marks, which was a pittance. So the trip took three days and then we found ourselves in Gurs. And Gurs -- I don't know, have you heard about Gurs? Have you read about it?

Q: Most of what I know is from your -- is from your interviews. So tell -- so tell me in your -- in your experience.

HL: My experience, well, like everybody who got there, six and a half thousand people got there, was utter confusion. Totally -- most of the people were totally traumatized. Understandably so, right? First of all the three -- three day trip. Then we were taken off the train in open trucks, in pouring rain. From the railroad station in Orlong San Marie, to Gurs is about 15 kilometers. Not terribly far, right? But enough to be thoroughly soaked. The camp itself was built on a land that had been completely deforested. There were no trees. There are trees today, but that's 50 years or 60 years later. And the ground was mud. It was real mud, like -- clay-like sort. And of course, with the rain, this became an impossible situation. So here we came to the place already, we stepped right into the mud, right? The barracks were totally empty. They were wooden structures, only tarpaper, no windows. There were no windows. We had flaps that could be opened, but you had to prop them up. Now if you opened the window -- so-called window, right, it would rain in. You closed it, you were without air and light. Had a door on each end -- at each end and -- there comes my husband -- and --

Q: I'll stop the tape for a -- we're back. So yeah, just the -- the daily life and the conditions [indecipherable] talking about.

HL: The daily life -- daily life was very hard. The first night we got there, we were given some straw and not sufficient for everybody. That for days people were really lying on the wooden planks. There were no cots, there was nothing. Eventually we were given blankets, we were given straw, we were given those cotton -- something like a sack to put the straw in, make something similar to a mattress, right? The food, like in all concentration camps, was -- I guess almost everywhere the same. We got something that resembled coffee in the morning, half a pound of bread, it was our daily ration. We got a watery soup at lunchtime with some vegetables in it. Mostly root vegetables, turnips, carrots, things like that. It had also some chickpeas and occasionally a little meat. Our meat ration per week was about four ounces. A good sized hamburger, okay? For the whole week. Evening was the same thing. Life was very, very difficult. No one who ever was in Gurs will forget the mud we had to live in. No one will forget the rats, the mice, the fleas, the lice and the bedbugs. There were no beds, but we had bedbugs. And I think this was the most -- the constant dampness in winter, the constant rain, the constant dampness. Being cold all the time, even though we had our own clothes. They did not take our clothes away. We were constantly cold and damp. And heat, yeah, there was in every barracks was a stove. But we very rarely had even two pieces of wood, you know, whatever. We had electricity, contrary to some reports that I have read, we did have electricity. We had two lightbulbs in each barracks, small ones. We did not have to work, we were not forced to work. People created their own -- in that they started handicrafts. A cultural life was born. My husband, by the way, participated in that. Music was made.

The Y provided instruments. You have to understand that in France the camps were just a little different from what you usually hear, in that social service agencies could function in the camp. And so we had the Young Man's Christian Association. We had the Crakas, which is an American organization. We had the Swiss Red Cross -- children's division, or children's aid. It was ch -- first the Children's Aid Society and then they combined it with the Swiss Red Cross, because otherwise they could not have functioned. We had them and we had Catholic and Protestant agencies and most of all we had the OSE, which is a ch -- Jewish child welfare organization in France. And OSE did tremendous work. Absolutely tremendous work, their social workers were far superior to anyone you can find, really and truly. And more oft -- most of these social workers, if not all, were Jewish. And so they really took a lot of chances and faced a lot of dangers helping us in the camp and taking children out of the camp, to place them in their children's homes. Because they had to travel, they were on the road, they had to -- you know. And even in unoccupied France, things became evermore difficult. So they did a tremendous job. The Swiss Red Cross brought in some food for the most desperate. And they would feed young people in the morning and it went in rotation and then in the afternoon, day or something, they fed adults who really had nothing at all. We could receive money in the camp. We also could write letters and receive letters. So, these are things that did not exist in other concentration camps. It was most helpful. The money we could receive, well it created a black market of phenomenal, you know, prices. This was possible because we had a lot of Spanish people with us, who came to this camp, 1939, from the

Spanish Civil War. These were refugees from the Spanish Civil War. For them this was not a concentration camp. For them it was a place where they could live. So-called, right? But they could go in and out of the camp. They had special -- that was a completely separate situation. These people brought in food, as much as they could get from the farms around or wherever and then, of course sold it at tremendous prices in the camp. That was their way of making a living. So the prices went up and up and up til one day we ourselves decided this can not go on because not everybody can really participate in this thing and a lid was put on the amount of money you could get each month. It was something we instituted ourselves, we kept an account for everyone, right? And out of this account, twice a month, you got a certain amount of money, several hundred francs. But that meant that you no longer could pay total fantasy prices, and it curbed this thing. We also instituted -- you could say it -- almost self help, in the following way. If people got money that was sent to them from wherever, they had to pay a certain percentage into a fund. This fund was used to help the people who received nothing at all, okay?

Q: So -- so, did you --

HL: I don’t think there are many camps or you have ever heard that people would -- sometimes it was a struggle to get people to really pay up, you know, their -- whatever percentages it was, I don’t remember.

Q: So it was sort -- it was a self government, essentially.

HL: It was -- a c-certain amount of it was self-government, definitely. Each block -- now the camp had -- was divided by one main road on each side of the main road, where wooden -- the wooden barracks subdivided into blocks. Each block, of course surrounded by barbed wire and a ditch and a gate with a ga -- military guard standing there or whatever. And -- and a rifle. Little did we know they didn't have ammunition. But we could not circulate between the blocks. We had to invent a system by which the men and the women were separated, so that was a great hardship, because husbands and wifes could not talk to one another. They could not see one another. So the first thing that happened is then, when people died, all right, they would go to the funerals, because we did have funerals. And they would meet at the cemetery so they could talk to one another, right? And that was one way in the beginning. And people died very, very soon. Very quickly. Dysentery broke out. Meningitis had broken out. There were a number of -- you know, diseases that very rapidly spread and so many -- especially the elderly, died very quickly. I can show you the list of the people who passed away. I have one. And eventually we instituted a system with little tickets that were given out for an hour's visit or else in the men's block, so the wi-wife's could go to the husbands and then the husbands would get a ticket to come another day to see the wife. But this of course also went, you know, in rotation. Not everybody could go every day.

Q: And you said -- you said, "We instituted this system."

HL: We instituted that system.

Q: Again that was -- that was a system that -- that you had [indecipherable]

HL: Yeah, but this -- this system had to be approved by the administration. On holidays, when there was a holiday, you could -- could get out of your block and circulate and there was no problem. But this was a holiday treat. But for the rest, this was instituted with the approval of the French administration.

Q: So you describe an admin-administration that was fairly hands off, that just

HL: It was not entirely hands off. When it came to cultural things they -- they were all with it, because that's the way the French are, right? There was no problem. You have to ask my husband, because he worked more in the office than I did. I worked in the office in our block. But he was -- in his block he also worked in the office, he was more involved than I was. My job was more of giving out the mail, running, you know, giving out the mail that came. Run the errands, do some statistical work, things like that, you know. Anyway, life in camp was very, very hard. I would not say it was life like you hear about from Auschwitz or any of the other camps. No, that it wasn't. It was tough, nevertheless. Once you are a prisoner, you're a prisoner. So we didn't have to stand in formation, okay? This did not exist. We were counted, however, in the morning. There was a woman who came through the barracks every morning to count us. God forbid if she overlooked a small child, because we had some small children with us and you know how it is, children go always under the blanket, right and she didn't see them. She was miscount and then she was -- she was just horrible, you know. Screaming, stamping her feet and -- I mean it was just terrible. Totally unnecessary. There were some escapes. Some were on -- people were unfortunately caught and brought back. Others made it, that depended on if you had contacts outside, if you spoke the language, if you had money, you knew where you were going. Most of us -- only some young people tried from our group, I think . The group of German Jews that came from Barton and the Polatinate were an overaged group of people. Very -- percentage-wise very few young people and children. It was mostly 50 and up. So 50 and up, people are not quite this adventurous any more, you know. And they were all traumatized and in shock and it took a long time before people started to function. The ones who functioned from the beginning were the young people.

Q: Did you live with your mother at that time and other relatives [indecipherable]

HL: In -- in Gurs?

Q: In Gurs.

HL: Yes, with my mother and my three aunts. The first few months I think we were in the same barracks and then my mother and I were shifted over to another barracks, but we were just a couple of -- what, maybe 50 meters, you know, something like that. So that was not a problem.

Q: And communication an-and information?

HL: Between us? Between the people in each block? Constant communication. What did people have to do other than talk? I mean, let’s face it. My cousin was in the same block, my -- that was the daughter of my mother’s brother. Her mother was in the same block. Cousins of my mother were in the same block, right? As long as they were female. The males were all in separate blocks. So there was constant communication between us and the other people. Also many times fights. Bread -- distributing the bread. Cutting it into portions, because you got the whole loaf, usually was the flashpoint for a fight. Some people were very good at it, some were not. And when the bread was cut in portions, everybody watched, obviously, that none should get even one millimeter more. And there were some women who were not as good at it and bingo. My mother did it, it went in rotation, to make it, you know, equal. My mother did it, there was never, never a question, it was very funny. Never. There were some other people doing --

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: Okay, this is side B of tape one, interview with Hanne Leibmann. Okay, you were saying about the social service agencies?

HL: Do you know my name is misspelled?

Q: Oh, it's misspelled?

HL: It's L-i-e.

Q: Yeah. We'll -- we'll fix that on here. It's spelled about three different ways on these forms so, we'll make sure it's the right one.

HL: Possibly with a P too. The social service agencies were very helpful to us. And indeed one day a social worker came to my mother and asked me whether she would let me go out of the camp to a village called Le Chambon. And by now you must have heard about Le Chambon. There was a concerted effort to get the children and young people out of the camp and they started with the younger ones first, because they were in greater danger. Danger of malnutrition, danger of -- you know, I mean the whole thing. So this y -- young lady from the OC came around and asked whether she would let me go to that village, that there was a minister there by the name of Trocme and they wanted to take some young people out of the camp. And my mother left the decision to me and I decided that I wanted to go. And so after quite some time, actually, maybe six, seven weeks, we were finally told we would leave. And we were seven young people -- seven teenagers all together, to leave for Le Chambon.

Q: How long had you been in the camp at that point?

HL: At the point I left -- well, we got to the -- we were arrested on the 22nd of October and arrived in Gurs on the 25th, 1940. I left the camp on the seventh of September, 1941. So, 11 months, little more than -- whatever. More or less. We were four boys and three girls to leave and we came to Le Chambon and that was the most marvelous experience anyone could have had, ever. I don’t know if you have seen the documentary, “Weapons of the Spirit”? Well, you have to see it to understand what I’m talking about. We were placed in a home that was run by the Swiss Red Cross, children’s division. We were quite well taken care of, under the circumstances. France was very hungry, they had very little to eat and even so, we were in the country surrounded by farmers, these farmers were very poor. We had enough to eat, with the exception of one or two of the boys who were growing like weed and you know how teenagers can eat, like non-stop, 24 hours. However, we were free. We were in wonderful surroundings, people who appreciated us. It was a flip-flop from Germany. It was a total flip-flop from Germany. After having been persecuted, discriminated against, segregated out of society, right? We now where the people -- that we are wanted, right? And no difference was made between the French and us, right? Whether in the children's home, in the group home or anywhere. Obviously, we were foreigners, obviously we did not speak French or not a good French. Obviously, we were dressed differently. I mean, we were very obvious in the village, no doubt about it. And there was -- we were just always appreciated. People always helped us. There came the moment when we had to be hidden. The farmers took us in and hid us, at their own risk, I mean, the risk of their own lives and the family, right? Even so, til 19 -- what was it, 1942, the unoccupied zone became totally occupied, right? All of France was occupied. The danger of -- for the farmers to be arrested, why -- because they were hiding us -- had they found us, was real. And they shared their bread with us -- shared it with us. They had children to feed. And yet, there never was a question. If fact, in one of the farms where I was hidden -- I was hidden on two different farms, in a four week period. Both farms the police came to search. On the second farm, the police asked the farmer, "Are you hiding anybody? Are you hiding any Jews?" And we could hear this upstairs in our hiding place. And the farmer was very calm, answered, "Not hiding anybody and I don't know what Jews look like." And after a little pause, he said, "Would you care for a glass of red wine?" Our hearts sank to our feet, believe you me, thinking that this guy is now going to accept and stay, right? We have to stay in our hiding place, being scared to death, right? And then we could hear, "No thank you. I am on my way." But this farmer was so calm about it, it was unbelievable. Just with a few words he finished the whole thing, "I'm not hiding body and I don't know what Jews look like." Well, no Jewish person had ever lived in Le Chambon, except for a few years, a Mr. Sesh lived there maybe a few years before the war. They had never known Jewish people. They knew the Jewish people only from the Bible. That was enough. They were the chosen people and you helped them and you took care of them. Being Huguenot, they knew their own history of persecution. They knew what this was all about, because, like the Jews, they always talk about their history. And so there was never a question. So this whole Chambon, their whole attitude, everything was the total flip from what we had experienced in Germany. I was in Chambon til February of 1943. In ‘43 I went to Switzerland.

Q: And before you went, how many Jews do you think --

HL: Live in Chambon today?

Q: No. Were there at that time? How many were being hidden?

HL: The official number is 5000 people. Among the 5000 were Christian people who were persecuted, okay, for one reason or another. Being that they were German Gentiles who had fled into France because of political reasons. People who had become Protestant but were of Jewish background, they had become or were baptized at birth -- we had a friend like that. She was in Le Chambon and she was in a Protestant home. We had all sorts of people. The number of 5000 is the accepted number today by the papers, the false papers that were issued in the village and the surrounding area. People came, stayed, got their papers, went on. Because once they had the false identification papers, especially with the French Jews, could maneuver, okay? So, if you figure 5000 people, or approximately 5000, to a popu -- equal population of about 5000, this is a tremendous amount of -- of people saved. Or given an opportunity to survive. It's tremendous. There were no 5000 people surviving in hiding in Germany, Jewish people. I think the number is 2000, but I'm not quite sure. So think of what one village did or one village and the surrounding villages, what they did in comparison to others. It is enormous. I must tell you that in the summer of 1942, I went back to Gurs to see my mother, because she had been very ill. I was promised a week's stay and they would let me go. That was the arrangement that was made for me, through the various social service agencies. And I went. About a week or 10 days before I went down to Gurs, my husband -- then boyfriend, was able to leave the camp and he was placed on a Jewish boyscout farm outside of Lyon. Now in order to go from Le Chambon down to Gurs, you have to come down from Chambon, go to Sentatien, go to Lyon, because that's the way the train would go, and he was outside of Lyon, so I stopped there first to see him. Then I went on to Gurs. And he told me, because he had been working for sometime in the so-called hospital in Gurs, that the ambulance comes through Orlong at such and such a time, such and such a -- blah blah. And when I asked, when I arrived in Orlong and asked for the ambulance from the camp, they said ambulance had not come for several days. So this already didn't sound too good. So I went by bus to the camp. And when I came to the camp I could not enter, I was not allowed to enter. And then I found a room in a nearby village, in an inn, very simple inn, but it was fine. And within -- I went -- saw my mother, because she was notified that I'm there. Saw my mother through many layers of barbed wire, great distance away and it was sort of shouted conversation like if I shout from here, across the street to the other house, okay? From the road. And they did chase me, police would come and chase me, I would go back. And then, within two days, I think, I was told that the first deportation trains would leave. And my mother was on the first train out. I was given permission to see my mother at the railroad station, the freight yards. And I believe the people were loaded on the trains during the night. And I was told that I had to be there very early in the morning. So went to Orlong -- back to Orlong, slept in the street, between two houses. Was at one time asked for my papers, which then were still my real papers, not phony papers -- by the police and after that they left me alone. I explained to them why I was there. And as soon as day broke, I went to the rayer -- rail yards -- freight yards and found my mother, with the help of a French policeman, actually. He was sort of keeping himself separate from the rest and he asked me why I was there and I explained it to him and he found my mother for me, because I didn't know in which -- which car. And so he also offered me -- five thirty in the morning, a drink of alcohol from hi-hip -- his hip flask. And I said no, thank you. I wasn't used to drinking at five thirty in the morning. And I spent probably an hour or an hour and a half with my mother. And then, of course, the trains were closed and locked and the train pulled out. On my way back, I went to see my boyfriend again and told him what happened and at that point, when I was there, I heard the first time, round ups for the people who lived free. And when I came back to Le Chambon, I told some of his friends who were in a American funded student home -- and told them -- told my friends that we had no longer any parents, that they were taken away. It was a horrible job. It was a horrible mission, really. The whole situation was incredible. And I told some of his friends, “We have to leave. We have to ma-make our way into Switzerland.” And they looked at me and said, “You’re crazy.” I said, “Okay, then I’m crazy, but that’s where I’m going to go.” Guess who went first? The ones who called me crazy. They went way before I did. I only went in February of 1943. I told my husband at the time I saw him, on that boyscout farm, Jewish boyscout farm, run by two rabbis incidentally, that if he felt he was not safe there, to come to Le Chambon -- which he did, together with another young fellow. And I took him to Madame Philip, the wife of André Philip, who was the right hand man to General DeGaulle. And she asked me only one question, “Can we trust him?” And I said, “Of course you can.” And by evening he had been hidden away. He was hidden away for four weeks. He didn’t know if anyone remembered where he was, he will tell you himself. And when he came back he was given false papers and together with some others and a guide, he was taken to Switzerland. So this village has done more in every way, than anyone else that I know, okay?

Q: Before we talk about --

HL: Yeah.

Q: Your -- your -- about going to Switzerland, tell me h-how you met your husband. You met in -- in the camp.

HL: We met in the camp, yes.

Q: How did that happen? What hap -- do you --

HL: How did that happen? Well, his mother worked in the office in the block where we were. She worked there -- everybody, you know, there was no pay involved or anything. But she spoke a fluent French. And we needed people in the office who spoke French in order to understand the orders that came from the administration. The statistics that had to be done and all of that. All right, you had to have people could communicate. And I happened to be helping in this office and he would come and see his mother and that's how we met. Very simple. Very simple story.

Q: How did you maintain a courtship, though, in that situation like that, in the camp?

HL: How -- courtship. I don't even think it was a courtship. It was a friendship, really. You know young people are sort of drawn together -- yes I fell in love with him, of course I did. I would be foolish to say not, that I didn't, right? But it was a totally platonic thing. There was very little privacy, right? Most of the time people saw us with his mother. Some even thought we were brother and sister. You know, I mean it -- s-some others, maybe they found some privacy or were looking for it. We weren't. And -- you know, I speak -- I speak in schools and colleges to the students about this time. And I mention my boyfriend became my husband. And not too long ago, in one class at Queensboro Community College, one girl in the question and answer session said, "I don't know how you could look for a man under these circumstances." I corrected her that I was not looking for a man, that is was totally platonic, which she couldn't understand, right? It was almost funny, you know. So -- we kept a cor -- kept up a correspondence after I left. It's as simple as that. I always knew where he was, when he left the camp, where he was, that's why I could go visit him, right? Once he left Chambon and went to Switzerland, as soon as he came into Switzerland, he let me know where he was, right? And we kept on corresponding. There was no problem corresponding between France and Switzerland at the time. After all, it was supposed to be neutral, right? We know a little differently today. Let's see, we even -- maybe we always knew. There -- there was not a problem, really.

Q: I guess the wi -- in a situation like that, you think that there are both advantages and disadvantages to -- to having a new relationship, whether it's a friendship or a boyfriend -- to [indecipherable]

HL: Or a girlfriend, or whatever.

Q: Or a girlfriend, you know, to hav -- that there -- you know, there are certain advantages in having a close companion and certain fears.

HL: There is an advantage to having someone, yes, especially if you're in the same situation, because you're each other's support. The same as when you're a group of people. Like we were seven young people, right? We were each other's support. There is no doubt about it. And it made things easier for us, right -- than being alone. If you're totally alone, without having this support, right -- it is much more difficult. One of my friends, who came from the camp with me, eventually, after I had left, split from the group. I'm not quite sure why she split. We assume she had a boyfriend somewheres. And she split from the group. And I think she -- in that time that she had left the group, until the end of the war, she suffered more psychological damages than any of us did.

Because all of a sudden she no longer had the support group -- of the group -- of the group who was in the same situation, you know. But she's -- you know, she's suffered really psychological damages to this day. And she's now in her 70's. She cannot deal with it. She lives in -- outside of Washington and to this day she has not gone to the Holocaust Museum. She cannot deal with it. Her mother was deported, her father was deported. Her brother was deported, he lived in Berlin. And she just cannot. And I feel it's very much the time that she segregated herself from this group.

Q: Did you maintain, or do you still maintain contact with other people in this group?

HL: All of them. All -- all but -- well, one lives in Brazil, I don't actually have contact with him, but with his twin brother in Paris. One -- we know he came here to this country and we have lost track of him. And all the others, yes, of course. Absolutely.

Q: Can you say -- can you say some of their names, just [indecipherable]

HL: Well, there is Elizabeth Koenig, nee Kauffman, she was with us. She did not come from Gurs, but she came to us in Le Chambon. She was, by the way, the chief librarian of the Holocaust Museum, til she became too ill and had to retire. There is Wiltrud Lavell, nee Eanee. She lives partly here in the States and partly in Spain. There is Jack Lewin, who lives right here, out in Long Island. There is Rudy Appel, who was not originally from Gurs, but came from Rivesaltes. The Atlas boys. Yeah, we all have contact with one another, absolutely. And we wouldn't miss it for the world. It took us a long time to even get together, because somewheres along the line we lost each other, because everybody -- you know, after they emigrated here, we didn't all come at the same time. Jack Lewin, yes, he was in Switzerland, he also fled into Switzerland, I had contact with him. But then he came, I think before we did and somehow we didn't know where he was. So it took years and years and years to find him. But eventually we fo -- he -- we found each other again. So we are really in constant contact, yes.

Q: Let's come back to that a little bit later. L-Let's keep going on talking about y-you made -- how you made it into Switzerland.

HL: How I made it into Switzerland? I went on my own.

Q: And -- and -- and -- and why? You -- you -- you [indecipherable]

HL: I just felt -- well, there were two reasons. First of all, Max had gone there, he was there already. I had made up my mind after I saw my mother being deported that I was not going to stay in France, no matter how safe in Chambon. I just felt -- and I had family in -- in -- in Switzerland. So my -- I was focused on Switzerland. One of my friends who lives out in Palo Alto, who came with Max from the Jewish boyscout farm outside of Lyon, we had arguments. He said, "You go to Switzerland, you go in a mousetrap. Something happens, you are lost there. Come with me, we go to Spain." I said, "I'm not going to Spain, I go to Switzerland." So we had arguments back and forth. He went exactly to Spain, with the help of the French underground, Madame Philip. His way was Spain, North Africa, England, joined the French army in England and came marching back into France. He then lived again for sometime in France and then came here to the United States. So, yes we did have arguments whether we do go to Spain. And from there on, or to Switzerland. So I chose Switzerland. And my trip to Switzerland, well, I went on my own. I went alone from Chambon, which I left on foot to go to the next village, because I did not want anyone in the village to see me take the train. This way I just disappeared. I stayed one night with the minister in Toanse, which is the next little town. And the -- in the morning I took the train, from there to go to Sentertien and from Sentertien you have to change to go to Lyon. Then you go from Lyon to Anmass, Anisee, Anmass and Geneva. And I did all that, it was not easy, it was not a joy ride. I was stuck in Lyon at the railroad station for a long, long time because there was no train going -- to wait for hours. At this point, in 1943, all of France was occupied. The railroad stations were full of German military. So I put myself in the waiting room, bought a magazine, right? Pretended to read this magazine, watched what was going on, right? Was as invisible as possible. I had bought my ticket, right -- and when the time came, I just walked quietly to the train -- to the pier -- to the platform. And took the train. Trains were overcrowded at that time. Stood a long time in the -- no, what do you call it, you know they have compartments in [indecipherable] and there’s this -- it’s like a corridor that runs along. I stood there for a long time and I put myself right next to a policeman. I figured if I stand right next to him, he won’t know that I’m scared to death, right? I did not start a conversation with him, he didn’t talk to me. But I figured, if I stand close to him, he will not think even to ask me for my papers. And that was exactly right. Took a long time before I found a seat. And there were three people -- funny enough, a lot of people must have gotten off. I found a seat, put myself in the corner, pretended to sleep. And these three people were talking about work in the resistance, which was a terrible mistake, because I could have been anybody who is going to denounce them. And in Anmass I got off and I -- no, Anisee, Anmass [indecipherable]. Got off in Anisee. Was supposed to go to an orphanage, a Catholic orphanage. Who -- and the man on the train, who was in this compartment said to me, “Do you know where you are going?” I said, “Yes, I have to go to the orphanage.” “Do you know the way?” I said, “I will find it, thank you.” “I will take you there.” I said, “Thank you, I will find it.” Well, he insisted on taking me there. Turned out not to be too far from the railroad station. We came there, nobody would open the door. So he said, “What are you going to do now?” I said, “Well, I guess I have to find a hotel.” I had very little money. And he said, “Okay, I will find one for you.” Well, what he found was a very simple place and downstairs was some sort of a bar type thing. And there were a lot of people in there, some of them from North Africa and I had never experienced that. And I got a room and I made sure I locked that door very tightly. I gave them a totally phony address. I gave them the name as it’s my -- in -- in my identification paper and as an address, I gave an address in Lyon. Every town, every city in France has a rue -- oh God, I can’t think of it just now. Rue Garibaldi. Doesn’t exist a town that doesn’t have a Rue Garibaldi. Such and such a number Garibaldi, Lyon. They didn’t look too closely, di -- neither did they care. And in the morning I paid and I left and I went back to this orphanage and then I could get in. They simply did not answer bells at night, for security reasons, obviously. And they gave me a little breakfast and told me how to go on. Which bus to take, where I had to walk, what I had to do. And so I made my way to Anmass and from Anmass I walked to another little place and on the way was a customs office. And I figured customs office, it's war time, there's no trade, what -- what customs office? And I walked by.

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: Okay, this is tape two, side A, interview with Hanne Leibmann, once again. So we're talking about your escape into Switzerland.

HL: My escape into Switzerland -- as I walked along the road, I saw this custom's office, as I mentioned before and I walked past and the officer called me back and asked for my papers, which I gave him. And he looked at them and then out of the blue came, "Are you Jewish?" Question I was not prepared for at all. And just as quickly, I answered, in good Nazi propaganda -- and don't ask me where it came from, I simply said, "I have nothing to do with this dirty race." And he sort of had a ha-half smile on his face and said, "Okay, you can go." Whether he believed me or not, I don't know, but he let me go. And I walked on and made my way to the priest of the village, the Catholic priests, which was one of my contact points. And he told me to what house I had to go to meet the man who would help me cross the border. This man was hired by my relatives in Switzerland to cross me over. He was paid for the job. There were a family there with two boys and later on a single young man whom they had found in the church [indecipherable] the story was and he wanted to cross over into Switzerland. So this night he crossed over six people. He took us -- actually, he was very close to the border. What he did was carry across -- carry us across the water. There was a little stream. He carried us across so we wouldn't get wet. Told us exactly what direction to walk -- now please, this isn't -- during the night, in the dark. In what direction to walk to get the street car that would take us into Geneva. Now, you know what streetcars do? They have the overhead electric wires and it sparks when they hit the connections. So you see this and you get confused. And we walked and came exactly back from where we had started. So then we knew a little better what we had to do, but it was a very anxious moment. This man was a widower, he had six children, teenagers and up. At one point, several months later, he took 40 people across the border, was caught and shot. So, it's a very sad story. That left all of his children without parents. Yeah, he was paid for it, but, you know, what good?

Q: Do you remember his name?

HL: No, not at all. If I ever really knew it. Or if I knew a name, it might not have been his real name, I mean you had to have lots of safeguards. In Anisee when I got off the train, I had to show my papers, right? And police looked at it and said, "Go on." You know, there was no problem. There were a lot of people and [indecipherable] you know. We reached a street car -- we had a few Swiss coins, which the man had given us -- the passeur had given us and he told us where to get off, and there would be a person standing there waiting for us, taking us to a little hotel for the night. And that's what happened. We got off at that point. I don't remember what the station was from the streetcar. There was a young lady standing there and she took us to this hotel, which didn't ask for any registration or anything. They must have been, obviously, paid off. And in the morning she came and picked us up, took us to her house -- to her apartment, gave us a breakfast. And I had asked her, as soon as I got off the streetcar, I said, "Please call my family immediately." "Oh, it's 11:30 at night." I said, "Please, call immediately."

And she did and my aunt came the next morning to pick me up. Around 11 o'clock or so, she was in Geneva to come and pick me up. Now, my entry into Switzerland was easy, compared to other peoples. Also, once I was on Swiss soil, I was legal, because my family had obtained an immigration visa for me. So only my crossing was -- in a way, illegal, right? But once I was in Switzerland, I was a legal whatever you -- immigrant, okay? While all the others, like my husband, were illegal immigrants, right? They were refugees -- illegal refugees. I lived with my family from March first til Decem -- 1943, til -- 24th of December, 1944. Much too long. My relatives did not understand what I had experienced. They had no understanding -- even so, my aunt had lost her sister. She could not accept that my mother w-was dead, til I flung it in her face one day. They just never understood. My uncle was a very Victorian man. Very Swiss, very Victorian. I was 18, he was in his 70's, right? I mean, this alone, right? And there were a lot of frictions. A lot of frictions also because I felt that he was a well-to-do man and he did not do enough. Did not do enough for the family, to save them. Two sisters of my mother were able to leave Gurs to go to Cuba. My grandmother died in Gurs. My mother's oldest sister died in Gurs, okay? And there was my cousin, who was a young woman of 35. There was a lot to be done and he could have done better. And the answer I got from him one day was, "I cannot eat my bricks." He had several houses and the answer was, "I cannot eat my bricks." And it was just so outrageous, you know. My aunt could be speaking about her brother that was lost, right, with his wife, daughter, son-in-law. And sees a stain on a little tablecloth with red wine and she became totally upset about this stain, while talking of her brother who died in Auschwitz. She didn't know about Auschwitz at the time, but she knew these people were lost. So you can see that they had absolutely no understanding. And the fact that I wanted to get married, well that was altogether outrageous. How can you get married to someone who has nothing -- who is nothing? You have to have at least -- all this was too much. And I must say that if I ever came close to a nervous breakdown, it was in my family -- in my aunt's and uncle's house. And one of my cousins didn't help the situation at all.

Q: Let me just go back a little bit.

HL: Yeah.

Q: You said that you had found out that your -- your mother had died. When did you find out and how did you find out after [indecipherable]

HL: Look, when my mother was deported and we had this hour or so together, she -- my mother was a realist. She told me she would never come back, that this was the last trip, that they were certainly going to be taken east and somehow people had a sense for what was going to happen to them. And so, you know, news filtered into Switzerland in '43, slowly and surely and there was no doubt in my mind that this is what happened. Besides, my mother had diabetes and I never even thought she would make it as far as -- as Auschwitz, which she did, unfortunately. In this case, unfortunately [indecipherable]. So, to me it was a sure thing.

Q: Were you ever able to find a [indecipherable]

HL: Also, a woman of 52 and the strain and stress and the deprivation of everything, right? And sick. How long can you last?

Q: So you felt that whole time that --

HL: That my mother was lost, absolutely.

Q: Were you able later on to find out any information about what happened?

HL: She was indeed -- she made it as far as Aus-Auschwitz and she was killed in Auschwitz. Because I looked into the Gedenk book, you know what that is? That's a memorial book that the German government publishes with all the names of German Jews that were killed. There's some mistakes in the book, however, essentially, you can find what you need to find. You can -- the museum has the book. You ask for it up in the library, they have it. So, to me, that -- there was -- we knew. There was no doubt in our mind, especially people of a certain age. When I saw my mother last, she had already lost so much weight. I'd never seen my mother that skinny in her whole life. So how much resistance was there left? So living with my relatives was not a good experience, not at all. I left them on December 24th and I mention that date because my uncle was Protestant, my aunt always remained Jewish and was a member of the Jewish community, but he was Protestant, and so Christmas, of course was celebrated because their sons were raised as Protestants. And my cousin, her middle son, threatened her that unless I was out of the house, he would not come for Christmas. And I had already been in negotiations with Geneva, where Max was taking a social service course -- to get a job there and the only job I could get was as a maid. And Mademoiselle DeMomela was the one who negotiated that deal. And I got a job with a very nice Bulgarian family. He was secretary at the Bulgarian consulate and resigned because of the Bulgarians being so German friendly, okay? He opposed the Germans with everything. So, I worked for them for several months. They were very nice to me. I worked hard, but they were very nice to me, very understanding. And in the mornings he would come and tell me, “I listened to the radio last night.” The broadcast, the clandestine broadcast from Bulgaria. “They shot that friend of mine and they shot this friend of mine,” and I got an up to date report every day of what was going on in Bulgaria. He associated with a lot of people that worked for various resistance groups all over. And they were really very nice. And I worked for them til the day we got married, which was the 14th of April, 1945. And then I asked for voluntary internment, so I could be with my husband. Because as an immigrant, I was to be free. So I asked for internment and the Swiss government said, yes, I could do that. And so we lived in various refugee homes. Now, Max had been in a work camp at one time. And we hear a lot about these things and is all so distorted. Some people like to say they were slave labor camps. These were not slave labor camps, they were work camps. They lived like all the military did, right? We got the same rations the Swiss got. We were paid a small sum of money every 10 days for the work we did. We could go out. There was never a fence, there was never anyone to say you cannot, you know, leave the house. Yeah, they had to do their work for certain hours and then they could do what they wanted. Weekends they could go in the village, go to the movies or to -- to local inn or whatever they wanted to do. And every six weeks we got a pass for the railroad, to go anywhere we wanted in Switzerland, provided someone was good enough to take a refugee in for a two or three day pass. So it was nothing at all like what you read today in the papers. It's -- it's -- it's sad. I mean, the Swiss did a lot of dirty things. What went on during the war, you know, it was immoral, it was terrible, but people will do things -- terrible, immoral things, in order to stay independent. And I cannot even fault them for that. Because, had they not done that, you and I wouldn't be talking to each other. Germany would have gone in there, right? And you and I wouldn't be talking. Had the Germans gone in there, those 28,000 Jews that were in Switzerland, would not be. Surely Switzerland was wrong in sending back 30,000 Jews to their death. This was as immoral and as unnecessary as can be. There was room for these people. But the things Switzerland did after the war, with the gold, and not paying out the moneys that people were entitled to and denying them what was rightfully theirs, this is what I resent. We didn't expect anything from the Swiss. We were glad to be there, we were glad to be safe. As long as they were safe, we were safe. Yes, there was harassment, yes we were the dirty refugees. Yes, we were the unwanted guests, right? But we survived and the name of the game was survival. Harassment? We had been harassed before, right? That they are anti-Semitic, no doubt about it. There's no doubt about that. But the name of the game was survival. I must tell you that Max and I were in three different homes. One of them, the woman who ran it -- the Swiss woman who ran it was not a nice person. She was a small, petty soul, who now had power over people and she let them know it. So this was not a nice place. We had mostly Dutch people in this home, who came from

Theresienstadt and they were mostly elderly people, very few young people among them. And she was not nice to them. We then asked for a transfer, after the -- the Dutch went home very quickly after the -- after the end of the war. Within a few weeks they went back to Holland. We then got a Russian group of people. These people were probably Ukrainian, possibly slave laborers, possibly all the people who had volunteered to work in Germany. Okay? We never knew the full story, except that they were Russians. And we -- they were a rough bunch. Most of them were pretty rough. And we asked for a transfer to another home, because Max worked in the office, so he had connections. He asked for a transfer and we went to Cloastuss, which is a lovely place. And there the Swiss management was just the nicest, really the nicest people. This house -- this home burned down -- this home burned down after the -- we first had Polish people there, Gentile people and then we had also again Russian people. And the Russian people, that was a very dirty story, what happened to them. What happened was that Switzerland did not have diplomatic relations with Russia, since 1917. Now, they were itching to re-establish this after the war and what better thing to do than to sell out these Russian people? And they were the only group of people who were forced out of the country. The Russian military came and picked them up. And you saw it, when they came. All of a sudden, this house was Russian property. This was the way they behaved. We had a hundred people in Cloastuss in this home. Four of them hid in the woods and did not go back. We later on found out from someone in the government in Switzerland that this whole transport of Russians, was killed in Austria by the Russian military, including the infants, and we had infants. So this was a group of people sold out in order to get diplomatic relations. Amoral? You better believe it.

Q: When -- when and why did you decide to -- to leave Switzerland and come to the United States?

HL: Switzerland made it very clear to you that you better go on. My husband had a cousin in Switzerland, had a clothing factory for men -- men's clothing. And he could have used him very much, to help him in the factory, in the office and so on and so forth. And so he asked for permission for us to stay, for him to work. And so the little village said, oh well, if the contone, which is like the state, right? We'll go along with that, this is fine. Then the contone said well, if the federal government will permit it. And the federal government turned around and said, when the -- if the contone will permit it. And wa -- you know what it became? A catch 22. And I said, "Forget it, we go to America." I had family here, right? Max had family in Israel, however this was not an option for us. And s --

Q: Why not?

HL: We just felt we didn't want to go to Israel. We just felt that was not the place we would want to be. And --

Q: W-W-Why?

HL: I don't know whether it actually had to do something with his aunt -- it prob -- aunt and uncle, really, because they were not willing to -- to do anything for him, even before we were deported. You have to ask him exactly what went on. And they were not particularly helpful during the time that his mother was in Gurs. His father took an entirely different route. They were not willing to help him either. And so we probably felt we better, you know, it was not the place we wanted to be. Later on relations straightened out, but it took a long, long time. In any case, our chance of coming here was probably also better. And so we came here in February of 1948. No, actually beginning of March. The first day in our -- in this country was our daughter's second birthday. Our [indecipherable] was born in Switzerland. And I tell you, we were in a refugee home in Taratae where the woman who was in charge was very, very nice. We had approximately 30 infants in that house, many of them born in Switzerland. No infant, no baby could have been better taken care of anywhere, than our children were. Each mother took care of her baby. We had a whole floor with nothing but babies, okay? A whole floor. Separate kitchen. Two pediatric nurses to supervise the whole thing, okay? I mean, these kids were so well taken care of, it wasn't even -- and I -- I mean it was really exceptional. If anyone says the kids weren't taken care of, it's not true. It's not true. We had older children with us, they went to school. One of the refugees was a doctor from Yugoslavia who had -- was with the Hungarian group, was in Bergen-Belsen and was brought out and came to Switzerland, this group of people, I don't know if you heard about them. And he was a terrific doctor and a specialist in pediatrics. So our children couldn't have had it better. And she was just two years old when we came here.

Q: And what happened when you first arrived?

HL: When we first arrived, my family had arranged for us to stay at the Steven Weiss home. Steve -- Rabbi Steven Weiss was running a -- a house on 70th Street, it was in the 70's on the West Side. And there were a lot of refugees in this house. We had a room to ourselves, large room for the three of us. And, it was -- we had breakfast, lunch and dinner. And the first week our relatives paid for us, I think it came to 30 dollars for the three of us. And it was really a very good set up because I could go down in the kitchen and get for the baby what I needed, you know? And so on and so forth. And then we wanted some help from some organizations here and my uncle, who was a brother to my father said, "Let's go down." I think they went to the HIASs. And Max and he went and I stayed back with the child. And down at the organization they told him, "Well yeah, but -- we can help you, but only if you move out of New York." And Max said, "Well, where do you think I should be going?" And he said, "Well, go to Peoria, Illinois." So he asked, "Well, what's in Peoria, Illinois for me?" "Well, go to the library and look it up. And the first thing you have to do is move out of the Steven Weiss home and move into the Hotel Marseilles on 100 Street and Broadway." And that was a terrible place. So we did and then we thought about all of this and it was a ridiculous idea. I have family in New York, I have family upstate New York. I have family in Pennsylvania. Why should I go -- be going out to -- to Illinois? I know -- don't know anybody, right? So, about 10 days or 12 days after we came here, Max found a job and very soon after that we moved into a s-single room occupancy situation and chugged along as best we could. And --

Q: Wh-What was his job?

HL: He worked in an office for an importer - exporter. Oh, some stuff. You have to ask him exactly what they were doing. Unfortunately I was sick. I spent some time in the hospital. My daughter went upstate to my cousin. And Max had a problem with his knee, he also had to stay in bed for several weeks. And it was a very rough beginning. After all, this was straightened out, we found a little place in Flushing, because we didn't want to be in Manhattan with the child and also the rents were much too high, we couldn't find anything. If I had walked into a place with a tiger on a leash, I probably would have found an apartment, but not with a child. Nobody wanted a couple with a child. And in Flushing we found something, it was very bad, but we had two rooms, a kitchenette, you know and we could sort of almost afford the rent. Not really. And we lived in that house til we had the house condemned, for the unsanitary conditions in the house. And then we found an apartment in Astoria with a very nice landlady who wanted someone with a child. And we -- that was a partly furnished apartment and it was very nice. And we just sort of got our feet on the ground when disaster struck. And disaster struck one night when I was coughing and first [indecipherable] really kind of funny. Then I was coughing again and then, by then I knew I better get up. And I went in the bathroom and I coughed up blood. Now, nobody had to tell me what happened, okay? My aunts, who went to Cuba from Gurs, had arrived in the States few weeks after us, so I had my two aunts here and of course they were no help to me because one had Parkinson's, the other one was even older, why not sick, but an aunt with Parkinson's is -- is enough -- [indecipherable] to tell them. And went to the hospital and they diagnosed the obvious, I had TB. And that was in 1950. Now we came in ‘48, this was the fall of 1950. My uncle had died, s -- maybe six weeks before that and then of course they took x-rays of my husband and of the child. And Max was equally sick with TB. The only one not sick, like a miracle, was the child. So we first had to send her up to my cousin to be taken care of, because she was not to [indecipherable] with us any more. And we then were placed in sanitorium, in Bedford Hills, which is Westchester County. Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, had a sanitorium up in Westchester County and we were placed there. We were there -- Max probably 18 months and I was there 21 months. Our daughter had to come back from upstate New York in order to be placed in a foster home. I could not leave her with my cousin. I cannot ask someone to take care of a child, a two year old -- a four year old at this point -- or four and a half, without being able to compensate them in some way. It is a [indecipherable] responsibility. And she came back to New York and she was placed in a foster home out on the island with a very wonderful person, who had been taking in foster children for many years. And there were other children in this house and she was very well taken care of. I mean, very well taken care of, but still knowing that her parents were someplace else. And it left it’s mark on the long run. The woman was very good, she had great understanding for children. And she was away from us for --

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: This is tape two, side B, interview with Hanne Leibmann. And you were just talking about -- h-how long were you sick for, actually, with TB?

HL: Well, from October 1950, til I came back, which was in fif -- about September 1952. Something like that. Must have been around that. And then of course, you're not supposed to work, you're supposed to blappa -- you know, take it easy, because at this point you are only arrested, it takes five years to be cured, okay? So it was felt that it's enough if you have -- if I t-take care of the child and my husband and the household, that I couldn't possibly go to work. He went to school. He went for accounting. He finished a course in nine months that usually takes two years. And we actually lived on welfare. We had to go on welfare, we had no choice. We got a s -- apartment eventually. When we first came out we had -- we subleased a room -- Max subleased a room in someone's apartment. And then after we got clearance from the government -- because we were not citizens, we got an apartment in Brooklyn, in the 14 section. There's a housing project, the 14 houses. And we got an apartment there and the minute we got the apartment, we could take our daughter home. And eventually, as soon as he finished school, he went to work. And we took it from there.

Q: How old was your daughter when you -- when she [indecipherable]

HL: Came back? Almost seven.

Q: So that must have been very hard.

HL: It was very hard. You have to find your way back. It's really -- you know, a relationship has been -- not totally cut of course, but still -- we could see her -- after the first year we could see her every three months, I think. But a couple of hours is not much, right? We would call her every Sunday, 12 o'clock sharp. She knew 12 o'clock on

Sunday, there's a telephone call from her parents. We wrote her, we sent her stuff. I would knit for her or crochet for her, do things, you know. A cousin of Max would go and see her all the time. This woman worked, she couldn't take the child, she had to support herself. She went out to the island, almost every weekend. But you have to find your way back. We would do anything and everything to -- you know, make this again a family. And yet, after maybe two years, maybe less, she threw at me one day, "You got sick on purpose, both of you, so you could get rid of me." This is a child's thinking, a child's imagination, a child's reasoning. A child doesn't know you don't get sick on purpose, right? And when I told our pediatrician, the very man who was -- who saw her born, practically, in Switzerland, he then said, "Well, maybe she should have some psychiatric care." And I figured that's going a little far, I think she will outgrow that. Well, she did not outgrow certain aspects. She realized, yes we didn't get sick on purpose, when she was older, but there were certain aspects that she did not overcome. And so she ended up with many years of psychiatric care. She's now the most level-headed, wonderful human being that you -- you know, not because it's my daughter and I'm prejudiced in favor of my daughter, but she really is, you know. And she is very understanding of other people. So it really has done what it was supposed to do. I mean she had to deal with another situation several years later when I got sick again -- again with TB, in 1961. So that was something that was just -- you know, a repetition, even so, this time I didn't have to go to a sanitorium, I was home. And she was already a teenager. But it certainly upset her greatly, you know. Said here again, mother is sick.

Q: How did -- how did your experiences during the war affect the way that you sort of saw yourself as -- as a mother or an -- an -- you know, here in the United States, how did -- how did that -- you know, color the way that you --

HL: You mean, did our daughter know what happened to us, did we tell her what happened to us? We didn't. Well, she asked me one day, "Why don't I have grandparents?" And she must have been about 10, something like that. And that was an unexpected question really, because I'd never thought of it. And I told her, "Your grandparents were killed in a concentration camp." Now that was a little much for a child, I know that now. I didn't realize it at the time. And then she didn't say anything any more. And my two aunts were sort of stand in grandmothers, right? She heard us talk about Gurs, definitely. She heard me talk to my aunts when we were talking about things in the past. So she always knew this, but we didn't push it. We did not say to her, like I know from other mothers, "You have to be very good, because of what happened to us." Mm-mm. We did not say, "You cannot go here or there," right? "You cannot have this or that, because we didn't have that you can be without." You know. She wanted to go out as a teenager or when she went to college, she went to Adelphi. And she wanted to go at night to the city, on Saturday night like all young people. We never said, "You cannot do that." I know parents who would not let their children do that. Simply because they felt, "We didn't have it. We had to do without that." They had no understanding for a normal life of a teenager, right? And they wouldn't let their children have it. And they really -- a lot of these second generation have a lot of problems. And I think that's one problem our daughter did not have.

Q: And why do you think they have these problems?

HL: Because of the parents, really because the parents were overprotective. I have friends who outright say, "Yes, we were overprotective of our children. We wouldn't let them do this and that and the other thing and we always worried where they were and what they did." And we just didn't do that. Or if we worried, we didn't tell her, and let her -- you know. One night my husband and I had a terrific fight. Why? Because Evelyn decided, with her girlfriend, to go to the city to a hangout. And this hangout was perfectly fine, there was nothing wrong, but it was snowing. It was snowing very heavily. And he -- she wanted to go with the car, obviously, from Jackson Heights. I said, "Go take the car. Go." And he was upset that in the snow I let her drive and go to city. "This is too dangerous," this is this, this is that. I said, "You know what? She wants to do it. If she gets stuck, she has to find a way to come home." She did. I didn't say you can't go, it's too dangerous, or this or that or the next thing. We let -- I let her go, he was -- he was upset about it. But I felt that, she's a young person, she has to find out what she can do, what she can not do. And we never stopped her from whatever she wanted to do because maybe we're too afraid of it.

Q: When she got older, did you talk to her more and more about your experiences?

HL: Well, she always knew some of them and eventually -- when we gave the interview to the museum, I think it was, she listened to the tape. I said, "Well?" She said, "Well, I always knew the story." That was the answer, I always knew the story. Because she heard us talk. Mostly with my aunts, or with friends or other people and there was never -- but there was never this emphasis on you cannot do this or you cannot do that or you have to be good because of what we experienced, which is a stupid thing anyway. No.

Q: Do you think that you felt differently or taught her differently about things like religion or being Jewish, based on your experiences?

HL: She had -- she went to Sunday school for a year or two. We are not a religious home, right? We are more cultural Jews than religious Jews. Yes, we do observe the holidays, right? We will have Passover and we will have people here for Passover or -- for Passover or for Rosh Hashanah or whatever, right? Yes, we had Hanukah but we are not, as such, religious people. She knows very well where she belongs, okay? There's no question about that. But to me, you know, it is by far more important that someone is a good human being, over being very religious and maybe not such a good person. One doesn't exclude the other, but you know, to me it's more important.

Q: What -- what do you think may have -- what do you think's been changed by your experiences during the war in terms of that -- in terms of the way you see religion or being Jewish? I mean, is th -- are there things that you can --

HL: I have never been ashamed of being Jewish, I was always so proud of being Jewish. I would never have entertained the thought of conversion of any kind. And by the way, in Le Chambon, there was never an attempt by anyone to convert us, right? That was an absolute taboo. Would have been very easy for these people to persuade us, right?

Absolutely not. I have asked many of my friends how they felt about it and it was the same opinion. Yeah, I have my quarrel with what is known as God, right? How could you not after what you experienced? And if you ask survivors, you will find that some of them became very religious or remained their religiousness and others who turned away. So, we're here somewheres in to -- in between. Which is a cop-out.

Q: Have you gone back there at all?

HL: To where?

Q: To either France or Switzerland?

HL: Oh, to the village? To Le Chambon? Many times. And I must tell you that when I go there, I feel very much at home. I know few people, right, as such. The people that I sort of knew have all passed on. But there's just something about the place that -- well, I feel very much at home. We have not gone back to Gurs, no. By the way, there is nothing standing of the camp, there is only the cemetery, which has been totally redone, partly or entirely with money from Germany. And moneys that were raised otherwise, I suppose, but it's totally redone, it doesn't look anything like what it originally was. It's like -- now like a nice military cemetery. So --

Q: You were talking about this group that you were -- that you were with there and then you sort of maintained contact with --

HL: Yeah.

Q: -- over the years. When you first came to the United States, was that important, to find people who had been through the war and had similar experiences? Or has it been more important [indecipherable]

HL: Well, we found many of our friends here, again, friends from before this total experience, you know, having be deported, Gurs and so on. Most of them, my husband's, some mine. Yeah, it was important to find our friends again. That was definitely important to us. Many had other experiences. I have friends who went into England with the kinder transport and I found them here again. Others came directly from Germany to here. Others had been in Switzerland. Yeah, it's important to have your friends and friends with whom you share a past. There is sort of an unspoken, you know, connection. You know, you don't have to explain to this person how you feel about a certain thing or a situation or in -- what it was in the past. You don't have to do that, they know. The ones who don't know, are the ones who don't even want to know. Or didn't want to know when we first came. When we first came, we were with one of my husband's friends and they said something and Max says, "Well, I had to go across the Alps -- not the Alps, but through the mountains." And the way we came here and so on and [indecipherable] so he sort of made a funny joke about a very sad situation and they really didn't want to know. And this is the complaint of all survivors, that the people really didn't want to know. And then I come across American Jewish people, "Oh, we didn't know what went on." "You didn't know what went on, when it was daily in the newspapers? Didn't you read them?" I mean there -- we have volumes of paper clippings from the New York Times, over here at the Holocaust center. Day by day where something has been reported about the Holocaust and the conditions in Germany before 1940. And people didn't know? Kind of strange, isn't it? So I have -- we have a problem. I mean, when people come and -- one of my friends, a survivor, told me and said they were invited somewheres, family, American, you know, extended family, when they came here and the woman said, "Well, tell me, did you get orange juice for breakfast?" Where? In Auschwitz? I mean the questions are so absurd. They were so absurd that the survivors just shut up and weren't talking.

Q: That one of the reasons that --

HL: The survivors did not talk for so long. They couldn't and they knew that other people had no -- no understanding, didn't really want to know. I spoke in a school in Staten Island several weeks ago. Jewish school. Not a yeshiva, but a Jewish school. On the line of maybe Hamas. You know Hamas school? They are a wonderful school, Jewish school in the middle of the city, have highly intelligent children there and a wonderful staff of teachers. And this is run -- there are boys and girls, so it's not, you know. But we wear long skirts and long sleeves and -- religious. I was over there and I spoke to about 100 children. And then I asked, "How many of you have grandparents that are survivors?" And I would say 70 percent of the kids there had grandparents that were survivors. And I asked them, "What did your grandparents tell you?" Nothing. Nothing. "My grandparents don't talk about it." I said, "Go back to your grandparents, make them talk to you and tell you." I said, "If you are supposed to remember the Shoah, commemorate the Shoah, then you have to know why. So go and talk to them. Make them talk.” They don’t talk.

Q: Why do you think the grandparents aren’t -- aren’t telling their story?

HL: I don’t know. They should tell their grandchildren. You have this opposite, the ones who don’t talk and the others who pile it on. Literally. And put a great burden on these children. It is almost a burden the way they do it. So you have these two opposites.

Q: Do you feel like your experience has been different as a survivor, having been married to another survivor?

HL: You will find most survivors being married to other survivors.

Q: But in your case, you actually had such similar experiences all the way through -- through the war.

HL: Yeah, and many people met in the DP camps in Germany or even knew each other at one point or another in the ghettos. Many of them got married in the ghetto, were lucky to survive.

Q: Can you explain in your experience why that -- why that’s been so --

HL: I think again because people were comfortable with each other, not necessarily because they were terribly in love, but because they wanted someone, right? Someone with the similar experience who understands what this was all about, right? And because they wanted a family. And I don’t think there were many divorces among these survivor marriages. Many of the people already had lost a family. Had lost a wife or a husband

and children. You know, so they were looking to establish again, a family. I think most survivors are married to other survivors. At least most of the ones I know.

Q: Is there anything else that you want to [indecipherable]

HL: No, not really.

Q: Post war experiences?

HL: No.

Q: No?

HL: Not really. At war's end -- when the war was over. The day it was announced on the radio and I listened to the speech of King George and I just understood enough English to understand what he was saying. We were in a refugee home in Shesare, where we had this horrible woman in charge of the home. I must tell you, I felt totally drained. It was a beautiful, sunny day. And here were the Alps in full sunshine and I felt totally drained. It was not hooray the war was over. We had lost everyone and everything. The last one to die was my brother in 1945 in the Battle of the Bulge. So we felt drained. There was no jubilation. Not a -- for any of us. You would think people would have been totally happy and s -- no. Mm-mm. In fact, we have a picture somewheres -- this woman in that home, in that refugee home, found it in her heart to say, "Well, the war is over, let's have in the afternoon, something special. Let's have some coffee and cake outdoors on the verandah." And so we did, and picture was taken and everybody looks glum. That was the hooray, hooray, you know. So, I think maybe you would want to speak to Max.

Q: I would like to speak to Max.

HL: But life, the beginning in this country was not easy, it really wasn’t.

Q: But, recent years has been easier?

HL: Recent years have been good, yes.

Q: Well, thank you so much --

HL: Eventually.

Q: For talking, it was wonderful.

HL: Eventually I did go to work, but I cannot [indecipherable] that officially.

Q: Shall I turn this off?

HL: Yeah.

End of Tape Two, Side B

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: -- tape three, and the beginning of the interview with Max Leibmann. And the interviewers name is Joe Richmond. So let's start just -- let's review your childhood that -- talking about your brothers and sisters, their names and ages.

ML: I -- no, I don't have brothers and sisters, I was an only child. Was born in Mannheim, Germany. I had a perfectly normal, middle class childhood and I started school in -- after [indecipherable] 1928. I switched schools in 1932, meaning that in Germany you normally completed either f-four years of public school and then went into high school, or if you did not qualify for high school, you continued for four more years of public school, then became an apprentice and went to school twice a week in the afternoon. So I switched schools. After four years I went into the -- a high school called Grayagunasium, which meant that in the first year we had Latin, and Latin continued of course, throughout school. In the third year we added French. So we had Latin and French and in the fourth year we had Latin, French and English. The difference between my high school and a gimnasium was, that in the gimnasium, you would learn Latin first, then they would add Greek and as a third language I think they added French. But the Greek was meant particularly for students who would become either lawyers or doctors.

Q: In your -- in your upbringing, though, you -- was it a religious household, was it --

ML: No. We were not -- we were not religious. I mean, we knew we were Jewish. My father was very active in the Jewish community, in fact he was an elected official to the -- let us call it lower house. And he was requested, I think in 1935 or 1936 to join the executive branch of the Jewish congregation, which he declined because he felt he was not religious enough. But he was active in a Jewish choral society, which after -- where he was the secretary, since the end of World War One. And this choral society, eventually, after we were excluded in Germany from cultural life, was converted into what was called cooltupunt, meaning we were, in our city, the cultural organization. We pr-produced concerts, we produced opera, as -- when this -- when we were excluded, we added a -- an orchestra, a string orchestra And th-thus we were able to perform all kinds of things. I was in this orchestra by the time I was about 15 or 16. In 1935 or 1936, I joined the orchestra and this went on until Crystal Night. Now, it should -- I have to emphasize that I was permitted to stay in school and not change to a Jewish school, because my father was a front line war veteran. And the children of Jewish front war -- war veterans, had the privilege -- some privilege -- of -- of remaining in school til Crystal Night. However, I did not stay in school after December 1937. I had decided by then that enough is enough. I could never go to the university in Germany, so it made no sense to stay in s-s-school, learn Latin -- continue with Latin and I switched from a -- from the high school, to a private commercial school where I -- with an emphasis on languages, but where I continued French and English studies. I also learned some steno -- German steno. Why I learned this I will never know, because I knew I would never use it. This brought us to Kristallnacht, which was on -- during the night of November ninth and November 10th. I went innocently to school on November 10th in the morning, not knowing about anything. And my mother called me on -- around nine o’clock, nine thirty, I should leave the school now and go to Heidelberg. Heidelberg was a smaller city which was -- is quite famous all over the world -- and I should go in the woods and stay there until the evening and call her again. Which I did. And on my way from the private school where I was, to the railroad station, which was about a 10 minute walk, I finally understood what was going on in the city, because I saw swonkrauts clustered around houses where I knew there were Jews living and furniture flew out of the windows, etcetera, etcetera. My father left Germany in March, 1938. He was offered by the firms he represented. He was a representative of textile goods, to go to Greece and start -- try to start selling there on their behalf and thus create a new existence which would -- should permit us eventually to follow him to Greece. This did not really work out. The competition became aware of his activities when he started to sell goods. And the competition managed to get him expelled in 1939. My father went to Italy. And from Italy, just before the outbreak of the war, illegally went to France, where he was first arrested, put i-into jail for six weeks and then lived a precarious life until he was caught in 1940 in Nice -- until he was caught by accident in a raid and was deported to Auschwitz. My mother's w -- remained in Germany. By the way, she -- she saw my father for the last time in August of 1939 and came back, instead of calling me and telling me to come down to Italy, because we all had passports, and that's -- my mother and I were trapped when the war broke out and we never saw my father again. And then we were deported on October 22nd, 1940, to Gurs.

Q: [inaudible] And how old were you when -- when you were deported?

ML: I was deported -- when I was deported in ni -- October 1940, I was 19. By the way --

Q: What can you tell me about that?

ML: Slow. Let’s step back first.

Q: Okay, okay.

ML: Let’s go back to Kristallnacht first. We had moved, in order to preserve money, because no inco -- there was no more income, we had given up our own apartment and moved in-into the apartment with my grandmother. My grandmother happened to have been a French citizen. And the house my grandmother owned had a ba -- a loft in the back, where there was a Jewish firm which sold electrical fixtures. On Krist -- on -- on -- not on Kristallnacht -- during the day when they started smashing everywhere, they also came into my grandmother’s house and went into the back in the loft and had a field day with smashing all these electrical fixtures which were stored [indecipherable] hanging, etcetera, but my mother had enough presence of mind to call the French consulate. Because, after all, this was a Fr -- a French possession, this was not German property. And the consulate called the police and within 10 or 15 minutes after these hoodlums had entered th-the loft, there was a uniformed brown shirt, who pulled everybody out and stood guard the whole day so that nothing would -- would happen to my grandmother’s apartment, because after all, she was a foreign citizen. That’s -- our apartment was -- was whole, was never smashed. When the war broke out, of course, with mobilization, we also had to report to the military, but we are immediately discharged as not fit for service as being Jews. Mustered out. And the next thing we knew is I was drafted for the first type of forced labor. We were sent to east -- to the eastern part of Germany, fairly close to the Polish border, to help harvest potatoes, sugar beets, red beets -- because of other people were drafted right away when the war broke out. And I was somewhat more lucky than some others I know of, because when the harvest was over, I was permitted to come back to -- to the -- the city where I lived, while others were not permitted. I know of other people who also were from my city, who never were permitted to come back home. So when I came back home, my mother saw to it that I was able to work starting January first, 1940, in the equivalent of Hiyas in Germany, which was centrally administered by the G-German Jewish administration in -- in Berlin and for the next 10 months, I served as a secretary in what was called in g -- what we called in Germany, histroin and we devoted the ent -- our -- all -- all our efforts, his whole office was devoted to helping people emigrate. And the -- the one benefit which came out -- I got a pocket money, I didn’t get a full salary, I got a small pocket money, a monthly pocket money. The one benefit which came out of this was that on October 21st, in the morning, the telephone rang and we were permitted to keep the telephone, which in the -- in -- in the office of the Jewish community, but we were not part of the Jewish community as such, because we reported to Berlin, to the central administration. And the head of my office, who was at the same time the contact person between the Gestapo and the Jewish community, was called down to the Gestapo and they told him that we would be deported the next day, to France. Unfortunately -- and we closed the office and I went home, unfortunately we could not publicize this because Ger -- the German Jews were deprived of their telephone when the war broke out. When I came home on that day, I told my mother that we would be deported the next morning, she didn't want to believe it. So I started to pull out former sandalbags from my father and started to pack. And she finally -- I finally convinced her that I'm not kidding, since it's not a joke, that we really would be deported. So, by the time the Gestapo came the next morning to arrest us, at least we had reasonably packed what we could carry. We had wa-warm clothes in, we had the right shoes. We had the blanket. So when they told us this -- this you can take, we were all ready, which we didn't tell them. And this was how the deportations started. Then we were taken by the police, to the railroad station, where there -- there were -- once we were asse --enough people were assembled, we were loaded into very old passenger cars, which, you know, in Germany, you had four classes, originally. But the time we left, there were only three classes, but they used the old fourth class passenger cars to load us and send us to -- to France. We were permitted to take along, besides food, which we were told, 100 marks and with -- we were told, if you take more and we find it, you will be shot. So we took, like good Germans, fo -- each 100 marks, which on the train were exchanged by the SS against 2000 francs. French francs.

HL: I forgot to mention what suitcase [inaudible]

Q: You can speak up.

HL: Oh. I can?

Q: Yeah, go ahead.

HL: The other things we could take along, or were permitted to take along, was one suitcase as long as we could carry it, a blanket, a set of cutlery per person and what else? That was it.

ML: And we were told to take food.

HL: Food for a couple of days.

ML: For a couple of days.

HL: Yeah.

Q: So you knew that you were being deported the next day?

ML: I knew, but I were -- we weren't -- I --

Q: Did you know anything else? Did you know where you were going to go, how [indecipherable]

ML: No, all -- all we knew is that we would be sent away to France. That's all we knew. Now, the Gestapo, or rather the SS, left the trains at the so-called demarcation line. The demarcation line was that part of France which was occupied and th -- and the -- the other part was unoccupied. The -- the -- the Germans left, the train went on to Lyon and I happened to have been in the first train which went to France. There were seven trains all together, I was the first train -- in the first train with my mother. And it so happened that in my car was a former German officer of World War One and somehow or other he caught the attention of the SS and they came to him and said, "You are the transport chief." He didn't ask for it, he didn't want it, but you are the transport chief. So when the -- when we arrived in Lyon and the French gendarmerie, the French police wanted to know who’s in charge, so he descended, he said, “I am in charge.” And since he didn’t speak French, I came along as a translator. And what was interesting was, we talked to a colonel of the French gendarmerie, which is the -- more or less the equivalent of what we have here as state police, but on the national scale. These people didn’t know who we were. They were told there are Alsatians coming -- or Lorraines coming, who don’t want to stay under German occupation, which was not true. They were not prepared for us, they didn’t know who we were. And so we first had to cue him in who we were. Though I believe that while we were talking with this man, the -- the people on the train got a soup by the French Red Cross and possibly some bread. We were eating -- we were fed, it was my first experience in Swiss paté. We had paté and we had with -- they gave us some bread and something to drink. Then we went back on the train and these trains then went on, very slowly [indecipherable] south. I think we were on the train at least two days.

HL: Three.

ML: Or three days.

HL: On the 22nd to the 25th.

ML: The 22nd to the 25th. We arrived at the railroad station which was close to c -- the camp, which was called Conde Gurs, which incidentally was built by the Spanish when the Spanish Republicans lost the war in -- the civil war in Spain and came across the border. We arrived there on -- on October 25th, in a downpour which was unparalleled. And --

HL: [inaudible]

ML: And from the -- the train -- we were taken in trucks to the camp. It was about 10 or 15 miles. The tr -- the trucks were -- were operated by the Spanish internees who were in the camp, who had many more privileges than we ever got. And since it was night, there was nothing -- we had absolutely nothing. There was straw which I think we got the next day and it was very primitive. And so eventually they issued covers to -- to stuff the straw in so that we had some kind of mattresses. And this is how we began in -- in the camp. Each block had about 30 barracks?

HL: 25

ML: 25 barracks. The barracks were built from wood, flimsy wood and were covered with tarpaper. There were no windows, you just had wooden flaps, which in order to have some light you had to open. There were two lights in the barracks, one at the beginning, one at the end and one stove, which gave a little heat when we had wood in winter. It was -- it was brutal.

Q: Were you able to maintain contact with your mother at that point?

ML: Yes, we were able to con -- to maintain contact -- con -- contact with our relatives. There was a system where the so-called block administration was issued little tickets -- I don't remember how many -- which permitted you to go to visit, maybe one hour every so many days. I don't recall the details. I was somewhat more fortunate because I had office skills, so I very soon made my way into they office and I worked in the office. So I had privileges. I could go more often to my mother and then eventually we were also able to obtain musical instruments and we started a string quartet. And once we started with the string quartet and began to concertize in each block, we were given camp passes. So I could circulate in camp day and night. I visited my mother every day.

HL: [inaudible]

ML: Yeah. That's how I met my wife.

Q: T-T-Tell me how you met your wife.

ML: My wife was a runner in the block.

HL: [inaudible] message.

ML: A messenger where my mother worked in the office. She was the principle -- my mother was the principle clerk in -- in the block where she was located and my wife served as a messenger. There was mail to be distributed, there was mail to be picked up, so the youngsters, you know, th -- see u-us youngsters adapted much better to these brutal conditions than the -- the -- the -- the grown-ups. And you have to visualize that the so-called streets within the blocks were earth, and when it rained hard -- and it rained hard there very often in this region, it was tho -- for -- about 25 miles or 20 miles north of the Spanish border. Sees -- the ground turned to mud. Now you have to realize, I had riding boots and with my riding boots when it rained, I would sink in almost up to the top of the riding boots, into this mud, which meant that we had at least one or two deaths of pe -- old people who had to go to the latrines at night, fell and couldn't get out -- and couldn't get up. Was one -- I think it was one woman. The food we got was between four and 600 calories a day. Not only was it very limited, but it was also established later that a lot of the money which was assigned to the camp for provisions was stolen. So we got even less than we would have normally gotten. And we soon had all kinds of problem in the camp with starvation signs. People collected water in their legs.

HL: Malnutrition.

ML: Due to malnutrition. It was called udame. I don't know what you call this in English.

HL: Edema.

ML: Edema. This was the condition in the camp.

Q: You both talked a little bit about how it was [indecipherable] a self government -- government system --

ML: Well, each block --

Q: H-How did that work, yeah.

ML: -- each block had a so-called blo-block aldist, a vice block aldist and an office. You know, in -- in every o -- camp, you have to keep track of numbers, you have to keep -- for food rations, you have to do your own cooking in so-called field kitchens, whatever we got. We got -- we got -- the bread was assigned so we had to count. There were constant reports to be made, that's why there was an office.

HL: Excuse me. I mentioned before there were constant statistics to be made. You have to report the people who die, right?

ML: And we soon had deaths, because the old people died like flies.

HL: Just a moment. I brought you here what I usually take to --

ML: I mean I think my wife gave you much more detail about -- about the camp, because she is talking about it constantly, while I am out of this since I -- since I'm working at the American gov -- with the American [indecipherable]. We started speaking together at the time, when it started, but when I joined the American [indecipherable], I stopped speaking. I speak here and there, once in awhile, but not through a great extent, so you forget some of the details. You know, I would have to refresh myself by reading and doing. We have the literature here to do that.

Q: You're still remembering good details.

ML: Oh yeah.

Q: Tell me how you -- how it came about that you left the camp.

ML: Well, let's finish with the camp first.

Q: Okay.

ML: Eventually, and I'm sorry to say this, it became evident to the French su-supervisors that the so-called two block aldist of our camp were more corrupt than other block aldist. And so one day they decided to dissolve our block, to stage an example for the others. And while this was going on, one day, shortly before the exodus started, where people were distributed to the other blocks. And actually, they probably did this also because they had moved a certain amount of people, transferred a certain amount of people to other camps. So one day, the supervisor of our block stood in front of me and said, "I want you to do something for me. I want you to do the inventory of what you are giving back to us." You know, blankets, etcetera, kitchen stuff. So I did this. Was be a lot of work. Was my first experience with what you call inventory. And after all, I'd never worked commercially. And so, when we were all finished, I was about the last one to be transferred out. The supervisor said to me, "Now look, I will put you in another block, but you will hear from me as a thank you. I will find something for you." Well, he found something for me a few weeks later. I didn't believe any more. Fortunately I still had my pass, I could circulate. By that time I didn't play any music any more, but I had a p -- a pass and I could go in and out. And one day the man stands in front of me. "I have something for you." And what he had for me was really something extraordinary. He transferred me to the hospital, the camp hospital. Which meant I lived in a halfway decent barracks. I shared one room with hospital beds and a stove, where we go -- for which we had wood, in the barrack where the personnel was partially sleeping. And I ran the office of the hospital. In the meantime, there were social workers at work, who were very busy to find places for the -- the younger generation, under 21. My wife left -- she wasn't my wife then, she was my girlfriend, left after 11 months in camp. And I was in camp much longer, I was in camp 21 months, but one day I also was approached, "Would you like to get out?" And my mother of course said, "Yes, let him go." So, I was -- and we have the documentation for that -- I was let out of camp on July 25th, 1942. Had I been there one week longer, you wouldn't be talking to me, I would have been deported to Auschwitz. And I --

Q: Wh-What happened one week later?

ML: One week later they closed the camp. They surrounded it with the gendarmerie and people were simply taken from the camp into -- via trains to Drancy, which was a -- a inderin camp outside of Paris and from there there were regular transports, like clockwork, with about 1000 people per train, to Auschwitz.

HL: Excuse me. Drancy was what is generally referred to as an umschlatblats --what the Germans called an umschlatblats. This was a camp or place where transports arrived, people were taken off the train and a day or so later, new transport trains were put together.

ML: And these transports went to Auschwitz. So I was taken out of camp on July 25th, 1942 and I was taken to a farm in Tareai, that is a village outside of Paris, where there was a farm operated by the Jewish boyscouts. Boyscouting in France was run along religious lines, so there were -- there was regular farm, which had about 50 or 60 young people, all foreign -- foreigners -- foreign Jews, who lived there in what --

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: This is tape three, side B, continuing the interview with Max Leibmann.

ML: Yeah, the -- the -- this facility was run by a French chemist and two rabbis who had managed to get from the -- the camp where I was in Gurs, to this farm. And unfortunately for me, it was an orthodox -- it was run along very Orthodox lines. The chemist, a -- a Frederick Hammer -- or Hamel was Orthodox, as were the rabbis. So I was in this farm

August, September, about three weeks, four weeks. Were -- were -- how long was I in Tareai, three or four weeks?

HL: Yeah.

ML: Yeah, about. And my wife came by. She had been -- obtained permission, and you heard the story from her and on her way down to -- to Gurs to visit her mother, she -- we saw each other and then she came on the way back again, to tell me what had happened in Gurs. And at that time, we arranged that should I get into trouble, for whatever reason, I should try to get up to her village, because while she didn't know what was really going on there, she felt they would help. Little did I know that I would run -- within the week after she had left, into the worst kind of religious bias you can imagine. There was one Friday evening for the Shabbas meal, an announcement that on such and such a date, a week from now, there will be a raid on the farm, but don't worry, we'll take care of you. Only when the ta -- the time came to take care of us and to distribute us, to hide us, there was room for everybody but four of us. A fellow who came with me from Gurs and two young Polish Jews. We were the four non-religious ones and for us we couldn't do anything. You're on your own.

Q: Because you were not --

ML: Because we were not religious. And so the young fellow was much yo -- was a few years younger than I and I -- I said to him, "I'm going to join Hanne or to try to find Hanne," and so the next morning we set out and went up to Le Chambon. We arrived at -- Hanne had told me how to get there, so that was not a problem. And the problem was that in -- I arrived there in the middle of the night, it was at 10 or 11 o'clock, now where am I going to find my girlfriend? So we came somewhere, which turned out later to be a tennis court, in -- in -- in what looked to us like a wood and we both had sleeping bags and the next morning we got up at -- at daybreak. And lo and behold, shortly thereafter, we heard girl's voices. There was a group of girls passing by. Amongst them Hanne. They had camped out from where they normally slept to avoid arrest in a possible, potential rape -- ah, raid. So we -- she -- my -- Hanne took me to Madame Philip. Madame Philip was the wife of what was after the war the first Finance Minister -- Minister in DeGaulle's cabinet after the liberation. At the time she took me there, Madame Philip was alone because her husband was already in England with DeGaulle. And from what I understand, Hanne was asked, "Can we trust him?" So she explained that, "Yeah, he is my boyfriend, he comes from Gurs like I did," and th-they put me up for the next night in the villa. People were very nice, they fed me. And the following evening, I was taken to a farm somewhere in the outreaches of Le Chambon. I don't know to -- to this day the name of the farm family who took me in. These farm houses are very small. They had -- this farm house had only two bedrooms. So the farmer put me up in the grange. So I was sleeping in the hayloft. And the man was very practical, the first thing he did was, he took his saw and he cut a hole into the floor and the other end from the -- of the hayloft, so that I had a toilet. This -- the -- below where he cut the hole, were the animals. So this was my toilet. And I was there -- must have been there about two or three weeks. And I thought already they had forgotten me. I co -- was well fed. I ate the same food the farmer ate and this gave me some of the vigor back, which I needed when the underground -- the resistance movement in -- in the village when I came back, helped me to get out of France and into Switzerland. Now, I have details is -- in -- in the video for a -- for a long time. We were given false papers.

Q: Before you go onto that, at this time, y -- did you know -- first of all, did you know where Hanne was?

ML: Yeah, sure.

Q: And did you have any sense of how often these raids would come [indecipherable]

ML: No, we didn't know anything. Nobody knew. Hanne was somewhere else.

Q: You -- you had to stay hidden the whole time?

ML: I was hidden two or three weeks. And -- but they took me back. The first thing they did is they photographed me. They explained to me, "We will get you false papers now and then we will help you to escape to Switzerland." And I think there were four of us who went to -- who were helped escape to Switzerland, I think we were the first group, because we went by railroad from Le Chambon to a village in the French Alps. I believe it was a sta -- I don't remember the station where we went to, but I believe it was the station one station before Seshaway, which to this day is a major vacation point in -- in the French Alps. And there there was a 10 year old who picked us up. He knew we were coming apparently, his father sent him. He took us to the house of his father, where we stayed overnight and we met there also a young, French pastor who would go with us part of the way the next day, because he was supposed to learn how to get people across into the mountains and into Switzerland. He didn't know the way, he'd never done it. So the next morning, early on, we had breakfast and we set off, into the mountains. Our guide was a 10 year old. And we climbed all day. Became night and it started to rain and we f -- and we found, fortunately an overhang of rock where we could duck under and that's where we spent the night, fairly dry because it was big enough through -- to be not in the open. The next morning at daybreak we started again. And we climbed most of the morning. And then around 12 o'clock the boy stopped and said to us, "Now look. You go down here." Now, you must understand, we were very high in the mountain, well above the tree line, there was nothing but rock, was totally open. There was nothing but rock and we had to climb to get down there, which was a tough job, because we didn't have the right or proper equi -- no -- we had no equipment and not the proper shoes. And my shoes went to [indecipherable] in about an hour or two as we were going down these rocks. And fortunately somebody had another pair of shoes which fitted me, otherwise I would not have made it. And so we climbed pretty much the whole afternoon. We were about at 12,00 feet, we had to come down. And so eventually we ended up on a small -- on a road which was driveable by a car, was narrow. And we walked and we came to a tunnel and all of a sudden we heard steps behind us, halt. And whom did we face when we turned around and looked? A f -- a Swiss military patrol, who told us we have been following you for hours with our binoc-binoculars. They took us to a mountain hut. Switzerland has -- we have it here too in the mountains, a -- a -- a facility which is quite primitive, but where there are dormitories where you can sleep. Where you can get some food and that's where they took us, that was a command post. And we found when we got there that there were about 30 or 40 people which have been caught in -- over the last 24 hours. So we were able to buy -- buy some food, even though we had no rationing c-coupons and swi -- Switzerland was strictly rationed. And breakfast the next morning the same way, I still had just enough money to buy breakfast and this -- the commander of this platoon of soldiers told us we are going to be returned to France. You're not going to permitted to come in. And so we started up -- back up into the mountains, to a point which was called no man's land, it was between France -- between Switzerland and France. But on the way up the mountain, something very strange happened and that was a non-commissioned officer of this platoon, started to -- to speak to me or yell at me in a very loud voice. And he enumerated very clearly what I am not supposed to do. I am not supposed to come back to fr -- to -- to Switzerland, I'm not supposed to do this, I'm not supposed to do that, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. It went on for about five or eight minutes and it dawned on me after a -- a few minutes that that man is giving you a message, what is that message? And the message was -- he didn't say so, but what was really happening is, that if I took out the don't, I had been instructed how to get back to Switzerland. So when the platoon stopped and told us, "Now you go down there and we go back and don't you dare to come back." We went on further down and when I was sure that they couldn't see us any more, I stopped the whole group and explained to them what had happened there. There were 40 people, I was one of the youngest. And nobody understood what was happening -- going on. They all heard the same thing, you know, the man that was speaking loud enough that you couldn't miss it. And so we -- we spoke, we argued, we discu-cussed this for half an hour. I finally found one guy who fol -- who understood my argument. We have nothing to lose, we can only gain. If we make it, we can -- we will be in Switzerland and we'll be safe. If we don't make it, we have lost the day. So I went back, toward Switzerland, I had -- I -- I looked at the map in this mountain facility and I knew approximately where I was. And lo and behold, we found our way and we came out on a -- in a village in Farro. And, when we left Chambon, we were given ins --explanations that we should find Protestant ministers. If you can't find the Protestant minister, go to the Catholic local priest. So I went to the church. Yarma -- the moush -- the -- and I was told by the housekeeper, "He is down in the villa -- in the valley. He is not here today." So we went down, because I didn't want to stay there overnight, it was too big. And eventually, as it became dark, we came into -- I don't know if it was a village. There were some houses along the -- the -- the way where we walked and I picked one because I didn't want to stay out overnight. Besides, we had no food and my sugar was running out, which was what sustained me on the way up the mountain and down the mountain. So I knocked at the door. They took me -- they took us in. We explained we are refugees. They took us in, they fed us, they gave us a bed. They gave us breakfast the next morning and they explained to us where to go and where not to go. For instance these people told -- were nice enough to tell us not to go to the next big village because it was a big military assembly point and there would be a lot of military police who would stop us. So we went to the next village, all the way down into the --

into the Rhone Valley, where, since I had no more -- I had no more Swiss money, we went to the -- we went to the local Catholic priest. He fed us and he gave me enough money to buy a train ticket to Lausanne.

Q: You were traveling by yourself at this point, or still with [indecipherable]

ML: No, I was -- had -- this -- with this other fellow. And so he cautioned us, "Don't go into an express train, because the express trains are being patrolled by a military police." So we took a local train, it wasn't that far, into Lausanne and in Lausanne I went -- after some moments of hesitation, I didn't know where to go, I said to myself, "You are a Jew, go to the Jewish congregation." There I went to a telephone, looked up the address of the Jewish congregation of Lausanne, which was -- which happened to be within half a block of the railroad station. And then we went there and when we explained to them that we -- we are refugees, just came into Switzerland, they told us, "Look, welcome to Switzerland. We have to turn you over to the military, but we can promise you that you will not be returned anywhere." We didn't tell them that we were already once returned. And this is how I got first into Switzerland. So, they picked the -- somebody came with a car, I think and picked us up and took us to one barrack in the park in -- in -- in a suburb of Lausanne, where we spent the night. We were interrogated there. And fortunately the interrogator was a Swiss -- a Swiss speaking fren -- a French speaking Swiss -- Switzer -- Swiss military who did not understand German, so I translated for the other guy, who didn't speak French -- for my companion. And I translated the way I wanted to translate, not what he necessarily had said. And from there we were taken to a so-called quarantine camp in Moudon, which was a very primitive set up in the school, where we were in the gymnastic hall, where they had set up some kind of possibility to sleep on the floor. And there we had to fill out a questionnaire of 36 or 40 pages. And eventually -- by the way, I arrived in -- in Switzerland on September 22nd, 1942. And eventually I was transferred -- not with the fellow I came with, I was transferred -- because, after all, since there was at one time an application made for a visa for me to come to Switzerland, they were able to establish who I was very rapidly. And the -- I was transferred to a -- another quarantine camp the other end of Switzerland in the Cantone of Appensel. We were -- were quartered, I believe in a village inn -- again in the ballroom, which was set up as a -- a -- a quarter where you could sleep, etcetera, etcetera. And there we --

Q: Okay, when you say quarantine, do you -- were these -- were these like DP camps, were they interment camps? Were they --

ML: No, no. That was -- everything in quarantine was military control. We were guarded by military personnel and this is the first -- where we first -- and everything in Mouton where I was and then in Appensel, this was military control. Everything was military. Btu the military -- that was now German Swiss, not French Swiss any more, they took us out every day on a walk. With the gun -- bayonet on the gun, you know. And we started an argument with the company commander or the platoon commander -- we explained to him there is absolutely no reason to guard us with guns, because where does he think we can go? Does he think we are escaping Germany or escaping elsewhere? We cannot go anywhere. So w-we eventually prevailed and this -- the Swiss soldiers walked with us, without any arms. On December 22nd, I was handed a ticket -- a railroad ticket to a labor camp. Again it's the French part of Switzerland. All alone. And I want to emphasize this because there was -- there was all kind of ouhaha about how badly we were treated in -- in Switzerland. Even the quarantine camps never had barbed wire or anything of this nature. Yes, in the -- in -- in the quarantine camp we were guarded by -- by Swiss troops. But I was given, when I -- when I was transferred to a labor camp, I was given a ticket, go there, alone. I went s-strictly on my own. There was nobody with me. I was the only guy who was transferred on that day. And when I arrived in the afternoon in this labor camp, the director of this camp looked at me like if I'm a ghost. "What are you doing here?" It was the 22nd of December, the camp was closed. There was not a soul in the camp besides the camp director, who had a ba -- a military barrack, which was outfitted as an apartment, where he lived with his wife and his daughter. Everybody else was on leave. So the next question was, "Do you have relatives here? Can you go somewhere?" I said, "Yes, I have a cousin." So I called my cousin and he said, "All right, come on." So I was handed another ticket and I was told, you be back on such and such a day, the day after Christmas. And I went right back, practically the way I came from, because I was in Appensel, and my cousin lived in -- in s -- in a -- in a village in Saint Garron. So I spent Christmas 1942 with my cousin, who was married to a Gentile woman and then I started my career in the Swiss labor camp.

Q: Now at that point, did you entertain thoughts about not reporting to the -- to the labor camp? Did you have any sense of what the labor camp would be like?

ML: I had no sense of anything and where would I go? Where should I have gone? Switzerland is a small country, you can’t hide. You know, I mean it would have been futile. Never occurred to me, either. I mean, you know, if you were brought up in Germany, you thought like a German in th -- in that you follow orders. So I went back to the labor camp and by the time I came back there was a few feet of snow. And the first thing we as -- we are supposed to do is clean the access road from the highway to the camp. The camp was in Seeare and it was -- oh, maybe a mile and a half or two miles to the access road, which you walked and then you walked the access road to the camp. The camp was put there in order to clear land. But the first thing of course we had to do is clear the access road. And I didn’t like that kind of physical work, so I made it my business to get into the office within a week. And now, let me explain, the labor camp had barracks -- had military barracks. They were no better, they were no worse, they were identical military barracks which were used by the Swiss military. We had barracks which had bunk beds and we were given mattresses, I don’t remember with what they were filled, but we had ma-mattresses. It was a two-tiered affair, you slept either high or low and there was a barrack for -- for dining. There was a latrine. There was an office barrack. There was another barrack where there was a sick room -- a sick bay where the Swiss personnel who helped run the camp lived -- I think we had one or two people in addition to the camp director. But there was not a single guard. And there was, of course, no barbed wire anywhere. It was open. And in fact something very funny happened along the way. In the morning you made a count. So one day -- I was already long in the office, we made a count, everything s-seemed fine and we reported by telephone that everything is in order and within 20 or 30 minutes -- there -- there was a central office in Zurich which ran this -- all of these facilities around Switzerland. We got a call back. “How come you reported everybody is there, when we are holding a guy who belongs to you?” What had happened was, that we had, apparently, a homosexual whose -- whose companion was somewhere in Zurich and he had gone to Zurich without our knowing. And the -- my -- the man who was in charge of counting missed him. He miscounted. I mean nothing happened, but I mean, you know, they had caught him somehow. We would never have known. I was in this camp quite awhile. I don -- I don’t have the exact dates any more, you can look them up. The museum has my so-called Swiss identification book, where all the camps are listed and where -- you know, where -- it was ended when I was issued some shoe coupons or some shoes or whatever, clothing, because all that was rationed. And eventually, once you are in these camp offices long enough, you know you are -- there are -- there is a three tiered payments -- by the way we were, in these camps [indecipherable] all Swiss internment facilities was [indecipherable] refugees. There was number one, a thr -- a three tiered payment system. There was rank and file, then there were two classes above, you know, supervisors above, who were paid somewhat more. I mean, the maximum you could earn there was four francs a day. And eventually I became on level up, and then I became two level up and I was very -- transferred a number of times from -- out of camp into so-called refugee homes, where I was running the office. Because there was a lot of work in these -- in the offices, because everything was rationed. You had to account for every meal, you had to account for every presence. And that had to be done on the typewriter, that was a job you had to learn. And there were all kinds of things to be done, so I was busy all day long in the offices.

Q: So the way you describe it, that there were no guards --

ML: No.

Q: You were getting paid, although a small amount --

ML: Yeah.

Q: How was it different from maybe just having had a job? I mean why -- what -- what --

ML: Well --

Q: What made it feel like a labor camp?

ML: Number one, in the labor camp you did physical work, or if you were in these refugee homes, the homes had to be maintained. So I happened to be in the office, but the other people -- there were people that were working the kitchens, there were people who had to clean the house.

Q: Were they -- were there bad conditions?

ML: No, there were no bad conditions. Number one, in all of these facilities, every six weeks, we were entitled to a pass. We would get a free railroad ticket anywhere you wanted to go, if you had some money to go, but the railroad ticket was free. You had your pocket money. The food was not luxurious and not -- not gourmet food, but it was totally adequate. I mean you weren't hungry. Not withstanding what many people claim, that they were hungry. There was always enough food. There were some facilities who had Swiss personnel who stank. Meaning mostly small, petty people who took their power out on -- you know, they felt the power of being a director of a camp and these lousy refugees now are going to do what I tell them to do. And they made life -- could make life quite miserable. There were some rotten apples among the Swiss personnel, there's no question about. As we had rotten apples among us. I encountered some of these people. But by and large, these facilities were adequate.

Q: Who was in the facilities? Who were -- who were in the [indecipherable] was it mostly Jews, was it many refugees --

ML: Th-Th-There were mostly Jews, but we were in some facilities later on, after I was married, where we had Gentile political refugees. For instance, in the labor camp, we had a German doctor who was a political refugee. And in fact, I got sick. I had hepatitis and this man absolutely did not want me to go in the hospital because he didn't trust the Swiss, that they would feed me properly, because I had to be on a diet. In those days, you know, I could -- no -- ee -- I didn't get any meat. I was permitted bread, I was permitted a jam, I was permitted some cheese and liquids. And he didn't trust them to give me what I should have gotten because of rationing. So, in the camp, it doesn't matter if one person gets more from one thing and less from something else, so he kept me for two or three weeks in the sick bay, until was able -- until I was recovering and could back -- go back to work. So --

Q: Tell me how -- how you got back in touch with Hanne and how [indecipherable]

ML: Well, look, once I was in Switzerland, Hanne and I corresponded. And eventually Hanne came to Switzerland and even though that was the only time I ever had an extra sensory perception. I knew that she was coming. And then eventually she either called or wrote, “I’m with my relatives.” And from then on, we were in regular contact.

Q: It -- it seems like it would have been difficult just to -- for her letters to find you and -- and [indecipherable]

ML: No, she knew where I was. I wrote her immediately when I got to --

End of Tape Three, Side B

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: Okay, this is tape four, side A, we're continuing the interview with Max Leibmann. You -- we were just talking about getting back in touch with Hanne once you were in Switzerland in the labor camps.

ML: That was not a problem, because we corresponded already when I was in the camp and she was still in France. And the mail worked miraculously, quite well. And once she was in -- in -- in Switzerland, I saw her every six weeks. And now, you want me to go through this again, with -- with a -- all of it, because this is all on the [indecipherable] tape.

Q: Yeah, well maybe -- let's move ahead to what happened when -- when the war was over.

ML: When the war was over, that was very simple. We had nowhere to go. We di -- we knew we didn't want to go back to Germany, even though, I don't know if Hanne mentioned that in her tape, I was released from the facility I was in, to participate in the social service course in Geneva. And while I was in Geneva, one day, I was contacted by a -- a Mr. Bauer. He would like to meet with Hanne and me -- we were not married yet, but Hanne happened to be in Geneva already and I was in Geneva, so he invited us one afternoon for a cup of tea. And that was very in -- a very interesting conversation. The -- I di -- wasn't quite sure if the man was a left wing Socialist, or if he was really a Communist. But the purpose of the conversation was to try to entice us to go back to Germany when the war was over, because it would people -- it wou -- they would need people like us to start building and by go-going back to Germany -- he meant East Germany and this was -- became a very interesting conversation, because I told him I am not interested in going to East Germany when the Soviets have camps like the Nazis. I'm mentioning this simply because years and years later, while we were here already for a long time, we saw an obituary for this man, who had -- who was with the Russians eventually, who got into trouble with them, was sent to Siberia, which I mentioned to him, you know, I don't want to be involved with a government which has Siberian labor camps, etcetera. Was eventually released or exchanged, became a -- an aide to Mr. Willie Brunt, who was then the Chancellor of Germany. And when he died, we discovered in the obituary that he was the man that we talked to. And whatever I told him about the Russians, happened to him.

Q: Wh-What was his name? Do you remember?

ML: Bauer. I don't know his first name. So that was -- and after I finished his soci -- service calls, I went back to internment. We got married at the same time in Geneva and then Hanne joined me in -- in camp. I got permission to -- she got permission to come with me into camp, for which we had to pay, by the way. They charged me the same amount of what the Swiss personnel had to pay. And so we were in -- in Switzerland until we were able to obtain an -- an affidavit to come to the United States.

Q: What were the interment camps like at that point, after the war?

ML: They had not changed. That was -- we were -- I was not in a camp, I was in a home for families. And these homes had not sh -- that were -- has not -- they did not change because the war ended. As e -- maybe the conditions were slightly more friendly from -- from the top down, meaning from the government on down, but all they wanted in -- wanted us to do was get out. The sooner the better. In fact, I had a cousin in Switzerland, same cousin where I was when I first came, who would have loved to have me in his factory, to run the inside, so that he could go out and sell on the outside and this -- we ran into so much trouble with this that I decide -- that we decided it's not worth to pursue and we are going to America, since we had a visa. We had an affidavit and we are able to get the visa. When we started to look at this, could we stay in Switzerland, the federal government said, "If the cantone government will accept you, it's fine by us." The -- the cantone government said, "We are -- you are welcome to stay here if the local government will accept you and give you permission to stay." The local government said, "If the cant-cantone government says yes, we will say," so it was a constant back and forth.

HL: Catch 22, I told him.

ML: Catch 22 and so we decided, to hell with it, we come here to the United States.

Q: Were there other place you considered going?

ML: No, we had nowhere to go.

HL: Well, excuse me, we were talking about Israel [indecipherable]

ML: We were talking about Israel, but this was another sore point. My parents -- I had an -- an uncle and an aunt who went in 1934 already, to what was then Palestine, with money. They left Germany at the time because they -- their money basically was in

Holland. My -- my uncle was a -- a representative of Dutch tobacco firms. And you know in -- in Germany one smoked cigars from here to doomsday, so he sold a lot of cigars and he also sold -- had a representation of a manufacturer of cigar boxes, which gave him such a nice income that the tobacco money stayed in Holland. And when the Germans pressured him to bring the money in from Holland because they need the foreign exchange, they emigrated to Palestine. So in 1930 -- the end of 1938, my parents asked my uncle to take me to Palestine, so that I could go to the conservatory in Jerusalem. And my uncle felt that he couldn't take this responsibility, he didn't have enough money and God knows what else. So, as far as I was concerned, Israel, after the war was not an option. I wasn't interested. So eventually we were obtaining -- we were able to get a -- somebody gave us an affidavit and we came here. So we arrived here on March the third, 1948.

Q: Do you remember when you first got here, what -- what you -- what you felt?

ML: Well, it was, you know, we had to -- it was a strange country. And we came with a t -- a two year old child, our daughter. And --

HL: What did we feel when we came here?

ML: Bewildered.

HL: Bewildered.

Q: I sh -- I wonder if you can move over a little bit, or -- and I could --

HL: I would say we were somewhat bewildered, maybe also the feelings that we had -- okay -- we were somewhat bewildered.

ML: Don’t forget --

HL: Also maybe the feeling that we’re finally at a place that’s going to be permanent.

ML: And not only this --

HL: That we’re not going to be chased from one place to another.

ML: And not only this, but it was also the first time that we were free. Because, don’t forget, we were not free in Switzerland. This is something most people don’t want to understand. We were internees.

HL: I mean, we -- in many homes is -- in most of the homes, life in the Swiss refugee homes and camps, it was bearable, okay? Nobody expected any luxuries or anything like that. We were satisfied with having a roof over our heads, a bed to sleep on a -- or sleep in and to have food in our stomachs.

ML: And, you know --

HL: We -- we didn’t demand anything, we didn’t expect anything.

ML: And on weekends, you know, aside from going every six weeks, having leave for two or three days, on weekends we could go to the villages and based on my position, I was free in the offices, I was free to go -- to -- out any time I wanted to go out. I didn’t even ha -- I didn’t have to ask.

HL: But Max, we could do that in Taratae as well --

ML: Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about.

HL: -- as long as you had done your -- your work or whatever your assignment was. Nobody asked where you went --

ML: No, no.

HL: -- during the day. You could go -- but still, you were not free.

ML: You were not free. You had a reg -- you had a regulated life.

HL: Okay.

ML: Regulated by somebody other than yourself.

HL: You knew you were not -- you were not free and you knew you weren’t free. And coming here was the first time since 1940 that we were free people. So all of it was rather overwhelming and then of course comes the immediate worry. Now what are you going to do, how are you going to support yourself?

ML: We came here with 90 dollars and we were three people. And the family had provided us with one week of -- of paid facility in the Steven Weiss house. Rabbi Steven Weiss ran a house where refugees like us would stay for a few days.

HL: For more, except that we --

ML: Fo -- We’d --

HL: Because of the Hiyas or whoever it was at the time --

ML: Yeah.

HL: Told us we have to get out of there and go to the Hotel Marseilles --

ML: Yeah.

HL: -- which they were running, in order to get any help, which eventually they didn’t give us anyhow.

ML: There was no help and besides, within a week, I had a job.

HL: 10 days [indecipherable]

ML: Within 10 days I had a job and I started to work.

Q: Will you tell me about your first job?

ML: First job was f -- f -- with an --

HL: Import [indecipherable]

ML: Import - export outfit and I worked in the office. I didn’t know anything, my English was limited. And I didn’t last there very long, they fired me pretty soon.

HL: Uh-uh, you got sick.

ML: Oh, yeah.

HL: That’s why they fired you. You got sick with your knee.

ML: I’m -- I got sick with -- I had a problem with my knee, I couldn’t walk, so they fired me. And I was in bed, I think 10 days or two weeks.

HL: Whatever.

ML: Then I got another job. And from then on I worked. Until of course, in 19 -- in November of 1950, I got sick like my wife with TB.

HL: 1950.

ML: 50, that’s what I said. I said ‘50.

HL: Okay, sorry.

ML: I -- I got sick in November of 1950 with TB and our daughter had to go to a foster home and we went into a sanitorium. And I was in there I think 18 months and my wife was in there 21 months. And when I came out, I was on what was called half-time, meaning I had a work tolerance, supposedly, of four hours. And we were not supposed to do more, because it -- one feared of a breakdown, that you would get sick again. And at that time, the state of New York had a program where people who had TB could be retrained. Now, th-this program I was able to go to a commercial school where, in how many months?

HL: Nine months.

ML: Nine months. I took four years of college accounting.

HL: I thought it was two.

ML: Four.

HL: Four. Sorry. I underestimated your capabilities.

ML: I took four years of college accounting and after that I had a profession. And I started to work as a bookkeeper, you know, cut my teeth on this. And from then on I worked, either as a bookkeeper, then an office manager, then controller -- in various jobs. My last job was with a greeting card company - a national greeting card company, which was a public company where I was controller and vice president of operations in a -- in a division in New York.

Q: Tell -- tell me more about life in New York. You -- I -- I know that you -- they had offered -- they wanted you to go -- to move to Iowa.

ML: Yeah. Not Iowa, Illinois.

Q: Illinois, sorry.

ML: They wa -- yeah. And so when I was there -- when we went down to the Hiyas, they said, “Why don’t you go,” -- or it was Neeyana, I don’t know which wa -- one of these organizations who took care of new -- newly arrived refugees. They said to me, “Maybe you should go to Peoria, Illinois.” I said, “Who, what?” And when I started to ask and who’s going to pay for it, they said, “Of course, your relatives. We don’t have money.” So I said, “Forget it.” And then we walked out and I had my jo -- I had a job and this is how I started to work. You know, you s --

HL: [inaudible]

ML: I -- I -- I mean the job I had was just enough to get by and the next job was a little better, etcetera. So, you know, you eventually work yourself up. And after we got sick and we got out, we went on welfare, until I was out of school. First I was alone for three months and my wife came. And then of course the o -- the only thing we had in mind was to get started to work again and so that we could take our daughter back.

HL: Well, it was also dependent on having an apartment.

ML: Yeah, and we didn’t have anything. We had no apartment, we had no furniture, we had nothing. So the first thing we did is -- we got -- when I was permitted to work, I got a job and we lived in a city housing project.

HL: Well, after the government just gave us [indecipherable] yeah. This I mentioned before, after the government gave us dispensation so we could move into public housing.

ML: And the federal -- there happened to be a federal facility.

HL: A federal housing.

ML: In fort -- for housing, in Fort Green, in Brooklyn. With -- I started to work, I was working. We were able to buy some furniture and but soon after I started working, I reached the upper limit of low income housing and Fort Green was low income housing, which meant we had to move. So we moved into a so-called middle income housing in Astoria, which was a very nice apartment and our daughter started, I think s-school.

HL: No --

ML: No, she start --

HL: She went to school in Fort Green.

ML: She went to school in Fort Green and then we -- when we moved, she went to school in Astoria. And eventually, I think it was time for us to get out of --

HL: Public housing.

ML: -- public housing, because the income was bigger than was ac-acceptable. So we bought a --

HL: A co-op.

ML: A co-op apartment in Jackson Heights. And we lived there I think some 17 --

HL: 18 years.

ML: 18 years. In the meantime I [indecipherable] in my job and after 18 years, my wife wanted a house, which we should have bought much before, in -- in -- when we moved out of public housing, we bought a co-op, which was very cheap and --

Q: Do -- do -- do you want to hold on for a second?

ML: Yeah.

Q: Okay, we're back.

HL: [indecipherable]

ML: We have one, besides.

Q: We're back.

ML: Can we play back one minute?

Q: Just to remind where --

ML: Yeah, where we --

Q: [indecipherable] talking about buying a house.

ML: Yeah. So eventually, it became time to buy a house and we started to really scout around. That was 22 years ago and you know, when you buy a house -- when you buy a house the first time, you have all kinds of ideas what you want and slowly, as you start shopping, you know what you don't want. So y-you go by elimination til you find something which you think is suitable. So we ended up here, where we are now. That was 22 --

HL: It's 23 years ago.

ML: 23 years that we have the house.

Q: So, we've talked -- Hanne and I have talked a little bit about just how your experiences during the war have sort of affected maybe the -- the -- the type of parents you've been and the type of people you've been in terms of --

ML: Well, look, we've --

Q: -- and the kind of choices you've made.

ML: We tried not to get our daughter into the refugee atmosphere. We did not speak too much about where we were and what we have -- wh-what --

HL: [indecipherable]

ML: -- and we did not -- we did not, like many did, give her a guilt complex. It was difficult enough for her to have been away from us while we were sick and that bothered her tremendously and eventually she needed psychiatric help -- much later, in order to get out of all of this.

HL: W-We tried not to -- really, as I mentioned, to make her think she has to do this or that because --

ML: Because --

HL: -- of what happened to us.

ML: Yeah. That we did not do. In fact --

HL: We did not put this on her.

ML: We did not put this on --

HL: She always knew the story, because she heard us speak about it -- she heard us speak about to my aunts and to other people, but we didn't say you have to do this or that because.

ML: And besides, until we discovered, in 1983 that we are considered Holocaust survivors, we really didn't consider ourselves as such, simply because we always were under the impression that Holocaust survivors are only those who were in the east. We were not in the east, we were on the west. Even though we were deported, we were in camps, etcetera. And in 1983 was also the time when we got involved with the Holocaust in some shape, form or manner. We were invited to a -- no.

HL: Yeah, we were invited to a -- to an affair. However, our involvement in all of this, started with the publication of a book, entitled “Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed.” This book was written by Professor Hally, of the Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. And it dealt with Le Chambon. And when I saw the book advertised in the book review, with a picture --

ML: It was a --

HL: I said, “I know these people.”

ML: It was in the -- not the advertising, it was in the Time mag -- in Time magazine.

HL: In the book review --

ML: Yeah.

HL: Of the New York Times, Max.

ML: Oh, okay.

HL: Okay? And I said, “I know these people.” And so of course we bought the book and then I read it. Then I wrote a letter to Professor Hally and this is how we slowly moved into this -- in this direction, because he used the letter that I wrote him and used it in many occasions in his lectures he gave or speeches he gave. He then wanted us to come along with him repeatedly when he spoke.

ML: Which we did.

HL: And so there was a slow progression of getting involved. Our involvement with the museum in Washington came supposedly through the tape we made in 1990 -- ‘93, something like that.

ML: [indecipherable] no, no, ‘90.

HL: ‘90? And Mr. Mead, apparently, the man who is in -- started or co-started the American gathering of Jewish Holocaust survivors, apparently saw the tape.

ML: He saw the tape in his capacity as a chairman of the contents committee of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. This was before it was opened. And then he contacted us and invited us to a --

HL: Fundraiser.

ML: Fundraiser in Washington, to which we went. We met with him and then he invited me to become a volunteer. And eventually I did become a volunteer there and I’m there for the last seven and a half years.

Q: Is there any reason why, before 1983 or before this -- this time period, that -- that you weren’t involved or maybe weren’t -- I mean, did you talk about it amongst -- amongst yourselves?

HL: Ourselves to get involved, well our f -- as I mentioned, our first involvement came through the book.

ML: Yeah, we looked -- we were, to start out with, busy making a living. My wife worked, I worked. Our daughter was growing up. She eventually, in 1967 graduated -- no, in 1963 graduated high school and went to college. So we were busy making a living.

HL: Just -- just like every -- just about everybody else, became really involved at the end of their career or when they retired. Very few that were involved before that. There were some, yes, like Mr. Chase in Connecticut who made an unbelievable amount of money in a very short time and was always involved from the beginning, helping.

ML: He isn’t there any more.

HL: Well, okay.

ML: But I mean, you know, we were busy making a living and trying to li-li-live as normal a life as possible. We have friends here, which go way ba -- fr -- on -- on both sides, for myself and for my wife. Most of our friends -- our social friends -- I have music friends, that’s a different story, they are all mostly Americans. But our social friends go back to our childhood.

HL: You see --

Q: Y-Your friend now and then, as well?

HL: Yeah.

ML: Yeah. The -- look -- bo -- some -- one of my friends I went to school with, started in second grade. We are still friends. Our wives got along when we came here, so we, you know, just continued. There are people like this on -- on my wife’s side. So, there was -- we have a -- a Gentile friend who once said to us, “You are an incestuous society.” We mostly get together with -- with our friends from Germany and since I am working at the American gathering, of course, we have other -- we made other friends, which are all survivors. And what was interesting is, I found when we talked for the first time to survivors, that in many things we thought alike. We didn't even know this. And you know, survivors, m-mostly married survivors and -- like to congregate with survivors and speak about the times which were lousy and so slowly, you know, this is how this worked. And when I retired and I ha -- I started to do a lot of music playing, but if you do a hobby on a -- on a daily basis, it soon becomes not a hobby and you are looking elsewhere, so when the opportunity came to -- to start working again, I said, "Yes, I will work."

HL: On a volunteer basis.

ML: On a volunteer basis, I said, "Yes, I will come one or two days." And on the first day I realized, I said, "I work full time or I don't become a volunteer." Because there is nothing in between. You -- I don't -- didn't want to s -- want to stuff envelopes and do things like this. And that is what you do if you are a volunteer here and there. So I started to work in the office.

HL: But you know, to come back to your question about our daughter. When we first came here, we deliberately did not move up, let's say, to the Washington Heights. This was --

ML: A ghetto.

HL: -- where all the German Jews had settled. Like any immigrant [indecipherable] the Italians are in one place and the Jews are another place and the Irish are somewheres else. We deliberately did not do that, because we felt that our daughter, growing up here in this country, has to know everybody, not just one group of people. If I live in area where there are predominantly, let's say German Jewish immigrants, the ch -- kids in school will be the offspring of these people. So she is surrounded by the same atmosphere, right? We did not want that for her. We wanted her to grow up with everyone.

ML: As an American.

HL: We still have our friends from Europe, we still have our friends from school days and even before, but I felt that she needed more than that. She needed to know the whole spectrum of people and not just one group.

ML: And I mentioned before, very soon after I came out of the sanitorium, I started to play chamber music. I played it -- I played [indecipherable] instr -- on the cello in -- in Germany and there is a whole group of people all over the United States who play chamber music, so eventually I found -- or they found me. I started to play chamber music, which I have been doing all my American life. And this is a totally different group of people. We don't mix those two.

HL: Well --

ML: We don't really. Music is music and social is social.

HL: Yeah.

Q: When -- when --

HL: But we are friends just the same with all of them.

ML: Yeah, in fact --

HL: We have a vast circle of friends.

ML: We have a vast circle of friends and particularly when you sp-speak about people with whom you make music. This goes over the c -- the cates

HL: The c --

ML: The -- the cates. I s -- I p -- I pl-play with many of these people for 20 and 25 years.

Q: And how many of these people who -- who aren't your survivor friends, how many of them know that you are a survivor [indecipherable]

ML: Oh, I made no -- I made no --

HL: All of them.

ML: All of them.

HL: All of them.

ML: I make no bones about it. I don't hide.

Q: And how -- how many of them are curious and ask you stories and --

ML: Well, if you --

Q: [indecipherable] converse with them about it.

HL: Very few.

ML: Very few. Look, our -- those of -- of our friends who came here in the 30's really didn't want to know about our experiences either, when we came. That was a taboo subject. They didn't want to know, they didn't want to face it. They were lucky, they came here in time. And some of them to this day really haven't ask us much about our experiences during this period.

Q: How does that make you feel?

ML: Look, I have accepted this a long time ago and some people can't cope with this, you know. Or don't want to cope with this -- don't want to be burdened with the -- with it. And you know, some of our friends classify us as we came here before the war, you came after the war, it -- it's --

HL: There is a difference.

ML: There is a difference.

HL: There is a difference in understanding of certain things, which the people who came here before the war do not have. They simply do not have the understanding. There is a -- there is a lack of whatever.

ML: Comprehension. I don't think anybody who is not a survivor can comprehend what this was all about. It just is not --

HL: It's not the same thing.

ML: You can't comprehend it. You might have heard a lot of stories, but you can't comprehend it and nobody el --

End of Tape Four, Side A

Beginning Tape Four, Side B

Q: This is tape four, side B and we're continuing the interview with Max and Hanne Leibmann. We were just talking about the people who came before the war, how did they -- how they can't comprehend these -- the -- the experiences of a survivor.

ML: Look, basically those who came before the war, moved to America. They didn't have the experiences we had. Most of them came even before Crystal Night and those who came after had a whiff of it but, you know, they were young. They were teenagers. And -- or younger and you look at it with different eyes as a t -- as a teenager or as a child, than you look at these things as an adult.

Q: Well, let me ask you this. You said that -- that no one who didn't go through those experiences can comprehend. So, what do you then do? Do you try to tell your story and make them comprehend --

ML: No --

Q: -- or do you just --

ML: We have never -- we have never --

HL: Well, I --

Q: Or -- or -- or, a-as it seems that you've done, you've -- you've -- you've preferred to -- to socialize with people who have those sort of experiences [indecipherable]

ML: No, we've socialized with our --

HL: [indecipherable] socialize --

M: -- fr -- w-we socialized with both groups, but with our friends, we never imposed the -- or forced them to listen to our story. They didn't want to -- didn't want to listen, fine.

HL: In the beginning, they didn't want to listen. They know now, some of the -- some of it. It is really never a topic of conversation as such. We might speak of the Holocaust in general, right? But the personal thing never really becomes a topic of conversation, or very little. The people who came here were Max's, well they just moved here, yell -- yes, they moved here. They had their own problems when they came here in the 30's. There was a depression. It was hard to find work. The women who had never worked in their lives and had maids in Germany and wherever, now became maids, right? So they had a different set of problems. An entirely different set of problems. No, their lives were not threatened, they were not starving. Anti-Semitism was great in this country, things like that. They had their own set of problems. Surely, in our eyes, or the eyes of a survivor who was in Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen or wherever, it is trivial compared to what they or we went through.

ML: And you will find that many survivors congr -- like to congregate with other survivors and they always speak of their experiences.

HL: Invariably. It never fails.

ML: It never fails. This is a -- a good way of -- how would you call this? It is mental therapy, for those who -- who are survivors.

Q: Has that been a part of your marriage, that sort of [indecipherable]

HL: I don’t think so.

ML: No. It hasn’t.

HL: I don’t think so.

Q: So you don’t talk with each other about your stories?

ML: No, no.

HL: No, because the story’s --

Q: They were the s -- they were the same story.

HL: -- essentially identical, right? With a little variation it's identical. So there is nothing to really talk about. I had a cousin who lived in Prague. And she and her husband were extremely lucky to survive. They were in Auschwitz, they were in Theresienstadt, then in Auschwitz and in many other slave labor places. And one of the cousins in Switzerland once said, "They never talk about it to each other." I said, "There is no need for them to talk about it. They know each other's story. They lived through it. They don't have to go and say what happened in this place or what happened in that pla -- they know." So we don't have to talk about it.

ML: No.

HL: We know.

ML: No. It's -- it's not necessary.

Q: Well, let me ask you this. At -- at this point, you look back on that history and you have a -- you have certain stories that you know and that you tell, that you tell in schools or -- are there still times when you remember new things that -- that all of a sudden you'll remember something or that isn't part of the story that you usually tell? You want to hold on for a second?

ML: Yeah.

Q: [indecipherable]

HL: Yes, the -- a few weeks ago -- you know, I speak in schools. And I tell them of the day when we were deported and what went on.

ML: And she speaks without notes.

HL: And all of a sudden I realized something is missing in my story, but what is it that is missing? And then I remembered that this morning a young girl was in our house, a Jewish girl, whose mouth was very loose. I mean, she -- she's a character. She would say things that she shouldn't say, right? And the Gestapo came and arrested her in our apartment. And we all thought, "Well, one more time she talked too much in the wrong place, and --" you know, that some -- they arrested her, before we were arrested, we didn't know yet. We just knew that that young lady, she was maybe a few months older than I, was arrested. And that was the thing that had slipped my mind, totally and completely, til I realized there is something -- there is something in that story, what is it? And then it finally came to me -- that she had been arrested before we were taken away.

Q: It was [indecipherable]

HL: Mm-hm. Sometimes --

Q: She's [indecipherable]

HL: You know, sometimes there are small details that you don't --

ML: You miss.

HL: -- you miss. You miss them. Sometimes it's a manner of not having enough time to go into details when I speak. Sometimes you really -- you know, like I did not tell you when you -- we were speaking here, when you interviewed me, about my grandmother on the train. I mentioned that she lost her mind, that she was totally -- the kids would say she lost it. So this -- this Mr. Wile that you have here on your notes, well, at one point, after the SS had gotten off the train in Shalons Urson, we were able to get the one doctor that was on the train. He was the last doc-doctor in the city I come from -- from Karlsruhe, was a lot Jewish, was allowed to practice. By the way, he couldn’t call himself a doctor any more, he was some sort of a healer. And was able to come to our car and he took a look at my grandmother and he assessed the situation and gave me several sleeping pills for her, which I managed to get into her -- not a small undertaking without any water or anything. And the intent really was clear, right? Unfortunately and it sounds horrible, unfortunately they were not enough. And so the poor woman had to suffer two and a half more months, okay? This is a -- as you say, a detail -- not a small detail, but something that I didn’t mention when I was speaking to you.

Q: [indecipherable] things that you even have forgotten about for 40 years yourself and then, you know, come back to you sort of later in life then as you’re --

HL: Not really.

ML: Not really.

HL: Some people do say you have a marvelous memory, but I don't know whether it’s such a good memory as having absorbed everything, you know, that went on in -- or as much as I could absorb as a child. Yeah, there are things like, I don’t usually talk about when one day in a nice summer day and the doors to the balconies in our dining room were wide open. And in the street, a bunch of Hitler youths were marching and they were singing one of their horrible things, that when the Jewish blood jumps off the edge of the knife, things will be twice as good. And my father got up and went out on the balcony and watched them marching by. And I became totally hysterical, right? Because I thought it was outrageous that he stepped out, that he shouldn't do that, right? Yeah, sometimes you forget to mention these things, but they don't really slip out of your mind, you know. You might temporarily when you speak not mention it, you know, because you're involved in whatever you're -- what else. But it doesn't really get lost.

ML: What -- what struck me is the first few times when we spoke, in that time, is we spoke together. With a -- our first major effort in this respect, was an invitation by Princeton University. And what struck me then was, we were in an academic surrounding, our audience was mostly intellectuals, lawyers and doctors. And we got questions which were slanted to what they thought they would like to hear. And you know, you had to knock this down. It was na -- it struck me that some people -- Americans, have -- had preconceived notions and it was quite difficult to answer these questions in such a way as to make it clear to them that their notions are not right.

Q: What sort of notions?

ML: Well, you know the questions -- they wanted to hear certain things and we didn't play ball with this. There is always -- we had -- we had -- the only thing I can think of right now is -- and this has come again and again -- what -- what -- the questions was, "In Le Chambon, what prompted these people to help?" And they thought this was -- I don't know what. And we tried to explain to them that when you -- when they helped, it was a spontaneous and they might not have known 10 minutes ago that they would help, because th -- th -- it's a question didn't come up. You know, they did this for religious reasons, for moral reasons, but one didn't know from the other, there was no organization in Chambon. You know, you do this, you do that. And the widow of the pastor who was pass [indecipherable] always said when she spoke to people, "If it would have been organized, it would have failed." The left hand did literally not know what the right hand was doing. There might have been people in the house next to you and the people who lived next to it didn't have no idea what these people were doing. And maybe tomorrow they would take people and nobody else knew. One didn't talk about it. It was spontaneous. When the need arose. And this was something very difficult to convey to people.

Q: Did you go back and visit there?

ML: Oh yeah, we were there a number of times. We even participated at their first symposium -- historic-historical symposium where they were trying to put things together in an orderly fashion, with historians and there was a controversy which was very interesting. There was a historian who researched this, a young French Ph.D., who stood up and said -- there were 150 people -- 150 Jewish young people who were in this village. The man was almost lynched, because what he found was, the 150 --

HL: [inaudible] it's 50 - 50.

ML: Oh, 50 people. He found the 50 people are registered in -- in police documents who were officially registered as living in a forced residence in Le Chambon. That there was something going on. All along during the war where people came and went and were fitted with false papers, never entered his -- his brain. The man was almost lynched and -- and was called a revisionist and God knows what. Because he took the number -- he disputed, you know, that there were 5000 people who were helped. And the 5000 number came from a man who forged papers. He’s a doctor today in France, but at that time he was a teenager who knew how to forge papers. You know, you get all kinds of crazy ideas. The his-historian didn’t understand that if you are illegal, you cannot be counted. You’re not there, officially. When I was in Le Chambon, nobody knew I was there. And the -- certainly not the officials or the police. I came, I was hidden, I came back, I was fitted with false papers and I went. And that happened before this man who -- who said he made at least 5000 false paper was ever in this village. He came much later. So you have all kinds of things where you have to dispute even historians. I had a -- we had a confrontation at the occasion of the opening of the Research Institute in the US Holocaust Museum in Washington. That was years after the museum was already open. We had the confro-confrontation with a German professor who was considered the German authority on the Holocaust. He never -- he -- he -- he stated in a speech, which he had prepared and which was slated for publication that the first deportations in Germany ha-happened in 1941. Oh? There was -- in March of 1940, there was Stettin, who were deported into -- somewhere into Poland. Then there w-were we, with 6504 people who were deported to -- to France. And there were of course the expulsions in -- in October of ‘38 of -- of the Polish Jews without proper Polish passports into no man’s land between Germany and -- and Poland. Never mentioned it. And he got so upset when we confronted him and told him that he’s revising history. I’m talking about Professor Yecky. So, you know there, we are trying to keep all of this historically correct. And that is a big undertaking.

Q: Did you ever think 20 years ago or however many years ago that you would be so involved with --

ML: No, no.

Q: -- doing that sort of thing now?

ML: Because we are so far removed from organized religion that it never occurred it -- to us. And we were too busy. We never belonged -- we belonged for three or four months to a Jewish congregation and our daughter went for a few weeks to Sunday school. Other than that --

HL: She went two -- one or two weeks.

ML: Other than that, we never belonged to an organized congregation or anything.

HL: We are not joiners.

ML: We are not joiners, we are not religious, we don't practice. That doesn't mean we are not Jews. I mean, we may not be Jews in the eyes of the Orthodox, the ultra-Orthodox. But nobody ask us if we were religious or not religious when we were deported.

Q: So why then do you think you're so involved now with hearing people's stories and -- and [indecipherable] and being part of the gathering and --

ML: That is --

HL: I think one has to give something back to society.

ML: To society, yeah.

HL: I think it is necessary that the young people know about it. That they understand what can happen when a dictatorship takes over. When I speak to the kids, I always tell them that you have to do everything so democracy doesn't get lost, because choice is zero after that. That they have no future and no life in a dictatorship. These are really some of the reasons. So they know what has happened, right? And that they can learn from the experience of others, what mankind can do.

ML: Yeah, and the motto of the -- the basic motto of the American gathering is thekor. In Yiddish, gdank and in English, remember.

Q: I --

HL: Do you speak any Yiddish?

Q: Only a few words.

HL: Oh.

Q: But I wanted to show you this. It's the one -- the museum sent me this, which I thought was interesting, this is Netanyahu and he says, "This is the lesson of the Holocaust, this and only this. That the existence of the Jewish people is tied to Jewish sovereignty and a Jewish army that rests on the strength of Jewish faith."

ML: Yeah, but this Jewish faith, of course is somewhat neb -- in my book nebulous because the ultra-Orthodox in Israel don't serve in the army. They don't even recognize, per se, the state of Israel.

HL: [indecipherable] Israel.

ML: [indecipherable] these people don't want the state.

Q: But this is a st --

ML: Yeah.

Q: -- a very specific sort of lesson of the Holocaust. I wonder, you know, if you have your own sort of idea of what the lesson is.

ML: The lesson is remember, teach so that it will never be forgotten.

HL: Teach tolerance. Teach understanding. This is what I ask of the children, to get to know each other. To understand and respect each other. Because if that all breaks down, then you get hatred. And hatred, we cannot live with that. Many times the children ask me, "Do you hate?" And I will ask them, "Do you know what hate does?" And they look at me. I said, "Do you know who gets hurt first when you hate? It's you yourself, because your soul dies. Before the other guy knows that you hate him, you are already destroyed." And they look at me and then they start thinking about it. So I'm not only telling them what happened to me, but I'm trying to tell them what they have to do and what they have to learn and the consequences they have, you know, if things go wrong.

ML: And you know, one of the functions I have in the American gathering is I act, actually as an ombudsman on behalf of survivors, vis a vis of the claims conference. Many people can't get what they think they should get -- a pension, for whatever reason. There are many restrictions why they cannot get it. And the personnel of the claims conference, is basically Russian. With a -- to us totally alien mentality, in Russia, I always say, in Russia, y -- a social service is -- is not social service, civil servants are not there for you. You are there for civil servants. And that is the attitude which you get when -- when a survivor calls the claims conference with a question. They can't get answers, they get nastiness. So I am the one, they are calling us and my name by now seems to be known up and down the country. Call Max, Max might be able to do something for you. So I am trying to be something of an ombudsman and if I explain to them -- some of them -- why they cannot get that pension which they are longing for, I do it in such a way as not to offend them, but when they get the answers from the claims conference, it is done in such a way that there is an absolute hatred against it. But that is one of our functions.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add about --

ML: No. I think we have talked long enough.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you so much. It's been wonderful. All right.

HL: You're welcome.

End of Tape Four, Side B

Conclusion of Interview