

And for Holocaust studies. The person being interviewed is Heinz Bohm. My name is Gilda Manuel. The date is the 6th of May, 1989. Right, Mr. Bohm, could you give me your personal details your name, your full name, the year of your birth, the place where you were born, the country, and some of your family background details?

My name is Heinz Werner Bohm. And I was born in 1922 in Duisburg, Federal German Republic. I spent my early childhood in Duisburg. I stayed in Duisburg until I was 16. And as a result of the destruction of the synagogues in November 1938, I went by children's transport of the Red Cross to Holland, where I was interned originally in a camp, de Kleine Haag, which was near Arnhem.

Right. Before you go on with the Holland section, could you give me a little bit of detail about your family background and your life in Duisburg? What socioeconomic level were your family? Were they wealthy, were they not wealthy?

Right.

And also, what I'd like to know is what your young life was like. Were you Jewishly involved? Did you belong to you movements? Or did you go to synagogue?

Right.

That sort of thing.

Well, both my parents were born in Poland. And they came to Germany shortly after the First World War. I attended two Jewish public-- a Jewish primary school. And in 1933, I went to the Realgymnasium.

And we were members of the center of the Jewish community. We belonged to the Duisburg synagogue. And apart from my education at the Jewish public school, I had my education-- I had lessons from our rabbi, Rabiner Dr. Neumark. In 1938, that was the year when Hitler came to power, I went to the Realgymnasium.

What kind of school was that?

That was a high school, where English, French, and Latin was taught. Basically, there were three categories of high school-- the gymnasium, where Greek and Latin were taught and no modern language, the Realgymnasium, where modern languages and Latin, history, et cetera were taught. And then there was the old Realschule, also a high school, but without Latin.

So this was not a Jewish school anymore?

It was not a-- no.

No.

No, there was no Jewish high school in Duisburg. I belonged to Habonim. And well, my parents had their own furniture retail shop, a retail, and then ladies' and men's clothing. After 1933, my father sold the furniture section and conducted a business for men's and women's clothing and also drapery. Our clientele consisted mainly of mine workers so that my father had to do quite a bit of traveling. Every payday, he and another employee went out and then collect the installments due.

So his clientele was not Jewish?

No, no, no.

But what about your social life? Was that involved with other Jews?

Yes.

What size was the community?

The community would have consisted of a few thousand people. And there was a relatively high percentage of so-called Ostjuden. And as far as I was concerned, I was born in Germany, but most of our friends had a similar background, where the parents came from Eastern Europe. So even then, there was a certain division between Ostjuden and Westjuden.

And as I mentioned, I belonged to Habonim. My parents belong to the Zionist organization. And as far as I can remember, practically all our friends were Jewish. We observed Shabbat. We observed the holidays, I mean, all the Jewish holidays.

So you were an identifying Jew?

Oh, yes, we were what would be called here traditional Jews. And as far as affiliation, the affiliation was similar to what is called Conservative synagogues in the United States. Or if I may use an example here, like the Lindfield or the Great Synagogues.

Right. I see. Good. OK. So you lived there until you were 16, did you say?

That's right.

Right. And then what was your initial contact with Nazism? How did it first affect you personally?

It affected me straight from the time when I was attending high school. Although being members of the Hitler Youth was not yet compulsory, there were already a few of my classmates who were members of the Jung Volk, as it was called. And they made life rather difficult.

I had a certain-- I suffered under a certain disadvantage. I was rather fat and not very sporty. And taunt-- I mean, normal taunting, but there were antisemitic undertones. It became worse from 1935, when it became compulsory to be a member of Jung Volk, or then, the elder group, Hitler Jugend.

As far as my teachers are concerned, I was very fortunate that the teacher for the subjects which I really liked was a very devout Catholic, who imbued in me the love of fair modern languages and also classical language. Some other teachers made life very, very difficult.

And as time went on, I was isolated. I had to sit at the back of the class. And I had dispensation from certain lessons dealing with the rise of the Nazi movement. I was not asked to join those classes. As far as physical attacks are concerned, no. But I was ostracized by my-- and I was well made aware that I was Jewish.

Were you the only Jewish boy in the class?

No, there were two of us.

Did he experience the same thing?

Yes. Yes.

So you were in one camp versus the others.

That's right.

Right.

And until '35, I did not notice much of outside antisemitism because Duisburg book is a highly-industrialized area. And it was one of the strong points of the Social Democratic Party and also communist parties. The clients were, as I mentioned, all non-Jews.

But then in 1935, after the so-- excuse me, after the so-called Nuremberg laws, it became more difficult for non-Jews to come to our business. As far as personnel is concerned, we had domestic help and we had also office help. And they were-- well, they could not be German women or otherwise of German backgrounds, like Sudetenland, et cetera.

So that obviously affected your father's business too?

Yes.

It must have started to go down once the people were not allowed to come.

Yes, well, I was then 14. Of course, as far as we are concerned, I mean, business matters were not discussed at the table. But if I may anticipate that, when I started, then, lodging my compensation claim, then it was clearly noticeable how the business deteriorated from about '35.

Right. And did you come from a large family?

No. I had one brother.

One brother. And did you have extended family in Duisburg?

Yes, I had uncles. I had one uncle, two cousins in Essen, which is not very far. I had uncle and cousins in Cologne. So within two hours' travel, we were, I think, about 20.

Right. And were they all-- did they all perish in the Holocaust?

About half perished, either in a camp or by committing suicide.

OK. Right, now, when you talk of that your first sort of encounter with Nazism, in what way did it affect the community as a whole? Did they all leave their place?

A relatively high percentage left. Now, how it became noticeable is that Jews were not allowed to attend theaters. They were not allowed to go to parks. And later on, benches in parks-- well, that was now *für Juden verboten*. But then about that time started the Jewish theater because the artists were not allowed to perform at theaters. And they created their own. And they created their own.

Right.

Then there were those things that, as I said, we were not allowed to go to swimming pools, and restriction to go to parks, restriction to go to theaters.

Right. Now, were the people from your town actually deported to a ghetto or put in a ghetto at first? Were they rounded up at any stage?

Through the-- I don't think that there was mass arrest. There could have been before '38 prominent Jews that they were arrested because they were politically active. That I don't know. But I know that quite a few prominent Jews migrated to Palestine, as it was called then, fairly early.

The first mass arrests really started just before November '38, when Polish Jews were rounded up and then deported to Zbaszyn at the Polish-German border. And the Poles didn't want them. They were sent back to Germany. So they were

used as a ping pong ball.

You mean the Polish people in your community?

Polish Jews-- yes, Polish Jews in Germany.

Right, right, right. And they were sent to Poland. And then Poland sent them back.

They were deported to Poland then and back to-- but eventually, then, they were sent to Poland. Some of them, understand, escape to Russia. But the others all perished in Polish extermination camps. Two of my uncles were in that situation. They were sent to Zbaszyn. And then they were for a while in Poland. Then after that, nothing was heard of them.

Right. So you were not actually in a ghetto for Jews?

I was not in a ghetto. I was arrested on the morning of the 9th of November. And I haven't come to that yet. So on the 9th of November, fairly early in the morning, my father had a phone call from one of our non-Jewish friends that the synagogue was burning.

Well, the synagogue was about 10 minutes, a quarter of an hour walking distance. So my father and I left the house to go to one of the suburbs where one of our employees lived. And on the way, we were picked up by the Gestapo and put into prison.

After a week or 10 days, I was sent home. And my father was sent to Dachau. When I came home, our apartment was completely destroyed, I mean, completely. The only room which was left untouched was my mother's bedroom, who was ill at home then.

But otherwise, all the furniture were-- well, we lived on the second floor. And we had a large-- how do you call it-- [GERMAN]-- concert piano that was thrown out of the window, carpets, et cetera, et cetera. In other words, they cut the legs first, and then threw it out.

My father remained in Dachau for about three or four weeks. If I may mention that in August '38, we went to Holland. Strangely enough, we had the permission to go there and came back. And my brother stayed, then, in Holland. So when this happened in 1938, my brother was in Holland already.

So what did you go for at the time, just for a visit?

Yes.

I see. You didn't, at that stage, emigrate to Holland?

No. And also, my parents went to Czechoslovakia, where we had relatives. Strangely enough, they came back.

They came back, yes. So after coming back from Holland, how long were you-- what happened after that?

Well, then we-- well, between July and October, I mean, things were just as bad as they were before. I mean, I was still allowed to attend school. But the restrictions--

Were getting more.

--grew-- were getting worse and worse. And then, of course, after the destruction of the synagogues, I was not allowed to attend the school anymore. And as I said, my father was in Dachau. My mother was ill in hospital.

And then I don't know who arranged any-- oh, the Dutch Red Cross organized a children transport, with which I went to

Holland. And my father then was discharged from Dachau. And he and my mother then went to Holland illegally. And they lived there.

They joined up with you and your brother or not?

Yes, yes, yes. My brother was with a Dutch family. And my parents were in The Hague. My brother then joined my parents. And I joined them afterwards. After the occupation, then, we were evacuated to Utrecht. And I think it was in '42, all Jews had to wear stars. So I wore the star for about one or two months.

And then deportation of young people, that is, my age group started about that time. They were sent to Mauthausen. And then my parents suggested that at least I should try to get away and try to help them, then, to get papers. So I left Holland, then, in May.

Can I just ask you before you go on, how would they have known who to give stars to? Now, how would they know who the Jews were? Because like in Eastern Europe, the Jews dressed differently. But in Holland, did they? Did they look different?

No, no.

Did they look the same as everyone else?

I think-- well, see, at that time, we still had German passports--

Oh, it was not.

--with a J in it. And then after the occupation, there was a Gestapo edict that we had to surrender our passports.

So they had records.

Yes. And I don't know how they had the-- or where they got the records from. And I assume that there is-- what is it-- a population register that each suburb or each commune has a register of.

And might there have been a leader in the Jewish community who gave that information about them?

I would be very surprised. I would be very surprised because the relationship between the Dutch Jews and the immigrants was not too bad. I never had the feeling that they resented it or that they felt that our presence would endanger them.

They were sympathetic, in a way?

Yes. I mean, of course, I suppose that it's typical from many migrants who said, ah, well at home, things were better, et cetera. Said, what are you doing here?

OK. So they were sympathetic, or mostly?

They were sympathetic and they were helpful. I understand that my brother stayed for a while with Dutch Jews. But then afterwards, he stayed with non-Jewish friends for a while.

OK. So sorry, can you go back to where you were before?

Yes. So I joined my parents and my brother in The Hague. And then after the occupation, we were evacuated to Utrecht, where we stayed until '42. Then we all wore stars with Jood written on it. Then later on, the deportation of young Jewish men started.

And then my parents suggested that I try to get away in the hope that I would be able to help them, then, to get fake papers to migrate. So in May '43, I left Holland first to Belgium. I joined a group of Dutch Jews there. And then we had a guide who took us, via occupied France, to Switzerland.

In Switzerland, I was interned because I had no consul to look after me. The Dutch Jews-- I mean, the Dutch consul or the French consul looked after them. For a while, I was in internment camp, which was an adjunct to a prison. So I just had to work over seven or eight days and eight hours per day. And then there were-- afterwards, I was sent to various refugee camps.

And that internment camp, how were you treated?

How we were treated? The same as the prisoners. So I mean, there was no cruelty. I mean, no one threatened us. But we were just ordinary prisoners. We were kept away from the criminals. But the way as the war-- as far as the wardens were concerned, we were prisoners and had very limited rights. I mean, I think we were allowed to write one letter a week or something like that.

Right. And what was the food like?

The food was prison food.

Yes. Was it soup and bread?

Soup and bread. And they had those famous little triangular cheese, which was like chewing gum. But at least it was enough to-- I mean, we didn't starve.

Yes. And how long did you stayed in that camp?

I stayed in that camp, I think, for about two years-- two months. And then I went to refugee camps, where we had deserters and refugees from various countries.

And where was that?

That was in Switzerland in Valais, which is a French-speaking canton. The treatment there was OK.

Who was running those camps, Swiss people?

Yes, Swiss ran that. But in the first camp, there were also Polish officers. And there were tensions between Jews and the Polish officers. And particularly, when they got drunk, I mean, we kept well away from them.

So the attitude wasn't really sympathetic.

No. No, unfortunately, the Swiss government had not a very, very good track record. But there was a stage when Jews were sent back. But the population was not aware of it. When the population became aware of it, there was such an outcry that that stopped.

Sent back to wherever they'd come from?

Back to Germany or France, wherever it was.

I see. All right. So then how many of those refugee camps would you have been in?

I was in-- so first, I was in internment camp. Then I was in two-- three refugee camps. And then I was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship to go to Basel University.

I see. And why did you keep changing camps? Did they make you do that? Did the authorities just--

No. No. They just-- I don't know whether each camp served a certain purpose. Let's say that people were just arrived, that they were sent to camp A, or what happened, or maybe that a new-- well, this second camp, where it was a relatively new camp.

And so we had to do some useless work there, getting rid of rocks, carrying rocks from one cone and put it down in another one. But the main thing, I suppose, was to keep us away from the cities and to keep us occupied. I mean, there was no attempt made to have some sort of social life or cultural life.

And it was a mixed camp, men and women--

No, no, no.

--or just men?

It was just men. There were some mixed camps, I mean, to keep families together. But we, in our camp, we had a few men who were married. And their women-- their wives were at the other end of Switzerland. But I think they were united, then, afterwards.

Right. And the conditions in all the camps were the same?

Conditions were the same, treatment-- the treatment was the same, food was the same. As far as liberty is concerned, we were allowed to, on Saturday afternoon, to go to the nearest township. But I mean, there was no barbed wire. But I mean, there were just rules that we were not allowed to.

Did anyone try to escape from there?

No.

No, they stayed?

Well, some tried to go to the nearest city. But Switzerland is such a small country. And even for the ordinary population, there such strict regulations. You had to register where you live. And so anyone who is not known, they would have been discovered straight away.

So it wasn't worth their harm.

No. And people realized, too, that if they tried that, they would be deported.

Right. Now, you went to one internment camp.

That was the first one when I came when--

Then three refugee camps?

Three refugee camps.

Right. And after those, what happened?

And well, after that, I was fortunate enough to get a scholarship to Basel University. And I stayed there.

And did you go to university?

Yes. But before I went there-- I have to go back. Seeing that I left Holland in order to help my parents, I established contact with Central American consulates. I think Honduras was one of them which supplied papers or visa.

And I had just about made the final arrangements when I received a letter from Dutch friends that my parents and brother had been deported from Westerbork to Sobibor. So after I left Holland, and my parents stayed in Utrecht for a while, then they were sent to Westerbork, which was like a transit camp.

And where is that?

And Westerbork is in Holland.

Right. Right. And Sobibor was in Poland, wasn't it?

And that was the trend-- and then they were deported to Sobibor, which is in Poland. And now, I was able to ascertain from the Dutch Red Cross the dates. They were deported on the 18th of May in 1943. And they died in Sobibor on the 21st of May '43.

So just a few days.

Yes.

Did you say the 18th of May--

18th of May. And that is according to a letter from the Dutch Red Cross, which I still have. They were my parents and my brother.

So they all three perished?

Yes.

I guess it's lucky for them that they didn't live longer to go through those--

Yes.

--things.

Right. So now, there was no point in doing anything more for them. So did-- or you didn't know then? When did they reach you?

I did not. Well, I didn't find out until after the war.

I see. So you just continued to get papers through. Did you try and get for yourself as well, then?

No. No, I was-- well, I was-- I tried mainly to get them, to help them. I mean, I suspected something because I was in contact with my parents. Then I didn't see anything from my parents. Then I wrote to non-Jewish Dutch friends. And they told me that they had been sent to Westerbork. Then I wrote to Westerbork. I had one or two letters from them. All of a sudden, it stopped.

It stopped again.

And then I wrote to those non-Jewish Dutch friends. And I didn't hear anything from them.

I see.



So I really didn't know.

Were they the friends that were hiding your family?

No, they were other friends. They were friends which I had. They were personal. They knew my parents.

Were they taken as well?

No. No, no, no. But all of a sudden, I didn't hear from them.

Right. So in the meantime, did you start university?

Yes.

And how long did you stay there?

I stayed in Switzerland till '49.

From when, sorry?

Oh, when did I go there? I think end of-- early '49. I think from '44. I was in Basel till late '48. Then I went to Germany. Yeah.

The war ended then while you were in Basel.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes.

I see. Right.

Then I went to Germany because I had found out that cousins who had lived in Poland, they were living in Munich. I was so surprised to hear that they were alive. They said, well, why don't you come to us? So I went to Munich. And then-- but I didn't like the atmosphere. 1949 was the Cold War, and the fear, and the uncertainty. And I wanted to get as far from Europe as possible.

So even after liberation, one still felt?

Yes. And I felt uncomfortable in Germany. I mean, when non-Jews, when they knew that I was Jewish, they started, oh, we-- of course, we didn't know anything about it. We were against it. There was one who was honest enough to say, yes, I was in the party. I believed in it. And I found that much more honest. So you could accept that. It was more reasonable.

Accept that. And then one-- what really made my decision to migrate-- what was it? Yes, I needed-- obviously, I needed paper to migrate. And so I went to the German authorities. And they said, well, you are entitled to a German passport. And I said, no, I don't want a German passport. They said, well, all the laws are-- I don't take any moment till now.

He said, oh, when you surrendered your passport, whom did you give it to? I said, to the Gestapo in Amsterdam. Did you get a receipt? And the question was asked in all innocence. But after a question like that, I said, no, look, there is no future for me in Germany. And then I decided to migrate to Australia.

I see. And I just wanted to ask you, before we leave Europe, the years you spent in Switzerland, you were not affected in any way by anything-- by Nazism or the war going on? You didn't feel anything then?

Well, I felt-- I felt worried. I felt threatened because I didn't think that Switzerland would be able to remain neutral.

And the Swiss people themselves, what? [AUDIO OUT] For themselves, how did they treat you? How did you feel about them?

The Swiss people were generally-- they were supportive and understanding. There were a few exceptions. And there were-- maybe some of them felt threatened by the migrant invasion.

Was it a large invasion to Switzerland?

For them, probably. I don't know how many were there. But I don't think it was such a large number. And I only am aware of the numbers who were in camps. But there were a few emigres who had been there before. So I don't know what the total migrant population was.

OK. So you left Switzerland in '48, end of '48. Right. And you migrated to Australia? Very soon or--

From Switzerland via Germany.

Right. And how did you accomplish all that?

Through the ORT organization.

Right. They arranged papers for you?

Yes. They assisted. Now, I don't know whether they actually arranged that. I don't know which organization it was who arranged for a visa for me. I have an idea it was done here through my cousins, probably via the Australian Jewish Welfare or whatever body helped with visas.

Did you choose to come to Australia because you had family here?

This is a question which I've often asked myself. I have only one cousin here. And I have many, many more cousins in the States. And what made me pick Australia? I assume that it must have something to do with McCarthyism in the States at that time.

I see.

I don't regret that I came here.

You don't regret, to boot. So you came to Australia then. And how did you build your life? And what did you-- did you finish your studies in Switzerland? Did you complete something?

I studied pharmacy. I did the theoretical part. And the study involves one year practical work. I was not allowed to do that as a pharma because if I had finished that, that would have meant permit to work as a pharmacist. And foreigners, or refugees, were not allowed to work. I'm talking about refugees who came at about the same time as I did, not the ones who came after '33. They were allowed to work.

So when I came here, I stayed with my cousins. And I inquired about the pharmacy course. That, again, involved one or two years' practical work at very, very low pay. And so I decided, no, I don't want to do that. And I just took any job that I could get.

How was your English, would you say?

My English-- well, before I left, I did a special course for interpreter-- English, French, and German, of course.

So your English was good then?

My English was fine, except certain colloquial expressions were a bit difficult. And then I worked as a packer and a store man. That was my first job, was Elliotts & Australian Drug, which are now, I think, Drug Houses of Australia. And then I worked for in a garage as a claims clerk. And then I joined the federal public service in 1957 in the taxation department. And I worked there until I retired in October '87.

Right. So you came here, then, as the sole survivor of your family?

Yes. And you married in Australia?

I married in Australia.

Yes. And was your wife from Europe too?

My wife is from Switzerland.

Right. Did you meet there when you were living?

Yes.

I see. So did she come out with you? Was she always--

No, she came a year after--

I see.

--after me.

And do you have family here?

We have two daughters. One is in Brisbane now and the other one in New Zealand.

I see. Right, well, how did you find the attitude of the Australians-- the Australians generally and the Australian Jewish community-- when you came?

To answer this question, I have to go back to my stay in Switzerland. As I said, I had a very traditional Jewish background. When I heard that my parents and brother had been killed in a concentration camp, for me, God was dead. And Judaism was dead. So for a few years, I was completely removed from anything Jewish.

So when I came back, the first few years, first two or three years, my contact with Jewish people were limited to my cousins and their own group who came from Eastern Europe. And they had all survived the war. It was not until we moved to Willoughby and I joined North Shore Temple Emanuel that I became, again, a practicing Jew.

Is your wife Jewish?

Oh, no, no.

OK. Did she convert?

No, she did not wish to convert.

Right. So what brought you back to the fold again? Was it the influence of some event or a particular person?

It was the influence of a particular person. That was the late Maury Lewis, who was, at that time, the cantor of North Shore Temple Emanuel. And he was also-- well, I met him at the taxation office. He was a very dear colleague. And he

introduced me to North Shore Temple Emanuel.

And then gradually, well, my interest and my love for Judaism came back again. I took up my study of Judaism and Jewish subjects, which were interrupted in 1938. And I don't feel as a, in inverted commas, "reborn Jew." I don't like the concept of reborn. But I just felt the need and that there was something missing, something worthwhile, and something for which so many people have suffered, and something under which I have suffered.

For survivors who were in concentration camps, it may be hard to understand that a person like I am, who was privileged to escape concentration camps, can still regard himself as a victim of the Holocaust. I'm not talking about the death of my immediate parents.

But I'm talking about the lack of normal development, the lack of the person I would have become, and the lack of education facilities. I wanted to go to the Breslauer Seminary, which was a rabbinical seminary. And that, of course, was not possible.

Right. Well, you-- as you say, you suffered all those things nevertheless.

Yes.

And things turned out very differently from the way they might have had the war not intervened. That's understandable. So do you feel, in Australia, that you feel free to-- that you can be Jewish and not be afraid?

Yes. Yes, I feel that freedom. I mean, I can live a Jewish life if I wish to. I can live my Judaism in whatever form I choose. And I'm very privileged to have met so many wonderful people.

Right. Well, that was very interesting. Is there anything else that you'd like to mention, anything relevant to the time or your experiences?

No. I only hope that the work which the association does will continue and that, particularly, our young people are taught about the Holocaust without putting too much emphasis on the gruesome details because we are talking about young, impressionable people.

I think the background should be given-- how it started, how it was possible-- and explain to our young people who are in the fortunate position here that they cannot understand how people could let that happen. It's most important that those children are made aware that it was possible, that it could happen. But spare them unnecessary gruesome details.

Thank you very much.