

Kurt Herman Interview



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Kurt Herman Interview

[Beginning of recorded material]

[Director's comments]

Interviewer: We'll start with you giving us your name and spell it.

00.04.58 Kurt Herman: Okay. My name is Kurt Herman, K-U-R-T H-E-R-M-A-N.

Interviewer: Let's start with that story you were mentioning about you and your mother.

00.05.13 Kurt Herman: Okay. Well, we lived in Vienna during -- after Hitler came into Austria. And we happened to be crossing the Danube River between the 9th District and the 2nd District. And along came a motorcade with Adolf Hitler in it and all his entourage. And we had to stand there and do the normal Nazi salute. And we're scared, but we survive.

[Director's comments]

Interviewer: Kurt, when was the first time as child that you have a recollection of what it was to be Jewish in Vienna at that time?

00.06.27 Kurt Herman: The recollection in Vienna at that time for a Jewish person really hit us after Hitler came into Austria and started to separate me as a child from my non-Jewish friends in the school

system. And I asked my dad actually, "What did I do?" And he said, "You didn't do anything. You were just born Jewish. And that's the way it is right now."

Interviewer: What business was your father in?

00.06.59 Kurt Herman: My father and grandfather had a fabric business in the 9th, uh, District.

Interviewer: Tell me about what it was like to be a Jewish student in elementary school.

00.07.22 Kurt Herman: Okay. Well, prior to Hitler, we were all -- boys and girls of all faiths were mixed seating in the classroom. And the boys after school went to the playground, played the sport that we played over there, which is called fussball and soccer here. And it was all well. As soon as the sign came up after Hitler invaded that said "Jews over here and non-Jews over here," that all ended.

00.07.48 They all had swastikas, and now I was harassed because I was Jewish.

Interviewer: Once Jews in Vienna began to realize the best course was to leave Vienna, what are your recollections of what you and your friends were talking about?

00.08.19 Kurt Herman: Well, we had a little discussion. But we're little children, and we all knew we have to try to leave here, but it's really at the discretion of our parents because we can't really do anything. But my Jewish friends including my cousin -- another cousin who lived near me -- were all talking about ["Can't we] -- I hope we're going to go to America and see each other."

Interviewer: Why America?

00.08.44 Kurt Herman: That was always the country of choice. First of all, we had relatives here, and we thought that they -- they left earlier, and they said that America is the place to be, it's free, and everybody can come. Well, we found out not everybody can come, but we did -- that was our decision. And we never wanted to go to another European country. Somehow I think we had an inner feeling that this might not stop here, which was a good guess.

00.09.13 So why go to the next country and then to go again? So we tried.

Interviewer: Do you remember as a boy, what would you have heard about America? What did you know about the U.S. at that point?

00.09.32 Kurt Herman: Not very much except that I had relatives here, and they all talked about that -- how nice it is here. They're not discriminated against as much. And there's freedom, freedom you can say anything you want and, uh, the newspaper isn't controlled. Even though the Austrian newspaper wasn't completely controlled,

it was somewhat controlled. And after the Nazis there was no freedom anymore at all.

Interviewer: Your parents at this point, I'm assuming, themselves were eagerly looking for a place to leave as well. Tell me --

00.10.06 Kurt Herman: Very, very -- yeah, Mother -- Mother and Dad and grandparents and all -- everybody was trying -- my grandfather wasn't so hot to leave. He thought that they wouldn't bother him because he was a general in the Prussian army in the first World War. Of course, he was wrong. And the effort was being made, but it's diff- -- it was difficult to come here. You needed a sponsor. You needed to [fall] in the quota system.

00.10.31 And things weren't -- it was just tough to do, but we kept at it. And then later on perhaps we succeeded.

Interviewer: Tell me what happened to your father.

00.10.48 Kurt Herman: Well, my father, who was of Polish birth, fell under the Polish quota system as did my grandmother and grandfather. And they were able to get passports to leave, destination Cuba. The thought was if they can get to this hemisphere, Cuba is near the United States, and maybe later they can come here. Unfortunately the ship they were on, even though they had proper papers and passports, was unable to land in Cuba or anywhere in the Western Hemisphere.

00.11.22 And after being on the ocean and ports and so on for several months, finally landed up in France as displaced persons.

Interviewer: What happened to them at that point?

00.11.34 Kurt Herman: Well, my father in early 1940 after I had already been here as well as my mother was able to get bookings to the United States and arrived here and our three-family unit was intact. My father -- my grandfather and grandmother could not and perished in Auschwitz.

Interviewer: Now let's move to the Kindertransport. The larger one involved many thousands of children going to the UK. Was that an option for you and your family?

00.12.23 Kurt Herman: My mother confronted me several times about signing up to go to Great Britain, which eventually took 10,000 children. But for whatever reason, particularly one that I wanted to come to America and that my mother was trying to come to America, I decided I don't want to go to Great Britain. It could've been bad the decision, but I'm here. So it was a good decision.

Interviewer: And instead what happened?

00.12.50 Kurt Herman: Instead what happened? Several months later in the Jewish press they announced a Kindertransport to the United States of America. Now, I wasn't certain that I'm going to make it, but I certainly went and tried. And we were -- people came from

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Gilbert Kraus, his wife Eleanor Kraus, and a doc- -- a pediatrician by the name of Dr. Schless came and interviewed us.

00.13.20 Took us, gave us mental, physical tests. We conversed. Of course we had an interpreter because we don't speak the same language. And while there were some 600 people that applied, we found out they're only taking 25 boys and 25 girls. And after the interview was over, we went home and hoped to hear, which we did hear.

00.13.44 May 10th we heard that this lucky person was selected for this venture to the United States, which I should arrive at the train station in Vienna in May with the passport and the two suitcases [that were] the regulations for our journey to America in June at the -- June 2nd on a ship called the USS President Harding out of Hamburg, Germany.

Interviewer: Before you arrived in the U.S., the interviewing and questionnaires for the choosing of the children was happening in February --

00.14.29 Kurt Herman: February or March, yes.

Interviewer: And you didn't find out until --

Kurt Herman: May.

Interviewer: A few months later. What do you remember about that period in terms of -- was your father still around or was it just you and your mother at that point?

00.14.43 Kurt Herman: Mom and I were -- Mom and I were the only ones left in Vienna at the time. My father had since departed. We didn't know where he was because there was no instant communication, but we later found out he's on the ocean somewhere. Actually I landed before he did, which was several months later. [Unintelligible] there's really not much you can do. You got to wait and hope that you're lucky to be selected.

Interviewer: And in those --

00.15.08 Kurt Herman: You can't call anybody and follow it up. So.

Interviewer: And in those months, Kurt, did you have other friends your age who were leaving?

00.15.18 Kurt Herman: Uh, I -- you asked -- I'm not sure that friends my age left. I will tell you that my other cousin on my father's side and his mom left on their own to the United States. That's about the only recollection I have.

Interviewer: Tell me with as much detail as you can recall about the day you left Vienna on the train.

00.15.57 Kurt Herman: Well, of course that was a day that we were all anxious for. We got to the Vienna train station as instructed by the time. I arrived at the train station and found that the train station was full of stormtroopers. And our first recollection was, well, they changed their mind. They're not going to -- I mean we didn't know what went on behind the scenes -- that we're not going to leave. They're not going to let us go. The parents particularly were concerned.

00.16.24 And then of course they did put us on the train. But I was told that they told the mothers, and the fathers if they were there, they're not allowed to cry. That they're using this as a publicity how good they are to let these go. And they're not allowed to wave because that's too close to sieg heil. And they just have to put up with it. So after a period of -- I guess it took an hour for all this happen -- we're on the train. And we left.

00.16.53 And waved goodbye to Mom. We could wave, but they couldn't. And said to ourselves, "Are we ever going to see our parents again?" Which was one of the conversations on the train.

Interviewer: You mentioned a couple of suitcases. What kinds of things do you remember bringing with you?

00.17.10 Kurt Herman: Just mostly clothing. In fact, all clothing. There was nothing else that, you know -- not TVs, no radios. We just brought clothing. No food. So, you know, personal things like toothbrushes and toothpaste. Things you have to do to get along.

But nothing -- and no money. [Well, we] didn't need any. But, uh, that's it.

Interviewer: Even going back further to February or so, what do you remember about one or both of the Krauses?

00.17.46 Kurt Herman: Well, they were impressive people. I do remember Eleanor. Red finger nail polish was so different than what we are used to seeing. So I remember her. I know she had more makeup on than I was used to seeing. So I was pretty impressed with her. I was only a young guy, but I thought she was a pretty woman. What the heck? You might as well start.

00.18.11 Uh, other than that I didn't remember much. Uh, I remember the doctor because he examined us, gave us a physical test and so on.

[Director's comments]

Interviewer: As I understand the story, you first went from Vienna to Berlin --

00.18.41 Kurt Herman: Correct. Overnight.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about --

Kurt Herman: Well, they brought us into -- as I recall, they took us to Berlin and put us like -- I think it's like a gymnasium because a big place. And we slept on the floor as best we could. We were harassed a little bit when we got there. However, when the American consulate came

with having our passports to go to America, the Nazis eased off.
And the pressure was over.

00.19.09 Then we slept there. Got up the next morning and were transported to Hamburg, Germany, to board the ship the USS President Harding.

Interviewer: I assume you had never been on a ship before.

00.19.23 Kurt Herman: Never.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Kurt Herman: Awesome. It was an awesome sight to see this large ship which is going to take us to America, with the American flag flying. It was something to be remembered.

Interviewer: What are your specific memories of being on board that ship for however long it was?

00.19.47 Kurt Herman: Well, it took -- it took altogether like over two weeks, but we did stop in two places, Liverpool and Le Havre, to pick up passengers. The remembrance was that all the children were housed four in a -- in a -- in a room with bunk beds in third class. And the Krauses were in first class. We basically had to fend for ourselves, and we were just the darlings of this ship.

00.20.15 Everybody took to us, the captain. We had -- they put us in drills, life drills. We also had English lessons by the Krauses. And the rest of the time we just [moped] around, and we took particular interest in eating because we hadn't really had good food for a while. And the most interesting part of the eating was we couldn't read the menus. So we had to point to things to eat and then if the waiter brought it and we didn't like it, we just shook our head and said, "No, we don't want this."

00.20.49 Sooner or later they figured out they better not bring spinach or all this good stuff that Mom thinks we should eat because we're not going to eat it. Unfortunately I would say 50 percent of the children were seasick. So they didn't have this pleasure. I was not seasick a day. I had this great pleasure.

Interviewer: What was the best thing on the menu?

00.21.11 Kurt Herman: Ice cream was the best thing on the menu.

Interviewer: Did you have a roommate on the ship?

00.21.26 Kurt Herman: Yeah. There was three other people in the ship. I don't recall their name. Julius wasn't one of them. I know that. There was three other boys around my age. They were trying to do that, but one of them was younger. We sort of watched over them. There was one child that was a lot younger. The older ones. Big deal. I was nine. So I was older. Watched over them.

00.21.47 We sort of helped each other. The older ones helped the younger ones. So we sort of took care of ourselves. But adults helped. They were all -- everybody that was on there was willing to help if we needed it.

Interviewer: I realize you were all relatively very young kids. I'm curious if you remember amongst the group of you when you would talk at night or during the day, what your sense was of just the gravity of the situation that had you on that ship in the first place?

00.22.21 Kurt Herman: Well, we were certainly conscious of the fact that we have now escaped Nazi Germany where things aren't good for Jews, even though the things weren't that terrible yet. It was bad enough. And that we're going to an adventure to a new country where we have rights and freedoms, fully understanding that it is possible we will not see our parents again and that we may be living --

00.22.50 We didn't know where we were living. We didn't know whether we're going to a community place or foster homes. We didn't even know we were going to a camp, even though it was summertime. We just knew we were coming. And I also knew that when I got there that, uh, there were some relatives there but that nobody was taking -- nobody went to relatives. We all stayed together, all 50 of us, in the holding area until we were told where we're going.

Interviewer: Was there interaction with the Krauses --

00.23.25 Kurt Herman: Yes.

Interviewer: On the ship?

Kurt Herman: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell us a little about that.

Kurt Herman: The Krauses taught English to us. We had classes. They would show up and help us learn English once, sometimes twice a day. There was no interaction at mealtime because they were in a different era -- area. But yes, we were in the -- they were around. We saw them, and we had pictures. They were part of the pictures.

00.23.49 Not all of them. Sometimes we only had children, but they were part of the -- they were there. They were the heroes. They're our heroes.

Interviewer: What's your first memory of arriving in the United States?

00.24.07 Kurt Herman: Statue of Liberty was our first memory of the United States. We were facing the Statue, as we have some pictures of that, looking at this lady and cheering. "Here we are, arriving in New York." It was a wonderful feeling.

Interviewer: You knew the Statue of Liberty?

00.24.34 Kurt Herman: Yes, we -- well, they-they told us. We were warned. It's not like we knew what the Statue was, but we knew what it stood for by the time we got there. I mean that's what the Krauses did, you know. Indoctrinated us a little bit. And it was good enough for us to do. So. Yeah, we knew it.

Interviewer: So you arrive in the harbor there, and you head straight to Philadelphia or --

00.25.05 Kurt Herman: We had -- we were boarded on a bus and sent to Collegeville, Pennsylvania, for a summer camp that -- owned by Brith Sholom.

Interviewer: What was life like there for two months?

Kurt Herman: We'd never been to summer camp before. So life was great. I mean it was just terrific. We could -- you know, we were -- had counselors. We had controlled groups. We were taught English. Twice a day. We're taught "The Star-Spangled Banner." We're taught, "Pledge allegiance to the flag. God bless America." In addition to playing our own sport, fussball and -- or soccer, we're taught baseball and basketball and learned how to chew gum, because American kids chew gum.

00.25.47 So we didn't want to be different.

Interviewer: Still chew gum?

Kurt Herman: Yeah, I still chew gum. But now more like a gentleman, not like before.

Interviewer: While you were at the camp that summer, were the Krauses a presence?

00.26.10 Kurt Herman: Sometimes. We had dignitaries from Brith Sholom, and the Krauses would visit with the president or the whatever they call them, grand master. Yes. We had other visitors, too. You know, Jewish -- maybe prospective -- I don't know who they were. They could've been prospective foster parents visiting the camp. It always seems to be visitors there.

00.26.36 And sometimes, you know, we'd have Pledge Allegiance every morning and sometimes there's an adult there helping other than the normal counselor and staff. So I'm assuming they had something to do with Brith Sholom. Actually we didn't know Brith Sholom was involved at that point. We did not know that. We just knew Krauses.

Interviewer: So you're understanding then was that these two people were solely responsible basically for bringing --

00.27.03 Kurt Herman: Yes. Somehow or other, somebody mentioned B'nai Brith. So we thought it was B'nai Brith.

Interviewer: While you were at the camp what, if anything, did you know about your parents?

00.27.19 Kurt Herman: I was in correspondence with my mother at the camp. Every day -- it was required to write letters, of course in German. They knew where she was, and she knew where I was. I knew nothing about my dad. I knew my aunt was there, too, but I didn't correspond with her.

Interviewer: Of course this was prior to the formal outbreak of war --

00.27.48 Kurt Herman: Correct.

Interviewer: So letters and correspondence were still --

Kurt Herman: Yes, there were -- I'm not certain they weren't edited, but I wrote postcards. There was nothing to edit. I'm telling I'm playing, I'm having fun, I'm eating ice cream. And playing.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about the family that you at least temporarily stayed with.

00.28.15 Kurt Herman: Okay. At the end of -- at the end of the summer, there was a lady came. Her name is Mrs. Leonard. I didn't know that she lived in Allentown, but she lived in Allentown, PA. She took me and another boy by the name of Julius to live in her house. The lady is a family lady, has children, had a grandchild already that was only three years younger than us, and her youngest child was a senior in high school.

00.28.44 Fortunately for us, she happened to be a very wealthy lady living in a 10-bedroom mansion with live-in help. And I thought I was in heaven living in this place. And very lovely lady. She disciplined us, but she helped us, too. There was a lot of tough times in school initially with the language. And the socialization wasn't bad with the other kids because we played sports and sports takes over, covers all other prejudices.

00.29.23 If you can play, you play. So that helped.

Interviewer: And Mr. Leonard?

Kurt Herman: Mr. Leonard was nice to us, but he was in his -- doing his business, and he -- and she -- and he wasn't with us all the time. But one thing we had at the Leonards', quarter of 7:00 every night you had to come down to dinner, not coming off the playground. You had to be cleaned up. You didn't have to wear a tie, but you had to be neat.

00.29.53 I remember they had a piped-in radio station, Lowell Thomas came on at quarter of 7:00 every day through mealtime. And mealtime was togetherness. And if you came late and were dirty, you didn't get your allowance money.

Interviewer: What grade were you in at this point? What was school like?

00.30.17 Kurt Herman: Well, I was supposed to be -- Julius and I age-wise, supposed to be in fifth grade. But when they interviewed us after much hullabaloo at the school, they put us in third grade. Our

English wasn't good enough, but we were great in math because we already had all this stuff. But I give credit to both of us. We did get through third, fourth, and fifth without missing a beat, without having to stay back a year, and moved on to sixth grade, which of course was after I left the Leonards because that year was over and Mom had since come.

00.30.54 So we moved to in school -- another school in another section of Allentown.

Interviewer: So please tell me then a little about your mom arriving and what that was like in terms of the reunion with your mother.

00.31.08 Kurt Herman: Well, Mother came. That was a -- you know, reunion. Hugging and kissing and crying. And Mother came -- and interpreting for Mother to speak to the Leonards because I'm now a bilingual guy. And she's not. And from what I gather, I stayed at the Leonards'. That Mother was, uh -- they got her a room through the Jewish community there. Helped her out a little bit. And since fortunately she could operate a sewing machine, they got her a job in one of the mills.

00.31.41 So she was able to sustain herself and get on her feet a little bit. And she started to take English classes. And by the time the school year ended, I left the Leonards to live with Mom. We set -- we had a small apartment in another side of Allentown where -- where it's not so ritzy. But always in touch with the Leonards, constantly.

Interviewer: So that means you lived with the Leonards from the time you arrived --

00.32.11 Kurt Herman: It's about a year, close -- a school year basically. A school year. Yes.

Interviewer: So you started back in school in, say, September of '39 and you stayed with the Leonards through the end of that school year --

00.32.24 Kurt Herman: Yeah, May, June, whatever. Yes. And September then I -- I went to a different school. It was a little harder at the different school because again that was a different neighborhood, less Jewish. So -- but it wasn't that bad either. Again, I must emphasize they saw me play ball, and I was playing with them. So they didn't bother me.

00.32.46 Thank -- my mother used to say, "Thank God for sports." Although she resented that I was playing all the time.

Interviewer: And then when did your father arrive?

00.33.00 Kurt Herman: Well, my father came, uh, during the time -- during that time. Before I finished, he came. Finally got out of France. So he and Mother had a place already before I officially moved in 100 percent. But it was in that close range. It wasn't that long. And my father having had experience in the textile business was able to get a job in one of the mills there, too, as a pattern cutter.

00.33.28 And he was already a linguist. Unfortunately, English wasn't one of the things he'd learned. But he was well-educated for that era. And a linguist can pick up the language -- he picked it up pretty-pretty fast. They both picked it up pretty fast. They spoke with an accent, but they can't help that. And five years after they arrived, they became citizens.

Interviewer: How about you? When did you become a citizen?

00.33.53 Kurt Herman: Well, I automatically become a citizen when they did. I'm a child. I also automatically became a citizen when I went to the service, the military. But I already had my papers before that. So it was not a problem -- I didn't have to do any testing. It's the same thing as a minor child.

Interviewer: During the time you lived with the Leonards, at that point was there any contact at all with the Krauses or --

00.34.21 Kurt Herman: No. Not that I know of. I do not remember the Krauses. I do remember contact with another foster family who took in one of the girls. And they were friends with the Leonards. So once in a while we saw her. They visited.

Interviewer: But otherwise basically no contact --

00.34.40 Kurt Herman: Not -- maybe. Not from me. Perhaps from them. Not to my knowledge. No. I don't remember interfacing with the Krauses after that at all.

Interviewer: I want to jump ahead many, many years. I'm very interested in the story of how you came to learn some years later sort of what and who was behind this whole operation --

00.35.20 Kurt Herman: Okay. I don't know the exact date about it, but in the '50s, in this area was published a paper called the Jewish Times. I was married. I was employed. My wife calls me on the phone and says, "I just heard from somebody your picture's in the paper today." I said, "Well, how's my picture" -- she says, "When you're nine years old." I said, "How come?" There's a story in the Jewish Times that says it is not true -- B'nai Brith did not rescue these children. Brith Sholom did.

00.35.44 That's when I knew -- so look how many years later -- that Brith Sholom rescued us, through the Krauses obviously. They were their representatives. And not B'nai Brith. Now, what was interesting about the whole thing -- one of the people behind Brith Sholom was a gentleman by the name of Alex Stanton. I was very active in -- at the time I was employed as a CFO at the Federation of Jewish Agencies.

00.36.11 And he used to come in there.

[Director's comments]

Interviewer: Go ahead and retell the story of how you first --

00.36.36 Kurt Herman: Okay. I-I didn't know that -- who rescued us, which organization. In 1972 in the Jewish Times, which is a Northeast Jewish paper, there was an article published by Brith Sholom that indicated that it's wrong -- B'nai Brith did not sponsor this trip. Brith Sholom did. And they quoted Alex Stanton who was the grand master of Brith Sholom.

00.37.00 At the time I was employed at the Federation of Jewish Agencies as a chief financial officer and had interfaced with these people constantly. They didn't know who I was. I didn't know who they were. Well, now we reunited. They came to my office. And from then I was known as one of their children. Several times Mr. Stanton was honored. We had -- we were invited, my wife and I, to sit on the dais.

00.37.28 And we're always introduced to the Brith Sholom crowd in -- when he was honored. And his-daughter and son-in-law were very active in the Federation and worked with my very closely on a lot of matters. So that's how we -- that's how Brith Sholom came into my life.

Interviewer: You've got more history with Brith Sholom recently. Tell me a little bit about your --

00.38.03 Kurt Herman: Well, uh, in about mid-'90s -- well, we had one reunion with Brith Sholom. But I had nothing to do with that, other than I helped as being one of the survivors. I -- they invited me to come to one of their closing events as a guest. So then I decided maybe I should join Brith Sholom. I was near retiring, and I had time. So I did.

00.38.32 And I joined, ironically, the Kraus Pearlstein Lodge, which was named after Gilbert Kraus's father, uh, the oldest lodge that Brith Sholom has. And I was -- became a member. And then I became a vice-president. And for the last four years served as president of the lodge. And I'm also involved in the national office as treasurer. And on the board of governors.

00.39.03 So I'm pretty actively involved with Brith Sholom now. It's called a give back time. They rescued me. I should give them my services, which I'm happy to do.

Interviewer: Let me ask a little about your Judaism, how observant you are. Were you an observant family in Vienna?

00.39.38 Kurt Herman: In Vienna, I would rec- -- as I recollect, we certainly observed the Sabbath. And we went-went to services Friday night and Saturday. My grandparents was -- were kosher. Uh, I don't think we were kosher, but they were. Then we sort of centered our Judaism around their house. Uh, we're always synagogue members.

00.40.08 My parents in Allentown -- my father attended Sabbath services regularly. I went some Friday nights. I didn't go always on Saturday because my junior high basketball team practiced Saturday morning, and you can't interfere with that. I was bar mitzvahed and was a member. I was always a member of the Jewish Community Center in Allentown where all our social and athletic activities for Jews centered.

00.40.39 So I -- so Judaism was always part of it. Uh, when we're married, uh, the -- we became original members of the synagogue that's in our neighborhood. We're still there. I served as treasurer for 10 -- uh, treasurer for 10 years. And now I'm a financial advisor to that group. So we've been synagogue members -- are we truly completely observant? No, but we are attendees. And we're actively in the synagogue. My wife also.

Interviewer: You've got a large family, kids and a number of grandkids. Have they always known this story, your story?

00.41.27 Kurt Herman: Yes. My -- my story -- before I told this story to other people, which wasn't till after the movie Schindler's List, my children and grandchildren knew. I'd been -- I went to their schools and spoke. And if not, we spoke here. But I never publicly spoke about this to outside groups. I was never asked. Nobody ever asked. It became vogue it seems. I guess they figured these people are dying out, we'd better get something down on -- messages down.

00.42.00 And now it's become like [a-a vocation] I would say.

Interviewer: Was there something specific about Schindler's List that kind of triggered?

Kurt Herman: No. I don't know. I just know that people started to call Jewish places to -- "We want to hear about the Holocaust." Well, it started out with then the kids came -- my daughter said they want to learn in my -- in my grandson's school. So I went to that school. So I was pretty much on my own until the Holocaust Museum opened here.

00.42.38 And then they booked speakers. And now it's-it's big. They have a Web site. And then -- then I was -- then I heard about these symposiums about where they have kids come in to colleges. Uh, so they call me for that. It sort of exploded, you know. Then I -- there was Downingtown has big programs every year, and I go there now. Uh, so I would say that I delivered this speech a good 24 times a year to as little as 10 people and as many as 900.

00.43.15 Same message.

Interviewer: What's the core of the message?

Kurt Herman: The core of the message is -- well, I'm still -- I'm hoping that the core they get that hatred is not good and that here's my story of how I finally was able to escape all this hatred and survive. And I-I don't mince any words. I was lucky, very lucky. And I suffered probably less than most because I got out of there faster.

00.43.46 Then the message is Brith Sholom's great. They saved my life.

Interviewer: Why do you suppose the Krauses and Brith Sholom did what they did?

00.44.06 Kurt Herman: That's an excellent question which I really don't know, but I guess they felt if they could possibly rescue some children out of this thing, that they should make an effort. Because - - and [know] it was difficult to get American passports. And they were able to main -- get 50 passports. Maybe they would've rescued more children if they could get more passports. I don't know. But that was the story.

00.44.29 They had some connection in the Roosevelt administration with Biddle I believe is the man's name. I don't know what his position was, but somehow got these passports. So I assumed they had the -- they had a big meeting according to what I heard, and they voted. And they had the funds that they should try to rescue some people, which thank God they did.

Interviewer: You said you had stayed in touch with the Leonards. What became of them?

00.45.19 Kurt Herman: Well, Mr. Leonard passed. Mrs. Leonard [lived] alone. Now, I lived with my family in Allentown for a while and therefore visited her quite a bit. Then we relocated to Philadelphia basically for better jobs. But I had my mother and

father there. So when I visited Mom and Dad with my children, I went to Mrs. Leonard afterwards and saw her.

00.45.47 So whenever I visited Mom and Dad, I visited my other mom. Gracious lady. A couple times she was honored in Allentown by [Adasa], and I was invited. And I attended. And she introduced me as-as a son. So.

Interviewer: You mentioned hearing from the granddaughter.

00.46.13 Kurt Herman: Yes. Mrs. Leonard's granddaughter -- Gail Leonard was her name -- lived on the -- the house adjacent to the Leonards'. And was three years behind us, but went through the Allentown school system. And I knew her. I mean just -- not socially, but I knew her. We talked on occasion. So one time when I went on the computer recently a year or two ago on Classmates, I noticed that Gail Leonard was on there.

00.46.45 So I took the liberty of sending her an email. And she remembered two boys being at her grandmother's house. And, uh -- and so we reacquainted on email. She actually didn't know why we were there. So I -- I told her a little bit of the story and then told her to go to Google and she can read all about me.

00.47.11 So periodically we send emails. We exchange wishes. She once indicated she might come east, which I said, "Well, if you do let's be sure we get together," because she has a grandchild I think at Bryn Mawr. But that so far hasn't happened. But we are in touch

and, uh, we wish each other Happy New Year's and Happy Holidays. And when an article comes up or something of interest here, I always tell her, "I spoke today, Gail. And, uh, both your grandmother and you were in the speech," which I will do later today.

Interviewer: What's the message you most want those kids to take away?

00.48.05 Kurt Herman: Well, I -- there's two messages I tell them to show that they shouldn't hate anybody. The second message I give to youngsters. If you heard me today I said, "Get an education. I got one. My grandkids have it. You need that to succeed today." Because some of these kids think they don't need this, they don't need that. Well, they're wrong in my opinion. And so I preach -- preach that to them.

00.48.33 And the fact that there was a Holocaust that shouldn't happen again, they shouldn't people as much, even though it's happening everywhere else again. It's just not going to change. But you got to try. I mean what else can you do? And as some [peop-] -- I'm introduced with a person who introduces me says, "You're fortunate, children. You have a live survivor of this event. And there won't be many soon."

00.49.04 So that's another message, that they're fortunate to-to have somebody that's really, uh -- really was there. In fact, several times somebody came up and said, "I didn't believe any of this till today." Even though I'm not telling a-a camp story. They said, "I didn't

think this happened, but now I believe." So maybe that -- if I reached those, that was good.

Interviewer: If you can tell again the story of your aunt and your cousin winding up on the same ship --

00.49.49 Kurt Herman: Yeah. About -- yeah. Uh, about five months after I had arrived in America and only a few months at-at the Leonards', I was notified from relatives in New York -- they knew where I was [by the way] -- that my aunt and cousin had come to America. And, uh, that's all I knew at the time. So we talked and they came to visit and mentioned that they were on the same ship --

00.50.18 And when she got into the cabin and having seen my name on-on the -- on the board -- on the bed, she realized that she's in the same cabin that I had five, six months before. Of course she cried. I don't know why. I was saved. And we had a nice visit, fully understanding that I'm not going to live with her now and possibly - - possibly if nobody else comes, that's all that's left.

00.50.45 I mean the Leonards had no further obligation. But after [an hour] I was content to stay where I was because I was better off than they were, fortunately. They had just started. They language hasn't [come], you know. So they stayed in Brooklyn with relatives. And we brought -- of course we were in touch.

Interviewer: What was your name doing on the bed?

00.51.11 Kurt Herman: I put it there. I put my name on the bed. I was a mischievous kid. I thought it'd be fun. That's what kids do. Later on I remember during the war when they say "Kilroy was here." I said, "Oh, I beat him." I put "Kurt was here."

Interviewer: What haven't I asked you that you'd like to say?

00.51.44 Kurt Herman: Uh --

Interviewer: We covered a lot of ground.

Kurt Herman: Yeah. Uh, well, I should tell you that, uh, if I haven't already that both my uncle, who left Vienna to go to Shanghai, finally got to the United States to reunite with his mom -- his wife and son. And that my father got out of France and reunited with us. Eventually all six of us set up life in Allentown, PA. So six out of eight people who started got here.

00.52.15 The oldest people unfortunately died, but by the law of nature, that was pretty good. I mean it was sad, but as I said, considering a family of eight, for six to survive, that's a high percentage. Considering we were dispersed all over the place, you know. Some in Europe, some Italy, you know. I thought -- I think that's-that's miraculous.

00.52.41 And fortunately for me both my mom and dad lived into their 90s. So I had them for a long time. They were able to share my-my children and grandchildren. So it ended pretty good. Uh, and I think

I mentioned that, uh, I've been married for 55 years, 56 years. To some lady from Philadelphia. Her name is Rosalyn. And, uh, we have three daughters, six granddaughters, and two grandsons.

00.53.23 All in their -- well, not now. They're dispersed a little, but they're all at least -- three -- five of them are close. We see them. The grandchildren are all grown. One is married. The five of them have college degrees. Two of them in college now, and the other one's going, too. So they're all going to have educations. If I preach to those kids, I preach to my own kids.

00.53.50 Uh, I should tell you that, uh, I am getting a pension from the Austrian government. Even though I never worked there. But that was part of their law and rule. Wasn't easy to get, but after six years of writing, I got it and now get a check every month. And, uh, we got some other money recovery from my grand- -- father's and grandfather's business. A check.

00.54.18 And, uh, through my stroke of luck I found that my father had money in a Swiss bank, and I got that, too. So instead of spending that money on some nonsense, I'm educating my grandchildren with it. So that their burden isn't as great because education's very expensive. And now after working as chief financial officer in some companies, I'm retired.

00.54.43 And I volunteer in many -- many places. And I give speeches. And somehow they make me the treasurer of all the organizations. Except one, where I'm the president. But I handle the money, too.

Interviewer: You mentioned this morning that you've not been back to Vienna.

00.55.09 Kurt Herman: I've not been back to Vienna. I have no interest in going there because it's not -- I don't have good memories. I was invited to come and speak there. At that time, they -- I was negotiating with money for my bus- -- for my family's business. So I wrote them back. I said, "Rather than send me to Vienna to speak, send me the money you owe me." Which they did, but it took a while.

00.55.41 You got to be persistent with them. They're not just going to give it to you. But you do get it. Take a while. They break your heart. But it -- if anybody's listening and has a chance, stick with it. You'll get it. Austria's better than most. Than some other countries gave nothing. Hungary was very -- Germany's starting to do a little bit now. But, uh, so I can't complain about -- I-I looked at that as found money. Never counted in my life.

00.56.13 Never expected it, but if they put a law in, you try.

Interviewer: What is the first time you felt like an American?

00.56.38 Kurt Herman: First time I felt like -- well, sort of when I -- when I started school and I started to master the language. And particularly when I left that first school where they knew I was a refugee. Because I went to the second school. All they knew then is I was Jewish. They didn't know I was a refugee because I have no

accent. So -- and then of course when I went to the Jewish center and I participated in their activities, they never singled me out as anything.

00.57.11 They didn't even ask about my story. They just accepted me as a Jew and in their activities and a basketball player. I think that comes up a lot in my life.

[Director's comments]

Interviewer: When you went to camp, obviously you were picked by a family and you went to Allentown. But do you remember anything about the selection process or people coming?

00.58.00 Kurt Herman: No one talked to me, but I do remember people coming to take other kids. This all happened close to the end of the -- between the summer and -- excuse me -- the school year. The fact the Krauses took two people. And I remember some people had parents already. Some went to relatives, and others went to foster homes. I remember, but no one interviewed me other than when I met Mrs. Leonard.

00.58.28 She didn't even interview. She just said, "This is it." So the interview process must've taken place in the office to see who's left. She actually wanted a-a brother and sister, but there weren't any. So. Lucky for me. She took two guys. [Unintelligible] going to take -- yeah -- the brother and sister, but I think there was only one of them. And they went somewhere else. To Texas, I think.

Interviewer: I assume kids were siphoning off during the course of the summer, some probably fairly early after you arrived. Some as late as --

00.59.13 Kurt Herman: No. No one was siphoned off early. The siphoning off process began between the end of August when camp was over. Last week. Most of them stayed till the end of the camp. We didn't want to miss all that good stuff. So I don't recall anybody leaving early. I mean even if a parent came early, why would they take their child out of there when, you know, it's an adjustment period?

00.59.40 They're going to get more out of adjustment there than they are at home. They're more -- you know, we're talking not German now. We're trying to speak English. We have classes. It's better. I thought it was better. I thought it was pretty easy adjustment. I mean when I got to school, I could speak pretty well, you know. I -- my grammar wasn't -- I didn't know my grammar, but I could -- I could converse in the lan- -- and understand most of it. So.

01.00.07 I-I don't recall everybody -- anybody leaving early.

Interviewer: Was there already a functioning summer camp at Sholom Ber or?

01.00.16 Kurt Herman: There was a regular camp across the lake, which we interfaced sometimes. But our side, we only were by ourselves except when we interfaced on Fridays.

Interviewer: So there were other --

01.00.29 Kurt Herman: Across the -- we went across the lake. The American guys. I might give you an interesting ane- --- a-a-a-a, uh - - speak. Somebody called me when one of my articles was in the paper and said to me, "My name is" -- whose name I do not recall. "I was on the other side of the camp, and I remember you people coming in. And we couldn't figure out that sport you were playing. Now I know it's soccer."

01.00.57 So that's very -- I thought that was very interesting. That's when my one article was in the Jewish paper or something. He picked it up.

Interviewer: He had never seen anybody playing soccer before?

01.01.10 Kurt Herman: I guess not. Not here.

Interviewer: Did you become a good baseball player?

Kurt Herman: Fair. But not enough to -- no. Not enough to make school teams. No. I played all sports. Well, not all sports. I was a good swimmer, too. But I focused on basketball. That was the game I loved.

Interviewer: Did you know anyone else who interviewed in Vienna for the trip or was this the kind of thing that you talked about with your friends? Or was it really just a family-oriented thing, and the family said, "Don't share this outside the family"?

01.02.17 Kurt Herman: Uh, no. No one said I shouldn't share, but I would tell you as I recollect today, I only know one other boy who was a friend of mine who tried to go on this trip. So other -- there was just people I didn't know. He wasn't selected. He was a friend prior to that. And there was another boy who did go on the trip who I'd met once or twice. So I knew who he was.

01.02.43 The rest were all strangers. We didn't talk to anybody. I mean we talked among family. They knew I was interviewed because my-my aunt could've sent my cousin, and she didn't want to. He was six, and he wasn't -- other people were six years old. But she chose not to do that. It's not easy to send your child away and then never see them again perhaps. So.

01.03.12 But people did it. They sent them to England, too. So you do what you have to do, I guess, to survive.

Interviewer: The friend that you just mentioned who was not chosen, do you know what happened to him?

01.03.28 Kurt Herman: No, I don't. I do not know what happened to anybody there. [Just do you know] where they're located. You come here, you have to adjust. You're not worried with this guy or that guy, you know. You commute with your -- communicate with your family. That's about it. Because they move around. Who knows where they -- maybe they left Vienna to try to escape this guy. I mean eventually there was no escape, but in the beginning you

could -- they let you out if -- even if you went to Switzerland, you know.

01.03.59 They did let you out. But then they closed everything up after a while.

Interviewer: I believe you said your mother ended up being on one of the if not the last ships to leave --

01.04.12 Kurt Herman: Yes, my mother was-was-was -- had papers to come to America. But she had to go to Genova, Italy, to sail on an Italian liner. And when she got there, she found out that she was a person on the waiting list, number one person on the waiting list. Fortunately for her, someone got sick. Unfortunately for that person. She got the spot. And according to information we had, that's the last ship-ship they left out -- let-let out of there legally.

01.04.45 So she was fortunate to come here. Somehow all the luck fell in place, didn't it?

Interviewer: This is a very Philadelphia story. As far as I understand, you're the only surviving Brith Sholom child still living in Philadelphia or has been living in Philadelphia.

01.05.18 Kurt Herman: I'm the only surviving member of this 50 currently living in Philadelphia. There was another lady who lived in Philadelphia, but she died. Other than that, most of them were somewhere else. There's some in the close area. New England I

think there's a Dr. Braun, and Mr. Tepper is in New Jersey. And there's a couple other guys in the area.

01.05.42 But the others are dispersed, which we found out when we had a reunion and about 13 or 14 people came to tell their stories.

Interviewer: You must really like it here.

01.05.57 Kurt Herman: Well, my loved ones are here. I'm not so crazy about the weather, but my loved -- my family's here. So why shouldn't I be here? And I've, you know, made a name for myself here. I'm involved. And yeah, I like it. I could --

Interviewer: Did you hear of anyone moving back to Austria?

01.06.21 Kurt Herman: No, I never heard anybody going back to Austria.

Interviewer: There's apparently one guy living in Germany, but I haven't confirmed his whereabouts --

01.06.31 Kurt Herman: I have no idea.

Interviewer: Oswald Lewinter.

Kurt Herman: The name doesn't ring a bell.

Interviewer: Yeah --

Kurt Herman: And I don't know why he wants to live there, but that's his business, not mine. No, I don't recall anybody.

Interviewer: And I believe there's one gentleman living in Israel.

01.06.44 Kurt Herman: That's possible.

Interviewer: I only know of the one --

Kurt Herman: Israel -- Israel is possible. Sure. But Germany? To each his own.

[Director's comments]

Female Voice: And I have one other little vignette to tell you.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Female Voice: Kurt was speaking at one of the schools. And he had his paperwork in his folder. He showed them just to show them the document of the paper saying that he was being allowed to come with the group. My daughter -- and he handed the paper off to my daughter to put in the folder.

01.07.43 My daughter looked at the paper, the letter, and she gasped. And I looked at her. I said, "What are you gasping for?" As I mentioned, we're married 57 years May --

Kurt Herman: Yeah, that's a good one. I'm -- she should listen to this.

Female Voice: We were married May 10th, the time -- the date on the paper stating that he was coming to this country to be taken with the group was -- was dated May 10th. Now that was bashert. That of 300 and so many days, we -- we were married on the day.

01.08.18 Kurt Herman: 365.

[Director's comments]

[End of recorded material]