

TRANSCRIPTS OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR INTERVIEWS (Page 8)

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Gunther Siegfried Aron Recollections

Jastrow was a small, old market town surrounded by several villages. Farmers would drive in to sell their fresh eggs and fresh butter, live chickens, and in the fall, apples and pears by the sackful as well as potatoes by the wagonload. They and their wives would drive in on Tuesdays or Fridays, the designated market days, and park their horse-drawn wagons on a wide street running through the center of town. That is where my father had his dry goods store and that is where I was born. Berliner Strasse 1.

The house belonged to my mother, the business to my father. It was a dowry arrangement, Grandfather Joseph Neuman did not seem to have trusted my father, "a city slicker" from Berlin. Grandfather had made his money in America's Wild West trading with Indians and supplying gold miners during the 1840's (he was born in 1821). Mother told stories of his being taken captive by Indians. Eventually, he returned to Thorn in what was then Germany, where he assumed the no doubt well-deserved life of a rentier. He died in Thorn around 1906 and is buried there in a family plot surrounded by a cast iron fence. I remember it well from one of the annual journeys Mother would make for arranging for the maintenance of the graves. This gives a suggestion of my mother's background.

Regarding my father's background, he was born at Lauenburg in 1878 to Emil and Rosa Aron nee Michaelis who operated a small dry goods store. There were three other children: Onkel Arnold, Onkel Leo and Tante Selma. Onkel Leo became a grain dealer in Ruegenwalde, a town on the Baltic Sea. Onkel Arnold seems to have pretty much disappeared until my brother Erwin ran into him in a concentration camp.

And then there was Tante Selma. She and her widowed mother had moved to Jastrow in around 1915 after having sold their business for 11 thousand Thaler and used the proceeds to make a Kriegsanleihe (buy War Bonds).

My mother's mother, Minna Neuman (nee Dunn) was also now living in Jastrow. She, like many other Germans had fled after Thorn had become Polish. She had sold her property for a pittance and to add insult to injury, was soon to be paid off in worthless money during the soon to follow inflation. For as long as I can remember, "Grandmother Thorn", as we called her lived in a one room flat around the corner from us. She died there at the age of 75 shortly after Hitler came to power. There were two other relatives living in Jastrow. They were Gerda and Joseph Neumann, the children of my Mother's only full brother Siegfried although, unbeknown to me, Mother had had a half brother who was an apothecary living in Koenigsberg. Siegfried, for whom I was named, was killed in the First World War. Gerda eventually married an American engineer by the name of Levy and was consequently able to save her brother, Joseph and her mother, Dorah. This then constitutes my extended family in my hometown.

My immediate family consisted of my father, Alwin Aron, born in 1878 at Lauenburg and my mother, Amalie born in 1888 at Thorn. All of us children were born at home. My brother, Erwin in 1909 and my sisters Ruth in 1911, Edith in 1913, Lissy in 1920 and me, in 1923.

During World War I, Ruth unfortunately developed polio and would never walk again despite Mother's frantic and persistent efforts. She immediately took Ruth to the eminent professor Sauerbruch in Berlin who, of course, could not help her. In subsequent years Mother took Ruth for operations at the prominent clinics in Danzig, Gottingen and Rotterdam.. Ruth and my parents, as well as Tante Selma perished in the Holocaust.

Tante Selma was a lovely person. I often think of her fondly and of the delicious fish she would prepare on occasion.

I never knew Erwin well. In my youth, he was the mysterious person who would show up every now and then during school breaks from a private school at Schneidemuhl and, later, in between terms of the University of Breslau where he was studying chemistry. He later immigrated to the United States with wife, Lydia whom he had met and married in Breslau and their small son, Bernard. Irwin died in New Jersey in 1988 at the age of 79.

My sister Lissy has her own story to tell but she won't, except for isolated and, in retrospect, sometimes amusing incidents. She was on her way to England where she had secured a position as a domestic when the start of the war left her stranded in Holland. When the German army overran Holland, Lissy - aided by the underground - went into hiding at one point, and remained in hiding until the end of the war. Jews in Holland had been required for some time to wear the yellow Star of David and, as she tells it, when the order came for Jews to report to designated places, she removed the permanently attached star from her sleeve, and loosely tacked it back on. She bought the ticket for the ordered destination and, also one for a station in-between.

At the appointed hour, she boarded the crowded train. When it made its stop at the in-between station, she quickly tore off the star, got off the train, handed the correct ticket to the ticket agent at the gate - as was required - and was never to be heard of or seen again by the Germans.....well, perhaps not quite.

There are two encounters especially, she sometimes recounts. On those occasions the expression on her face and the sound of her voice betray the anxiety she had felt at those terrifying moments almost sixty years earlier. At the same time a gleeful expression would creep over her face joined by an uncomfortable laughter evincing perhaps also a little pride in her cunning, for as she was telling the stories, she already knew their outcome:

On one occasion, perhaps six months before the war in Europe ended, Lissy was alone at an isolated country home owned by a Dutch woman who was hiding her at the risk of her own life. The "underground" had promulgated the information that the Germans were still searching for students and Jews. On that day, Lissy suddenly noticed a German soldier approaching the house.

With the instinct of a longtime fugitive, she quickly put a bandana around her head, grabbed a broom all the while thinking, "what language shall I speak? German would give me away, my broken Dutch would give me away...." But, when moments later, the terrifying knock came at the door, nineteen-year-old Lissy was ready. In broken German, she asked the young soldier standing before her, "What can I do for you?" all the while wearing a friendly smile. "Are there any Jews or students in this house?" he asked. "No", she replied, "there is just me".

At that, the soldier returned her smile and turned away, no doubt pleased at not having had to face the seemingly all pervasive hostility that the long years of oppression in Holland had brought on.

A second incident occurred some time later which appears to have left a profound imprint on my sister and potentially could have cost her life as well as that of the heroic Dutch lady. The two of them were at this same lonely country home where, by now, the incessant thunder of American gunfire could be heard in the distance. Suddenly, a very drunken German major and his aide appeared. "We shall protect you!" the major blustered.

A little while later, as they were leaving, and the major out of earshot, the aide turned to Lissy and said, "Euch ist es schlimm gegangen aber jetzt kriegen wirs" ("You have had hard times, but now it's our turn").

Lissy now lives with Lou Adler, her husband of many years, near their son Jeffery, his wife Phyllis and daughters Emmy and Rachel, in Denver, Colorado.

The last time I saw my sister Edith in Germany, was on the platform of the Anhalter Bahnhof in 1938. She and her husband, Herbert Haase, and their 2 year old son Wolfgang (later changed to William), were fleeing to Shanghai, China. Mother had come up from Jastrow, which was about 150 miles away to say goodbye. The conversation centered on the recent events that had precipitated this hasty departure.

It appears that, in the general round up of Jewish men during Kristallnacht Herbert had found himself in a concentration camp standing in line next to his brother Sigi. The commandant had ordered the assembly to make an announcement. "Those of you who are due to emigrate within the next few weeks step forward". Herbert grabbed his brother's hand and dragged him that critical step forward. This single step forward turned out to be their and their family's lifesaver.

So far so good. The trouble was, that Herbert had lied. Despite the fact that he had a sound affidavit to emigrate to the U.S., his quota number was so high that he would have had to wait for many years and, Sigi had nothing at all!

The perplexing situation that faced Herbert and his brother was, there was no country in the entire world that admitted the Jewish refugees - never mind how desperate their situation might be except Shanghai and, in Shanghai there was no way to make a living.

All countries seem to have operated under their standard emigration procedures, admitting only regular immigrants. In the United States, for example, the requirements were flawless, Strong affidavits from sponsors in the U.S. guaranteeing the maintenance of the prospective immigrant were needed, plus, there was a strict quota system. So, it was Shanghai for the Haases.

The city of Shanghai would eventually admit 25,000 refugees - in contrast to the country of Brazil admitting 25,000 regular Jewish immigrants, 9,000 were admitted by the entire continent of Australia, 8,000 into the country of Canada, and India admitted none at all. These are examples demonstrating the degree of compassion and help that we Jews could count on from the civilized world.

From what I heard, the life in Shanghai was very hard for most refugees. The climate was awful, sanitary conditions often a disaster, at least in the eyes of civilized Europeans, and there was this intractable problem of how to make a living. Herbert had established a cigarette business - buying cartons of cigarettes from arriving refugees who needed cash and then selling those cigarettes singly, The modest income garnered from this together with an allowance from our cousin in America, Selma Melvoin and her generous husband, Charles, afforded the Haases a more bearable life especially as their good friend, Dr. Dittner, took care of their medical needs.

After these difficult times in Shanghai, Herbert, Edith and young William settled in Chicago where William still lives with his wife, Joan, and near their married children, Linda Cohn and David Haase.

Edith and Herbert lived to a ripe old age, speaking English with a pronounced accent and loving their wiener wuerstchen and potato salad to the end.

Today is the first day of November, 1999. My wife, Geri and I have lived in Santa Fe, proper for more than twelve years. Previously, we had lived for about twenty years in a small village

nearby in an old schoolhouse we had acquired in 1968. The four-room adobe-type structure was located in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo mountains about fifteen miles southeast of Santa Fe. A classroom at one end of the building had a separate entrance and I made that into a studio apartment to rent in order to supplement our income. One classroom became my studio and an eight feet wide, forty-foot long hallway served as a display/storage area for my sculpture. We made the remaining part of the building into our home. There we lived modestly but comfortably for almost twenty years until ever increasing shaking of my hands made welding for me first difficult, and finally impossible. As I relied heavily on welding in my work, this really spelled disaster.

Also, (unbeknown to Geri) I had experienced the first hints of some eventual heart trouble.. For those reasons, combined with financial considerations and my lessening ability to maintain, largely by myself, an isolated home in the mountains, with a private water system, private sewer system and a steam heating system as well as wall furnaces - all of which needed attending to, it was time to move.

We sold the old school house we had partially built with our own hands and hearts, and relocated to our present compact townhouse in the capitol of The Land of Enchantment - Santa Fe.

Now, I intermittently make jewelry using silver and turquoise. Jewelry making is not new to me. In fact, that is how I met Geri. The year was 1953. It was my first time as an exhibitor at Chicago's Old Town Art Fair where I was to show my work for the next twenty years - first jewelry, and then sculpture and Hanukkah Menorahs.

Geri's cousin had recently opened a small gift shop in one of Chicago's suburbs and the two of them had come to the fair to look for some jewelry for the shop. That is how we met and became friends. We were married three years later. By that time I was living in the back of a "store front studio" on the near north side of Chicago. After our marriage, we continued to live there for a time where, at night, we could hear Fred Comacho with his guitar serenading his customers. The patio of his restaurant, the Azteca, was only a few yards away behind a brick wall.

Unfortunately, the landlord would not give us a lease to the store, and Geri, my anvil, as well as my acetylene bottles were demanding stability. And so we were moving, but Chicago's Near North Side was to remain our home until, in 1973, we moved to New Mexico to the old school house, which we had acquired five years earlier.

My mother would have loved my way of life here in New Mexico since, in a way, it resembled the sojourn in America of her greatly adored father more than a century earlier. It seemed fate had chosen me to fulfill her dream. Yet, how different it might have turned out for me had it not been for the Nazis coming to power in 1933, at the height of the depression. I was ten years old at the time. Father was in financial trouble: the goods in the store had lost much of their value, customers defaulted on their debt - especially farmers whom father had the custom of carrying until harvest time. After the Nazis took over, gentiles did not have to honor their debts to Jews. Father attempted to collect through the courts in a couple of egregious cases but soon learned his lesson.

From now on, a Jew simply could not win against a gentile in a German court, never mind what the circumstances might be. The Nazi machine had corrupted the courts. German Jews lost their court cases, the German people lost their courts. The Nazi's attack on German institutions and culture had begun. Soon the Reichstag would burn and with it German democracy. Soon the books would burn and with them, the Universities. And later, when at the Universities, being a good Nazi was given preference over who is an outstanding scholar, nobody cared any more.

And so the once mighty German Theater of Max Reinhard went. The once mighty Bauhaus was in shambles, most of its eminent instructors had fled - some to America where they started design schools of their own or headed departments at prestigious American

universities. Modern painters fled or were not allowed to work.

By the time Germany mourned the death of Hindenburg, its president and victor of the battle of Tannenberg, it was all over. But, we didn't know it then.

Father was more preoccupied with meeting his obligations, and the Brownshirt outside who was preventing customers from entering the store did not help matters.

Empty stores don't need sales personal. Soon, Mr. Sochalski was gone followed by Mitzi Brown, Erna Lau, and Erna Runo. Only Lieschen, the apprentice stayed for a few more years until my parents sold the house and business and moved into a flat. I believe that almost the entire proceeds went to clear up father's debts. But, by that time, I was living in Berlin.

After the transfer of power in 1933, it did not take very long until father's store was completely devoid of customers. Instead, I would occasionally see some other Jewish gentlemen talking to father. As may be expected, their subject was invariably politics.

There were two camps. There were the optimists, "Er wird den Winter nicht uberstehen" (he is not going to survive the winter), and the pessimists "Ich sehe schwarz" (I foresee a bleak future). Father was the author of these prophetic lines, early on. He was ready to emigrate right HERE AND NOW!

Mother's reaction to this extraordinary notion was, "Wir muessen doch erst die Kinder erziehen" (But first we have to educate the children). But by 1937, even Mother had come to the conclusion that these days a suitable education meant Learning a Trade and not going to University. Consequently, she had managed to make arrangements for me to attend a newly constituted trade school in Berlin sponsored by the Reichsvertretung.

During my two year training at the school, I lived at a hostel. Berlin, Rosenthaler Strasse 26 was the location of the hostel the Reichsvertretung had established for Jewish boys from the "hinterland" who attended either the ORT school or Holzmarkt Strasse School. 26 Rosenthaler Strasse was also the address of the Wertheim department store. In fact, the Wohnheim, which is what the hostel was called, occupied two apartments located on the second and third floors of an annex at the end of the building and faced the confluence of Rosenthaler, Gormann, Gibbs and Weinmeister Strassen. The Weinmeister Klause was located at this intersection. This tavern was very busy, especially on Friday evenings and helped, no doubt, to complete the education of a bunch of recent Bar Mitzvah boys from the countryside. So did the adjacent streets for that matter.

But living at the hostel was also an education, though of a different sort. The Wohnheim was headed by Herr Schoenfeld and his wife. Their living quarters were on the second floor, adjacent to the kitchen. Mr. Schoenfeld was a corpulent gentleman of medium height. He had a jolly disposition but he brooked no nonsense.

I believe he did the cooking for approximately forty boys. Eva, a young woman also from the hinterlands, assisted him for a while. She had her own room next to that of the Schoenfeld's. In addition, there was Mr. Lipska, the head counselor, who had two young assistants that came and went. I suspect emigration had a hand in the turnover.

The eating facilities on the second floor served also as common rooms. On the third floor, we boys slept in triple-tiered bunk beds - nine boys to a room. My daily routine was to get up, wash up in the washroom at the end of the hall, past the two toilets and two showers. Then down the stairs for a quick bite to eat and then off - along the Weinmeister, Muenz, Memhard Strasse, across the Alexander Platz, along the Alexander Strasse to the Holzmarkt Strasse 55 where the school was located. Time of arrival: two minutes to seven, hopefully, and, after an eight-hour school day, directly back home and supper. I believe we had to be in bed at eight o'clock and lights out by eight-thirty.

The uncertain conditions of the time seriously impacted on our daily routine to the extent that Mr. Schoenfeld, or someone, needed to know where we could be reached at all times. Even on weekends, to get a pass, we needed to fill out a slip telling where we intended to go and where we could be reached.

This last provision was to play an important, perhaps critical roll on the day many of us abruptly left Berlin for England.

THE SCHOOL

The purpose of the trade school was to prepare us, sons of merchants and professionals, for an uncertain future and make easier, as far as possible, our survival in any foreign land. And it worked!

These are the instructors as I remember them after more than sixty years:

Herr Ledermann was a short man, balding with reddish blond hair, of what had remained, and buck teeth. He had the pale blue gray eyes one associates with his hair color and complexion. He may have been in his early fifties in 1937. I retained the impression that he had been a bachelor. Professionally, he had been an engineer with the prestigious firm of Ludwig Loewe, a precision machine manufacturer. I believe Mr. Ledermann had been with that firm for a great many years - perhaps thirty, when they kicked him out. He was now reduced to attempting to teach a bunch of unruly teenagers the rudiments of technical drawing, basic math - particularly trigonometry and simple equations and, some geometry. He tried, in addition, to demystify the arcane workings of the various machines upstairs and the acetylene generator in the adjacent welding room. He was teaching every Friday in what doubled as dining and classroom.

This room accommodated simultaneously, all students, perhaps 50. This room, together with the already mentioned welding installation, wash up facility and material storage area constituted the lower floor of our two-floor school.

Meister Schoenfeld (not related to the hostelmater) spoke with the dialect of someone that had been born and raised in Upper Selesia. He had lost part of one leg in a mine accident. Consequently he walked with a limp and used a cane. Other conspicuous features were a handsome mustache and a thinning hairline. He was of medium height and medium build, perhaps forty years of age with a young redheaded wife and two small children. The Schoenfelds lived just around the corner and every day the older boy or the mother or, all of them would bring the Meister's lunch. They were ostensibly a harmonious family. I remember the Meister fondly. He was a very decent and compassionate man who put up with a lot from us boys. Not that he did not have an occasional flare-up of temper - for good reason, no doubt.

Seeing it now, we were a motley crew of difficult to manage teenagers. Some had a limited talent, others did not want to be there at all with a consequent lack of applying themselves and, of course, we had our share of "Berlingrossschnauzen and witzbolds". (big mouths and jokers) I remember - it may have been the very day I started at the school, I had been given the task of straightening some angle iron on a thick cast-iron table for that purpose, when Salo Doyle came over to me and took my hammer. "Roll the hammer like this", he said, and made an exaggerated circular motion hitting a piece of angle iron. This I did, and a few moments later Salo had sidled up to the Meister, who had been near by, and said something to him that made the Meister look over to me approvingly and commented, "That boy should work out well!". I was later told that what I had done was an exaggerated way the meister worked.

But Meister Schoenfeld's job also had its gratifying aspects. I think he knew in his heart that

many of us would later put to good use the skills he and the other instructors were teaching us. In fact he did not have long to wait for confirmation.

In 1938, the German government rounded up all Jews it had classified as being Polish and then proceeded to push them over the border back into Poland. A student by the name of Walter Storozum was among them. A few weeks later as all of us students were lined up to get ready for our morning calisthenics, the Meister appeared with a paper in his hand. It was a letter from Walter. In it Walter explained that he, together with his entire family, had been forced into Poland that fateful day. He further explained that he had been able to obtain a job as a welder and was now supporting his entire family. Walter was then sixteen years of age. At this date, in 1999, Walter lives in the United States.

Mr. Grohmann was tall, twenty-eight years old and proud. And he had a right to be; he was a tool and die maker, which is a very skilled trade, indeed, as I was to find out later. His contribution in our training was the emphasis on precision bench work, that is to say, accurate measuring, filing, drilling and layout. In addition, he instructed us in the use of various machines - the lathe, milling machine, shaper, etc. Also, it was he who would procure the needed materials from a scrap yard not too far away. I believe he was from Berlin.

Mr. Meirowitch was a small man, perhaps in his late thirties. He was unassuming. I remember him for his instruction in operating the lathe. He was also from Berlin, I believe.

Mr. Mader was of small stature, perhaps in his mid-thirties. His specialty was welding and he was magnificent at it. I remember him to be admirably patient with those of us who did not catch on easily, but his obvious characteristics were his imperturbability and quietness. I never heard him utter a harsh word to anyone. Add to this, an ever-present smile and an ever-present cigarette, and that's how I remember Mr. Mader. Mr. Mader was not Jewish.

The original school plan called for a three-year training period but after only two years had elapsed, I took the opportunity that I was offered, to transfer to ORT. Berlin ORT was then intended to serve as a vehicle to escape from Germany in addition to its original basic purpose. That was in the late spring of 1939. From that time on, until our sudden departure a few months later, I, like the other ORT boys who lived at the hostel took the S. Bahn (the elevated) to Siemens Strasse where ORT had its training facilities.

I joined the "Feinmechaniker" (precision mechanic) department headed by Meister Adler who was assisted by Max Abraham, "Maschinenbauer" (one who makes and repairs precision machines). The training program at ORT appeared to me to be about the same as that of the other school. I do not recall any noteworthy occurrences until that eventful and final day in Germany more than sixty years ago.

That Saturday, or Sunday - I don't remember which - I had filled out the usual questionnaire indicating where I could be reached and went to visit Tante Eva and Onkel Otto. While there, the word came to hurry back to the hostel where, I was met by the feverish activity of boys quickly packing their suitcases. I was told we were to assemble at the school, and that we were leaving for England.

I don't remember if we actually left that evening or the next, but I do recall that I, like other boys who did not live in Berlin with their parents, had no money to pay for the trip to England. Somehow though, Mr. Simon, the school's director, had managed to get the necessary funds together on extraordinarily short notice. At any rate, no one was left behind. The first transport was on its way!

About a hundred of us boys and a half dozen instructors made our way to the Charlottenburg Terminus where, that evening, we boarded an already crowded train bound for Cologne. There was standing room only. I was standing next to soldiers in uniform who were probably reporting for duty. War was in the air. Day had turned into night when we arrived in Cologne, which is where we had to wait for a Dutch train. Cologne was also the place from where I

mailed the postcard home saying goodbye. It was a postcard scribbled while standing on the train.

After a while, the train that was to take us to Holland arrived, stopping at the border where there were a few tense minutes as custom inspectors made their way through the train. In the end, everything was ok and slowly we began moving again.....and, in a minute or two, crossed the border into Holland. We were free!

I spent the next 8 years living in the north of England. During the war I worked as a toolmaker in a small toolroom which supplied jigs, dies, and fixtures to munitions and aircraft factories. Towards the end of December 1947 I boarded the Queen Elizabeth bound for the United States where my brother and two sisters were now living. The United States has been my home ever since.
