

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HANS HARTENSTEIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Gerry Schneeberg

Date: January 15, 1989

© 1998

Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

HH - Hans Hartenstein [interviewee]

GS - Gerry Schneeberg [interviewer]

Date: January 15 1989

Tape one, side one:

GS: Can you please tell me when you were born, where, and a little about your family?

HH: Okay, I was born in Vienna, the capital of Austria, on January 27, 1923. My parents are both Viennese born. They married at a rather young age, my father having just gotten out of World War I where he had fought on both the Russian and Italian front. My mother was 20 when she was married, my father was 24. They both came from middle class Jewish Viennese backgrounds. My father entered his own father's printing business and worked with his brother and his father for a number of years and then decided to branch out on his own and established a successful printing business. My mother helped him in the business for a while. I am an only child. I attended a *Volksschule* in Vienna, which is the equivalent of our American grade school, and then entered *Gymnasium* at the age of 10. There were two avenues of schooling available to Viennese children. Those who had higher academic aspirations went to a *Gymnasium* or *Realgymnasium*, or *Realschule*, depending on whether their bent was more toward a scientific, technical or humanistic career or, if they had no intention of pursuing higher education, went to a *Bürgerschule*, which ended at age 14, after which time they were able to obtain a job. I went to a *Gymnasium* which emphasized a humanistic type of education, such as learning Greek, Latin, and of course History, German, etc. I attended *Gymnasium* for the first four years, after which time I was forced to leave *Gymnasium* because of the *Anschluss* which occurred on March 10 and March 11, 1938. After two days of the Hitler occupation, Jewish pupils were expelled from schools such as *Gymnasium* and were all herded together into all Jewish schools, which they were able to attend for a number of months and then were disbanded.

GS: I'm interested in knowing a little more about your life in the period before the *Anschluss*, before Nazi victories in Europe. Did you personally, or did your parents, ever experience any antisemitism that you recall?

HH: Austria was ruled during the '30s by a so-called Christian Socialist Party, headed by Dollfuss, who was assassinated in 1935 by Nazis, and thereafter by his successor named Kurt von Schuschnigg. It was a clerical regime. There was anti-Semitism, although not on an official level. There was antisemitism as far as promotions in government service. There was a subtle antisemitism as far as the professions, admission to medical schools, etc. But it was not a government-

tolerated antisemitism or governmental sponsored anti-Semitism. And I, as a pupil in a *Gymnasium*, experienced some. On a personal level I experienced some antisemitism from teachers, and certainly from some schoolmates, but not on an official level.

GS: I know you were very young, but do you have any recollection of how your family reacted to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany and the change that implied?

HH: Although my family, especially my father, I think, were very, very sophisticated politically—avid newspaper readers, magazine readers, and meetings attenders—I think there was somewhat of a failure to realize that what happened in Germany starting in 1933 could happen in Austria, which was an independent country as you know, until 1938 and that something similar could happen, despite their intellectual knowledge and understanding of the persecution of Jews in Germany. I remember a number of times my parents speaking about the Nuremberg Laws and the persecution of Jews in Germany. I remember my parents giving money to German Jewish refugees who had fled to Vienna penniless, who needed support. Despite all these warnings and misgivings, I think many native-born Viennese felt that this could not happen here, that, after all, we are native born. We're not refugees from Eastern Europe, Poland, etc. We are Austrians, my father always felt; he was decorated during WWI—he was gassed on the Italian Front. He fought for the Austro-Hungarian Empire's army. They felt that they would be not affected by even a more antisemitic government. Little did they know what actually would happen in Austria.

GS: In the period before the *Anschluss*, did you or your parents belong to any Jewish organization or a synagogue in Vienna?

HH: I and my parents belonged to a synagogue. They were not avid attenders, or attendees, I should say. I was Bar Mitzvahed. I studied with a rabbi who was hired by my parents and who came to my house several times a week for a number of months before my Bar Mitzvah. I was taught the *Torah* and the *Haftorah* and how to lay *tefillin*. However, shortly after my Bar Mitzvah, I did not continue to lay *tefillin*. And I don't have any strong memories of a strong religious Jewish identification on the part of my parents. Certainly a strong cultural identification, but not a strong religious one.

GS: Was there a membership in or interest in any non-religious, any secular Jewish organizations?

HH: Before Hitler came, I was not involved in any, either religious or sectarian Jewish organizations. After Hitler came, I became intensely interested in Zionism and joined the Hashomer Hatzair. As a matter of fact, in the early days of the Hitler annexation of Austria, they allowed Jewish children to attend a

*hakhsharah*¹, which consisted of a country estate which had been donated by, I believe, a Jewish family, a few hours' drive from Vienna where a preparatory camp was conducted, *hakhsharah*, in other words, for those who had expressed the desire to emigrate to what was then Palestine.

GS: Was this in 1938? After the *Anschluss*...

HH: Yes.

GS: And after you were forced to leave the *Gymnasium*?

HH: That's correct.

GS: Yes. Besides your father, were there any other men in the family who had taken part in, who had served in the Austrian army, or any other national army?

HH: I remember, every male member of my mother's or father's family had served in the Austrian army during WWI, several becoming medium-ranked officers, a number having been wounded on the Russian front. Every male member of the family that I remember was in, had war stories to tell about WWI, yes.

GS: You told something of the experience of how your life changed after the *Anschluss*. Was the Jewish Council in Vienna of any influence in terms of your interest in Zionism, and in helping you to leave when you departed from Vienna?

HH: I don't remember any, I honestly don't recall how I became interested in the Hashomer Hatzair² group. I don't think it was in any way connected with the *Kultusgemeinde*, which was the name of the Jewish communal organization. It happened during the time when my father was in the concentration camp. He was arrested on April 13, 1938. He was in concentration camp for 13 months, so I think he was released in May of 1939, having been first in Dachau, and then in Buchenwald. It was during those days that I became interested in the Zionist movement. I had the strong intentions of emigrating to Palestine. However, because of an English visa coming through before anything was heard from Palestine (as far as, I think in those days it was called a Certificate Of Emigration), I managed to get out of Austria the last week—August, '39, just before the war broke out—to England, rather than to Palestine, because the only opportunity for getting out was the one to go to England.

GS: Before you speak further about your departure and the circumstances of your leaving, I'm curious to know, how was your family able to support themselves during the time when your father was in the concentration camp, and after he returned? I assume his business was no longer available to him.

HH: Of course the business was immediately confiscated after he was sent to the concentration camp. We, of course, had our standard of living reduced

¹*Hakhsharah* - agricultural training in preparation to immigrate to what was Palestine (Israel).

²Hashomer Hatzair – a Zionist youth organization.

immeasurably. I frankly don't know how we—my mother and I—supported ourselves. I think my grand parents, namely my mother's parents, helped us. Eventually we moved in with them after our own apartment was confiscated. We had to move in with my mother's parents, who lived in a much smaller apartment. I don't remember what other source of money we had. I think the grandparents helped and I think there must have been something which the Nazis didn't take, that my mother in some way was able to hang on to.

GS: Do you remember anything of *Kristallnacht* and your reaction to that, in November of '38?

HH: That was the time that a number of other Jewish families were made home less, and were moved in into our apartment, before we moved into my grandparents' apartment. That's the main memory I have, namely of sharing our small apartment with five or six other Jewish families. So that's what...

GS: Five or six families?

HH: Families, sharing our apartment, yes. They eventually moved out. I don't know what happened to them. And then we lost our own apartment and then moved in with, as I mentioned earlier, my grandparents.

GS: You during this time were still taking part in the Zionist activity with other young people, or had this come to an end?

HH: No, despite *Kristallnacht*, as a matter of fact I think I was on the *hakhsharah*. *Kristallnacht* was November 10, I believe, 1938. And I think the *hakhsharah* was in the spring of 1939. So this was a, we were able to continue those activities.

GS: When you were able to leave Austria, tell me where, and how you left, and the circumstances. I'm particularly anxious to know if there was anyone in Vienna who was helpful to you.

HH: I probably owe my survival to the Quakers, the Society of Friends, in Eng land, who were able to send visitor permits to both my father and to myself, which enabled us to leave. My father had to leave Vienna within 48 hours of his release from Buchenwald. He had to sign, like everybody else who was released at that time, that he was well-treated and would not make any derogatory statements about Germany and would leave the country within 48 hours. I was able to get out of Vienna with what appeared to be the last train from the continent. My mother had to stay behind, because she did not have any emigration papers at the time. I did have my English visitor's permit, which was arranged as I mentioned through the Society of Friends.

GS: Do you remember how, or were you aware of how the contact was made with the British Friends' group?

HH: I had a very dear, close friend in Vienna, a young, a physician named Dr. Herbert Bauer, who had escaped Austria a few months before I did, who had

contacts in England with the Society of Friends, who then in turn helped my father and me to get out.

GS: While you were still in Vienna, did you have any contact—outside of this one friend who had gone to England—with people outside the country? And were you aware of what was happening to Jews elsewhere in Europe?

HH: I was probably the last one among my circle of friends to leave, and one of the last ones of the surviving people in my family, my mother's and father's side, to escape. I used to get mail from friends and relatives who had left before I did and so that we were informed by them about things happening abroad. At that time the mail from abroad apparently wasn't censored. Also we were avid shortwave radio listeners although this was of course *Verboten*. And I have many memories of listening to Radio Strasburg, Radio Moscow and Radio Hilversum's German broadcasts, as well as the BBC on our radio set, which we kept in a room away from walls at a very low volume. And I have memories of having a blanket around the radio set so that no sound would be heard except to those sitting very close to the set. These foreign broadcasts would give us information totally unavailable to Austrians or Germans. So we had some information coming through letters from other people who'd left earlier, as well as through radio broadcasts from other countries.

GS: Did you ever have any contact with anyone in a resistance movement, or were you aware of any resistance activity?

HH: No. I did not. The Austrians were not opposed to the Hitler takeover. I think they welcomed him with open arms. And it's true in retrospect that there were some who were opposed to the Hitler regime in Austria. But in the time before I left Austria, I did not meet any resisters.

GS: Can you describe what life was like for you when you were in England, and separated from your family? I'm anxious to know if you were able to maintain contact with your family, with your mother or other family members in Vienna, and what was your daily life like during the period in England?

HH: I lived in a small English town, about an hour-and-a-half or two railroad trip south of London, in a county called Sussex. The name of the town was Burgess Hill. My father and I lived together in a very tiny room which was given to us in the house of an elderly English single lady who was very lovely to us. However, it was not exactly the easiest time of our lives, my father having just been through a harrowing experience in the concentration camps, and I being a young adolescent boy of 16-and-a-half or 17, whose mother was still in Vienna. We had no idea whether she was going to get out or not. War had broken out in September of '39. We had almost no communication from her. We finally learned that she was able to leave Vienna in January, 1940, directly for the United States via Italy. I was not allowed to work. The permit that helped me emigrate to England was a visitor's

permit, which excluded any remunerative work. We did not have enough money, of course, for me to attend any formal school, but the English people who helped us escape and who looked after us in England were extremely kind and thoughtful and gave father and me English lessons. And I was able to work in a nursery—not the kind for children, but the kind to grow and take care of plants and flowers—and work there every day. I was able to have a few weekends off, was able to save tips which they gave me in the nursery. But I had saved up enough to make a couple of trips to London.

GS: Did you have any contact with other Jews, either British Jews or Jews like yourself who had fled from the continent?

HH: I had no contact at all with any English Jews. I think there were no Jews living in that little town which we lived in. I did have contact with a few friends who had escaped Austria who were living in London, as well as an uncle of mine. So I did have some contact with Viennese. They were infrequent, because we could not travel often and we could not afford to travel, but we did see, and correspond with them rather frequently.

GS: Were you able to correspond with your mother, in Vienna?

HH: I remember a few letters from her to England, but then they stopped coming, and we heard indirectly from American relatives that she was okay, because she was able to write to America, obviously, because America did not enter the war until 1941.

GS: During the period that you were in England, and when you were still in Vienna under the Nazi rule, did you ever feel strengthened in your trials by any ideology—Zionism you have mentioned—by any religious faith, or did you live with the hope of a speedy Allied victory?

HH: I don't think I ever had any strong religious feelings, which would help me to look forward to salvation. While still in Vienna the idea of working in a *kibbutz* in Palestine along socialist lines, which the Hashomer Hatzair represented, was very appealing. After escaping to England, I was very grateful to get out, but I do not feel that any spiritual type of help was either forthcoming or wanted.

GS: Can you describe your coming to the United States? Were you helped by the Society of Friends in England to come to the United States, once you obtained your visa?

HH: No, my father and I were able to come to the United States because relatives of my mother's, living in Milwaukee, who had emigrated to the United States many years ago, sent us affidavits which were their guarantees of our not becoming wards of the public; not going on welfare; that they would support us in case we couldn't support our selves, which was the way in those days that immigrants were able to come to the United States.

GS: Did you have money that you had earned through your limited work, that was sufficient for your passage?

HH: The passage was paid for us by our American relatives.

GS: Once here, you continued your high school level education in Milwaukee. And this was during the period when news was first known about the killing of Jews in camps. When you first heard new of Jews being murdered in mass numbers, do you remember your reaction? Were you able to accept, did you believe these reports?

HH: I think I believed them. My father almost never spoke about his 13 months in Dachau and Buchenwald. I do remember his mentioning that there were some, a number of his friends and fellow inmates did not make it back. He never spoke of mass killings. Certainly there were no gas chambers, in '38, '39 when he was there, as there were later on in the extermination camps in Poland. I certainly had no doubt in my mind that these reports as they came out in the early '40s were unfortunately true. I never had any reason to doubt that these were not true, especially in view of the fact that a few glimpses of my father's experiences led me to believe that Nazi cruelty would eventually stop at nothing.

GS: You said he rarely spoke of this. Do you feel it was too painful an experience for him to relate? Or do feel he was trying to protect you as a young man?

HH: I think both. Initially, I think, seeing that I was still a very impressionable teenager after he came out, he possibly wanted to spare me the horrors of what he went through. I think later on as I became an adult and could have perhaps in some way helped him get over it, he probably had developed enough power of repression, not to want to dig up old wounds.

GS: During the period of 1942 to '45, when you were in high school, and I guess beginning college...

HH: I finished high school in Milwaukee in 1941.

GS: '41. All right, so then these would be your college years, '42 to '45. Was there any contact between you and your parents and family members still in Europe?

HH: There was no contact, because it wasn't possible. This was the height of the war years. And there was no way of communicating with anybody in occupied Europe.

GS: There were no messages ever received from people who had seen or knew anything about-

Tape one, side two:

GS: ...of an interview with Dr. Hans Hartenstein. After the war ended in 1945, were you made aware of the fate of family members who remained, had remained in Europe?

HH: We made many, many efforts to communicate with all the members of the family on both sides who could not escape. And we communicated with various organizations such as HIAS and the Red Cross, various other organizations, to find out more about their whereabouts and their fate. We did find out through various agencies that nobody had survived except a cousin of mine who was hidden by Dutch farmers during the war. After the end of the war, his father —my uncle, through the Red Cross, was able to find out that he was alive and was reunited with him. We have in some ways found out that certain members were deported to Theresienstadt, others to Auschwitz. We have no other details, but there are no survivors.

GS: Were you aware of any other person in Europe who had aided a Jew, such as this Dutch farmer who had helped with your cousin?

HH: I should have mentioned that one cousin of my mother's, who would be a second or third cousin of mine, was able to survive the war in Vienna. I don't know how he managed to do this, whether he hid somewhere or he assumed a false name and in some way was not known to be a Jew and didn't have to wear the "J". And why he wasn't deported I have no idea. He never found out. But he, he was the only other survivor in the family who managed to be alive. Now let's see, what was the question?

GS: Any awareness you had of a non-Jew...

HH: Oh.

GS: Helping a Jew survive?

HH: Not by own personal experience, of close family members, but a number of friends have had similar stories to the one that I mentioned about my cousin who was helped by the Dutch Catholic farmers.

GS: The local police, or local officials in Vienna, do you have any impression of whether any of them had ever been helpful or actively hindered the efforts of Jews to survive or to leave Vienna?

HH: I have no personal experience with the Vienna police either being helpful or harmful to Viennese Jews. I do know that some Viennese policemen were helpful to Jews. On the other hand some immediately became the most ardent Nazis and out-did the Stormtroopers in their cruelty.

GS: I appreciate very much your sharing these experiences. If there's anything else that you would want to comment about, I would welcome your doing so.

HH: Thank you very much.

GS: Thank you.