

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

RUDY KLEIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Hanna Silver

Date: April 4, 1992

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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RK - Rudy Klein [interviewee]

HS - Hanna Silver [interviewer]

Date: April 4, 1992

Tape one, side one:

HS: This is Hanna Silver for Gratz College interviewing Mr. Rudy Klein, April 4, 1992. Where were you born, Mr. Klein?

RK: In Bonn.

HS: That means in Germany, later West Germany?

RK: Yes, in the Rhineland.

HS: And when was that?

RK: I was born on July 21, 1904.

HS: Tell me about your family, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

RK: I did not know my father. I was five years old when he died. We were raised by my mother, who unfortunately died in Theresienstadt.

HS: Your mother? When was that? In 1942 or 3?

RK: Yes, in 1942. I came here and had the intention to bring my mother over here to the U.S. I married an American girl. I could become a citizen in three years. It was four years, and my mother had everything ready to come but passage, when the war started.

HS: In 1939?

RK: Yes. If the war would have started three months later, she would have gotten here.

HS: While you were living in Bonn, did you experience any antisemitism, while you were a child or as an adult?

RK: No.

HS: Not at all?

RK: No, not at all.

HS: Did you go to a regular school there?

RK: I went for three years to *Volksschule*.

HS: Elementary school

RK: Then for six years to a *Gymnasium* [high school]. When I left the *Untersecunda* [Ger: grade in high school] they told my mother that they would give me a *Stipendium* [Ger: stipend], I should study for three years.

HS: Did you belong to a synagogue or other Jewish organization?

RK: In Bonn we belonged to the synagogue.

HS: The whole family belonged to a synagogue?

RK: Only my mother and I have one brother, who will be 94 this year. And I have a sister, now 92.

HS: So you did belong to a synagogue?
RK: Yes. We belonged to a synagogue.
HS: Did you belong to any Jewish organization?
RK: Yes, I belonged to the *Kameraden* [Comrades].
HS: A sports club?
RK: Yes.
HS: Like the *Wandervogel*?
RK: Yes. I am not a religious man.
HS: But yet you had to pay the price.
RK: Well, maybe that is why I am not a religious man. But we never learned it. Our Jewish education in Bonn was a catastrophe.
HS: It was so poor?
RK: First, the rabbi asked for only two days: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Later we had a rabbi, Emil Kohn, you may know him, he was later in Berlin too. He asked for five Jewish holidays. But that was all.
HS: Was that Reform, did you belong to the Reform movement?
RK: Yes, we belonged to the Reform movement.
HS: Did any members of your family serve in the German Army?
RK: My brother, for years.
HS: In World War I?
RK: Yes.
HS: And he came back alright?
RK: Yes. He was very lucky. He developed carbuncles. They thought he was causing it himself. So they treated him with *iodic* [Ger: iodine]. And he is allergic to *iodic*. They thought he was working on it himself and they put pressure bandages on him, which made it even worse.
HS: Because it stopped his circulation?
RK: Yes. So he never got to the front.
HS: Do you remember January 1933? The reaction of your family when Hitler came to power?
RK: On the thirtieth of January 30, 1933 I was working at that time in Duisburg, and I traveled on weekends to Bonn to my mother. And I came home and I said to my mother: "A new era has begun..."
HS: How true.
RK: "... and it will be no good for us," these were my exact words.
HS: You foresaw. You were one of the few who foresaw what was to come.
RK: I tried to go to France-- oh, I lost my job in September 1933, already I was fired at the department store.
HS: So then what did you do without a job?
RK: Well, I moved in with my sister who lived in Neukoelln.

HS: In Berlin, Neukoelln¹?

RK: Yes. She and her husband worked for a department store. Hermann, something.

HS: Herman Tietz? Probably?

RK: No, Hermann. Then we were overcrowded, my mother was there, my sister's mother-in-law with my sister and her husband.

HS: You lived all in one apartment in Neukoelln?

RK: This was the worst time of my life.

HS: But it was not too bad as yet?

RK: Then I went back to Bonn.

HS: By yourself?

RK: No, with my mother. Naturally she went into a *pension* [boarding house] and I had a room. I became acquainted with-- a friend of mine introduced me to Siegburg. There was a *Einheitspreisgeschäft* [Ger: five and dime] store, I became the porter there. Until December 1935. Meanwhile the manager and the assistant manager had to flee one night. The Nazis wanted to get them.

HS: So did the Nazis take over the business?

RK: One Nazi became the headman, but he was very friendly to me.

HS: So he did not fire you right away?

RK: Oh no! Suddenly they had nobody with buying experience so from porter I became the buyer.

HS: Because they needed you, that saved your job.

RK: This lasted until November 1935.

HS: So by then the *Nuremberg Gesetze* [laws] had come out. How did they affect you?

RK: Well, they fired me. You know, in Germany they had a law: when you had no contract they had to pay you for three months salary. If you had a contract you had only one month notice.

HS: So you did not have a contract and they had to pay you?

RK: Yes. I had the nerve to take them to court.

HS: That was nerve, alright.

RK: You said it.

HS: You didn't win?

RK: I won!

HS: You did win?

RK: I won in the court in Siegburg.

HS: And they had to pay you?

¹Neukoelln / Neukölln – a section of Berlin.

RK: Yes. For three months. And I got a big applause from the people that were listening in court. That was very interesting.

HS: Was it a friendly judge? Or do you think the old laws were still intact?

RK: The old laws were still intact. Then on the 15 of April -- first I wanted to move to France.

HS: At this point you started to think what you could do to leave Germany?

RK: I started already before. The minute I lost my job I wanted to go to France. They did not let me in. I told them I want to go to the Sorbonne. I had a stamp in my German passport wherever I would apply for a visa they should not give it to me. As a matter of fact, when I left America, I wanted to see my brother.

HS: When you left for America.

RK: *Yah*. They refused to give me a transit visa. Finally a headman on the Cunard Line told them, "If you refuse to give Mr. Klein a transit visa, we will [unclear]." And I got my visa for three days and I met my brother.

HS: For the last time?

RK: Yes, at that time for the last time.

HS: And so you went to America and this was in 19...?

RK: I arrived here on May 14, 1936.

HS: And your mother was still in Germany?

RK: Yes, in Bonn.

HS: Where did you brother live at that time?

RK: My brother was working in the Saar District, so he could go to France easily.

HS: Yes, it is close to the border.

RK: The Saarlanders, when the election was held whether they wanted to go to Germany or to France, they could go to France. Since Hitler was in power, then he went to France.

HS: While you lived in Bonn, before you left, did your family have contact with non-Jews, neighbors, or socially?

RK: Plenty, plenty.

HS: So there was no antisemitism for you so you could socialize?

RK: Well, some of my classmates they go to the other side of the street not to talk to me but that was the extent of that. The strangest was, the only antisemitic incident I had in Berlin, Friedrichstrasse. A young man saw me there and said "*Jude!*" [Jew]

HS: That was before you wore the star, right?

RK: I never wore a yellow star.

HS: No. He just guessed. But this was all he said? He was not aggressive in any way?

RK: No. Then I got my visa on the 15 of April, 1936, and on May 4 I was out.

HS: Which was good. So you did not have anything to do with *Kristallnacht* and all the bad things that ...

RK: No, that was 1938.

HS: You were long gone by then. Where did you go here in America?

RK: Well, I came here in 1936. I remember in 1935 there was the World Fair in Brussels. We went there [unclear] in two cars and I wrote a letter to a cousin of my mother in New York and she agreed and gave me the address. Then as fast as I could...

HS: Did you come to Philadelphia?

RK: No, I went to New York, had a room in Manhattan.

HS: How did you support yourself?

RK: I had a few dollars and then my cousin was very generous. He was a millionaire, lived on Central Park West.

HS: He helped you to get started?

RK: Well, he gave me-- in May or in June he told me, "I am going to go fishing in Maine. You move into my apartment."

HS: For how long was that?

RK: Three months. Every morning the girl came to make my breakfast, to clean up, etc.

HS: So you lived in luxury?

RK: You said it. I started in luxury. Then I had a job that lasted only three days in a cosmetic factory, in July, 96 degrees, standing on a hot kettle...

HS: No ventilation, no fan?

RK: No air conditioning, nothing. I had also, my cousin had a friend in Savannah.

HS: In Georgia.

RK: Yes. And he owned a department store there. And he got in contact with him, and his son came to see me to interview me. I had to give up my job. After three days on the job, in those days you cannot take a day off. I had lost ten pounds in three days. Then I got a job in a department store in Brooklyn.

HS: So you did not go to Savannah?

RK: No. By that time he said "I can't make a decision, my father will be here in four weeks. He wants to talk to you." By that time. . .

HS: Four weeks was a long time for you to wait when you have nothing?

RK: My cousin said, "The best thing you did to give up that job. It was much too hard for you."

HS: You were not used to physical labor?

RK: And on top it was 96 degrees, without air conditioning in a hot weather.

HS: So you went to Brooklyn?

RK: No. I lived still -- I did not move to Brooklyn when I married.

HS: This was later, then.

RK: *Yah*, I married in '39. In '38 I met my wonderful wife. I could say, she fell for me and within five months we were married. She came to New York and lived with a colleague of hers, worked in Brooklyn in the hospital, my wife only did private duty. She brought her friend and they came to New York and we met – *veni, vidi, vici* [I came, I saw, I conquered].

HS: *Kam, sah und siegte* [Ger: I came, I saw, I conquered].

RK: We had a wonderful marriage.

HS: During this time, as long as it was possible, did you have contact with your brother or other relatives?

RK: Yes, my brother was in France.

HS: In the free part of France?

RK: No, he volunteered when war broke out for the Foreign Legion. I brought my sister with her husband over with my cousin in 1937.

HS: That was soon before it got real bad. So you had no immediate family left in Germany?

RK: My mother.

HS: She was the only one, and did not make it by three months.

RK: A cousin of mine, in other words, my mother's brother's daughter, was the last surviving doctor in Theresienstadt.

HS: She did survive?

RK: She survived. She made her mother survive with a little medication. She took her to her brother who had survived Auschwitz. And she went back, I think she got ill, she went back to Munich.

HS: To Munich? Did she live before in Munich?

RK: No.

HS: So she went from Theresienstadt to Munich.

RK: And then she committed suicide.

HS: After the war?

RK: But she had written us a letter with all the details. I must have had about 25 relatives who perished.

HS: Were they all from Germany?

RK: Yes, from Koblenz, from Cologne, on my mother's side. They all perished. On my father's side-- this may interest you-- one of my cousins went to Russia, he was a brain surgeon.

HS: So in order to escape the Nazis he went to Russia?

RK: He went to Russia. He was a brain surgeon. He still had to operate on a few Nazis before they left him out. His wife was a general practitioner. They went to Russia.

HS: Together, he and his wife?

RK: Yes, he and his wife and two children.

HS: The children too.

RK: And everything was fine until Germany attacked Russia.

HS: In '39.

RK: Then the Russians shot them.

HS: The Russians shot them?

RK: To please the Germans.

HS: To please the Germans?

RK: I don't know whether to please the Germans, I only know they were shot. And I was working here and had a wonderful marriage.

HS: Do you have any children?

RK: We adopted a boy who lived in Brussels. A cousin of my mother was his house-mother. She recommended him to us and she sent him. We brought him over here in 1956. He still lives in New York. I wanted him to get into my business but his mother-in-law at that time, she had a daughter and a son, said, "All my three children have to become teachers!" And he became a French teacher. He is very successful. But, we got apart.

HS: In other words, there is no close relationship anymore?

RK: Well, we talk to each other on the phone, he comes here sometimes.

HS: So it is not completely broken off?

RK: It was completely broken off. And after 16 years he called me and said he was now divorced.

HS: So he did not have the mother-in-law, too.

RK: I was the chief financial officer of one of the largest housing complexes in Manhattan, in the village, South West Towers [unclear]. I said, "Come to the office," we had coffee, we talked. And he said "I also want to see Yetta." And so we established our relationship again.

HS: This makes you feel better, does it not?

RK: When you are brought up in an orphanage you become very selfish. You have to fight for everything. I hear from him. He calls occasionally. He was also here to be re-married, he seems to have a very happy marriage. But it is a very loose connection.

HS: And your wife, unfortunately, is now in the nursing center here.

RK: Yes, in the worst part of it.

HS: And you are able to visit with her every day?

RK: Every day! She has dementia, you know what that is? She became a "screamer," she has to be kept in that section, it is terrible.

HS: You certainly have a lot of sadness in your life.

RK: I still have a companion with her, three years already.

HS: You couldn't leave her alone? Is that it?

RK: Well, I had her when she [unclear].

HS: Yeah. And the stroke.

RK: Then she became-- you know. Dementia either goes into Alzheimer's, thank God that is not. She talks to me.

HS: She knows you.

RK: Oh, yes, oh yes, and I can talk to her next to me. When I come in, her arms go up for an embrace. She also she had a sharp mind. I told her that I was invited to a party and that everybody called me "Uncle Rudy." I said, "I don't like it." She said "Why?" I said, "It makes me feel old." She turns around, looks up to me and said, "You are an old man." So this is my life here, I don't have to tell you anything more.

HS: Well, I thank you very much for letting us tape this interview. There is enough in it that is very interesting as part of ...

RK: I also want to tell you that I saw in 1910 the Kaiser and in 1933 Adolf Hitler in the Leipziger Strasse in Berlin.

HS: [unclear]

RK: He passed by [unclear].

HS: Again I want to thank you very much.