HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

WILLIE NOWAK

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Josey G. Fisher
Date: May 9, 1983

Holocaust Oral History Archive
Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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WN - Willie Nowak [interviewee]
JF - Josey G. Fisher [interviewer]
EN - Else Nowak [wife of interviewee]
Date: May 9, 1983

Tape one, side one:

JF: Mr. Nowak, can you tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your childhood?

WN: 1st of August, 1908, in Berlin, Germany.

JF: Can you tell me a little bit about your family and what kind of life you had?

WN: Well, my father and my mother came from Austria and when I was born, of course, we lived in Germany.

JF: Why did they come from Austria to Germany?

WN: I think my father just wanted to go to Germany because the opportunities were very good there.

JF: The economic opportunities were better.

WN: Yeah, my father had a tobacco factory in Berlin, and, of course, my mother didn't work and we had a very good life, very good family life.

JF: Your family then was fairly comfortably off?

WN: Oh Yeah.

JF: What kind of neighborhood did you live in and what kind of interaction did you have those around you?

WN: It was a mixed neighborhood. In other words Jews and Christians, very nice, decent neighborhood, good people as neighbors and that was about it.

JF: Was there any difficulty in the neighborhood, was it accepted that you were Jews?

WN: Oh yes, there were no problems at that time, no, no.

JF: So in your early years growing up you played with non-Jews and Jews alike?

WN: Oh yes, in fact my best friend was a non-Jew at that time as a school boy. We went together to school every morning, we lived in the same apartment building, and we would go together to school, the same walk to the school and back.

JF: What kind of school was this?

WN: It was, I don't know how I can say it to you here, it was high school but in was a *Gymnasium* which is something different here of course and there was a *Realgymnasium* which would be the same type of *Gymnasium* but, for example in the proper *Gymnasium* you would have Latin and Greek languages and of course the other languages, French or English. In the *Real-gymnasium*, to say it in German, at the moment, we had Latin and French and English but we didn't have Greek, that was the difference.

JF: What did that difference mean in terms of the education at the time?

WN: You just had another language, an old language like Greek, for example and Latin and we left the Greek out, we just had the Latin and the English and the French.

JF: It was more current?

WN: Yeah, I would say that.

JF: So you were in German public schools then essentially with the high schools and your lower schooling was also?

WN: No, at the time the school had what you call public school now, we had that in one building in the same school. We had three years of let's say of public school for children growing up and then we had the other classes which were the languages and all that. It's a little hard to compare from there to here.

JF: But you were in the educational system that most of the other German children were in. It was not a separate system, you were not in separate Jewish schools?

WN: No, our religious, our training of learning were actually in the same building, in the same class, everything the same, but we had a rabbi who came to the school and taught us.

JF: When was that, about what age?

WN: Let me see. I was six years old when I started school. So we had three years first. From six to nine I would say.

JF: A rabbi came to the school?

WN: To the school and he would teach us.

JF: For how many hours a week was that?

WN: We had two or three days a week.

JF: One hour two or three times a week. And in addition to that were you also members of a synagogue or in any other [unclear].

WN: My parents were members of the synagogue at that time of course.

JF: What kind of synagogue were they members of?

WN: We call it liberal, here we call it conservative.

JF: And were they very involved in the synagogue?

WN: No, not too much. In that respect my parents were not too religious. At home, yes, but...

JF: What do you mean at home, yes?

WN: Well, observing Shabbos, light candles and all that business, my parents always did that. In the beginning during Passover we would eat no bread and all that.

JF: They didn't keep kosher?

WN: No. They observed the Shabbat and the holidays.

JF: And did this include any kind of education for you in the synagogue or was your religious education mainly in the school?

WN: In the school. We strictly went to synagogue for services.

JF: Did you have training for Bar Mitzvah?

WN: Yeah, I had training for Bar Mitzvah and that was special training at home. We had a teacher come to our house and I was taught for the Bar Mitzvah.

JF: Was this an important part of the life of a Jewish child as you knew it?

WN: Definitely yes.

JF: This is something that most of the boys did?

WN: Yes, absolutely. To give you an example, the teaching that we had for the Bar Mitzvah, that was private at home by a teacher, for example, but when it came to the actual Bar Mitzvah ceremony, we were seven boys.

JF: At the same time?

WN: At the same time.

JF: In one service?

WN: In one service, one after the other.

JF: Was it that there were so many who were Bar Mitzvah at that time or that you chose?

WN: I didn't choose anything. When I came, there were seven boys, we were altogether seven boys for the actual Bar Mitzvah ceremony. It was an exception, there were usually not that many boys at the same time but it just happened with me.

JF: Your parents were involved, or your father, I guess, was involved in business with non-Jews as well. Did they also interact socially with non-Jews?

WN: Yes, we had some friends, non-Jews.

JF: In your memory was there ever any conflict for your parents at the time when they were living there?

WN: No.

JF: Was your father in the army in the first World War?

WN: No my father had one eye a little defective, in other words, he couldn't see out of one eye, so he was never in the army. Furthermore, coming from Austria at that time, he was not a German citizen first. He then became a German citizen, he was naturalized.

JF: When was that?

WN: That was, I think it was about 1909, 1910, something like that.

JF: Before the war.

WN: Yes, absolutely.

JF: But it was a physical problem.

WN: Oh yes, physical problem and furthermore, he was not a German citizen—born, so he was not called to the army at that time.

JF: So, if you were a naturalized German citizen you were not called to the army?

WN: No, not at that time.

JF: Do you remember the war and the effect it had?

WN: Very, very vaguely. I know we had some little problems with food, and we had a friend who was in the Austrian army, and he used to come to us, he was an officer and he was a Jewish friend and no, nothing otherwise.

JF: Did he report anything that you remember about his role in the army as a Jew in the Austrian army?

WN: No, no, no, the only thing that we knew was that a Jew had a hard time becoming an officer in the Germany army, but that's about all that I can remember in regards to things like that.

JF: When the war was over and Germany had been defeated, do you have any recollections of what things were like at that time, did it affect you directly in any way?

WN: No, I wouldn't say that, no. Because all those things, look, Berlin was a pretty big city, and whenever something like that would happen, it was spread out, it was not actually centralized in one section, so I cannot remember anything after the war. I saw the revolution coming, of course. People on trucks chasing out the emperor and all that.

JF: You remember seeing these trucks come into Berlin?

WN: Yes.

JF: Was it frightening?

WN: No.

JF: Did you understand what was happening?

WN: Yeah, I understood what was happening, but it wasn't frightening in that respect, no.

JF: Was your father's business or life affected in any way by the revolution?

WN: No, no.

JF: Things went on as before?

WN: Yes. Business was closed for a few days, of course, until it settled down and that was about it.

JF: Do you remember your parents talking about the revolution, whether they thought it was a good idea or not or whether they felt there would be any change for the Jews under the new regime?

WN: No, I can't even remember that too much because I was too young.

JF: And then what happened during the 20's? There were certainly a lot of changes in Germany, the financial situation was severely affected.

WN: We had inflation, which was pretty bad, of course.

JF: I guess you were in the *Gymnasium* around that time?

WN: Yeah, at that time. The only thing that I remember was that our school building, for example, was pretty much damaged by the revolution, by the fights that were going on there.

JF: In what way, by crossfire?

WN: Yeah, crossfire, and our building was pretty bad at that time.

JF: Were you ever in the building when there was firing in the street?

WN: No. We were kept at home, the schools closed at that time. When there was any danger, they closed the schools, and, no.

JF: You were a young teenager at the time?

WN: Yeah.

JF: Was there any talk among the teenagers of joining in the fighting or allying with one side or another, did you sense any kind of allegiance at that time?

WN: No, not at that time, no, not at that time. That came later, of course.

JF: Not in your early teens?

WN: No.

JF: It was like something that was happening outside you?

WN: Yeah, basically my father may have been more involved in that, of course, but I wasn't.

JF: No, but you and your friends did not feel a part of what was going on?

WN: No.

JF: You were not aware of any upset that the Kaiser had abdicated or that there would be a new...

WN: Oh Yeah, I was aware of it because I heard my parents talk about it.

JF: But the kids did not seem to feel anything, that there was danger or anything would happen to Germany at that time?

WN: No.

JF: Were you aware of any of the early moves that Hitler made in the early 20's? Was that something that was known among the group that you were in?

WN: Well, when it started, as it was almost all over Germany, we laughed about it.

JF: In what way, what did you think?

WN: We thought they were just nuts, nothing. We didn't take it serious.

JF: You knew Hitler himself existed but you didn't take him seriously?

WN: No.

JF: And his men were also laughable?

WN: Well, it happened, in fact it happened to me, when Hitler started, which was in '33, I don't know if you know the expression, they had the SA men, Brown Shirts. I was on the street and two of those SA men came by and called me a dirty Jew, and I turned around and hit one of them and then I realized what I was doing and I run away, and we had corner houses where you could go in here and come out on the other street, which I did and went up to my mother. My mother was a widow at that time, didn't say anything to her because I didn't want to frighten her, and I stayed home for about three or four days waiting if someone would ring the bell.

JF: Did they chase you?

WN: No, no one had seen me.

JF: Did the Brown Shirts that you had hit chase you?

WN: No, I was so fast, I went right into the next house out of the other and I never heard anything.

JF: You say this was in '33. This was after Hitler was already chancellor then?

WN: Yeah, just the beginning.

JF: Now, before that time, in the 20's or the late 20's, did you have any sense that this would come to pass?

WN: We heard about Nuremberg, of course, where it started, and my parents talked about it and other people, and they all laughed about it, they didn't take it serious, of course.

JF: Now you were already, by the late 20's, were out of school. You were -- this is after your *Gymnasium*?

WN: Yes, Yeah, Yeah.

JF: What were you doing at that time?

WN: I was an apprentice in a company.

JF: For what kind of work?

WN: Pharmaceutical business, and I was learning there as an apprentice.

JF: You were learning sales or you were learning pharmacy itself?

WN: Actually sales and office, at the time that's what I was learning.

JF: Was your father alive at that time, you said he had died.

WN: He died in '25.

JF: Was that expected, had he been ill or?

WN: He was ill for about four weeks. He had cancer.

JF: So when he died, were you in a position to help with the family economically or was that?

WN: No, not at that time because I was too young. I just started as an apprentice and you didn't make money at that time.

JF: What was the name of the pharmaceutical company, do you remember?

WN: Yes, I remember that: Max Kahnemann [phonetic] and then you have to write in two letters, A.G., which was incorporated, stock company.

JF: And you were in sales.

WN: No, actually I was in office work.

JF: In the office as an apprentice. During that time then in the late 20's, with the depression, did that affect you in any way and your father's death?

WN: Yes, everyday you had a different money situation. Let's say the mark was 100, $1 would be 4 marks, then it was 20, then it was 100, then it was 1,000, and it came up. Everyday they had new money. Because the money wasn't worth anything the next day.

JF: How was your family operating financially at that point? Had there been enough money from your father's company to keep you going?

WN: Yeah, we never had any problem, as far as that is concerned.

JF: In the early 30's, when so much was going on politically, were you thinking that there was any serious threat on Germany from Hitler?

WN: Mrs. Fisher, if we would have thought about that, we would have left.

JF: You really thought that Hitler would never make it?

WN: No, because as so many of us, we did not believe in that, so we never left; we should have left in '33.

JF: What about, I am sure you knew people who did leave or who talked about leaving?

WN: I have friends of my father who left, when my father was still living, in fact.

JF: In the early 20's. Did you think they were being over cautious?

WN: Yeah, partially yes, because as we all, most of us thought, well, we had our living, we had no problems, so why should we leave. We had our home, we had everything there, so why should we leave, and where should we go. So there was never any-- I had some friends who left earlier but otherwise, no.

JF: Was there any change in the non-Jewish population attitude towards you, either people you had known or other people?

WN: Other people, yes, but people that I had known, friends and so on, no, there was no change.

JF: When did you first feel the change in the non-Jewish population?

WN: Well, actually, you know the Crystal Night, of course. Well, when that started...

JF: No, we are jumping now a few years. There was nothing before *Kristallnacht*, when the Nuremberg laws came in?

WN: When the Nuremberg laws came in, yes, but I was two years in Czechoslovakia at that time.

JF: Okay, let's back up then. In '33, you told me about the incident with the brown shirts. What happened after that, maybe we can progress up until the war; you were still an apprentice at that time, or were you working?

WN: No, I was already working in the office.

JF: In this pharmaceutical company?

WN: Yes.

JF: And then what happened after that, did you notice at that point any changes in the non-Jewish population towards you, before the Nuremberg laws?

WN: No, I still had my friends and there was no change. Absolutely not. I had customers all over.

JF: Non-Jewish customers and that was not a problem?

WN: No, no problems, whatsoever.

JF: When the Nuremberg laws were instituted you said you were in Czechoslovakia. So when did you go to Czechoslovakia?

WN: I left Germany in 1936.

JF: So you were there from ‘36 to ‘38?

WN: No, I’m sorry, ‘35 I left.

JF: ‘35 to ‘37 you were in Czechoslovakia.

WN: In fact I came back to Germany in January ‘37.

JF: Why were you in Czechoslovakia? What was happening?

WN: Well, our company in Berlin was not doing very well. So the owner of the company said to me, "Willie", he was born in Czechoslovakia and he said, “I want to leave Germany and I want to go to Czechoslovakia. I have my parents there and I want to start our business”, which we had at that time, “in Czechoslovakia with our products which we had produced, and I have already connections where I can start a factory and an office and everything. Would you go with me? Do you have any money?” And I said, “Yes, I have some money left from my parents.” He said, “Would you take that money and go with me and pay for your own expenses.” I said sure. So we left together and we went to Czechoslovakia with his car and went to Prague, and there met a chemical engineer who was willing to open up a small factory with our products, manufacturing our products.

JF: Was this a Jewish person?

WN: Yeah, it was a Jew.

JF: And was the person you are talking about Jewish or non-Jewish from Berlin?

WN: No, he was not Jewish. We went to Prague and talked to this man together, he and I, and then we went to Brunn. [Brno, today] This is in, South Czechoslovakia. And that’s where this chemist had his home and his place of business, so from Prague we went together with him and started, he manufactured the products, we opened up a small office in Brunn, together he and I went, took the package you have for your beauty cream, or whatever, we took that and starting at the German border, we went with the products that we had from Germany, manufactured in Germany with the address in Berlin, and we went from one drugstore pharmacy, we went from one to the other, he on one side and I on the other side, with our German products, and we showed the people. “This is what we want to do, this is what we want to manufacture, this is the way it will look, of course, in the domestic language, and so on, and this is what we want you to do. Will you give us an order?” And they did. So we collected about a pack of this and, then we went to the manufacturer and we said, “Now here are the orders which prove that we can sell that,” and that’s how we started the company.

JF: Now, at the time you were in Czechoslovakia, things were still fairly quiet there as far as the Nazi party? Things were beginning to start.

WN: On the German border, that’s where it started.

JF: Did you feel it when you were up there?

WN: Personally, no, but you could see the German attitude, compared to the Czech attitude.

JF: When you say the German attitude, do you mean among the Czech population who were pro-German?

WN: No, along the German border there were Germans who have come from Germany and who were living there. They were called Sudeten Germans, that's along the German border, and that's how we got started, because we couldn't speak the other language, we spoke in German.

JF: So in other words you sold initially to the Sudeten Germans and they bought from you?

WN: Oh, yes. There was no problem, no question.

JF: But you sensed a change in their attitude?

WN: I heard from talking, not to us, not against us, but I heard the attitude they had compared to the Czechs.

JF: Did they know you were Jewish?

WN: The Czechs?

JF: No, the Sudeten Germans that you sold to.

WN: No, I don't think so because we came from Berlin and they never had any questions.

JF: Did you sense anything among the Czechs at all that would indicate what was going or what would happen very shortly politically?

WN: You see, Mrs. Fisher, you must understand, Czechoslovakia was actually around the borders Germans, former Germans, I would say. Then in the southern part there were the people who spoke Hungarian and Russian. This is all on the southern border, and in the heart of the actual Czechoslovakia, there were Czechs, which was only a very small section. They didn't even speak German, they spoke just Czech, or if they spoke German, they didn't want to speak it. So, therefore, everything else was mixed. The real pure Czech section was only a very little section in the heart of the country, so that's why you could do anything in certain languages, you could speak German all over, that's how we could do business and…

JF: You didn't speak Czech then?

WN: No, I never spoke Czech. So it was not hard to go with the German language and do business.

JF: Did you have any feeling that more was going to be happening in Germany as you were in Czechoslovakia hearing these reports?

WN: No, I'll tell you why I didn't know. For example, when I wrote a friend of mine who lived in Germany that I am coming back, when I made my decision I leave and go back to Germany. I sent him a letter that I will arrive. So...

JF: You said you had written a friend.

WN: I had written a friend that I want to come back. I didn't even wait for his answer, I just packed my stuff, went back to Berlin.

JF: And this was in January of '37?

WN: Yeah, and I went to the next telephone booth because he wasn't at the station. Usually when you expect someone, you go to the station and wait for the person to come out of the train, and he wasn't there, and I was looking and I couldn't find him, so I went out, and outside he was standing there waiting for me and I said, "What is this, why didn't you come to the train?" He said, "Come on, I'll tell you outside, not here." He said, "Didn't you get my letter?" I said, "No, what letter?" "Well, I wrote you not to come back, because if you come back from Czechoslovakia, they put you in a schooling camp for about six months which was like a concentration camp, and I didn't want you to go through with this."

JF: Who were they putting in the schooling camps?

WN: People who came from other countries back, like I was.

JF: Who had been in Germany before?

WN: Yeah.

[End of tape one, side one.]

Tape one, side two:

JF: This is tape one, side two of an interview with Mr. Willie Nowak. These camps were set up purely for redoctrination?

WN: Right, exactly.

JF: There was some fear that you had had other political ideas being on the outside of Germany?

WN: And, furthermore, they felt sometimes that you hadn't been there before they started, and they wanted to indoctrinate you.

JF: But this was for German citizens who were coming in? Or for anyone...

WN: For people who lived in Germany or came in, entered to Germany, they would take those people and what they would call indoctrinate them.

JF: What happened?

WN: Before I left Czechoslovakia I went to the consulate in the last city in Czechoslovakia, and I took out my German passport out and showed them and I said, "I want you to change my residence from Berlin to in Gablenz, [phonetic] (was the city in Czechoslovakia) because I am living here now and I had taken from my landlady a certificate that I am living in her apartment."

JF: Does that then mean that you gave up your German citizenship?

WN: No.

JF: It just meant that your residency was in Czechoslovakia.

WN: My residency was as a German citizen in Czechoslovakia. This is what I wanted to prove because I knew about this so-called schooling camp.

JF: You knew about this already in Czechoslovakia?

WN: Yes, I knew that and I didn't want to go in there, naturally, so I went like that, and the first thing happened after I came back that I went to the police and wanted to register as a citizen who just returned, and wanted to give him my address and everything else. So they said, "Oh no, that's not the way we do it. You came from Czechoslovakia, so you got to go to the Gestapo first, they have to check you out." And I said, "Okay." So I got a summons right away, the next day, to come to the Gestapo. So this friend of mine went with me and I said, "You wait outside, because if something happens, if you see me coming out in company with someone, we don't know each other," because I didn't want him to get in trouble. So I went into the office, and there was a typical Prussian officer sitting there with a mustache, and when I saw that I feeled already better. So he waited outside and I went in, and there was this real old Prussian official sitting there.

JF: He was not a Gestapo person?

WN: No, he was working in the office; the Gestapo was downstairs. So I said to him that I would like to have a passport, I would like to have this changed my address as German now living in Germany, with a residence not in a foreign country. And he said, "Well, you go," (I was traveling on business already, I had that arranged with a company

that I knew) and he said, "Well, you have to wait four months, three months, two months, I don't know, but you have to wait until we call you." I said: "No, I can't wait because I have work and go out and work on business." So he said, "Well, you traveled and you lived here already without being a citizen, so what difference does it make?" I said, "Now wait a minute, first of all I didn't know that I am not a citizen anymore. As you can see on my passport, I am a German citizen. This was arranged at the consulate at the Czechoslovakia border before I left. So I am a German citizen who was living in another country and, therefore, I didn't do anything wrong. Here's the passport." He said, "Well, you have to return that passport, because you are not a citizen anymore. We took your citizenship away while you were in Czechoslovakia."

JF: Why?

WN: Because I was a Jew and I left Germany, so they took the citizenship away, which I didn't know, so I said, "Let me ask you a question, how do you handle this when someone is living in another country and you take his citizenship away, don't you notify the people?" He said, "Well, we couldn't notify you because you weren't here. We didn't have the address." I said, "Well, you had the address and you wanted me now." He said, "Well, you could have read that it in the Official Employees of the Government." (That's a special paper.) I said, "Let me ask you a questions, do you read that paper?"

JF: This is only distributed to employees of the government, which you were not.

WN: No, that's right, I was not, but they thought I should know.

JF: And that was the only place that this law was written?

WN: Yes.

JF: Not in the public newspaper?

WN: No. So I said, "Do you read that paper?" And he laughed. He said, "No," I said, "Fine. Now, if you didn't read it, how am I supposed to read that?" So he laughed and I laughed, and I figured now I have won. So, he said, "I'll tell you what to do. You have to leave your passport, but you go right down to the next floor and apply for a stateless passport so that you can travel without getting in trouble."

JF: In other words, there was no way of getting back your German citizenship?

WN: No. So I said, "Okay."

JF: You were a Jew and that was it?

WN: Yeah, I said, "Okay." I do that. How can I? Then I went downstairs and I applied for a stateless citizen pass, and they said, "Okay, you have to wait a month or two months or whatever," and I said, "How am I supposed to travel if I have no document proving that I am living here?" He said, "Well, ..."; that's when I blew up, and then he said, "You should have read that in the paper," and I said, "You don't even read it." He said, "I'll tell you what. What you do is you go down and apply for that stateless passport."

JF: This would have been at Gestapo headquarters that you would have had to apply for it?

WN: Yeah, and when you do that, ask for a receipt of your application so you can't get in trouble when you are traveling, which they gave me. So if, for example, it was customary during that time when you were in a hotel and you had to leave your passport with the desk, and then when you leave, you get it back, so I said, "Well, if I have no proof that I have my passport even if it is a stateless passport, what am I supposed to do?" He said, "Okay, I give you a receipt that you have applied, which you can take with you so that you are protected in case you have any questions." And this is exactly the way it happened. Nobody bothered me, I had my proof that I had applied for a stateless passport, and when I returned to Berlin I got a notice that my passport was ready to be picked up.

JF: So you traveled in Germany working? Using this receipt?

WN: Yeah, yeah.

JF: As you were traveling, what did you notice about the changes in Germany?

WN: The first thing "Jews not Wanted" in every store and every restaurant and all over. That's the first thing, the signs, yeah.

JF: Hotels also?

WN: Oh, yeah, hotels also.

JF: What did you do?

WN: Well, I was very well known over there because I traveled for years and I knew every hotel, so there were always small hotels which did not display that particular sign, and I used to go to those hotels and stay there. And I came to one hotel which I knew before, and I went into the dining room after I had taken my room and took my clothes and refreshed myself and so on, and I came into the dining room and they had greeted me already as an old friend, and I was ordering the dinner and reading the menu and giving my order, and I looked up and behind a wardrobe stand where you put your clothes was that sign.

JF: On the wall behind the wardrobe?

WN: Yeah.

JF: So that it didn't show?

WN: That's where they put it.

JF: So legally they had put it up, but they didn't pay any attention to it.

WN: Right. So I said, "Call the owner," and it was a lady. She came out and she said, "What's the matter?" I said, "Cancel my order and cancel my room, I am leaving. She said, "What's the matter? Why?" I said, "You see this." So she took a coat and she hung it over the sign and she said, "Do you see that sign?" I said, "No." "What do you want?" This is the way they handled it. So I stayed there, naturally, and there was always a place where you could stay, of course.

JF: These were primarily people that you had known before?

WN: Most of them, because I was staying overnight in those hotels. Then I met, this is an interesting part, then I met a young man who I knew as a competitor, a salesman, a competitor from another company and he said, "Willie, how are you?" We had actually

met in a customer's place. I was waiting outside because if someone goes in, we used to wait outside for the competitor to come out and then we would go in. So he said, "Willie, when did you come back?" I said, "Just a few weeks ago." He said, "Let's talk about it, I'm finished, I'll wait for you. When you finish we will go and have a coffee." And he was, do you know the name Horst Wessel? Horst Wessel was the man who actually composed the song and he was a very good friend of that man. But we were very good together, too, and he said, he waited. When we were finished, he said, "Let's go together and have a coffee," so we went and he said, "Where are you going now?" He said, "Well I'm going this week all the way down to southern Germany." He said, "I have a car." (I didn't have a car at that time.) "How about we go together?" I said, "Now wait a minute! You are working for a competitor. They will know very soon that you and I are going together, and I am in your car, do you know what that means? You are taking a Jew in your car?" He said, "Let me worry about that. We go together."

JF: On the paper, this temporary application that you were carrying with you at this point before your passport, before the stateless passport came through, was there a J?

WN: Yeah. J printed.

JF: The J printed, a big J.

WN: Yeah, but that was all over wherever you went, stateless or German, you had the same J.

JF: So he took you in his car.

WN: So he took me in the car and we went together for three or four weeks in his car.

JF: Were you ever stopped? Questioned?

WN: No. Nothing. So, when we came back to Berlin, he said, "Well, we meet again on Monday." This was over the weekend. "We meet on Monday again and we go together again!" I said, "Look, you better check this, because you are going to get into trouble with your company and I don't want this."

JF: This is during 1937?

WN: Yes. So sure enough on Monday, he called and he said, "Willie, I am very sorry." I said, "Don't tell me, I told you this before, I don't want you to get into trouble, so forget it." And, of course, then we split up and I took the train again, that was all.

JF: Did you continue to have contact with him?

WN: Yeah, only with cards and so on. There was another incident which was interesting. When I was traveling I also set up distributors in certain areas, so I had an ad in the paper, and I interviewed them at night in a hotel to see if I can set up a local distributor for our products, and this man came to the hotel, he had applied for the distributorship, and he was a local salesman there. He had several companies that he already represented. So, we sat together and I liked him, and he also came from Berlin, and I hired him for that particular area as a distributor, and one day he came and said, "You know, this is interesting." I took him together with me to train him and to introduce him to the local

customers, so that they know that he will represent our company instead of me. So one evening we were in our hotel after we worked together and made our reports and he said, "You know, a funny thing happened." There was one drugstore that had about eight branches in that city, in other words like a chain, and he said, "You know this guy what he said to me today?" I said, "No." He said, "You know the man with whom you are working together, he's a Jew." And he, the salesman laughed, would you believe that? Now I was fast thinking, I figured, if I say something now, I pull the rug from under his feet, so I didn't say anything, I didn't say yes or no or nothing. I just didn't react to it and let it go, and I had made up my mind when I come back to Berlin and I meet him, then I will tell him. And we worked together, we continued working; everything was fine, and I left for Berlin and about two or three weeks later he called me and he said, "Willie, how are you? I am back here temporarily, how about having some coffee?" and I said, "Fine." I had made up my mind, when he walks in, and I am sitting at the table before and I am going to tell him I am a Jew, and if he don't like it, just don't sit at my table. And he came in, and I was already waiting and I said, "Before you sit down, I want you to know" and he said, "I know that." I said, "What do you mean you know that?" He said, "I've known for quite a while." I said, "How come?" There was a Jewish girl that I knew when we were young, we grew up together in the same neighborhood in Berlin and I found her by accident in a cafe house which we were sitting, this salesman and I, and she was a prostitute, a Jewish prostitute, and, of course, I didn't know that. He said to me, "You know that girl?" And I said, "Yeah. I know her from where we grew up together." He said, "Oh." So I didn't say anything. She told him that I am a Jew and I said, "You still went with me?" And he said, "Sure."

JF: This was something he knew before the trip or after?

WN: Before.

JF: Before the trip.

WN: So, he just didn't pay attention. Things like that happened. So now what else?

JF: So it sounds like there were several people that you had contact with, for whom these laws were just irrelevant.

WN: Forgive me, another thing. I had all my customers, as I told you, and a few customers, one in particular, I remember when I came back from Czechoslovakia, he said to me, "I thought you don't live anymore, I thought they killed you." I said, "Why should they kill me?" He said, "Well, you are Jewish." I said, "Well, how do you know?" He said, "I know, I know for a long time," and he said, "I also know all the people here, and they all told me that you are Jewish" and they all bought from me. So I said, "Well if that's the case, why do you buy from me?" He said, "Why not? We are doing business together and it's nobody's business with whom I do business, and I know you for years and that's all."

JF: Was there anybody among that group that you had known before who knew that you were Jewish, who refused to do business with you after this time?

WN: No. Not one.

JF: Many of them knew that you were Jewish.

WN: Even after they knew, only one person that I remember, one or two, who said, "Willie, we can't deal with you, so please don't be angry. We would like to have you come by in the evening or something, but not on business."

JF: You mean they would see you socially?

WN: They wanted to, but I didn't go, but they wanted to see me socially, but they were afraid that someone would perhaps report us that they are doing business with a Jew. You must understand that they are all smaller towns, not like Philadelphia, or Berlin or something. But that was also an exception because they felt they were forced to do this to protect themselves.

JF: For business.

WN: For business.

JF: But if they saw you socially in the evening that would be fine.

WN: That would be fine. I didn't have any experience like that from anyone that I knew.

JF: At this time, we're talking about '37 now, and you were experiencing the reality of Hitler at that time. Did you think of leaving at that time?

WN: No, when I was thinking about it, when this came up , this idea of leaving, that was after *Kristallnacht*, when it was really getting bad.

JF: So it was not until then that you actually thought of leaving.

WN: No. No.

JF: From this time that you are describing now in '37 when you returned until *Kristallnacht*, was there any change in what you experienced as a Jew traveling and selling?

WN: Personally, no.

JF: You had the same kind of experience, where you were able to find certain hotels, restaurants. Customers would still be dealing with you?

WN: Yes, absolutely.

JF: Your mother was still in Berlin at this time?

WN: My mother was dead already.

JF: Your mother died in...

WN: In '33.

JF: Before you went to Czechoslovakia?

WN: Yeah.

JF: Did you have any family left in Germany at that point?

WN: No.

JF: You were an only child?

WN: I was an only child, yes.

JF: What was your experience with *Kristallnacht?*

WN: I was living at a friend's house, as I told you I came back and lived with a friend who waited for me at the station at the time.

JF: This was in Berlin?

WN: In Berlin. And I lived in his apartment where he lived with his mother, who was a widow. And I woke up at night hearing glass shattering and people running. And I didn't know what it was, what caused it, nothing. And then in the morning a friend of mine who was half Jewish, and he still had a car, called me and said, "Willie, I want to take a little ride with you."

JF: I want to take a little ride with you?

WN: "A little ride with my car. Let's take a look what's going on here."

JF: Did he know what was happening?

WN: We all didn't know, we heard, but only on the radio we heard in the morning, and he said, "Let's take a look what's going on." So we went in his car and he was half Jewish, so he didn't have a license at that time which showed that he was a Jew. So we parked the car, and we started walking and we saw the synagogue burning.

JF: Which synagogue was this?

WN: Oranienburgerstrasse.

EN: Fasanenstrasse.

WN: No, Elsa, [wife of Willie Nowak] that was Oranienburgerstrasse. Don't tell me. That was where I was Bar Mitzvah.

JF: It was the synagogue where you were Bar Mitzvah that was burning.

WN: And, excuse me, I have to apologize.

JF: It was which synagogue then?

WN: Fasanenstrasse.

JF: Fasanenstrasse.

WN: So we were standing here on this side across the burning synagogue and we saw them throwing out the prayer books and all and the prayer shawls and all that was laying.

JF: Who's doing that?

WN: People.

JF: Just the German citizens were doing that?

WN: Yeah. So we were standing on the other side, with other people, of course, and we heard the laughing, and my friend who was about almost a head taller than I, standing behind me holding my arms, like that.

JF: To keep you back?

WN: Yeah. And I wanted to run over to pick up a prayer book or something and he held me so I couldn't move, and then we went around and we saw how they threw the furniture out of the apartments where Jews had lived. They threw everything out and we saw all that. Remember when I told you about that, when they broke in the houses and threw all the furniture out. They sent the kids into the candy stores to take out the candies.

JF: You are talking about the citizens now?

WN: Only citizens. Not the Nazis, just the citizens.

JF: You didn't see the Nazis doing it?

WN: No, the Nazis were just standing there watching. In uniform but otherwise, no that was the citizens. My fellow citizens.

JF: Did you continue to feel like you wanted to break into this group and do something? Or were you...?

WN: No, all that I wanted was to take the prayer books out of the street because I knew I couldn't do anything with them.

JF: You wanted to save the prayer books. What about the Torahs, did you see them?

WN: Yeah.

JF: They were thrown?

WN: That's also something that I wanted to do, take out of there.

JF: Were they just throwing them out, were they burned?

WN: They were burned. They threw them out first and then they burned them.

JF: And there was laughter.

WN: Oh, yes, they enjoyed it. Now this is a personal opinion on it. Some of them just enjoyed it for the fun of it, not even because they hated the Jews. They just liked to see that.

JF: They liked the excitement of the crowd and the feeling of destruction?

WN: Yeah, some of them.

JF: Why do you say that, was it something that you observed?

WN: Yeah. You didn't hear anything from those people, for example, "Those Goddamn Jews" or something like that, nothing. They just liked to see that.

JF: So you were sensing the frenzy of the crowd?

WN: Yeah.

JF: That they were whipped up to a frenzy and that's what was motivating a lot of them?

WN: Yeah, however, naturally, there was also the satisfaction that the Jews are getting it. But not all of them at that moment, at least, expressed that kind of thinking.

JF: What else about that day or those days that you remember?

WN: Well, it was not very good for our nerves.

JF: That's an understatement. Your mind must have been going very quickly trying to figure out what to do now.

WN: Not even at that moment. Actually her father was the one who came.

JF: You and Mrs. Nowak were engaged at that point?

WN: Yeah, but she lived with her parents in Berlin, and I lived by myself, and her father actually came and said, "We have to leave and I am going to book for all of us."

JF: Where did he think you would go?

EN: It was not her father.

WN: A friend of her father. He said, "We have to leave."

JF: Your parents did not want to leave at that point.

WN: He talked us into it leaving.

JF: The friend of your father's?

WN: Yeah.

JF: Where were you going to go?

WN: The only place that was open was Shanghai. He, in fact, was the one who told us that Shanghai was the only place that we could go, so that's where we went.

JF: Was it difficult to get passage?

WN: Well, you had to wait, because the ships were overloaded with our people, but otherwise no. We took an Italian liner and left from Genoa.

JF: You traveled by train to Genoa.

WN: To Genoa and then by ship.

JF: What were you allowed to take with you?

WN: Ten German marks and our immediate possessions. No rings, no jewelry, nothing.

JF: Were you able to sell anything?

[End of tape one, side two.]

Tape two, side one:

JF: This is tape two, side one of an interview with Mr. Willie Nowak, on May 9, 1983, with Josey Fisher. You were talking about whether or not you could sell any of your possessions and you stated that the return from selling them would not have been...

WN: Negligible.

JF: Very negligible. And you were limited, even if you sold them to the ten marks.

WN: Oh, yes. Or what you could do if you had that money available, you could buy new clothing. Things like that. But that's it. You could leave a suit there and take a new suit with you.

JF: Were you limited as to how many personal possessions you could take?

WN: No, not in clothing, things like that.

JF: But no articles for instance, art objects, jewelry.

WN: Valuable things, no.

JF: No, that all had to stay. So the only things that you could take were clothing.

WN: Well, what you could do is, they call it a lift. When we left we couldn't take it. What they could do at that time first before we, when we left it was all stopped already but before they could have what we call a lift, it was a big container where the people would come, the moving people, and put all in, and you had to have a list of what is in those big containers.

JF: What could be in those big containers? Then you could take furniture or...

WN: Clothing, furniture, things like that.

JF: But when you left you were not even allowed to take such things, no furniture?

WN: No, not anymore at that time.

JF: But you were not limited as to how many suitcases or trunks or anything you could take?

WN: No. It was just the amount of money.

JF: Your passage was paid beforehand, and you had ten marks and that was it. So when you took the train from Berlin to Genoa, was there any difficulty in that passage?

WN: No.

JF: The two of you went with?

WN: The two children my wife had.

JF: You had two children?

WN: Yes, from my first marriage.

JF: How old were the children?

WN: 9 1/2 and 12, when we left.

JF: And with these friends of your parents, did they go with you?

EN: One man.

JF: The man you had mentioned before.

JF: And you left on May 1, 1939 from Berlin.

WN: Yes.

JF: What about passage, what was the passage like to Shanghai?

WN: You mean in money?

JF: What was the experience like on the ship?

WN: The ship was alright. The Italian sailors and waiters, etc. were perhaps not as respectful as they were with other people, but otherwise everything was alright, we had no complaints.

JF: Do you think there was a difference in the way the Italians service was towards the Jews?

WN: Yes, definitely yes. Because they knew we were refugees.

JF: What class did you travel, or was that not an issue?

WN: Economical.

JF: Were you put in a certain class?

WN: No, whatever you could afford.

JF: In other words, if you could afford first class, you could go first class?

WN: Absolutely.

JF: There was no discrimination then as far as that is concerned. How long was the trip?

WN: The boat, four weeks. That I know. [Discussion with wife]

EN: The 27th of June we arrived in Shanghai.

JF: What was it like when you arrived, what were your first impressions of Shanghai?

WN: First impression? Very simple. Now you must understand we came from a pretty normal life. So we arrived in Shanghai and we saw ruins, wrecked houses, damaged houses, nothing.

JF: Ruins?

WN: Yeah, ruins, and we were put on trucks, like prisoners.

JF: By whom?

WN: By the Jewish organizations.

JF: The Jewish organizations put you on trucks?

WN: Yeah, because they had no other transportation for so many people. We were brought through streets where there were no houses standing anymore, because it was the Chinese Japanese war. Now I must explain this to you first, Shanghai was an international settlement as you may know. Now the actual city of Shanghai in Chinese hands was taboo for us; we couldn't go in there. We were, the English settlement did not take the refugees in. The French took a few in the beginning and then they stopped. So we were put in the Japanese, occupied by Japanese district, which was completely destroyed, and only school buildings had been repaired for us. We were brought by trucks to those

school buildings which were repaired for our purpose, and they had bunks, two up and two down, 41 people in one room. For example, in our case there were 41 people in one large room, one little stove, and we were put in bunks, two and two, our children were here, we were up. And that's the way we were put, 21 people in one room, but what we did, then the other people, of course, we put curtains, we made curtains ourselves to cover so we have a little privacy.

JF: You married.

WN: When we arrived in Shanghai.

JF: When you got to Shanghai.

JF: Can you tell me about that?

WN: Yes, there was a Chinese lawyer, we had somewhere...

EN: May I?

WN: Yes, sure!

EN: We wanted to get married the Jewish way but I didn't have a *get.* [bill of divorcement] They were looking, the Jewish people were looking for my former husband in America already, they couldn't find him, so we had to get married in China with a Chinese lawyer, but we were thinking it wouldn't be efficient for the whole world, so we went to the German consulate and we paid for stamps from the German consulate, certifying our marriage. It wasn't necessary, but we did. We sold a camera which we had with us to buy those stamps for $3 each.

JF: So did the German consulate certify your marriage license and that would be an internationally accepted document.

EN: Yes. It wasn't necessary, but we did it.

WN: Right.

JF: So the Jewish community, the officials of the Jewish community, would not marry you without your *get*?

WN: Right.

JF: So what was the experience like with the Chinese lawyer. Did they send you, did the Jewish community send you?

WN: No, a friend of ours, he took us to a lawyer. The same friend I told you who helped me back. He was with us on the trip.

JF: How did you communicate?

WN: In English. Everything in English. We couldn't speak Chinese, never learned. But you could speak English. Even the rickshaw coolie would bargain with you in English.

JF: So when you were living in the Japanese occupied section, you could still travel in between the sections, or were you restricted to that area?

WN: We were restricted by the Japanese. In other words, in front of each camp, we were in a refugee camp, as I told you.

JF: The camp included the school buildings, that was the camp.

WN: That was the camp. And after the war broke out, with the United States, when that broke out, we were completely closed up by the Japanese.

JF: But until that time you were able to travel back and forth.

WN: Back and forth, anywhere, not restrictions.

JF: Did you have to stay in that building, that school building during your entire stay?

WN: No, later after the war we took an apartment.

JF: But throughout the war years you were restricted to that building?

WN: Yes.

JF: The Jewish community was taking care of that?

WN: Yes.

JF: This was the Ashkenazi group?

WN: Right.

JF: Did you have any contact with the Jews who had lived in Shanghai before the war?

WN: No. No way.

JF: They kept themselves apart?

WN: Completely, I must say this, the Russians, if it had not been for them, who gave the money, the Russians, the Russian Jews, for this particular action that was given to feed us, for example, there were kitchens, we called it; in every home or camp, there was a kitchen where we were fed.

JF: Like a dormitory situation, cafeteria.

WN: Yes, we would stay in line and get our food; we would go eat it in our room. That was financed by the Joint. [Joint Distribution Committee] The Joint was financed at that time temporarily by the Russian Jews.

JF: By the Russian Jews where?

WN: In Shanghai. They gave the money with the understanding that after the war, they would be reimbursed by the Joint.

JF: So, you are talking about Russian Jews who had immigrated to Shanghai before the war? The Ashkenazi community.

WN: Way before. So they gave the money so that we could eat, and they got reimbursed later.

JF: Were they reimbursed later?

WN: I don't know, I understand that they were, but I don't know, I have no idea.

JF: They lived where, the Russian Jews you are talking about?

WN: They lived in the French section mostly, actually mostly in the French section.

JF: And the Sephardic Jews had lived in another section?

WN: Either the French or the English settlement, yes, which was the center of Shanghai, actually the business center, shall we say.

JF: Was there much interchange that you knew of between the Sephardic and Ashkenazi community?

WN: I have no idea.

JF: You didn't hear about any. Was there any interchange with you and the Ashkenazi community which was contributing towards your keep or did they set themselves off from the...

WN: Only connection was the what do you call it?

JF: These were the representatives of the Joint from this community that helped you?

WN: Yes. Margolis. Mrs. Margolis was the representative of the Joint.

JF: What did she do?

WN: Actually she supervised, so to speak, our camps and she was in charge of the whole thing and she was a very nice lady, and the Shanghai Jews gave the money for it, and that's about it.

JF: She was your main contact with that community?

WN: Yeah, well, we had no contact, actually. All we had to do was the office in our camp, which was handled by people from our group. They came before us and they had the jobs already in the offices.

JF: What kind of work were you able to do during that time?

WN: I was a musician at that time, a drummer.

JF: Had you had experience in this?

WN: Yes, when I was a young man, it was usually customary all over there, those little groups where young men who put together a band and played at private affairs, Bar Mitzvahs, whatever, and that's what we did for fun, mostly.

JF: This was in your youth?

WN: Yes.

JF: And then when you were in Shanghai, how did you do it?

WN: Well, I took a drum, bought that stuff in Berlin, and I took it with me, and then I played as a drummer over there.

JF: Where?

WN: In bars, nightclubs.

JF: These were Japanese?

WN: No, not Japanese. They were white Russian Jews mostly and then.

JF: In the French quarter, the French section?

WN: No, in the Japanese section, some of them in the French section, of course, too, but most of them were in our district.

JF: So they were mainly Jewish bars?

WN: Yes, all of them. In fact, our people opened bars, people who had money, many of them came from Austria and they came with money, which we didn't have, and they opened up bars, little cocktail bars with dancing, and Jewish girls from our people

would be the bar maids, and they would sit with the customers and entertain them and we played in those places.

JF: And you were able to earn some money that way?

WN: Yes. Yes.

JF: Was there any way that the Joint could help you find work or is this something you had to find on your own.

WN: No, we did it on our own, in fact, when we came to Shanghai, I had already a job without knowing it.

JF: How?

WN: They were looking for a drummer and a friend of mine said, he's coming.

JF: With your drum?

WN: Yeah.

JF: You must have known that there might be a chance that you could use your drum.

WN: Yeah, I heard, we had letters from friends already, and her idea was to buy one.

EN: I heard musicians were... very well there, they are looking for. How about you take a drum with you.

JF: So you were able to support yourself with what you earned being a drummer?

WN: Partially, yes.

JF: Were you able to work also?

WN: She worked also.

EN: Very hard

JF: What kind of work did you do?

EN: First I was a milliner in Germany, and I started with that, and later on our people didn't wear hats anymore, only in the beginning, so I went in a factory, I pressed underwear for the Japanese. It was for Austrian people, but they had orders from the Japanese, and I was pressing those things.

JF: In other words the factory was Japanese run?

WN: No, Austrian refugees.

EN: We worked for the Japanese, who got the orders from the Japanese.

JF: The Japanese were buying the products.

WN: The people from Austria were able to take money, many of them.

JF: So they were then able to open up businesses that could employ the German Jews who could not have money.

EN: Especially the people who went half a year or a year before us. They could take a lot.

JF: Now you lived in this camp, there was no way you could get private quarters?

WN: There was no money, first of all.

JF: Was there a way to have money?

WN: Not at that time, no. After the war, yes. [Discussion between WN & EN]

JF: There was no way?

WN: No, there was nothing.

JF: Was there an educational system?

WN: They had schools for our children.

JF: These were set up by the Joint?

WN: Yeah, with Kadoori.

JF: I'm sorry, who did you say?

WN: Kadoori was a school named after the Russian[1] man who paid a lot of money for the Jews.

JF: And that was the name of the school that your children went to?

WN: Yes.

JF: Was it staffed by teachers from?

WN: By our own people.

JF: By your own people. What about religious observance? What was going on? What was available to you and what was happening?

EN: We had in our camp Friday night services, or Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and then in movie theatres for the high holidays.

WN: But Mrs. Fisher was asking about the children.

EN: They had lessons from Jewish teachers.

JF: Were there rabbis involved with you? You're shaking your head, there were no rabbis.

WN: There were rabbis but they were actually from the... We have friend, for example, who was a cantor in Shanghai, and others we know.

JF: But these were people who had come as refugees?

WN: Yes.

EN: We had the two German rabbis, Teicher...

WN: But they were all refugees.

JF: In other words, the Jewish community, the religious Jewish community already existing in Shanghai did not provide any kind of services or training or anything for the refugees?

WN: No.

JF: And the German rabbis who were there, you said, "Teicher."

WN: He's dead - he died.

[1]Kadoori, like Sassoon, family of wealthy merchants and philanthropists, originally from Baghdad, who had settled in the East, especially Shanghai.

EN: One was Silberstein, our son got Bar Mitzvah, with Silberstein. And the other one we didn't like, remember?

[Discussion between the Nowaks]

JF: Did they operate out of any kind of center, was there anything that was made into a synagogue-like place?

WN: Well, what they had for the high holidays was movies.

JF: Movie theatres.

WN: Movie theatres, and they had, in the camps they had auditoriums, the halls, and they would conduct services for the high holidays.

JF: For Friday nights also?

WN: Yes.

JF: You said your son was Bar Mitzvah by Rabbi Silberstein. What was the experience like in Shanghai with the Bar Mitzvah? Was there private tutoring?

[WN is laughing.]

JF: Tell me you are laughing!

EN: He had to go to the yeshiva to study.

WN: That was not from us, it was from the Russian Jews.

JF: They provided, this was their yeshiva?

WN: No, it was their yeshiva.

JF: He was going to the yeshiva with the children of the Russian Jewish community?

WN: I think so, Yeah.

JF: What was his experience with that, was he set aside or set apart as a refugee?

EN: No. I don't know if there were Russians; there were only our people there - I don't know. I know he went. I was working so much there, I really...

WN : Actually, we can't tell you too much about all this because we were both working.

JF: But the yeshiva that he attended was one that was attended by both the previously existing Russian Jewish Community...

WN: I don't know, I think it was started by them, but I don't know.

EN: In our section there were no more Russian Jews.

JF: Was this yeshiva in your section or did he have to travel to another section?

WN: No, it was in our section.

JF: And then he was Bar Mitzvah where?

WN: In a camp.

EN: He and another boy.

JF: In one of the auditoriums in the camp, in the hall.

WN: Yes. And the reason I laughed was the so-called Bar Mitzvah meal consisted of what did they have, buns?

EN: I don't know, not, that was our wedding, the buns.

WN: Oh, Yeah, our wedding meal was - what do you call it here?

JF: Rolls?

WN: Something like Danish. That was our wedding meal.

JF: And the Bar Mitzvah meal?

WN: I can't remember, very, very little, the same thing.

JF: Was food hard to get or you were reliant on the kitchen.

WN: We were relying on the kitchen, on the camp.

EN: We could go to the market and buy and cook if we wanted to, but we didn't have the money.

WN: If we had the money we could go to a restaurant.

JF: But you needed the money?

WN: Yes, we needed the money, we didn't have the money.

JF: Were you well enough nourished with the food that they provided for you?

EN: We had stones and we had glass...

WN: No, we were not very well nourished. Undernourished.

JF: Were you well nourished?

WN: No.

JF: There was stones and glass?

WN: Look, they had big kitchens where they fed all the people in one camp. The food came from central kitchen and it was handled by our people.

JF: The Jews themselves cooked the food.

WN: Our own, the refugees, and you couldn't expect too much, and they got the absolute necessities for nourishment.

JF: Was there any way that these kitchens could be kept somewhat observant?

WN: Yes, you mean kosher? Yes. It was all kosher, absolutely.

JF: So the food was handled totally by the Jews under kosher supervision.

WN: Yes, absolutely.

JF: You said that you were living in the Japanese quarter, what was the interaction like between you and the Japanese and the Chinese that you experienced?

WN: With the Chinese we had to deal only if we wanted to buy something.

JF: They had the small shops?

WN: They had shops and markets. The Japanese who were in charge of our section, now that's a different story, of course. We were completely under Japanese jurisdiction and supervision.

JF: What does that mean?

WN: When the war started, our section was completely closed off by the Japanese. No one could go out or in without a certain special pass that they gave out. You had to apply for it. For example, Else worked out of the district that we were in and she had to have a special pass for the time she left for work and when she came back; that was the time she was permitted to go out of that district.

JF: Could you be permitted to leave the district for any other reason other than work?

WN: If you applied for it, yes. Funerals, or something like that; otherwise no.

JF: It had to be an exceptional event.

WN: Yes, you have to go to an office where you apply for it and give the application to a Japanese official.

JF: It sounds then unless it was something special that it was hard to get this pass?

WN: Right. Now there is another thing they did which was very smart, we ourselves had to control our people. In other words, they set up a militia consisting of our people, under their supervision, and every soldier, for example the entrance to the camp, the exit of the camp, everything was controlled by us. We were given, we were picked out from them, they picked out certain people and they picked out a certain leader who would be in charge of that area.

JF: Was this like police?

WN: Yes.

JF: Or army.

WN: No.

JF: More like police. But the police were run by the Japanese.

WN: The Jews.

JF: Jews under Japanese orders.

WN: They appointed a lawyer, for example, who was in charge of our camp. Then they appointed people as so-called officers: I was picked up for that, too.

JF: You were an officer?

WN: Yeah.

JF: What did that mean?

WN: You had to wear an armband and you had a nightstick and a rope, that was your equipment.

JF: A rope?

WN: Yes, a rope in order to close up a section if necessary.

JF: You're talking about the Japanese section now.

WN: Only. Where we lived, most of us lived. In fact, after the war, everybody lived there.

JF: So when you are talking about the entrance that was guarded, you are talking about the entrance to the whole Japanese section or to the individual camps?

WN: To the individual camps.

JF: Each individual camp was guarded as well as the surrounding section?

WN: Yes.

JF: Was each surrounding section walled off physically?

WN: No. Only with guards. Well, if you wanted to sneak, if a guard wanted to take the chance, one of our own people, let's say if a friend would say you can go, I watch it. If a Japanese at that time would come by and see us pass and would check us, this guy would go to jail.

JF: Which guy?

WN: The guy who let us out, the guard.

JF: The guard would go to jail?

WN: Yeah. So for that reason they were very careful and naturally we were also very careful. We didn't want to put anybody in trouble.

JF: So in your responsibility as an officer, you were one of the guards?

WN: I was in charge of the guards in our camp, so they were very clever in doing that.

JF: Was the feeling among the Jews to be given this responsibility a positive one? Did they feel better about governing their own people?

WN: Yeah, because we didn't have to…

[End of tape two, side two. End of interview.]

Tape two, side two:

JF: This is tape two, side two of an interview with Mr. Willie Nowak. You were talking about the feeling about the Jews being in control of their own community and you said that the Japanese...

WN: Well, the Japanese actually put the responsibility on ourselves, that we will follow their regulations, by just doing it ourselves and be responsible for it.

JF: And then were you not reliant on the fact that the Japanese might be more abusive?

WN: There could have been a chance of it.

JF: Had you experienced that before this section was closed off? Were the Japanese harsh with you in any way?

WN: No, none whatsoever.

JF: Was there any difference between the Japanese and Chinese in their treatment of you?

WN: Well, the Chinese, this was already when the war had started when the Japanese were already in charge. The Chinese police that was also there, because that's their municipal police from Shanghai, they were sometimes more abusive than the Japanese.

JF: Was that so before the war started?

WN: Not so much, because that was the new Chinese, Japanese supported shall we say, police. In other words, let's say all of a sudden a German would be a Nazi, so that's what the Chinese who changed under Japanese rules and actually fraternized with the Japanese.

JF: So before the war started, the Chinese were not like this towards the Jewish population?

WN: No, they never bothered us.

JF: Did they help you, were they significantly helpful or were they just...

WN: No, if they would become friendly to you because you did buy from them, let's say the merchants, they may be friendly to you, but that's about it.

JF: And the Japanese? Did they form any kind of relationship with the Jews?

WN: Yes. For example, an uncle of mine was very friendly with a Japanese officer and through him I was friendly with him, but that was about it.

JF: But after the war started, there was this group of Chinese who were...

WN: They were a little bit more on the Japanese side and taking a little more advantage, shall we say.

JF: Did the Japanese themselves crack down in terms of relations with the Jews, or they were just more strict about not letting you out of the quarter?

WN: They were strict in that respect, but I would say that they cracked down on us just for that reason. That was the only restriction that we had.

JF: Was not being able to go in and out. Did your lives change after the war inside the Japanese section?

WN: You mean after the war?

JF: During the war.

WN: During that time, oh yes, it changed because we didn't have the freedom to move. We had to apply, as I said, to a certain office for permission to go out and things like that. Otherwise, no.

JF: Was money the same, were you able to work as much?

WN: Yeah.

JF: Was the Joint as involved, were funds as available?

WN: The Joint still took care of us.

JF: There were still no difficulties.

WN: That was all done by the Joint; the Japanese did not interfere with that. No.

JF: Did you feel any antisemitism on the part of the oriental population?

WN: No. Well, let me put it this way, if, like I worked, for example, in the nightclubs or bars, or things like that, if a Japanese would be drunk, he could abuse you.

JF: He would say something, or he would try to...

WN: Not necessarily as a Jew, but just because you were white.

JF: But not antisemitic, anti-refugee perhaps, or anti-white.

WN: In fact, I don't know if you know that already, but as we found out, the man who was in charge of the district where we had to apply for permits to go out and things like that, he was the one who saved our lives, because the Germans had set up the necessary equipment for gas for us.

JF: Where did they set that up?

WN: Somewhere, we didn't know where. But we read about it afterwards and he was the one who did not permit that it will be done.

JF: What was his name?

WN: Ghoya, the King of the Jews, he called himself.

JF: And he did not agree to cooperate with the Germans?

WN: No, he did not agree.

JF: You did not know this until after the war?

WN: No. In fact a friend of ours who was in Japan, he found out that Ghoya was the one who saved us, Walter Silberstein.

JF: Walter Silberstein.

WN: You know him?

JF: Oh sure. But this was not known until after the war.

WN: No, that was after the war when we knew that.

JF: Was there any way during the war of you finding out what was going on in Europe?

WN: In Europe?

JF: Did you have knowledge of what was happening with the war or with the camps or what was happening with the Jews while you were there?

WN: No. While we were there, no.

JF: You didn't find this out until after the war?

WN: After the war, yeah.

JF: You said that your parents, Mrs. Nowak, did not come at the time you and your husband came.

EN: No. One year later.

JF: Was there any difficulty in them getting out?

EN: Yes, as Willie told you, his uncle had a very good friend a Japanese, and they gave at that time already permits to come into Shanghai, which wasn't before. It was open before, but at that time they started this permit.

JF: This was when, in 1939?

WN: No, beginning of the '40's.

EN: Since he knew this man, he got the permit for my parents, and it was the last minute when they came. From Germany, it was the last minute, later on, they couldn't get out anymore. They came already over Siberia, they came by train.

JF: Was there any news they were able to bring you about what was going on, because these concentration camps were already in force at the time.

EN: Oh, they told us when they came, oh sure.

JF: Did they know about the gas chambers at that point?

EN: I think so.

WN: No, we didn't know that at that time. When the parents came, no, they didn't know that. But the funny part was, I said my uncle knew that particular Japanese official, and when they started with the permits, they opened an office and I was working in that office where the applications would be set up, and my uncle knew the Japanese official, that's how we got our connection, and I talked to him about her parents and my uncle, of course, especially, so that's how we got them out and it was the last minute that they got out.

JF: Is there anything else about the war years that you can tell me, any other experiences that you had during that time?

WN: You mean the Second World War?

JF: Before the war was over.

WN: No, because in Shanghai we didn't know too much, and we were in Shanghai at that time.

EN: We had bombs during the war, in Shanghai.

WN: We were bombed, but that has nothing to do with Germany.

JF: What about the medical care.

WN: Good, very good.

JF: Who was it provided by?

WN: Our people and the Joint. They financed it.

JF: There was a hospital?

WN: We had our own hospital, yes. My wife was in the hospital there, my daughter was in the hospital there.

JF: And you were treated.

EN: Very well.

WN: By our own people.

JF: And they had enough medicine?

EN: Not always. For instance, my daughter was almost given up, and a lady brought some medicine which she had and gave it to the doctor, and the doctor said it saved her life, but otherwise, they had, it was good. The food was even better in the hospital than what we got otherwise.

JF: Illness was quite common.

WN: Yeah, people were weak. They had no resistance.

JF: And there was a great deal of typhoid fever?

WN: Oh yes.

JF: Was it of epidemic proportions, as far as you know?

WN: No, I wouldn't say that. Epidemic? No.

JF: You're questioning that?

EN: Yeah. Dysentery was very bad.

EN: My daughter had it and typhus, both together at the same time. And I had typhus, my son had scarlet fever, but that was not epidemic.

JF: Let me ask you something. With I'm sure considerable numbers of people who were dying during that time, what provisions were made for a Jewish cemetery or Jewish burial?

EN: We had a Jewish cemetery, Point Road, but I don't know if it was just for our people.

JF: You said Pine Road?

WN: Point Road.

JF: This was inside the Japanese section or was it outside? Was that part of the Ashkenazi cemetery or did you have your own?

WN: I don't know. We have a friend we could ask, he, in fact, buried people, as a cantor there, Gustl could tell us that. I know Point Road was a cemetery, that I know. See if he's home.[2]

JF: You said that you stayed in Shanghai after the war was over?

WN: Yeah, but only a short time.

JF: Was it difficult to leave Shanghai?

[2]He means Cantor Gustav Florsheim, then cantor of Tikvah Chadoshoh in Philadelphia, where they belonged.

WN: No, when you had passage, you could leave. There were no problems whatsoever.

JF: How did you get the money together for the passage? Were you able to save during that time?

WN: How did we get the money together, that's a good question. Else, come here.

JF: Tell me about the process, as well as you remember, about how you were able to leave Shanghai after the war?

WN: First of all

EN: We had to apply. You had to apply, then we had to go for a medical exam.

JF: Were people turned down for what reason?

WN: Mostly lung disease. They had to go back to Germany, they couldn't get to the States. In fact, that friend that I told you about, he had to go back to Germany because he didn't get permission to come to the States.

JF: What kind of lung disease would disqualify you?

WN: TB.

JF: TB. And these people were sent back to Germany?

WN: Yes. They had x-rays taken and if they had spots, they had to go back.

JF: Was that the only thing that disqualified them?

WN: Yeah. [unclear] would have been another one but mostly that was it. The lung x-rays, that was frightening for anyone because you never knew.

JF: Was it difficult to get permission to come to the States?

WN: No, that was collective affidavits which was given out by Truman.

JF: To those Jews who were in Shanghai. So you had an open invitation. Now what year was this?

WN: We left in '47, December '47 and arrived in January 48. During '47.

JF: You left in December '47 and arrived 2, January, 1948. What kind of ship did you take?

EN: To Shanghai, I know, but from Shanghai.

[Discussion among the Nowaks]

JF: Was the Joint involved in your leaving at all? Were they involved in helping to pay for your way?

WN: No, that was a collective affidavit and we didn't have to pay for it.

EN: That's what I think.

JF: You think Truman's order included your passage?

EN: No, it didn't include our passage, I think that by the Joint.

JF: The Joint paid the passage?

WN: I think it was paid by the Joint, Yeah.

JF: So it was just a matter of when you could get a boat? You had no difficulty in leaving once this affidavit was issued?

WN: No, thanks to Truman.

JF: What then was your experience, you went to San Francisco?

WN: Yes, and in San Francisco there was a reception committee, also, of course, from the Joint, and we had a choice to go where we wanted to go, except New York, which was closed because there were too many already there, things like that would happen. And we had our son in Washington and our daughter had come from South America to New York.

JF: In other words your son and daughter left Shanghai before you did?

WN: Yes.

JF: How did they leave earlier?

WN: Well, my son had an affidavit from his father, who lived in Washington. My daughter married in Shanghai, and his family provided the necessary papers for South America. So that's how she left after she married, and our son left before and went to his father.

JF: And then where did you go?

WN: We went to San Francisco, and then we had a choice. They asked us where do you want to go, Seattle, and we said no, we don't go to Seattle, New York was closed, of course. So we decided that our son is in Washington, our daughter is in New York, we would go in the middle, that's Philadelphia.

EN: And we had friends here, they wrote us, come to Philadelphia, the Committee is very good here, you get a home, I mean you get furniture.

JF: The Jewish Committee was helpful.

WN: Yes.

EN: And you get a job.

JF: When you look back on that time and your years before you left and your years in Shanghai, what thoughts do you have?

EN: I don't understand the question.

WN: That's a pretty tough questions to answer.

JF: What did you feel during that time?

EN: In San Francisco?

WN: No, in Germany, when you left Germany and you went to Shanghai.

EN: Very sad, very sad.

JF: You were leaving home.

EN: Leaving home, leaving the parents.

WN: That's the way you have to answer, actually. It was a very tough time, because you didn't know what is going to happen to you. Shanghai was the only place that was open. We didn't go by our own free will. We had nothing else. We had two choices: either we go to a concentration camp, because we were told if you don't leave, that's where you go. So there was nothing else to do. We had to go, what did we know about Shanghai? Nothing. And there was no other place because we didn't know anyone else. It was pretty tough.

JF: You said before that you had been invited back to Germany three years ago.

WN: Yeah, but only for a visit.

JF: Can you tell me how that came about?

WN: Yeah, the Senate had decided and, that also happened in other cities later, by the way, that they want to give the Jews who had to leave at that time an opportunity to come back as guests.

JF: This is the Senate in Berlin?

WN: And also in other cities, later, as I heard. And they decided they wanted to have those people back to show them how everything has changed, so to speak. So we got a letter. At first we had decided, if we get a letter, should we get that letter of invitation from Berlin, we will decline, we will not go.

EN: I didn't not want to go.

WN: She didn't want to go either.

JF: Other people had received this letter?

EN: The older people first.

WN: And down the line, the older first.

JF: Was it by random selection or was everyone issued this opportunity? That you know of?

WN: That I know of, in Berlin I know that many, many people who were born in Berlin, you had to be born in Berlin.

JF: You had to be born in Berlin in order to go.

WN: They were invited and also in other cities by the Senate to come back at their expense. They paid for everything, for a week, as a guest, but also to make up for whatever.

JF: For them to relieve them of their guilt?

WN: Yes. Exactly, you said it. And she didn't want to go; I didn't want to go. Then when we got the letter, we were thinking, and I said, there's one reason why I would go, to see the graves of my parents, and that's why we went, actually. But I must say this in fairness, they were terrific. Whatever they did there, and also in the city there, was tremendous.

JF: What did they do?

WN: They paid for everything. We didn't have to pay a penny.

JF: Did they take you on tours, did they have someone who was hosting you?

WN: They had buses who would take us, and they had guides who went with us to show us the sections in Berlin because we didn't...

EN: It changed.

JF: You stayed in Berlin.

WN: We were put in a hotel. Very, very good hotels.

JF: You didn't see other parts of Germany then while you were there?

WN: Oh, yes, we took a taxi, we went over to East Germany, but that's it.

JF: Just East Berlin.

EN: Yes, because that's where the cemetery is.

JF: So you were able to visit the grave?

WN: Oh, Yeah, and we took a taxi and...

EN: We had to have a passport to go to East. You had to pay for, but then you could go.

JF: How is the cemetery kept up?

EN: Not at all.

WN: There's nobody there. They can't get people to do the work. You can see it. They couldn't do anything. We went to the office, because if you want to find a person, because this is years later, they had the numbers, we had the number also, of the graves and we went to the office and we told them this is the number we are looking for and they had a plan.

JF: This is the office in the cemetery.

WN: In the cemetery and they had a map and they gave us a map and they pointed the location of the place.

JF: Who was running the cemetery? Jews, non-Jews?

EN: A Jewish cemetery.

WN: Yeah, but who was working there. I think non-Jews. It was the Jewish community actually, but the people who worked there in the office, I don't think they were Jewish.

JF: So you think it's being supported by the Jewish community in East Berlin?

WN: No, that I don't think. I think it's West Berlin who's doing it, not East. Definitely not. But you could go there as I said, you had to apply for permission to go to East Berlin and you would come to the Charlie's Point, the famous Charlie's Point, of course, and then you could go take a train and we took a train, didn't we first?

EN: Yes.

WN: Yeah, that was a subway, we took a subway and we went to the cemetery.

JF: And they claim that there was no one who would work to keep it up.

WN: No, no one who would keep it up.

JF: Was it being desecrated in any way or is it just falling into disrepair?

WN: I couldn't tell you because I saw quite a number of stones fallen over. It could have been deterioration, that I know. But I think it was more the wear and tear than desecration.

EN: But my husband's parents' graves were perfect.

WN: They are at the corner of the-- you know there are walks on the different-- and my parents are right on the corner and it was completely perfect, nothing wrong; and when you went further in, that's when you saw all the weeds growing up. Sometimes you couldn't even see a grave.

EN: We had it restored, I think the parents were still alive, about twenty years ago, right? We had it done at that time. Was it later?

JF: How did you feel being in Germany?

WN: Well, let me put it this way, when I was not in actual contact with them, it was okay, but I remember one thing, when we came from the cemetery. Else went to the hotel and I said I'm hungry and there was a restaurant which I liked the food there, it was close to our hotel. So I went over and had something to eat, and she was in the room already in the hotel, and there were those two people sitting there, typical with the hats and the feather, the typical, to say it in German as we would say, "*Gewittergoy*", typical and I saw them, I could jumped on them right away. Otherwise people were very polite to us.

EN: When we arrived at the airport, in Frankfurt, and the guards, or police were standing there looking at us, I just wanted to turn around and go back.

WN: That man was standing up looking down. He was standing on a balcony, looking down.

EN: He greeted us with flowers.

JF: Who greeted you with flowers?

EN: From the Senate.

WN: Everything was from the Senate.

JF: Did you look up any of the people you had known during the war or before?

EN: His girlfriend.

WN: My girlfriend.

JF: You looked up your old girlfriend. She was Jewish?

WN: No, she was Catholic.

JF: Were you able to find her?

WN: Yes.

JF: Did you talk to her?

WN: I called her on the phone and she came right down to us to Kurfürstendamm. We had dinner together and then we talked on the phone and when we left the last day, hold it, oh hold it! How about [unclear]

EN: A nurse I had for my children for six years, and she lived in the East Section, but she knew that we were coming and she arranged everything to come to West Germany.

JF: Were these two people able to give you any more information about what had gone on after you left?

EN: I think we didn't even ask.

JN: Was it more talk of the old days?

WN: If you only have two evenings we had with them, so there was not much.

JF: Did you get any sense from them about the position of Jews in Germany now, or is that not something you would have discussed?

WN: I would have discussed it, but I don't...

JF: Just not enough time given.

WN: That's the point. You didn't have time enough, the few hours that you were sitting together, there was so much to talk about.

EN: I think…

WN: [unclear]

EN: That is still the old positions.

WN: That will always be there. That's a different thing.

JF: Is there anything else you want to add?

EN: The only thing I have to add is that we are very happy to be in the States and one of my happiest days was when we became citizens.

JF: You belong again. Thank you both for talking with us.

[End of tape two, side two. End of interview.]