

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SIDNEY H. WILLIG

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Bonnie Bailes

Date: May 23, 1985

© 1996

Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

SW - Sidney Willig [interviewee]

BB - Bonnie Bailes [interviewer]

Date: May 23, 1985

*Tape one, side one:*

BB: This interview of Professor Sidney Willig is being conducted by Bonnie Bailes. Today is May 23, 1985, and we are at the Temple University Law Center where Professor Willig teaches. Professor Willig, to start this interview, I would like to ask you about your background and also your Jewish background prior to World War II.

SW: Well, actually I thought of that when you advised me that for formal purposes you were going to call this an interview with Professor Sidney Willig. Because essentially I have had three names. My name was Hunnah, short was Hunnela, and so I came from a home where a Jewish name was used. My parents were orthodox and my mother kept a kosher home and I knew the Sabbath smells and rewards for scholarships were honey *leykakh* [cakes] and freshly baked sponge cakes, but through it all in my generation there was this strong urging to be an American and my parents were very much part of that to a point that they very rarely spoke Yiddish or other languages except in a sense if they wanted to say something that we ought not be privy to. They did, however, expose us to enough Jewish records, Jewish theater and Jewish friends so that I picked up some Yiddish. Of course, the older members of my family, my two sisters and my brother, were much better at Yiddish than I was because by the time I came along my mother and father were probably speaking better English and this might have been one reason. The other was, of course, that they were probably making a concerted effort to move into neighborhoods which they presumed would be better for my sister's opportunities at marriage. They were a typical Jewish family, however, in almost every respect that one might think of. I had, therefore, a very strong feeling that I was Jewish but it was not something that I carried to school with me, even though the neighborhood and the schools that I attended were mostly non-Jewish. We observed the holidays and my only real religious observance was on the High Holy Days. As a matter of fact, by a combination of circumstances, mostly the fact that there was no money in the home, I really had no pre-*bar mitzvah* instruction until about a half year before my actual *bar mitzvah* and so I never learned to read Hebrew well. But I did fine with my *haftorah* because after all that was just memorization. My father on the other hand was extremely learned in Hebrew and had a very thorough Hebrew education and members of his family had often had some vocation such as Rabbis; we had a *mohel* that was in our family and so on. And we would visit with some of the older members of his family too, usually at the end of long walks on the High Holy Days from where we lived which was near Gramercy Park in Manhattan all the way down to the Lower East Side and taste of the Jewish delicacies that an old aunt prepared, etc. But the main point was this, I really had no formal Jewish education. I just knew I was

Jewish. I felt I was Jewish but not in a kind of an adversarial way ever. Nonetheless, despite all of this feeling on the part of my parents that they would like to see us educated and that we should be primarily Americans in those terms, there was a great deal of pride in our being Jewish. We never sought to hide it.

It makes me remember one little story that has nothing to do with my own personal life. I know it seems strange to hear about now but, the telephone company did not hire Jews in my youth. And my sister Myra, who was a terrific young woman in every respect, got a job at the telephone company and she never disclosed to my parents that she had gotten that job by lying on the application by stating that she was Protestant. Since most people assume with our name we might be German. However, can you imagine the telephone company kept a record of all of the days that she took off for illness and chronologically confronted her with the fact that she had taken off Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in every year of her employ and fired her? I am talking about the 1920's now and Myra lost that job. My mother was absolutely floored at the thought that Myra would have lied about her religion. And yet to tell the truth, Myra was the only continuously and gainfully employed member of our family, but on principle she was told never to do it again. That's about all I can tell you about our home life.

Then in the circles of friends which I moved in, there were many who were non-Jews. I never really thought too much about it until just before World War II. I was a boxer and I had been very successful in a match in Connecticut and for some reason we were put up on a Coast Guard vessel. And as a poor boy from Brooklyn to see those delicious steaks that were being served and copious amounts of other high calorie and desirable foods, mind you it didn't trouble me that it wasn't kosher, at any rate, set my mind thinking. And one of the officers on the boat said to me, "Why don't you join the Coast Guard Academy?" He said, "It's a terrific career." I had other ideas, however, but he had given me an idea and so just before my graduation from college at the height of my athletic prowess--I was a long distance runner at the time as well as a soccer player and I had gotten my varsity letter in boxing--I just felt there was nothing in the world could be denied me.

I went to the United States Navy to enlist as a naval cadet. As I filled out the application, nothing particularly was said to me and in those days applications had no hesitancy about asking your religious affiliation. And while I had no affiliation, of course, I always put down I was Jewish or Hebrew. I don't really remember what I put down at the time but something to denote the fact that I wasn't Christian or Moslem. And they gave me an exam, which was like an IQ exam, which I scored, as they disclosed to me, satisfactorily on. They didn't tell me that I scored high or low but I can tell you that I took the same exam subsequently for the Air Force and I discovered that I was in the first ranking of IQ students. In addition to that, they gave me a physical test. It was a lark. I did everything that they wanted me to do and I did it well, depth perception in terms of the eyes, the ability to do X number of push-ups, run, all of these tests. Then when I got all through, they had me come back for an interview and this was supposed to be a personality interview or a psychology

interview or something like that. And the officer that sat there, sat there with that certain look that every Jewish young person meets with some time and it's a look that says, and you know what it says. At any rate he sat there with me and he went through, he says, "Your physical went well, but you know what, I must tell you, we have to turn you down." I said, "Why are you turning me down if I passed the medical and I passed the physical?" He said, "We'll call it a matter of personality." I didn't say, because after all we learned restraint, I didn't say to him what I knew at that moment, and it was for that reason that later on following Pearl Harbor when I enlisted, I did not enlist in the Navy.

BB: That is a very perceptive story and it leads me to the next question which is to speak about your involvement in the military, in the United States military. So would you please speak to that.

SW: Yes, when I enlisted and, of course, my mother was no different than any other mother and I'm not saying a Jewish mother at all. It was something shocking to her that I should have gone off and enlisted without first consulting her and my father and without obeying the advice of my school adviser at the time because I was in my last year at pharmacy school and doing well. And they had indicated to us that they could put us in some kind of a [unclear] program--I forget the particular digits--which would mean that we would finish school and then have a job as a pharmacist in the services somewhere along the line. But instead here I was having elected to enlist in the United States Air Force to be a cadet. I assured her that I was going to sit at a desk. What I didn't disclose to her was that the desk was going to be in an airplane. I told her that I was going to be a navigator. She knew I was interested in astronomy and that I enjoyed puzzles and the wonderment of the universe and so she could understand some of that, but she must have suspected it because she was too bright to know otherwise and I am sure my father did too.

At any rate, ultimately, I did go into the service and it was an interesting experience because my name was Willig and the closest man to me in the line--and we started essentially as something below a human being, even though we were in the cadet corps--this closest person to me was a wonderful young man named Bob Winney who was later an usher at my wedding. Can you imagine finding out later on that his parents owned a very famous tavern, inn, on the Hudson River which had denied service to my family because they were Jews? This inn was called Beekman Arms and my family had gone to visit, at that time, the sainted house in Hyde Park, and had gone there, driven there, and were just simply turned away. At any rate, Bob Winney was a very wonderful friend. I met with others in the service and my military experience did point out that being Jewish was something very special.

When after a while, my wife and I were married, we made arrangements for her to meet with me because I hadn't had a leave of absence and we had not had a honeymoon and she was coming down to see me for the first time. And we made arrangements to meet in the chapel at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama. I don't want to dwell on this too much because it's a very roundabout story but as a lowly creature, a rat, the lowest creature

that walks in the cadet scheme, I didn't even know where the chapel was and I had to find out for *Shabbos* because that's when my wife was going to have an opportunity to come into the chapel and see me for the first time since our wedding, some many months previously. So I decided I would chance it and I stopped a cadet officer, with the braid and the hat and the sword at his side--we were not allowed to look him in the eye because he was an upper classman--but from my position I stopped him and I said words to the effect that I would ask permission to ask him a question. And he granted me the permission to ask him a question. And then I said to him, could he tell me where the Jewish chapel was? And it took him aback, and he suddenly looked around him from right to left and finally he said to me, "I'm one, too." And he said he was a Jewish young man from Louisiana, and he did tell me where the chapel was.

I had two sessions of fisticuffs in the service; both of them were due to the fact that antisemitism was involved. In one instance, I got in a fight with some fellow who I didn't even know, nor did he know me, but he passed a comment about Jews with reference to someone I did know, and who I suppose served him as a stereotype. And I was in the shower--I remember it well--and I heard what this fellow said and we had some words, and we came to blows. We were both officers by that time, which after all, officers were not supposed to bat each other around. Earlier I had a fisticuff experience at the very same cadet training place in Maxwell Field because we had two Bostonians in there who didn't talk about Jews in an antisemitic way but interestingly enough spoke about Arabs and it was quite obvious they meant Jews and kept making these remarks, and making these remarks, until I asked one of them to step outside. On top of that he had made some insulting remarks about the fact that I had seen my wife for the first time and I was very sensitive in those days. And so we stepped out and I just remember that this fellow was supposed to be a prime athlete; we used to call him "Baseball Joe." I won't give you his last name. We used to call him "Baseball Joe" and he was really surprised. So there was some of that.

On the other hand, I was the only Jewish member of my own air crew. And I must confess that when I got into combat and into England that I looked for other Jewish fellows mostly because at the behest of Father Smith, who was our guiding angel, we did make *minyans* on Friday night, something which I had never done as a civilian. When we were in, we made a *minyan* and Father Smith would help us and one of the enlisted men who knew a good deal would do the reading and we would read in English from our translated little copy of the Bible, issued by the service. I indicated to you in my earlier remarks, I intended to be a navigator. In fact, I had enlisted as such, but that didn't mean that the service didn't play games with me. In fact they decided that on the basis of my physical tests that even though I qualified as a navigator I could also be a fighter pilot. It just so happened, therefore, that they put me through the first stages of the pilot training where I flunked out. I flunked out of dangerous flying and over-speeding and this all occurred in South Carolina. When I was reassigned, therefore, they finally gave me my first choice

which had been navigator, although they thought it was a punishment for me for having improperly trained as a pilot.

My real interest was in being a navigator and I also wanted to be in a B17, a flying fortress, the high-assed bird as we used to call it. It was a beautiful plane and very air-worthy and being replaced by the Air Force because of the fact that it didn't carry a very large bomb load. But nonetheless, it was a beautiful thing and it just caught my imagination. When I had graduated from navigation school, after a short stint of getting my wings as a gunner as well, I was sent to a place in Lincoln, Nebraska, where we would be assigned to a particular plane and a crew. And in the course of that, I met the brother of a friend of mine who was a private. I don't even know if he was a private first class, but he was "Permanent Party" which meant that in truth he made a lot of decisions. Knowing we were there to be assembled and sent off and so on, he said to me in a very comradely way, and maybe even in the role of a brother Jew, if there is anything he could do for me, he would be glad to. I said to him, "Yes, there is." And to his surprise all I wanted from him was to be sure that I was assigned in a B17. He was much relieved by the ease of that request. He said, "Oh, you'll have a B17." And sure enough I was in a B17 and ultimately I know that that saved my life to be in that kind of a plane.

Now even at this stage, before we went overseas and then again when we got there, as a Jew, I was very concerned. I began to think about the possibility--since we were trained to meet so many possibilities, ditching and evacuating the plane in the air and parachuting and crash landing and so on--and I thought a little further and thought to myself, "Well, what will happen if I am taken, caught by the Germans?" And no one could give me an answer. No one would try to respond to this. Finally in England when I was at the base there, the people, and in G2 I think it was called, said to me, "Look, you are asking this question, we can't answer it, it will depend upon who it is that captures you."

At that time I wrote my wife a long letter in which I prophesied for her that if I were to be shot down that she should not worry, even if she hears that I am missing, that she should not worry because she knows how well I speak German and understand German and so on and I will try to avoid capture. The prophecy in a sense almost came to be such. We were returning from an unsuccessful bombing mission to the *Leuna oel fabrik* [oil refinery] in what is today East Germany; it was East Prussia at that time. The Germans had developed a methodology of creating fuel from coal and they were making this synthetic fuel and they were protecting it. They had very little air power left and very little fuel and so they always used their best forces there. The result was they shot the hell out of our formation and we went scurrying back with not that much fuel and certainly very low on oxygen to drop bombs as secondary and tertiary targets. We managed the latter; I think it was the railroad yards of Hanover. And by that time we had left alive in that wonderful B17, only one engine and that one engine had to suffice us to get back. Eventually we kept losing altitude. We were down to about 1,000 feet and soldiers were shooting up at us with rifles and machine guns and I was aiming for the English Channel. We had known all about

a place named [unclear] where a man had one gun there and I guess that was his fate in life to knock off those who were laggards. And there we were and his gun finished us off.

We readied for a crash landing, since by that time we were only about 500 feet above the ground. Fortunately, there were P51's, mustangs, who had flown around, alerted to the fact that we might be in trouble and they machine-gunned Germans on the ground to permit us the opportunity to crash land safely and to leave the flying machine. As we gathered to crash land, the pilot, Lloyd Warden, and I split the crew up. I had always said I would seek to evade capture and three elected to go with me. Actually, Lloyd chose them to go with me although Bonnie Bonacat the bombardier chose. He took the balance of the crew with him because they intended to surrender.

Bonnie Bonacat, Ray Haydell and Blackbird followed me at the crash landing, which Lloyd Warden carried off beautifully with the help of those P51's. We all took off out of there, and I often think to myself, we ran for the first piece of woods and it had a tremendous fence around it and we hadn't really fully gotten rid of our clothing but as I indicated to friends later, I guess we had adrenaline rockets and we managed to get over that fence, ran into the woods and laid down flat just like the army instructed us to do. We were not going to move. We were going to wait for dark and attempt to escape in the dark. The only difference from the manual was that these characters knew where we were and so they shot a hail of bullets over the area with their Schmeisers. They never came in to get us. They never threw a grenade in at us. "Was that luck?" I ask myself that.

As we lay there in a row behind some cover, I grasped my dog tags with the H on them given to me by my government and a little gold ten commandments that Eleanor had given me with Hebrew inscription, and I wondered about my past conversations. And so I just didn't know what to do. And then finally I said to myself, "Fuck it, if I die, it's as a Jew." And I was angry when I said that to myself, angry at everybody. But once I made that decision I was myself and I was able to take over the leadership and kept the others quiet.

And at my direction we slithered, and we really slithered, out of that forest. We followed the army instructions which were, "Get away from the site of the crash as far as you can before you ask for help." We did that. We traveled at nights. We hid during the day and on one occasion we hid right on a range where German soldiers were practicing, not knowing that the little shack that we were in was used for storage purposes. Fortunately, they never came in. We walked in the dikes because we realized we were being hunted with dogs, having heard them in the distance. And we walked through the water to cause them to lose the scent. I later learned that the *Gruene Polizei* [Green Police] had exhibited our Mexican radio operator who had surrendered with Lloyd, had exhibited him as a Negro and warned the locals that we were Americana Terror-Fliege, Negroes, who would rape their women, and solicited their help.

*Tape one, side two:*

SW: Finally, one day we hid near a barn in what looked like a quiet farm. Out of the semi-darkness I came upon a farmer as he was preparing to feed his barn occupants and I said to him in perfect German, which was very naive: "*Wir sind Amerikaner; Kannst du uns helfen?*" ("We're Americans; can you help us?") I must say to you that when I had written my wife and told her that I thought I would be able to pass as a German, I envisioned coming down in Germany and, in addition to that, I never realized that a fellow in brown shoes is a foreigner, and that there was no way that that little escape kit that I carried with the American utensils and a valet order strap razor and blade instead of a standard Gillette would not get me into trouble.

At any rate back to this poor farmer who was frightened half to death. He did motion me into the barn and at that point I called the three others and we climbed the ladder into the hay loft and he left for help. We were plenty scared too. We let him go for help but the question is would he turn us in. I'll tell you at this point that we had no gun between the three of us. He came back pretty soon with several men dressed in rough civilian clothes. They smiled at first; they looked very friendly, and then two of them took positions behind us and one came up to me. Suddenly his smile froze and he put a pistol to my temple and in pretty good Americanese he said, "We think you are Germans." I said, "I speak German but I am an American and the others are from Pennsylvania, Louisiana and California." He said, "Where are you from?" I said, "I am from Brooklyn." Then started an almost unbelievable script. It was right out of the movie. He made various statements. He asked me various questions. They were calculated to show that I know who the Brooklyn Dodgers were, who had won the pennant, who had won the World Series. I knew things of that nature. They had truly thought me a German double agent. Apparently we had come down in a strong-hold area for the Dutch underground, rendered precarious because of the fact that Monty had failed at Arnhem, and loads of English paratroopers were in hiding and the Germans were trying to round them up. The underground was trying to gather them and smuggle them over the river at the dark of the moon. Thereafter, we were split up although Bonnie Bonacat, from Upper Darby, was with me until day zero virtually. Occasionally, British or Canadians were joined with us and once an American. Haydell and Blackburn never rejoined us but were freed at the end of the hostilities.

The very first Dutch family that the two of us were hidden with was a strange old man who lived with his sister nearby. It was a very grand house with lovely furnishings from the one visit I got inside. But they had only a tiny garden and a rabbit hutch. We were put in that rabbit hutch with a large hare for company. The old man or his sister would bring us some food which was obviously rationed food--bread, coffee, a piece of margarine. The coffee, by the way, was ersatz, and the jam was ersatz. And at night they would bring us in a little bit of *pap* [phonetic], which is a Dutch cereal containing grain and usually some buttermilk. After only 24 hours we could detect some great anxiety.

Finally, about 4 p.m. the old man came in. He did speak English. He told us to look at his hands and for the first time I noticed how gnarled they were and bent and misshapen. He said he had been in prison and his hands mangled for seeking to shelter a Jew and that he just couldn't go through that again and we must leave. I said to him, "Contact our courier," but he said he had already tried to no avail. I saw how intensely ashamed of himself he was. We had bicycled to his place but the courier had taken the bikes away. He begged us to come in for a last meal and leave. We went into the house. As I indicated, the furnishings in the house were mementos and he had been with the Dutch East India Company. I realized later that these people were trading goodies to live. Then came dinner. His sister had prepared *Hasenpfeffer*. It was the hare we had spent the day with. I couldn't eat. I ate a little bread and potato and Bonnie did the same and out we went.

Of course, the courier had given us instructions earlier. If you pass somebody, everybody's very polite and you say, "*Welkom*." If you pass a German you should pass air. Here we were on a rural road in the dark after curfew. It was not a good time and I might say the moon was out. We had gone a short way down the road to begin this new adventure when a disreputable looking large man alone on a bicycle overtook us. I said, "*Dag*," thinking he'd go by. But he took a second look and I might add we had been redressed in civvies over our uniform and with black shoes that the British had supplied. He turned to me and said, "*Onder duiker?*" [undergrounder] and I, "*Ja*." He said he had been sent to look for us and his name was Jan. In the course of the evening he had told us he had been a trolley driver in Utrecht and had been unable to resist the temptation to run over a German officer who chanced in front of him. Of course, since then he had spent his time with the underground.

He led us to another farmer and that man kept us for a few days. He got his payoff in American corn which was in great demand and then he told the underground we had to go. I might tell you at this point that a great reward it might seem to some farmers, but the risk was very great as well. What British Lancaster planes did following instructions, was to drop sacks of American corn that all Dutch farmers needed desperately for their chicken feed so that the farmers could be rewarded who gave shelter to Allied soldiers. However, as you know, should they have been found, they would have been killed, their farm houses burnt and their farms confiscated.

Following this experience I was in many places and I became kind of a real Dutchman. As I said in the beginning, I've had three names in my life, on my birth Sidney Henry Willig, and at my circumcision Elkanan ben Zelophehad, and in Holland my name was Hendrik Willig. I really didn't have to learn the new name which was a relief. In all the time I was in Holland as an American Army officer I realized retrospectively I only met with one Jew in hiding and I will tell you about it. I only told one person in Holland I was a Jew and that was this Jew. I had a brief opportunity to speak to him, mostly a few minutes in the night while we exchanged pots as I'll explain later. In all the time I was in Holland, even though being a Jew was part of my reason for being there, I didn't really

think of myself as a Jew but rather as an American. As Americans we tend to think of ourselves as Americans who practice religion as Jews. As a first generation American full of love and gratitude for my country as taught me and is expressed by my parents constantly, my Jewishness was kind of segregated within me for special occasions. That included the times when it was challenged.

My one Jewish contact did give me a picture of the extreme circumstances that befell Jews. But apart from that until recent years, I had only heard the Anne Frank story. Historians, however, tell me that other Jewish survivors have described the Holocaust Holland style. Jacob Presser wrote a book, *The Destruction of the Jewish Jews*.

BB: Dutch Jews.

SW: *Of the Dutch Jews*. Of all the operatives I met with in the Dutch underground--and we were all called *Onder duikers* --not only did I meet with no Jews but no concern or sympathy were expressed for Jews. And I must say that without casting any adverse reflection on their courage and their patriotism and their desire to beat the Germans. The issue never arose. No one talked about Jews. I did not meet them all after all, I mean in terms of the Dutch underground. But of all that I did meet, that is my observation. I must tell you it is hard for Americans to conceive the effect of the *Grüne Polizei*, the Green Police. They were such an effective and well-trained occupation police force, having been trained since prior to World War I, that they had the Dutchmen terrorized.

One family that I stayed with was the van der Munt family and I had the most ease and the most tension, the most living and the most frustration with them. We lived in a barn with a large swine, a stud bull and four cows and numerous chickens. At first I lived in a hay stack with a front door that had a tin sign for Hellmar cigarettes. But when it got too cold we came into the barn. The owner, a little powerhouse, van der Munt, was quite a man and kept us--to his credit and to his pride, I suppose--despite the fact his son, Job, was a fierce NSB'er, a Dutch Nazi. Job tried in every way to irritate us to fight or to leave, but when his father saw that I could handle him verbally, he just sat back to enjoy the joust.

The old man taught me checkers and on Sunday when the dominee came, he sharpened my game and in a twinkling, I established a reputation as being unbeatable. People came to play me from as far off as Utrecht, unchallenged. And I was introduced as a cousin from Friesland Job burned. He scoffed as Bonnie and I did household chores like sweeping, peeling potatoes, cleaning the barn and so on, Americana officer. I told his father that Job had told us that German officers were barracked in that farm for a few weeks during the past year and asked whether they had done household chores. The chores didn't stop but the teasing did. Eventually, Job caused us to leave when he was badly injured by a blast that he caused by flicking a cigarette lighter after he had believed he had removed all the fuel from a jettisoned gas tank from a British Typhoon.

I went back to see this barn, this family, and all the townspeople of Binninfeld in 1972. Although my wife and I didn't realize it until now as I recount the tale, I didn't tell

them I was a Jew the second time around either. I had real reason not to tell them the first time. It was no wonder that I learn now many years later that many people were critical, even in Holland, of the fact that the underground university hot-houses of resistance stayed aloof from assisting Jews. Many good patriots just unknowingly helped the Germans carry out their anti-Jewish measures, we are told. Actually, Hollanders didn't call Germans by any other name than Muff or *Kohlkopf* or *Hun*, or cabbage head. Among the people who had extreme religious conviction, somehow or other there wasn't that much sympathy for Jews who were really considered outsiders. Imagine if my Dominie friend had known that this American neophyte who was the neighborhood checkers champ immediately after learning the game, was a Jew, that this individual who read the Bible according to Matthew, in this Calvinist household, was reading a strange Bible.

In the course of one discussion that I had with my underground cohorts and my proposal for anti-Muff activity, a comment was made as to my mind and my appearance. And the individual said, "[unclear] if you are not an American officer, you would be taken for a Jew and if you were," a gesture-meaning death followed. My dog tags, they were still around my neck with my ten commandments. I came home with them. In my initial interview with the underground, they looked at the dog tags, scoffed at them, and never examined them closely because they thought me a German plant because I spoke German and I never had occasion to show them again until I was freed.

When we left the van der Munts we went to stay with a gutsy little farmer, Derk Vetter. He and his wife were coarse outside but beautiful in heart. After they knew me for a while, they took me one night to Herman van Ziden's hiding hole. I visited him on the pot exchange most every day thereafter and we spoke in English. He was a Jew that they had hidden. It had a clod of earth the size of a sewer which they removed and he would hand up his pots and we would give him the new pots that would contain food and he would hand up the pots that contained waste. In my conversations with him, he found it hard to conceive that I was a Jew and when I indicated to him in one conversation that I had volunteered for military duty, I could see that he was somewhat stunned. He spoke English fluently, by the way. He was a Rotterdam accountant and he told me he had no idea what had occurred to the balance of his family. A friend whom he did not identify in any way had made this contact from a long time ago and helped him reach Derk Vetter.

Could this have been an honored Gentile? I'll never know. That poor old man with the gnarled hands had been the first I'd met. These were the last. For all that I am saying here then there was after all, a Derk Vetter and his family that kept Herman van Ziden and someone who could pass in the countryside who deliver Herman to Derk Vetter. Jewish historians caution us to never to deny that they were such. What a risk those people faced. The figures that show the willingness of non-Germans to take a positive role in the destruction of Jewish people are frightening. Unquestioningly, they arose out of pre-war antisemitism nationalized in a dozen themes which you would find all familiar and therefore it was no surprise to learn of how many Jews were killed in Poland with high

percentages in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Hungary. Only 400 Jews survived in hiding in Bohemia and Moravia out of the 90,000 that had lived there before. And the same in Holland, especially in the large cities. For centuries, Jews had been accepted to live in peace. But when the Germans were victorious and the French and British were repeatedly defeated, that acceptance had eroded to something less than even mere compassion.

Authors tell us of the documents that are available which indicate that Dutch families were anxious to move into the homes and to gain the furniture and the other accumulations of Jewish less fortunates. It was a dehumanizing experience for Dutch people, but a far more bitter one for the Jews. In all fairness when I read these letters and these stories, I must quickly add that a great deal of the Jewish difficulty, I believe, lay in the fact that they were urban dwellers. The Boers, the farmers, were the new aristocracy. They had food, they grew it, they traded for it, they were able to steal from the Germans, they needed no ration book, they were the food heart of the *Schwarzhandel*, the black market. As the train of urban people pushing baby carriages and carts came out of the cities down the *Autobahn* [highway] and then into the side roads, their conveyances carried their finery, their furniture, their linen. They humbly approached each farmhouse and now the formerly lowly farmer, the Boer, was like a baron. What would they accept for a potato peelings, for pea casings, for bottom greens, for sugar beet? My heart went out to them. In some instances they were only allowed to apply for such barter at an outhouse or small window.

[A Dutch radio announcement of *Radio Oranje* is quoted.] The voice of the clandestine radio was beamed to us on our old sets. The Germans tried to jam the message, tried to discover these little sets. A little boy in the case of my staying at the van der Munts, the little boy was called Hotjohn, who stood out there in the road and at the approach of Germans or strangers, he would whistle and we would break into song, *Sarie Marais* and [unclear], the ultimate song you might remember from the picture "Breaker Morant," which was a patriot song of the Boers in South Africa.

Eventually, there came a day at Derk Vetter's when a Canadian artillery liaison pair with a jeep came by the house directed by the underground. They shouted, "Come on out, Yanks." We came out. And I knew we were still very much in the war zone so I asked why they were there. We had read that the Germans were threatening to flood the low lands with salt water. They had come in to get some idea from the underground where the Germans were located. We left to go down the road and there were two German *Wehrmacht* wearing the band of the Goering division. They threw down their weapons at the sight of us. It was my job to interrogate them. And of course, with every question and with every response I would say to them, "*Du lügst*." ("You're lying.") We got out one of them sitting on the loader front of our vehicle but Herman van Ziden was in the hole on that farm for the duration.

One of the curious things that followed on this was--and you must remember that the Germans had not yet surrendered--was that I had been told, of course, that I was not to

discuss this with anybody nor was I to divulge any names of people lest they be retaliated against and that I suppose is one of the reasons that I never recounted this story before. But wasn't it of interest retrospectively now to find that when I came home as a real surprise, although I had given my wife warnings of my new-found freedom by sending her a telegram from the commercial cable in Paris some months before the army gave her the information that I had returned. Wasn't it a surprise to me to be contacted by the Vichy consular official in Washington on my arrival in New York? This individual asked me for a list of the people that had helped me so that he could see to it that they were rewarded properly. When one thinks of the dastardly way in which the Vichy government unnecessarily sent Jews to the concentration camps when they could have delayed, when they could have saved so many lives, one wonders at the network in this country that gave this kind of information to that Vichy Frenchman. Obviously I did not give him any information; I never responded to him and I brought the matter to the attention of our intelligence here who merely told me just not to respond.

BB: I wanted to ask you about your homecoming and what that was like.

SW: My homecoming was fantastic because I lived in a small neighborhood that was about 80% Italian and about 20% Jewish, in Bensonhurst. The neighborhood was actually called Mapleton and those people made a block party such as nobody has ever seen welcoming me. Of course, it was wonderful to see my child who had been born while I was away and my wife and my Mom and Pop and the family generally. But my father was something special because my major concern while I was in hiding was that since he was an ill man--he had a very bad heart, he had four major heart attacks in the time I was in the service--that my being shot down might be fatal to him. That was the only thing that I was so terribly concerned about because I knew I was going to come out of all this. I knew I was going to come home; I knew that a child had been born to me. So one day--one night I should say--I was lying asleep in that straw hut and my father came to me in a vision and he said to me, "*Zorgsikh nisht*," "Don't worry, I know you're alive and I know you're going to come back," and the relief that I felt after that was absolutely remarkable. I really knew he had communicated with me. When I came back he told me that he had been trying to send me that message and that indeed I must say that he, my father, and my older sister were the only ones that held out certainty that I would return. My wife's family was sure that since she had heard from all the other members from the crew that they were in prison that I had been captured and killed and they were preparing her for the worst and trying to convince her of that. And so it was hard for her to hold onto her hopes, but my father and my older sister, Selma, always were certain; something told them.

Following that, you know, I guess the war came to an end, the German end of the war, and then when the Japanese end of the war came, it was wonderful. I am kaleidoscoping all of that to tell you about going back to school. My academic father was a wonderful fellow named John Dandro, an Irish Catholic at St. John's who had always advised me in all my lifetime. In addition to that, John Dandro had made it possible for me

to go to school and to graduate because he would arrange for the courses to come out for my convenience so that I could take them and continue to work. And he used to say with his terrible speech which everyone poked fun at, "Sidney, don't worry about it, you just tell me when you can take that course. Let the fellows whose mothers and fathers can pay for them, let them worry about it." This had been before I went to the service.

I found, of course, when I came back, that John Dandro was no longer the dean and indeed something funny had happened. There was a possibility that a quota system had been installed at my beloved university of St. John's. And I became president of the class and valedictorian and in my valedictory address I assailed that, and I remember that John Dandro applauded. And I was assured by Father Flynn at the time who was in charge that that wasn't true, that there would be no quota system. And to this day I have such warmth and feeling for St. John's because they were so good to me and they tried so hard. It was John Dandro who told me, "Sidney, now become a lawyer," and I took his advice and many years later I came to him when I was troubled. I was already in practice. I was involved with a corporation and my corporate leadership was bounced out and I was at a crossroads and I asked him for advice. He said, "I want you and Eleanor to come to Spain with me." I didn't know he was carrying a pouch with him, that he had had a colostomy. And he counseled me and it was he, essentially, who sent me into my professorial tasks. Tremendous influence. I can never stop the warmth and the feeling. The special pride that I have in being a Jew has nothing at all to do with the fact that I have met many honorable Gentiles, some that I weep for because this man should have lived a lot more years.

At any rate, that's the way it was in my own lifetime as a married man, as a parent. I saw to it that my children had an opportunity to make their own choice with respect to studying our faith, the history, the language and so on, getting a good Jewish education. I encouraged them to do it and they all did it. And to this day, of course, they read *Ivrit* much better than I do. But I guess with the realization of what has gone on in the world, it's not unnatural that as we get older we return more closely to the traditions of Judaism. I would just like to say one other thing, that I just feel that any time you tell a story of Jews you are likely to dwell on survivorship, because we are survivors. And I've sought the reasons but I kind of think that some of these outrageous and extreme actions, that, by which people-

*Tape two, side one:*

BB: This is the second tape of the interview of Professor Sidney Willig and I am Bonnie Bailes and we have decided to go on with a second tape to capture some of the ideas that he would like to express.

SW: As I wanted to indicate that I believe that the survival of Jews is related to genetic favoritism. Itself developed at least to some extent from the same millennia of historic circumstance that chronicles the history of the would-be exterminators and oppressors. It has been my experience that many people who have examined the rationale for these haters of Jews usually find in them some question, some haunting fear of their own inadequacy, of their own comparative inability. Jews are copers. They are survivors. History has taught them that they must do this. I would like to indicate that today as we all know, German scholars and historians are in the vanguard of investigating the terrible records. It is they who have helped accumulate a great deal of the evidence against the Nazis and so on. And in a way this catharsis and this purge has been truly salutary and exemplary in so far as Germans are concerned. But, unfortunately, as others have noted, it has led to a rather incomplete picture of the Holocaust experience not only in Europe but all over the world. I think it is something that we should bear in mind. In our own country, despite the extremely high percentage of persons who have been so thoroughly integrated into American society that we term them assimilated, we still have a nucleus of the same kinds of Jews that survived on the European continent, on the African continent, in Asia. And it is we who must accept this burden of maintaining that pride of history, that pride of motivation, that pride of humanity, humaneness, that is part and parcel of our estate. I am awfully happy to have this opportunity to add my small voice to that of Jews who underwent unspeakable horrors at the hands of the enemy. But I join them in their vigilance and with them, I join them in the hope that it will not happen again. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

BB: Thank you. As you know after an interview, always, there are more thoughts that come to mind. Something in an hour cannot possibly tell even another hour of another person's life much less an entire period and an entire history. So we've decided that other thoughts that come to Professor Willig's mind are appropriate for this tape. His concern that they are out of sequence I think is much appreciated and yet to lose any of these thoughts would be much worse than to be out of sequence in my opinion, so please do speak.

SW: I must say I don't know whether I got this from my father or what the reason of it was, but my father always considered that he came here quite by accident to this country and it was a wonderful accident for me that he remained. But he was interned as an enemy alien in World War I because essentially he considered himself an Austrian even though we would term him a *Galitsyaner*. He was an Austrian and he considered Franz Joseph was the great and benevolent Emperor. Whatever the reason I think I was rather

Germanophilic and as I went through college, especially, even though I had already studied Latin and French and Spanish, I spent my most time with German. I took German five days a week and learned conversational and more importantly, literary German. To me Thomas Mann was so great that *Tod in Venedig*, *Death in Venice*, was one of the most beautiful things that I could read, and I loved it. But the man who really made me a Jew while I was in college--and I thought about this, for a fairly irreligious kind of guy--the fellow that made me a Jew was Lion Feuchtwanger, that's spelled L-I-O-N, Lion I guess it should be pronounced. When I read his book, *Josephus*, I became a Jew. He put history in its perspective. And then I followed that with his *Jew of Rome*. And I read Wassermann and I read Thomas Mann; *Magic Mountain* was so great to me and I read all of these in German. And that I thought was very interesting that I should be so much of a Germanophile and Thomas Mann of course fled to this country. The others are gone. But the fact was that those people that he fled from turned out to be capable of such deeds when they had so much feeling for art and beauty in them.

How this has repeated itself also is of interest. The boy that was born while I was abroad, unfortunately, died at age thirty of cancer. But nonetheless, in the time he was alive and had attended and graduated from Allegheny College, he tavered as though he were a German student. My younger boy, who is now my only son, Kenneth, became a German scholar and German historian and indeed went to Japan and taught German history there, in German, to the Japanese students for two years. Kenneth sojourned in Germany to write his doctorate thesis on the position of the German bar and judiciary during the Holocaust. But he sojourned to Germany to do this. By the way, he got tremendous cooperation from the German people and the German archivists, much more so than our own in this country. To this day, Kenneth speaks German very well and has a thorough collection of the German *literati*. Isn't that a strange thing for a first and second generation of meager *Galitsyaner* heritage to be able to find as an interest, to find as a major interest? I really can't give you any clue as to why that is other than what I have told you already.