Werner Cohen (2006)

Interview 2.1

Interviewers: Jordan Weinberg

[Beginning of Interview 2.1]

Jordan Weinberg: This is Jordan Weinberg interviewing Werner Cohen on September 28, 2006. With the last interview, we ended with you talking about the story of Kristallnacht and about that. Could you talk about that more just to go back into that experience?

Werner Cohen: About Kristallnacht?

JW: Yeah.

WC: Well, I need to review what I said then you mean or what?

JW: Or just, yeah--

WC: Well, I think I indicated to you that the date was the 9th of November.

JW: Yes.

WC: And the year 1938, and by that time I’ve been forced out of high school which was the German high school, and I had been attending a Jewish high school in another city, Cologne. I lived in the city of Essen so every day I had to commute on a train. And on this particular day when I arrived at the Yavna High School in Cologne, the gates were closed and I knew nothing about what was going on until a teacher, one of the English teachers that was teaching a course leading to the Cambridge matriculation examination by the name of Alan de Russett made himself known by whistling. He was standing on a side street peeping around the corner and waved me closer to him and as I approached, he wanted to know what was going on. Why was I there? Well, he said that I better go back to Essen because there would be no school. There was all kind of events in Germany including the burning of synagogues all over the country. And with that I left on a train and when I got back to my home town and approached my own house walking up the street which had a curve, I perceived a large group of people standing maybe two or three deep outside. It turned out they were rubbernecking. What had happened was what happened to thousands and tens of thousands of homes. The organization, the Nazi organization, had prepared for this event, this type of event, for many, many months, many years, and the trigger for the whole Kristallnacht pogrom, I want to repeat, was the assassination by a young Jewish boy in Paris of the third counselor at that embassy by the name of Ernst von Rath, R-A-T-H. And the Germans took that to be a declaration of war of the Jewish population on the Germans, and therefore they needed to now proceed harshly and they took-- had the organization drive up in trucks and in other vehicles, in groups, in order to do a thoroughly destructive job on
anything that was identifiable with Jews--synagogues to start with, the insides of synagogues, Torah scrolls, some foreign books, but also private homes.

Getting back then to my own situation, the people who were rubbernecking as I called it, then they opened up a venue for me to approach into my house and I was told by my mother what you see there is what has happened. Your father, by the way, has been taken by the secret state police. He's in jail and you hide in your room up on the third floor which I then did, the idea being if they come back, they will miss you. Well, they did come back and they did find me, I guess, and marched me down the steps and I don't know whether I told you this. The only time that I felt so weak in my knee I nearly fell down the stairs as they were guiding me. Interestingly enough, I'd like to mention something. These guys, of course they were--I don't know--ordinary men from the people, but the German population was wholeheartedly backing what was going on. They, after the war didn't want to have that truth. Everybody wants to be a victim. They don't want to be a victimizer when the accounting is given, okay? Like the Poles. The Poles wanted to be seen as victims of the Germans. They do not wish to be seen as victimizers of the Jews. There is this one village. The Jews came back from concentration camps, sixty of them to that one village. The Poles turned on them and killed every one of them. They did not wish to be told that when they had a chance to take it out on the Jews that they were Jews haters and anti-Semites. No, they never were. That's the way. The Austrians, by the way, they forget how they jubilantly acclaimed the approaching Nazi armies. They say they were forced into it, but there's pictures and the films of the day show with what enthusiasm they joined the game.

This is an aside. I go back to the guys marching me down the stairs. They asked me whether the house was owned by my father. Well, it happened to be owned by my father, so I said yes. He said, that figures. What they were basically saying is here we secret police slobs don't have houses but you have. [laughs] That is, makes it that much happier for us to proceed against you out of sheer envy or whatever emotion they have. Nothing noble about it. Just a human reaction to that particular. Then took into prison local city of Essen had, of course, a prison and I was a 16-year-old boy. It was, on the one hand, it was interesting. I, for the first time had been inside a prison. I read about it. It looked like a commode or something, a bucket for human needs, this type of thing, but I didn't have at that time the mature understanding say of a grownup, fully grownup person, to understand the dimensions of the calamity which had occurred. And, did you want to ask any questions or what I'm saying?

**JW:** Mmmm.

**WC:** Please interrupt. I think it would be more interesting for you if you do rather than me just to say because pretty soon you'll be laying back your head and sleeping at me [laughs] while I'm talking. That would be disaster.

**JW:** Were there others in the prison in similar situations with you?
WC: Yeah. You see, there's a good question. They had rounded up several thousand, several hundred certainly other Jewish males in the city above a certain age and they were all suddenly put into that prison. Usually in a prison, you get one criminal and another, but you do get three, six hundred criminals dumped on the door until the prison and one goal, right? But that was the situation. They were--

JW: So the Essen prison was relatively large. It was a--

WC: What?

JW: The prison in Essen, it was--

WC: Well, it was a large prison. It's like--are you familiar with Baltimore downtown?

JW: Yes.

WC: The prison facilities. Well, they could take some hundred prisoners, new. I don't know whether it's quite that large or not.

JW: [laughs]

WC: The city was the same size as Baltimore, so that wasn't a problem. But I would just say that for about a week I was held there, and then because--actually, too many actually. They put me into another facility in a suburb of Essen, an old town that probably came from the Middle Ages and the prison was that much more ancient, and there was one other guy that was a contemporary of mine--Wolfgang Pelz was his name. And the warden there he was, I guess, amused by the fact he had 16 year olds coming in there from good families and so forth, so he let us out of the, opened the cell and made us sweep in front of it a little bit which was a pleasant relief for me, but it was obviously as far the warden was concerned, a situation he hadn't encountered before having ordinary people suddenly stuck in there for no reason other than they were Jews. That's what it amounted to. Well, back to the regular prison then onto a train all night, marched through the streets and early in the morning with the population that were up then and in the street just gawking and watching it all. Apropos the fact that after the war when I was in Germany for a whole year, I never encountered a single German who knew anything about anything. If you had asked the people who were in the street and saw the Jews being marched through the city, after the war, did you know about it? They would have said no, I never knew anything. [laughs] So that's apropos who was involved and who knew anything. Everybody, they knew a lot, particularly in the constant incitement against the Jews.

The train ended up on a--outside, right outside the concentration camp of Dachau, and as I looked out, I see these guys there in their uniforms, blue, white stripes, you know, the cap like that, [pause] and what I think I would like to do is pay more attention to the intangibles rather than telling you this is what happened. That what happened. Then we marched into the camp. Then this and that. What you have to understand is that you're moving into an unknown future.
You haven’t been told anything, so all of a sudden the doors are flung open and people yelling, get out of there! Quick! Quick!, with a demanding voice, aggressively acting upon you which is the whole theme of the concentration camp of creating a relationship with the people who are there that it serves to dehumanize and to degrade the individual. What is said and how it is said is not anything that you would know because you only lived in polite society. How am I going to convey to you the mood and the reaction to something that’s utterly degrading and utterly offensive? I mean, I have to practically knock you down in order for you to enter into what I’m telling you. Otherwise, this is the difference between trauma and drama where you are in the safe area of drama and I, you know, I can hear it today, the voices, that dogs and so forth that went with it. And of course, sidearms and, well, the barking and that went on and the insults. You know, dirty Jew. You pig. You, anything you can imagine is thrown at you, and then endlessly, endlessly, never stopping. They were trained in that.

So they made us line up. Now one thing that I have to convey to you. This is November. By this time, 9th of November, add a week, it’s like 16th, 17th of November. I have the date in my, somewhere, but on that date I was brought into— All of a sudden, getting out of that car, train, where we were under police, essentially the police were responsible. Now we were under the SS and lining up there, all of a sudden they had a raw wind sweeping down from the Alps, already in late autumn. You became aware of it, keenly aware of it. So we had to line up and they just stand there a few hours. And you had to [stutters] hands touching the seats of your pants and standing rigidly. Any movement, they barked at you and they were, God knows what they would do. We were not aware what this all meant.

Then we were marched into the camp and over the camp it says, arbeit macht frei which means, freely translated, honest labor is a liberating experience. Well, there was—the labor that took place in the camp was forced labor and it was not a liberating experience because people died in the quarries. I need to say something about Dachau. It ended up being an extermination camp. They built gas chambers there and people who were actually killed. The original camp of Dachau and several others were put up right in the beginning were instituted of the Hitler regime which was in 1933. At that time, they simply rounded up their political enemies, people who had been Communists and so forth, other groups, and stuck them into a camp. They weren’t exterminated there, but they were to, what they called be reeducated. This wasn't for Jews, but it was to turn their minds. The way they did that was with the harshest treatment, physical abuse and all this kind of stuff, and primarily very hard labor. I mentioned quarry labor and so forth. I had no experience of that because when we got there, we were not put in the labor battalion. At least, I wasn’t, and the chicanery that I was exposed to for the time that I was there had to do with how you tolerate the unbelievable cold which was accentuated by the fact we were bereft of our own clothes. They were stored some place. I got it back when I was released. And hair was shorn and we were given these blue white cotton uniforms. Where really it was cold before with a little bit-you’ve heard of layering.

JW: Yes.

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WC: If you have underwear, then you have a shirt or maybe you have even a sweater over that. You have two or three layers, the air being the insulating entity between the layers. But we only had one layer of cotton now. It went right through there so it was really, really unbearable. And the lack of food. We just got--while I was there, they had a little soup every day, ladled out into a tin can, and a slice of bread about, well, the size of maybe two slices of bread, sliced bread, for the whole day. And then it was mostly standing at attention. At 5:30 in the morning it was, you were up, out of your cot which was layered cots. You've seen that. And immediately the chicanery started. You could, you have to be five or seven minutes to rush into the bathroom, whatever. You take a little water in your face and then you had to be outside. Then they made, after all that rushing, you were left to stand there again for hours. And then they have counts and recounting and what they call it, a--that seemed to be something that was prevalent. They didn't know what to do with you, so they ended up making you count, you know, a count off. It was maybe two or three hours standing out there in the cold before you marched. They marched you off to a parade grounds and you continued there for another two or three hours (....)

All I remember is the cold and I remember the lack of food. In the three weeks I was there, I lost ten pounds. For a boy, I was only--I don't know how much I weighed then, maybe 115, 120. So ten pounds lost was a significant reduction of weight. You couldn't--I couldn't think of anything but food, what I had before and so forth as they would march you endlessly through the day. Any questions you have?

JW: Do you remember any particular people from your bunk that you were, the layered bunk that you were talking about?

WC: No. I do not know today. I mentioned this one guy who was in, from my same community, but I do remember one event that I may have mentioned before that I always remember and I always have this man in mind when we have memorial services. My mother's cousin, first cousin, her son who lived in the town in which he was born, a little rural town called Geldenneil in the lower Rhine area, Rhineland, and I met him there. He was in the housing and somehow he--it was totally dangerous to have, to use some paper. He had paper. He wanted to [phone rings] put that under your--if you were found, you'd get into [phone rings] Hello.

He had, he had gotten a hold of not one, but two undershirts. I don't know how they got into the camp. When people were released, they would leave it behind, of course. He had two and he gave me one of them. He could easily have said, I'm not going to mention that. So now I've got a layer now, one, two. He gave me one of those shirts and under the circumstances, I think that I would have to say that was the best present I ever received in my life because it made the difference to have that little bit of extra comfort. Any other question? [pause] Okay.

JW: [laughs]

WC: What about you? What, what, what, how does it strike you? What do you need to know?
Interviewer 2: Umm, this is sort of like Jordan. [laughs]

WC: Huh?

Interviewer 2: But I'm sort of drawing a blank here.

WC: You just keep rattling on. [laughs] Alright. Sarah, any--

Interviewer 3: Umm, if you could spell the name of your friend that you were in, or that the person in town that you were in prison with. You said--


Interviewer 3: Okay.

WC: Yeah.

Interviewer 3: Thanks.

JW: I was actually kind of wondering because you talked about this whole thing about how everyone kind of knew what was going on, and you talked about Austria and then, but also earlier--

WC: I'm talking about the-- After the event.

JW: Yes.

WC: Everybody wants to have clean hands.

JW: Yeah, but you talked about during the '30s and with the political prisoners, did people pretty much know what was going on then?

WC: Yes, yes. And you occasionally came across people who had been in concentration camps and they invariably told you that they were not at liberty to tell you anything. They told me you couldn't speak about it. It did happen. But this had nothing to do with Jews.

JW: Yeah.

WC: The Jewish thing only [stutters] and I know that the commandant of Dachau was in that position of knowing what to do with those thousand people or more that came in in one day because, as I said, they were not getting into, in the working groups to go into quarries and so forth because he probably was just wondering, what's going on here? How am I going to rearrange the routines of the camp with this sudden situation thrust upon me because if I react too fast, then the undoing of what I'm doing could be--it's better to wait to see what will happen, and that worked to my advantage because it would have been much worse to have to go into the chicanery of the labor battalion which were designed actually mostly to degrade and be a

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humiliating experience. What else? I don't know what to, how much of the quarried stone they needed that they couldn't have gotten elsewhere.

So then after about three weeks, there had been names called out days before already that had to report and then they were released, and one day my name appeared and I had to go back to the administrative building. They gave me my clothes back. I had a shower, a long shower. I put my-it was unbelievable, but at the same time I do remember the incredible sadness. I thought, here I am and I'm putting on the warm, my own warm clothes with all the other people out there continuing to have to go and continue in their misery.

I went back on a train and when we went through Munich, which was a larger town through which the train had to be rerouted or I forget whether we had to change trains. This time now we were on our own, no longer under supervision. There were some Jewish ladies with coffee and maybe some cake at the platform every day. I guess people from Dachau were coming through there and they were trying to give them some gesture of friendship and of sympathy or something like that. And then I ended up going home and here was my mother who informed me that in fact I was scheduled to leave in a short time and that developed that a chain of events that had occurred that was outside my knowledge. The British which had been preventing Jews from going to what was then Palestine, what is now Israel, because they wanted to court the friendship of the Arab rulers, masses and so forth. There had been a--let's put it this way. They had been singularly unhelpful in getting people out of Germany who needed to get out, who made every effort to go here, there or anywhere, and certainly Palestine. The word Palestinian didn't exist then. The Palestinians were the Jews. This is only since '67 I think that they're talking about Palestinians. Are you aware of that? The people who have been in Palestine, they claim to have been there from times immemorial. They all came in when the Zionists built up the land. When Mark Twain was in--have you heard about Mark Twain going to Jerusalem? You'll have to read about that or look it up. He said this is a devastated, devastating sight, stones and wilderness and a few stray cats and nothing else. That was the time when the first settlers went from Russia to Israel, to what is now Israel. And as the developments of the Jews flourished, okay, the surrounding areas, Arabs, Syrians, tried to get labor and they came into the area. Time immemorial. [laughs] Before the First World War, that's how they got into Palestine, what is now Palestine.

Why am I going there? I'm losing-- Oh, it really had to do with the mentioning of the fact that the British tried everything to avoid the flourishing of that enterprise which ended up being the State of Israel. Then somebody had a change of heart, but only after the 9th of November, and seeing the total destruction, the ruthless war the Nazis waged against the Jews, he in Parliament made a proposal that if Britain, the English would take 10,000 children under the age of 17. That was the hook on which my release ultimately depended because I had mentioned this high school, Yavna in Cologne, that had a director by the name of Dr. Eric Klobansky who had for years hoped to engineer some kind of an immigration project where whole classes would go together into a foreign country like England. But it was a dream. Nothing came of it. There
was--you could dream as long you want to. Under this new provision then of England being willing to take Jewish children, it was really a matter now of finding British citizens, preferably of Jewish background, who would want to sign responsible, financial responsible, for that project. Now if you don't think that's hard to do. I mean, people will pay lip service, but actually being involved, financial help, that is another situation. Don’t you understand? Wouldn’t you react that way? [laughs] As long as you can talk about it, right? When you're in trouble, your pocket money [laughs] Hey, not so easy.

Well, this young rabbi of this particular synagogue in London by the name of Louie Rabinowitz, Dr. Louie Rabinowitz, he got up and pounded the pulpit on a Shabbos morning. He said, I'm going to tell you something. My sermon this week consists of the fact that I've committed you to take a class from this high school in Cologne. We need a building, a hostel, beds and everything else, a kitchen, help and cooks, everything else. You pay for it. I've committed you and the amount everybody owes is this and that. A lot of people will say, hey, you committed me? You have no right to commit me. I'm out of it. By the time everybody declares I don't want to be in on it, he would have been standing there saying, I've committed it and I have not a single person to give anything. [laughs] Okay? That's human’s situation, isn't it? But he was able to do it and as a result, thirty boys in one class and then thirty girls in another class, all 13 years old, were brought to England and they were received cordially and friendly and all this kind of stuff, and there was a set up to collect the money every week. I don't know anything about that and how many started to default after a while and all this kind of stuff. That must have happened, but I was not in that part of it. But the fact that I needed to come out of the concentration camp. My mother approached Dr. Klobansky and said, what are we going to do?

And he said, I will take this boy who's older--I was 16--and I attach him. He's one of the 13-year-olds that are going to go out, the only one, everybody else being of that class. And that was the chain of circumstance, the British allowing it in, then my having gone to the Yavna. Anywhere else, I wouldn't have had a connection where somebody was trying to send out young kids, and being attached to that saved my life. I don't know whether I mentioned to you. I was in fact 16 when I was sent to the concentration camp, and when my mother undertook to get me out, which there was a delay. The actual transport leaving Germany was, I think on the 17th of January of the year 1939. Okay? By that time, I'd been home a couple of weeks already, three weeks, maybe months of preparation. My mother bought me clothes and this and that, whatever, but I had also, on the 8th of December, on the 8th of December, just about a month after the Kristallnacht, better than a month before I left, I turned 17. Seventeens were not eligible for that. If I had been born, therefore, a month or two earlier, again, I would not have been, I would probably die in the concentration camp. The guy with the shirt, gave me my shirt, his name was Herbert Grson, Herbert Grson, G-R-S-O-N, he eventually, I learned, was released from Dachau and he made, immigrated somehow to Holland. Holland was occupied and overrun when the Germans declared war in September and they got a hold of him again, put him back in the concentration camp and he died there. He got out once, but he didn't get out twice. So that’s why on Rosh
Hashanah, any memorial service, I think of my parents of course and others. I think of him all the time. What else?

**JW:** What was that process like with the time when you were waiting, getting ready to--

**WC:** Well, one of the things we did, a family picture was taken. I don't know. That took an hour.

**JW:** [laughs]

**WC:** Going there and coming back. But, well, one of the things that I can show you here might be interesting. Every day, I was a former concentration camp inmate. You can't trust them, and therefore every day, I had to report. They gave me a sheet here. This is in German. [pause] It says here the following, Werner Cohen, would been released from protective custody. That's what they called it. Protective custody. That's a euphemism.

**JW:** [laughs]

**WC:** Who lived at this address has to report starting from the 14th of December--the 13th I'd been released--14th, had to report to the police station every day to show that I was there, and here every day, see, every day, they, [stutters] a policeman signing it. So that was another hour or so walking there and back and getting--did you see that?

**Interviewer 2:** Yes.

**WC:** Anyway, other things were my mother bought, of course, went out and bought me some things. Yes? Did you want?

**Interviewer 2:** Just if you don't get to it, I wanted to ask you some questions.

**JW:** How did your father get out of jail?

**WC:** Oh, my father. I really don't know. I tell you, my mother was an extremely worldly wise person and-- In fact, she, under the impact of what happened to the family, husband in custody, son in concentration camp, everything destroyed [stutters] she rose to take over. I remember, just before I answer that question, I remember when I came back from the concentration camp, my father was back home and my impression of him was a totally changed one from what it was before I left. My father was a military type of person. He served in the German army and he, even with the constant onslaught of difficulty of making a living as a Jew in a hostile environment, he had enough self-confidence and savvy to take on the travails of the world, you know, part of familia is being, being in charge to protect the wife and family type of guy. When I saw him again, I remember him sitting on the side of his bed with his head drooping and basically what he was basically saying, no matter what I do, “This is too much for me. I can't handle it.” So it was really left up to my mother to do anything. I [pause] What was the question? Please repeat that. Oh. What happened to my-- My father had diabetes and whether my mother was able to go forward and talk to these Nazis and get him out or whether she took recourse to a

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personal friend. My mother came from a very isolated family. She had been what they used to call finishing school for young women, you know, what wine glass is served with this--

**Interviewer 2:** [laughs]

**WC:** This was real, was part of a certain social setup in Germany, and one of the girls that were there was Mary somebody who later became Mrs. Gartner, Mrs. Mary Gartner. Misha, my mother used to call her like a what do you call it? What kind of name? A pet name. When I was born, my sister was born, we were born in the OBGYN clinic of Dr. Gartner. He was not only a family friend, but he also took care of our family when we were born.

**JW:** How do you spell that?

**WC:** Huh?

**JW:** How do you spell that please?

**WC:** Gartner?

**JW:** Yes.

**WC:** G-A with double dot, with a double

**JW:** [laughs]

**WC:** R-T-N-E-R, Gartner. Actually, it would be Gardner now, Gartner, Dr, Gartner and Misha was Maria Gartner. See, my mother may have picked up the telephone and said, Misha, I know you-- See, they hadn't been socially. He made a career in the Nazi hierarchy and therefore Jewish friends were no longer accepted. He had a Persian rug from us and we never saw that again. Misha needed a rug and Mother had one too many. She gave it to Misha Gartner. [laughs] That was the relationship she had from younger, but later on then, we were Jews and he couldn't do that. Whether she called Misha and said, Albert has been taken. Get your, whatever his name was, to look into it. It's a possibility. I don't want to give him too much credit. It may be that there's actually--she may have asked it and he said, no, I can't do it. [laughs] I can't answer the question. He was there, but he was a broken man.

There were all kinds of things that happened. When we describe something, you do not under--you do not dwell on the fact that this particular guy is a broken man. It's a tragedy for the broken man. [laughs] You understand? Under this general story, the human fates involved at every step. Think of the heartache of a mother having to send young children out into a distant land where they don't know the language. They don't know anybody, where she doesn't know what will happen. If that happens to a 16 or 17-year-old, that's bad enough. My sister was 14 years old. There, on these kindertransport, there were women who gave babies in baskets to an older girl and say, take care of my baby. [stutters] Maybe the women would understand that better than the
men what it would be to part with a baby, the hope he will survive under the circumstances. That puts a personal face on what is going on here. Question?

**JW:** Did you interact more with your sister when you were there or was it pretty much the same as before?

**WC:** When I was where?

**JW:** When you returned home from Dachau.

WC: Oh, my sister. Oh, I didn't interact. My sister and I, even to this day. She's here and we are totally different personalities and not on the same page. It has to do with her interests and mine. I'm a man who's philosophically inclined. I'm looking into causes, effects and I like to clarity. She's interested in going to Atlantic City and playing the machines or something.

**Interviewer 2:** [laughs]

**WC:** Other times she likes to go on cruises. Cruises, I think, after two days would bore me to death. How many times would I want to run around on a deck and stare out over the ocean? I mean, it's a different, different life. Different people are different. Have you got a sister or brother?

**JW:** I've got one sister older than me and I have one that's younger.

**WC:** How do you interact with them?

**JW:** I interact with my older sister better than my younger sister.

**WC:** Alright. Okay. So.

**Interviewer 2:** I want to know what happened to his sister. What happened--so you waited at home.

**WC:** Yes. It was a matter of--it was a waiting game.

**Interviewer 2:** Okay.

**WC:** Really, I was looking forward to get the heck out of there. I don't think it was something to talk about because the outside experience was wholly negative. You were amongst such a hostile population. They don't want to have anything to do with you. There were exceptions, always exceptions. But my parents, of course, were clearly aware of an approaching day, whether it was five days or ten days or three weeks, when the whole structure of the family would be taken apart and maybe it mattered more to them than to me because there was this expectation of going to an interesting new adventure in a foreign land and seeing new things and space and also getting out of, out of Germany, so it was more trying for the grownups.

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JW: When did you actually leave from Germany?

WC: Well, that was in January 17. I was on the train and it went to Holland. My parents actually got on the train. They bought tickets. I told you the main group of kids came out of Cologne and I came from Essen. My parents got on the train with me. We went to a city called Crayfeld which is equidistant from, roughly from Essen to Cologne, in order for me to change trains and then, too, to join the class. I became officially part of that group that I mentioned, and then they proceeded to the Dutch border. My parents got out of the train. The Nazis would, checked everything, what we had. We weren't permitted to take anything out except a small suitcase or something like that, no money. And then we crossed the Dutch border and I heaved a sigh of relief. The Dutch border patrol came on board and we crossed Holland to board a ship at Hoek van Holland. That's a port in Holland and Hoek, H-O-E-K, van, V-A-N, Holland, Hoek van Holland, and then I was on a boat crossing the channel and we went to Harwich, H-A-R-W-I-C-H, Harwich, and then I was on English soil and we were met by representatives of the congregation that I mentioned. Dr. Louie Raninowitz's congregation, loaded on a bus. We drove into London where they had taken possession of a house, private large house, put all the kids in, which happened to be located on number 1, Minster Road and the section of town was Crickle Wood, C-R-I-C-K-L-E, Crickle Wood.

So, 1 Minster Road, Crickle Wood, London, was where I spent the next year. There was a meal prepared and the ladies were swarming all over us. We were new. It was exciting. It was something they were involved in, but it didn't last long, the routine of life pretty soon blunts everything and everybody says, well, I had my excitement. I'm going home. Thank you very much. That's the difference between trauma and drama. [laughs] As soon as the drama gets a little bit tiresome, they say I don't need this, right? [laughs] Is that the way life is?

Interviewer 2: [laughs]

WC: Can you empathize?

Interviewer 2: Yes. [laughs]

JW: Do you remember anything from the boat ride or the train ride into Holland?

WC: Well, it didn't--it's not something that imprinted itself on my mind except staring out over the channel which was part of the North Sea. No, that was not. The thing that once we got into the hostel, then we had adjustments. First of all, I had to live with 13-year-olds. That makes a difference, whether you're 17 or 13. And one of my, one of the ladies in the committee in fact took a shine to me and invited me for Shabbos meal at her private home, and from then on in, I had a personal relationship sort of with that one family who occasionally invited me, the Snowmans. This was before the Second World War. War clouds were hanging over the world because Hitler would try to make, to aggrandize his power and so he kept invading countries like...

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when he took, went into Austria. Eventually, there was an appeasement attempt by a guy by the name of Neville Chamberlin. He was--have you ever heard of him?

**JW:** Yeah.

**WC:** He was prime minister and he was trying to do what our democratic party in this country is trying to do and many others. He wanted peace. He said, we got to the hell out of Iraq, get our people back. The heck with it if we don't. We've had enough. You lied first to get into there and all this kind of thing. They do not want to understand that there are people in this world who want to see us dead and if we do nothing, they will come back and take more planes and fly them into the Sears Tower and everything else. They're never going to stop. They are true believers. They are true believers in what they're doing and you cannot sit down and negotiate. True believers do not negotiate. [stutters] Mr. Chamberlin, Neville Chamberlin, was a very fine, English, upright gentleman, used to achieve the Parliament and civilized discourse even if he disagreed, and he felt he could go and visit Hitler, sit down and come to a reasonable understanding that the war clouds that hang over Europe should be dispelled by mutual give and take and we would go home, and he did go home. He stood on the top of the stairs, of the steps, that allowed him to descend from the plane in those days and he said, “Peace in our time.” [laughs] In retrospect, a complete idiot. He could be totally idealistic idiot who didn't understand that people were going to die by the tens of thousands and millions. Like we have in this country today. You know, I've been through all of this. I know what they [stutters] what was being said. There are people here who out of the goodness of their heart say that if you are nice enough, and if we retreat enough and apologize enough about cartoons in Denmark. We go on a bended knee and say, we should never have said Pope. The Pope must apologize, go on your bended knee. You're going to get him. Nobody wants to do. Nothing will happened. They will want to kill us because we're infidels. You know what infidels are? Nonbelievers. And that is what happened in [stutters] While I was in England, this kind of atmosphere prevailed and I was wondering what would happen because I had contacted my parents. I could telephone. We spoke together, and I knew as soon as war was declared, that would be the finish, and that's, in fact, what happened. There was another nine months or so, and the first of September of 1939 Hitler would talk to Neville Chamberlin and give him the feeling that it was peace in our time. He did what he should had said but he,[stutters] Neville Chamberlin understood would never happen. He certainly invaded the Sudetenland which was part of Czechoslovakia.

Now there happened to be a treaty between England, France and Czechoslovakia that if this happened, it was automatic war. Hitler should have said, “I hate, can't do that. Mr. Chamberlin wouldn’t like it, you know [laughs]. Mr. Chamberlin. I talked to him.” He didn't give it a thought. Hitler walked in there [laughs]. You see, it's a different kind of thinking. Mr. Hitler had a different way of thinking about things, and it was a brutal approach and he precipitated the war. But imputation it had, I could no longer talk to my parents. I was--communication was entirely through Red Cross letters which were thin pieces of paper. I think maximum 25 words, and all you could say was, I'm well. How are you? Bye-bye or something like that. And that's how I lost

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contact except for the fact I had a first cousin living in Spain. Spain was a neutral country, in Seville. He had married a Spanish girl. He was actually a Dutchman. [sighs] How was he a Dutchman and I was a German? My father's sister, my aunt, had married a Dutchman and they lived in Hilversum and the son became a chemist and then working for a Dutch chemical firm, he was put in charge of operations in Seville, Spain where he then settled.

Why is all this important? You could send--my parents could send letters to Spain which was a neutral country, and they did. My cousin Kurt, K-U-R-T, used to put them in another envelope and send them from Spain to England, and that way I was able to keep in contact with them. And my parents were constantly worried about what the kids were doing, all the details, and I kept writing and writing, and from the occasional letter which I got, I could, I found out there was a letter that never got to them. I'm constantly repeating everything. I also found that progressively the Germans were co-chairing their rations in the end. My mother, I said she was very circumspect, very world wise. Not only did she get my father out of the concentration, she got me out. When it came time, the Germans wouldn't allow people to be in their own houses. They made Jew houses, and instead of my parents ending up in some other house which had been turned into a Jew house, everybody was moved into my mother's house. She was able to hold on, she thought, whatever that meant. In the end, of course, they were transported out of that house, and it was only through restitution proceedings after the war that I was able to get title to the destroyed property. The bombings had destroyed the house anyway. I was able to do that, but the Jew house which my parents lived allowed for them only to have--my father and my mother were just assigned the kitchen, a kitchen. Every room was full of people, I understand--like there, here, everywhere, maybe 60 people in this house or something like that. So that was the reality. I found out that a very loyal baker on the corner afterwards told me she had slipped them occasionally some bread or something like that. But I do remember my mother writing that the furnace didn't work anymore, so they were cold. In the middle of the winter in Germany. It's like in Canada. Supposing you live in Ottawa or something, You have no heat in the house, right? But it wasn't the furnace. The furnace was a huge, steel. What she was basically saying is, we have no coal to put in the furnace. [laughs] Not okay. The furnace doesn't do you any good unless you can put something into it. So that was what I learned from my correspondence with my parents during the war there.

[End of Interview 2.1]

[Beginning of Interview 2.2]

WC: In 1942, April 21 I think, April. No. This is [pause] I think on April 21, they were sent out on a transport to the east and along with many, many other people, so they were in that house beginning of--the war was in what? September '39. April of 1942, that's what? Almost three years. And they were sent to a town or a place called Izbica, I-Z-B-I-C-A in Poland which is right next door to an extermination camp called Belzec, B-E-L-Z-E-C. And that's where, from where I received a card. Can you imagine? In England, in the war, I received a card that she sent
out of Belzec, out of Izbica. I don't know how it got to me, and it just said, I'm well. [?] Cohen. That's how that--

Well, I read you the last letter. This is dated, translated by me, dated April 18, 1942.

She says, “My dear ones, Thanks Ascham, are all well as least as far as our health is concerned.”

That means we are not well except we're not sick.

“You must always be brother and sister that care for one another even when you will not hear from us for a good while.”

So they understood that this was going to be a break.

“We will shortly be visiting Courtshin.”

Well, I forget who. This, what they are saying is a particular person called Court, but they thought we understood that he had been transported before. So instead of saying, we will be transported east or something, we will visit, we will shortly be visiting Courtshin, wherever he is.

“We do not gladly go there. You were going to send us a photograph.”

I'm sure I had sent a photograph. It never got there.

“Unfortunately, it did not arrive. I would have loved to have received it. We have photographs of you both and we look at them every day. The little ring which [Juana?] gave us I wear as a talisman. With Ascham's help, we will stay healthy. We will see each other again sometime. I would so much like to see you again. Think of us as we will be, will be with you in our thoughts. We put our future in Ascham's hand. I embrace you in my thoughts. Your Albert.”

My father wrote that.

And then [stutters] my mother wrote, “My dear kids, You will have received several of our letters and I see that you have correctly interpreted our message.”

There were all these codes involved.

“It is reassuring to us that you take care of one another.”

My mother was concerned that I should keep an eye on my little sister in a strange land.

“The echoes send you greetings.”

That's this code for Albert and Heddy.

We send you greetings.
They, see, for the censor she was saying this. Instead of saying, we send you good, we are going to move to another address as yet unknown.

“We will have little time to write. We will probably visit the graves of Hennie and Hans.”

That means-- Yes?

**Interviewer 2:** It was just a note. Don't worry about it.

**JW:** Yes. You can finish reading.

**WC:** Well, Hans was my mother's brother. See, they had already received--he was dead. Hennie had been sent earlier, was my father's sister, and she had gone earlier, and they, also they received, told him she was dead.

“Do not forget us. Heddy.”

That's my mother. That's the last letter.

Now there was, there was a person that, talking about good Germans. My father had established a relationship with a man who worked at the bank. I don't know. He had a position at the bank where my father did business, and this guy was not a Nazi. My parent's furniture ended up in his hands. I think my parents gave him the furniture, beautiful furniture they had bought in the anticipation maybe one day of immigrating. But he, he kept his promise to keep in touch with us, and he wrote four days after the letter that you just, that I just read.

He said, “Dear kids.” This is in German. I translated it. “You will be surprised to receive a letter from me instead of as always before from Albert and Heddy. Both of them send their heartfelt greetings. They parted today from Düsseldorf”--which was a place where they were transported to where the train took off to the east-- “where they spent the night with several others. The destination was where Aunt Hennie was also recently resided.”

We already heard that Hennie had already died, remember? He tells me that again.

“It's not easy for them to, it was not easy for them to depart. They left the day before yesterday at 7:00 p.m. leaving behind a greatly reduced living space in their home at Grandstraße 10. However, the hope that you will all be reunited sooner or later gave them the strength to overcome their grief. It is to be hoped that the two of them will not become too lazy to write. That is the case in so many cases.”

It's not that they got lazy. They didn't have any chance to write.

“For my part, I, for my part, will write to you every month to keep you current. I mention in passing that Hedwig found out by accident her brother no longer residing here for six months had passed just before her departure.”

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So that's the repeat of what I told you. So these were the last letters that I received. Questions?

**JW:** Yes. How did your sister get to England?

**WC:** Yeah. Well, are we going to meet again or is this the last time?

**JW:** There's another.

**Interviewer 2:** There's one more, but I just, if we can just get that question in, soon maybe we'll stop and pick up next time.

**WC:** Yes. I think we're going to finish up. I told you that there was this rabbi, Lou Rabinowitz, and he took a shine to me. He was older. He was also an army chaplain in the British army and I remember on one occasion I was, he was taking me with him. He was going to the barracks in Aldershot in Southern London, and he always asked me, well, how is things going in the hostel and so forth. And he felt maybe that he could have a little better relationship with me at my age than with the kids. They were only 13. I asked him. I said, “You know, I'm happy to be here and thank you for what you have done to get me here. I have one little sister. She's three-and-a-half years younger than me, and if there's anything you can do to get her out of Germany, I would, I would like to ask you to do that,” and he did. He made out some kind of a guarantee or something. He said, “For one more kid who I'm responsible for,” and she ended up coming to England in June. That answers the question.

**JW:** Was she put up like, was this one program, or--?

**WC:** Yes. She went into the hostel with girls.

[End of Interview 2.2]