Werner Cohen (2006)

Interview 3

[Beginning of Interview 3]

Werner Cohen: May I just ask a question?

Interviewer: Mmm, mmm.

WC: You know, right from the very beginning I think I indicated to you that there is a disturbance to be some kind of a problem when an older man who is two or three generations, at least two generations removed, speaks to another generation because what goes through my mind-- the images, the associations--they're part of my life. Much of it was in Europe and was in another time. Things were different. Now a new generation comes along and it really ties in with the question asked of Jordan because I see what's going on and I don't know--I don't know the mindset of a young generation. So after having held forth here for something like two and a half hours so far, I have absolutely no insight into the correspondence of what you received and what I intended to tell you. Do you understand what I'm saying? It's a little bit-- I almost think of a radio, transmitter. They can have the biggest power output, money put into everything and doing hard, work very hard. You have programming. But it all depends on having sets that are actually tunable to that particular wavelength because in the worst case, not a thing is said that you can tune in and they're talking to themselves. They don't even know it. Do you understand what I'm saying? To what extent--how can I--can you give me an idea of, what have you learned? What have you understood? Maybe each of you tell me a little bit so I can see what does it amount to so far. [pause] Jordan, do you want to--

Jordan Weinberg: I guess.

WC: Was it interesting?

JW: Yeah. I mean, I guess what I've learned is kind of what you were talking about, like this whole difference of generations, but then also with the experiences you've had because it's also a different cultural thing being Germany, so it's a different environment than I'm used to anyway, and then a different time period that I'm used to.

WC: It's a little bit like if I were to listen to a very old man from the provinces of China or something like that.

JW: Yeah.

WC: It's very interesting, very curious. [laughs] I guess there's not much we can do about it. Alright, then.
Interviewer 2: Okay. My first question was we had talked about you were in London and you had brought your sister over, and I just want to know what life was like for you during the war while you were in London.

WC: Yeah. That's a very good question. When I first came to London, it was a peaceful country and I've told you the rabbi had arranged--Lou Rabinowitz was his name. I think he had a doctorate if I remember. Anyway, he fostered us in a hostel, a hostel being a place where--it's like a, almost like an orphanage, you know, people providing shelter and food for kids, other people's kids that came from some other place and needed to somehow go forward. Immediately things became very clear. Most of the kids, myself included, came from middle-class families. I had expectations to go to university and make something of myself. It was immediately clear that the people who were sheltering us were concerned about giving us some food for the day and then we would be on our own as far as education and expenses or supervision or anything like that was not in their plan. And it was made clear to the kids that the best they could, that they couldn't expect anything, and I think the kids, only being 13 years old, didn't really know what it meant, but it really meant they went to school with working-class English kids. Schooling was far below what they had received at the Yavne, and I think you can expect, maybe I've mentioned this already, it caused friction after a while because here these kids were getting restless, the kind of instructions they were getting were pretty nothing, and the teachers felt the kids sometimes knew more than they did and that's not exactly what they were looking for. So here they were strangers coming around.

Also, my sister, for instance, as the war went along and bombing started, was evacuated to a--I think it was Nottingham. It was a smaller town in the countryside. Why? Because the Germans started to bomb the city. In fact, they cleared out the entire city by throwing century bombs, and after the war, or during the war, after the bombings, I'd been in the city where, for instance, in the area of St. Paul's Cathedral which is a huge structure, which, incidentally, was spared. That one building was spared. One bomb went through the cupola right into the crypt and it didn't explode, and civilian experts went in there, or maybe sappers did. Sappers were the people, engineers, who dug the unexploded bombs were sent in there. Anyway, they defused it, but what about the surroundings of the [stutters] St. Paul's Cathedral? It was like Vietnam, like, have you seen pictures of the atom bomb in Osaka and Yoshima? Have you ever seen pictures of that? Well, that's what it looked like. And the Germans did that. Every night they came for a period.

Let me say that the first part of my stay then was peaceful. The kids, the young kids, younger kids were in the school and the development for the Germans was in the east, confronting with the Russians, started there, so the western front was pretty quiet. But then things changed and now I'm teaching you history. What happens. The Germans attacked in the west and where the French, with a typical thinking of the military to fight the last war. That prepared a huge line of defenses. It's called the Maginot Line, but they had a very stupid way of, totally left out of consideration that all the Germans had to do go through the countries adjoining--Belgium and Holland--to walk into France behind the Maginot Line. The Maginot wouldn't have to, wouldn't
play any part. That's what the Germans did. So they started [stutters] you know, it doesn't take, it doesn't seem that it takes a lot of thinking to outthink the general staff of the French army, when you consider it, what they recommended and how so worth it was.

Well, anyway, then the attacks started and the Germans were hugely successful initially, and they cut off a British contingent that had, was on French soil, and the British made a heroic attempt at Dunkirk, Dunkirk, to salvage that army, even in little boats. I wouldn't say rowing boats, but everybody had a private boat even, went out across, in order to take some people off the beaches. Essentially, they salvaged the whole army. What am I saying? I'm giving you a background of what was going on in the world in the war itself, and that had, of course, immediate effect on the British. After Dunkirk, they felt much more vulnerable having just had what amounted a retreat, a dangerous retreat, the salvage of their personnel. They lost all their equipment of course, guns, everything. The Germans were entrenched in France, occupied it, and therefore the British then started to think about well, we have given shelter to some, what we would call refugees. That included the young people. They had also some older people had gotten there, for instance, for some Jewish women in Germany, they had taken the opportunity to come as domestics. The British needed people to work in homes, and if you applied for that, some people were able to go to England that way. There were also exceptional people who had somehow managed to get there, but not very many. The numbers were not large, but the British had to ask themselves with all these Germans. They didn't say, these are Jews. They said they're Germans. They're German Jews. With their spies amongst them, how do we secure ourselves? Like you have to secure ourselves against the Muslims that want to maybe blow up things in this country. You have to take safety measures. Somebody has to be on the watch. They discussed that for two days in Parliament, in the middle of the war. Should we, what should we do with them? And they decided to put certain people, eight groups of men and so forth--also women--into internment camps. In other words, this is more like prisoner of war type of status.

I've already indicated to you, by that time I [stutters] I wasn't fully English. I was German, but I, as far as the Germans were concerned, that made me stateless. I had no passport, no German passport, just an identity card which I've shown you. And so I had obtained permission from the committee that was involved, the hostel, from the congregation. I said I would really like to take a Cambridge matriculation examination and I prepared for it. Or I started to prepare for it, and they were reluctant, but then I had--one person spoke for me, and they said, okay, if you want to take it, go take it. I don't know. There might have been an expense, but by that time I had already started to work in a pharmacy as a helper for one pound a week. Today a pound is about what we would consider two dollars. For that amount, I worked for a whole week. The guy was extorting me actually, but I had to do something. I was the oldest and they didn't expect me to look to them for any sustained support.

Well anyway, in the evening, I went to classes, and you have to understand in that time, that was still before the heavy bombing started. Nevertheless, the British were keenly aware that if there should be attacks, huge cities like London would be like a carnival seen from the air, the lights

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abounding, easy to just know exactly where to drop the bombs. And so they arranged for a blackout. In other words, no light could be shown, and it was very effective. Even in the buses that were still running had a black guard with just a tiny little slit across for a little bit of light to shine out. It certainly couldn't be seen from the air, but it was just phenomenal to move around in total darkness. I don't know whether you've ever been in total darkness without any light.

So I was advised by mail--the details are not clear to me--that as of another few days I would be interned and the people actually, I think they came for me. Cut a long story short, the examination was a week later. All the work I've done, and I had gone to evening classes on my own, would have been down the tube. It's what they call an intermediate examination. There's--after two years, an intermediate examination before you can progress to a bachelor's degree, and so I pleaded, apparently convincingly, and they let me go another week just after the exam. I wasn't taken in. And then I sat for six months, first in tents, in Shropshire. Shropshire in a county in England adjoining Wales, in a tent, in tents. And there were [stutters] chow lines for people, tin cans to get your food, but there was no other care taken. It was quite different from the concentration camp which was engineered to be humiliating and to be debasing and to do injure. People there were supposed to suffer. In England, they correctly just dealt with people just holding them. At one time, I remember we were next to a prisoner of war camp. There was a wire between us and the Germans on the other side. It was boring as heck. Pretty soon some of the younger people there started a theater group. I don't know. It was--you know this?

**Interviewer 2:** Improv?

**WC:** Improvisation, improvisation. And then it got cold. And then they took us from the tent city in Shropshire in England on a boat to the Isle of Man which is in the Irish Sea between England and Ireland. The big city there, or the largest of the settlements there is called Douglas, and Douglas in peacetime used to be a destination for vacationers, and they took a few blocks, put a barbed wire around it, and that was then the new internment camp. The total time I spent there was six months. I don't know. I could, how much time I should spend. I didn't have anything to do. I grew a beard. I was like a--how old are you? 19?

**JW:** 19.

**WC:** So I was 18 and when I--in each house registered who was coming in additionally when we got in. There was this one guy who was maybe in his 30s, quite a well-known guy, a lawyer.

He took my, particularly asked age and I said “18.”

He looked up and he said “18, huh!?”

Apparently, that gave me a greater gravity, with beard. What do I remember? You know, I can go on and on. I'll tell you something that matters to me. In [stutters] Douglas [stutters] It was called the Hutchinson Camp actually, in Douglas. For people who had female family members,
maybe a man who had his wife. I happened to have a cousin who also got it, got sent to Isle of Man in a separate camp because it was a woman. And every once in awhile, they actually allowed meetings, so they took people out and they had a chance to meet. And so I met my cousin once or twice--I forget how much--in that period. What I want to say is something that I remember maybe with some satisfaction is there was one guy there. Most of them were Jewish. Of course, they were refugees, but there were people from mixed marriages and maybe one or two other people there, whatever. There was this one guy. He was maybe three years older than me, a lot heavier and bigger than me, but he--I overheard him a number of times making the derogatory remarks which I interpreted as anti-Semitic. He just took it upon himself to have something to say. Here he was with everybody else in the camp, and I don't know. It passed, but it didn't pass on me. Instead, it bothered me.

So cut a long story short, I arranged for somebody to tell this guy to come to our house, the house that I was assigned to, and from the front door you went all the way back into the kitchen, down a few steps into the kitchen with a door. I arranged for this guy coming in there and I slammed the door, shut behind him, and he didn't know what was going on. I didn't know--this was not the--what is it? A set up. A boxing match according to the rules of Lord of Shrewsbury, something like that. I jumped the guy and gave him such hiding. That's not American. That's an English term I guess, hiding. I gave him such a, such a wallop. The guy went out of there in much [pause]. In another day in good shape, he may be actually here with the people in my house, thought it was okay, he deserved it. Why nobody else took care of him, I don't know, but this is my nature and I did that. So, after that I didn't hear him say very much anymore. [laughs] Maybe that, that helped make him understand. He needed to be told firmly.

Then I was released after six months because I wanted to continue my study and when I came back, I had to make a living. Of course, in a wartime you have to have less supervision of everything, particularly labor, and I ended up in a demolition, demolition work. In other words, now getting back to the destruction. All the destruction wrought in London needed to be cleared up and so I ended up doing this very heavy laboring work for a while. [pause] So much to tell you.

**Interviewer 2:** Umm.

**WC:** Yes. What? Go 'head.

**Interviewer 2:** Well, I was just going to ask, were you in London during the entire war or did you--because I know.

**WC:** Yes.

**Interviewer 2:** Okay.
WC: It was during the war. Of course, eventually I worked in war industry. I might add this. British made it possible for people in the internment camp to join the army, but only the Pioneer Corp. The Pioneer Corp, under normal service conditions, was for people who were very often mentally challenged. They wanted to use them and somebody had to unload trains and so forth or do heavy labor, and that was the Pioneer Corp. But they didn't fancy, these German young guys, go in the army and running around, sidearm weapons maybe, whatever. That was a limited opportunity and I did not want to take that. The people who did take that, and I had friends who did, who got out and got in the army. There was one. His name [stutters] was Martin Levine. He became Martin Lewis. I guess that had to do with recognition as a Jew in the army. The Germans might have got--he became in due course a parachutist. He fought in North Africa. He was in the Battle of Arnon which was a critical conquest of a bridge that allowed American troops, English troops, to get across to Germany having crossed there. I would like to just add this, that all the people, of course, were killed amongst those. After the war, the British did not automatically or in any way make facilitate British citizenship. They could, like everybody else, apply after the war. It was a very meager reward for having fought there and I had made it clear I would [stutters] want to be given a chance for officer status. In fact, I had independently applied to the British Air Force, IF, and I also would see--some Americans were there. I applied to the air force. They chose not to take me. That was another matter. It wasn't that I wanted to avoid service, but I wasn't going to unload all these trains with a prejudice notion and that this was where I fitted in best.

As it turned out, I worked for a large electronic company called Ink, I-N-K, also in the film industry on the technical end and there I worked on semi-conductors which perhaps was more useful than me unloading trains or something like that. So as I--the conditions in London were severe, extreme rationing, and now again I have to say not only did they destroy the city of London with century bombs, but in due course they had rockets, A1 and A2. They just shot them off and they landed anywhere, and of course, a lot of demolition and a lot of people died in the city. It was a war zone. And many people with families, they made a habit every night to go into a shelter. There were some shelters. The so-called Tube, that's the underground--It's called the Tube in London--was made available. People are so--on the platforms you had to always dodge the feet of family groups who had stayed out of certain areas where they would spend the next few years coming back again and again sleeping underground, but that was the way the population lived. So it wasn't, but I decided it was either my fate or not. I was a young man and so I slept in my bed and when I heard the [stutters] what do you call it? What am I trying to say, the rockets. These were self-propelled and they had a motor, and so that would be alarm, silent all over London. And then I listen and pretty soon I hear that thing coming closer and closer and I decided, well, for me tonight or not. By the time it got over my head, I knew if it were a motor shut off and dive down, somebody else is taking a death. So I just turned around and went to bed. I went to sleep. I mean, it was [stutters] whoever ticket it was, that is what it was and I couldn't worry about it. It's--in the face of death, you can get callous. You get inured like the people who lived in Auschwitz. My wife. The (...) came in every day. There were some
lectures. People went mostly directly into the gas chambers, particularly the women and the little children, and the smoke came out, but the other people lived next to it day in and day out with the smoke drifting across from burned flesh. They knew it. Everybody knew that maybe tomorrow they'll select me and I'll be there, but I-- That had to be lived with. You can't imagine that controlling, can you? You have to think about it. I am poor or something like that. [laughs] They are different childhood experiences. Some sucks, I, but some of them lived next to exterminate- the [stutters] extermination chimneys. [pause] There's so much to tell. I have to be asked more specifically.

Interviewer 2: Okay. When did you come to the United--I guess I sort of wanted to go into when did you come to the United States?

WC: Well, I, at the end of, finally the war came to an end. I had long not heard from my parents. I mentioned they had been sent away and they were exterminated. Exterminated? They were murdered! I think it's really silly to call them, they were killed. They were murdered. It came to an end and of course that was my priority to find out like at least my mother. I could trace her somehow since some people did survive, and the Americans came, let it be known that they were interested in German-speaking personnel to hire for the war department because they were--they went into German, they wanted to supervise the postal communications, both the mail and the telephone services. Ostensibly, what they were basically saying is if there are any Nazis immediately caught, let's just find out who's calling and who's calling whom and let's get a handle on it. So I volunteered for that. I was hired and I went to Germany for a year in September of 1945. So that was just a couple of months after the end of the war. I went from England for one year to Germany. We were on an army base there and had uniforms of--these were not military uniforms. They were khaki, but they had a distinct insignia on it, just said U.S.

I just want to tell you something, that I very quickly became aware of the fact they weren't interested, the Americans weren't interested anymore in the Nazis. The whole, denazification which then took place, it was done in a half-hearted way because the Americans didn't think of the Germans as very bad. [laughs] The fact that they killed six million Jews didn't bother anybody. Mr. Roosevelt, as you know, had been told from eyewitnesses that these murders were going on and they said they couldn't send a single plane. It would impede the air effort. If they had dropped a bomb, some people would have died there, but they wouldn't have died every day by gas. But they bombed factories next to the extermination camp. It was a IG Farben chemical company. They bombed there. So what I found out was the Americans were not that interested. Sometimes I had some General hiding in the Alps and I wrote it up. I don't know. What they were really interested in was Communists. Now you have to understand Communists, they had started to have a confrontation with Russia and that quickly became the dominant theme in everything they did. And in Germany, there were no Communists. The ones that existed had been in concentration camps and survived. They had been there for six years, and I didn't find out about this one guy who had a little room someplace after he came out, and that was of greater

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interest than any of the Nazis that I gave, I had access to. So I did my duty. They wanted me to provide information. I did it. What they did with it was not my business. You understand?

**Interviewer 2:** Yes.

**WC:** I'm giving you the truth. I don't know whether it's uncomfortable or not, but shall I say it was a glorious experience? Well, it was, it gave me an opportunity personally to see whether I could find anybody while I was there. Another thing that was interesting. I had also civilian clothes and I mixed with the population sometimes. But in all the time that I wore my uniform and talked to the Germans in German, I never had a single German, one. Now I'm telling you. I never had two Germans admit one, that they were Nazis. Two, that they knew anything what was going on with the Jews. Now I told you I think how when I rounded the corner and looked at my house, they were standing around there, three or five lines crowded. If you had asked them after the war, they wouldn't have known or remembered anything. Nothing. And then we were marched in the morning out of the prison, the jail, to be transported to Dachau in the morning. The people there, if you had asked them after the war, they would say, what? Me? I never saw anything. Only one lady, she was a kindergarten teacher. She had been a Nazi. Hah! So that's human, human, the [pause] I don't know what to say. There's so much to tell. The Germans wanted to be friendly with the [stutters] Americans who were the occupiers, victorious, and [sigh] everything. That's a whole chapter. What can I say? The women threw themselves at the Americans for little things. They wanted nylon stockings and everything else, and it was a disorganized period.

Let me just say I did one year there and then I left, came to America. The German quota was wide open at that time, so I and my sister came on the (….) For a few weeks I did casual, you know--I think I mentioned I was a sandwich man for a while there in New York. Then I came here and I went to university here. So I thought I had to do something, so I arranged to get into that and I studied for my Ph.D. degree in '51. I was 29 1/2 years old by that time, an old man. I had lived through many different experiences, not only personal, but culturally. I had lived in Germany. I understood the Germans. I lived in England and I had gotten used to their ways. Now I came to America. Now I get used to American ways. I found it very difficult. I found that very difficult.

**Interviewer 2:** Why did you choose Baltimore from New York?

**WC:** Well, that had to do with relatives living here and also [sighs]. That was the main reason. I came visiting here and then because I had arrangements, got myself into the university here, so that determined that.

**Interviewer 2:** So when and how did you meet your wife?

**WC:** Ah! [laughs] That's a lady's question. Well, [laughs] well, I tell you, my wife. Let me just briefly say that she was sent on the transport from Frankfurt, and I told you she was the only
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survivor of some, either 1,300 or 1,500 souls that were on that. Only survivor. And then she went into Auschwitz, and then they closed that because the Russians were approaching. She was put on this death march where people had to walk in the snow and ice in Poland back into the German-held areas. Could go for weeks telling details about all this experience. When she came here, she ended up with relatives. Now, who were these relatives? Her grandfather had an uncle, had a brother, who immigrated to America in the 1860s and he had children. The children, when Hilda came here, were ancient, old people. Particularly, Tessie was an old lady and she had a maid and all, and I guess the idea was that Hilda go-- Some other relatives had arranged for her to go here maybe as a lady's companion or something. I think the aunt thought of her more as another maid to take care of things for her. And that, under those conditions, trying to meet somebody. She had met my sister. My sister was born in Germany and spoke perfect English, but she did go to school in England, and so to my, Hilda, to my former wife, my wife of blessed memory, this was a godsend to her, this young woman her own age essentially who she could spend a little time with instead of the old lady who didn't understand anything. When she said what a--first of all, she didn't speak English, but to the extent that some communication took place, she was in a position of having to answer some questions.

“So, what did you do the last few years? How did you come here?”

She said, “Well, I was in a concentration camp.”

The aunt would say, “Oh, that's too bad,” without knowing what the hell that meant.

I mean, here you [laughs] the magnitude of the tragedy of this person and here a comfortable old lady saying, “Oh, too bad.”

“Well, let's move onto important things. What are we having for dinner?” [laughs] Things that matter in real life from day to day.

So, I think my sister had shown her a picture of me and it could have been this picture. Did I show you my picture, didn't I, when I was a younger. My wife said, she claims later on, she told my sister, “I want to be the first one to meet this guy.” [laughs]

Well, this came about actually. I visited an aunt that lived here and Hilda was, came to the front door of my aunt's place there on Lewington Avenue in Baltimore. I remember that, on Lewington Avenue, with my sister and here my sister said, “Yeah, we came to say hello.”

That was before I came from--I was still working as a sandwich man in New York. I just came to visit my aunt, and my sister came and, I want you to introduce this young friend of mine, and I said hello.

Well, what happened was I guess the background was similar and she really needed a more protective presence. It evolved from that, that I met her. We had dates. We did have dates. I hadn't any money and after I knew her, we went, sometimes we went to a movie. Do you know
Baltimore downtown, Howard Street in downtown Baltimore? Do you know that by chance? Do you know the Inner Harbor?

Interviewer 2: Yes.

WC: Yeah. Not far from there was a movie that all had European films and it was air conditioned. We lived without air conditioning.

Interviewer 2: [laughs]

WC: And so, how did we go there? We walked all the way, spent an hour there, and then we walked all the way back. That was maybe a total walk of five or six miles. That's--you know, if there's no money, how are you going to get to enjoy the movie if you don't walk? Okay. [stutters] For instance, Coke was five cents a bottle. I didn't have the money. Maybe once in a blue moon, I spent five cents on a bottle of Coke while I was a graduate student. So if I say conditions were different. My own children and grandchildren, they have everything. [laughs] I just. Sometimes I wonder why. [laughs] They don't really need it. It's just. Other questions?

Interviewer 2: Umm.

WC: It's all hit and miss, isn't it?

Interviewer 2: [laughs] You had mentioned that when you were younger that you were--I guess before the war, not a practicing Jew, but you are now Orthodox.

WC: Yes.

Interviewer 2: So I wanted to--

WC: Ah! This is perhaps the most significant thing that ever happened to me in my life because I was--I considered myself a sophisticated young man, partly because I'd been on my own all the time and anything I wanted to do, I achieved by myself. Even getting into Hopkins without transcription every now and then. With other people, they'd be doing a lot they don't know, but it was up to me. I'm a survivor. This is my number one role in life. If there is--if the chips are down, I will survive on the other side. But if the other people will be, I can't be responsible for that. So [pause] what was the question, please?

Interviewer 2: Oh. What made you decide, I guess, to become a practicing Jew?

WC: Ah! Yeah. The way, the way it was in Germany. I'm talking about German Jewry. Let's go back to a very well known figure, Moses Mendelssohn. Have you heard of him?

Interviewer 2: No.

WC: He was a significant personality at the time in which Jews for the first time in Germany had a chance to enter general society. Before that, they were restricted in every way and-- He came to
Berlin through a special gate for cattle and Jews. There were gates in the city. At the time he came into, in order to travel to Germany, he had to go through the cattle gate with the cattle. I mean, this is how much--talking about German culture, German history, that's where the Jews stood two hundred years ago. Generally, I can't go into everything, there were outstanding families that were useful to the princes as bankers and so forth. You had privileged positions, so there were such people in Berlin and Mendelssohn ended up at the household of one of those, so they got permission for him so he could stay in Berlin through connections and so forth. He [pause] Why are we talking about Mendelssohn? Because he was a Talmud scholar from having been trained that way. Then he had a chance to get into German culture and became an outstanding personality that German cultural elites wanted to meet [pause] and in this give and take, the other Jews which had found that opportunities arose, they took him as an example.

Anyway, forty years later, so now we are talking about 1810, after, through the leadership of this particular individual, Moses Mendelssohn, what is, what is the-- Mendelssohn Bartholdy was his grandson, the composer. Do you know Mendelssohn? Never heard of Mendelssohn?

Interviewer 2: I don’t study music.

Interviewer 3: It sounds familiar, but I don’t know his music.

WC: I have senior moment. I forget his first name. [pause] I will get it. I want to say that the Jews were, the Jews and particularly those who had ambitions to want to get into academia, get to university to take up, get into civil service, anything of that, as a Jew, you couldn't do it, so they went to the baptismal font. A third of all the Jews in Berlin as early as 1810 had gotten and had water sprinkled all over them. They were goyim by that time. They were [stutters] It was opportunism. It didn't have any--it wasn't out of great character. It's just what they wanted to be. And so the Reform movement arose in Germany, made big strides. So let me put it this way. In 1930, before Hitler came, more than fifty percent, better than fifty percent of German Jews in Germany, intermarried. Now in America we have the same phenomenon today. For five million Jews that are in America today, more than two-and-a-half million have no association with Judaism, not even with a Jewish community center. So this flight to get away from it, it was seen as something you really don't want. That was yesterday. It was something that was backward. It was something, and that was how I was more or less taught about it. I was a self-hating Jew. I went to school with the Nazis and they were trim and they were great in their uniforms, and I wanted to be one of them, and I could see the Jews through their eyes.

My father would sometimes say, if I didn't have a military bearing, he would say, “Don't walk like a Jew boy there. Walk like a Nazi.”

That's the self-hating that came and that was deeply ingrained in me. That's what I was taught. Only when I met my wife did I for the first time have any kind of inkling of a self-respecting Jewish personality in my life, and cut a long story short, when we had our first child, they handed her-- First she had trouble getting, first she didn't want children. Four years, we didn't

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have children and she explained it that the very idea of a Jewish child gave her the creeps because all the kids that she had seen in the concentration camp, if it was a Jewish child, they put them automatically into the gas chamber. And then having acclimatized and acculturated herself into a new life, one day then she was able to have children. They gave her her baby for the first time and she blessed her with a blessing,

[Hebrew blessing]

(May you be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

יְשִׂימֵךְ אֱלהיִׂם כְשָׂרָה רָו

May God bless you and guard you.

יָשְׂרֵךְ וְיִׂשְמְרֶךָבְקָׂה רָה

May God show you favor and be gracious to you.

יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָׂה וְיִׂשְמְרֶךָ פָׂנָׂיו אֵלֶיךָ לָאֵמְר

May God show you kindness and grant you peace.

יִׂשָׂא יְהוָׂה פָׂנָׂיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיָשֵם לְךָ שָׂלום

This has to do with--I should translate it now, I guess.

Interviewer 2: I know what that is, yes.

WC: And then progressively she increased the stakes. For instance, we had at one point in our early marriage bought absolutely wonderful dishes and we ate pork and everything else. My wife, she had nothing to eat in the cans deemed a little kosher. And so, for a while, I was sort of like a goy [laughs]. I ate anything, especially shellfish and whatever, whatever was prescribed. Made me a real man. So there I see these beautiful dishes just bought outside the garage where we were living.

Come back from home I said, “Hilda, what's this? What are they doing out there, outside in the box?”

“We can't use anymore.”

“Why not?”

She said, “We've eaten pork from these. Now we're going to have kosher household.”

And I knew that I had nothing to give. Oh, yes, still I know mathematics. I know science. I know. I'm not a totally stupid man. I am well read. But of the essence of what it means to raise children with self-respect and with identity that is not in crisis and so forth, I felt I was totally a babe in the woods.
And basically what it amounted to, although we never had a written contract, was that I humbly said, “This is a house. We have a general. The general is Hilda. Whatever she says, will be done. And I'm the kitchen boy [laughs] and I'll do what has to be done.”

And that's what I have done, and I'm hugely rewarded today because I think I have told you that there was a sense of carrying into life, a sense of hope, of meaning, maybe even of, a degree of holiness to have the banal, the ordinary in the thinking raised to a level which comes when you have a belief in a higher power that sets the standards. If everything is situational, you know, today I can permit myself that. Maybe I'm getting a little fat, I don't know, I'm going to do that. But whatever I said yesterday doesn't hold me today. I'm a modern man and are you going to hold me to it? Under those conditions, you get people, kids who surprise you. They're having a party and they're having a party. They know their part. They have heroines and they live in houses that most people couldn't afford because it doesn't matter what your position in life is, how much you have. That if your personal status, your philosophy, your alignment for meaning in life is not of the right type, then everything else is secondary. Today I'm an old man and if people tell me what's important, I would tell you number one, good health, because if you don't have good health, then nothing. But if somebody presses me then and says, what else is there, I would say at least you’re alive if you’ve got good health. Then if you do not, that you must seek a somewhat transcendental orientation. If you ask me, am I believer, am I, I find it hard with all my background to totally fall in with all, but I do only have Orthodox friends and I wouldn't want anybody else. The fact that I'm a, let's say a weak link, that they are graciously letting me partake in the experience of life that I experience is a wonderful bonus to me. When I go to my daughter--I've just been to Rosh Hashanah and they live in a very Jewish enclave. Everybody is like that. And they have--I never sit to a meal. Sometimes they have five people invited, sometimes fifteen, and then we go out to schlep. They take me along wherever they go, and these are very intelligent people and always positive people, and they have wonderful children and that's where I belong. I don't meet people. My son-in-law, Mark, he comes from a family that gave him nothing. He had wonderful friends, all the Jewish friends. He became a veterinarian. He has one of the best practices in the veterinary field. You can imagine he's really a very successful man. But his friends, they came along and they held out amongst themselves meeting every month, once or twice for old time's sake. He doesn't want to see them anymore. Why? These people went along. They got married, had children. Pretty soon they didn't like their wife anymore so they divorced. Either they married again. That didn't work. The kids, who knows what happened to them, and they look at this guy like a dinosaur, like an Neanderthal.

I said, well look. You enjoy your divorces and everything else and the travails of modern life which is not guided by something else. I will go home. My wife has prepared a sumptuous dinner with lots of people, stimulating company. I don't have to worry about my kids. Thank you very much. Sometimes let me know [laughs] I would like to know that you're well. Please send me a card. But there's not, there's nothing left there between what are they talking about. You want to cry on my shoulder? You messed it up again, did this again and that again, because these
guys don't know what they really want. They need a bigger house or maybe the cars. I saw a car. He had big cars [laughs] big things. [laughs] So my wife rescued me, like my daughter. Two of my daughters, one married a man from a yeshiva. He's a rabbi. The others, the two boys, they are truly religious. The kind of junk that my wife didn't like for me to take, I was never able to take. My sons-in-law are in that position of having been able to redirect their lives into those channels with hugely rewarding results for their sons and for everybody else. So you wanted to know what happened to this guy who was trying hard to survive the vicissitudes of life under bombardment in concentration camps and internment camps and everything else? Everything in the end turned to gold or to diamonds. I met the right wife. Was she the beauty queen that I wanted to marry when I first came here? I had ideas. I was going to be rich and I was going to have a beautiful girl. Maybe after a while if it did any good, I would take her out like any good film star does. But instead of that, I got a woman of quality and [laughs] that's really what I really needed. [laughs]

Interviewer 2: Okay. I think that was the only question I had. Did you guys have anything else?

Interviewer 3: I was curious how you managed to have all those pictures of your family that you brought over with you. Did you--

WC: I don't know. I think what--some of them I got, too, a sister and a brother of my father's had immigrated, had more sense than my father. They were not as well off which is the irony, that the people who sometimes had a little bit too, well off like my father, take it too easy. They needed to take steps and they came here, and I think some of the photos were in their possession and they acceded them to me graciously. So that's how I answer that question. What do you think? There. What do you get out of all this?

Interviewer 2: I don't know. I thought it was-- I mean--

WC: What is your background? Do you--what is your philosophical alignment? Do you have, other than that you want to have much money and so forth.

Interviewer 2: Well, I wanted to be a doctor more to help people and I always had the interest in science and the best way to combine that two was be a doctor.

WC: Yeah.

Interviewer 2: To help people with science.

WC: Right. Well who are you?

Interviewer 2: Who am I? Umm. I'm a Reform Jew from Houston, Texas who wants to be a doctor. [laughs]

WC: What is a Reform Jew think?

JW: To me--
WC: What are your loyalties? What are your--

Interviewer 2: For me it's more family oriented. I mean, the holidays are big where I come from. We always have--I mean, each holiday, it's like--

WC: What about--hopefully you'll have a nice family and your kids will grow up. What will you tell them? How will you direct them? They will have temptations. They meet friends. Their friends may be good. They may be bad. Will they have the kind of [sighs] strength, ideological strength to resist temptation no matter what or will they give you grief?

Interviewer 2: I don't know, but I hope not. I want to raise them Jewish so I hope that maybe I don't give them something, some sort of values to look towards.

WC: Well, okay. Good luck. [laughs]

Interviewer 2: [laughs]

WC: What about you, Jordan?

JW: Umm.

WC: You don't know. [laughs]

JW: I mean I guess it's similar like, I mean, you hope they have good morals and they know what to do.

WC: Okay. Well, alright. Have you got some other questions or is that it?

Interviewer 2: I think that's it.

WC: Well, did anything come up that was of interest in our interviews?

Interviewer 2: Well, part of it.

WC: Yeah. I did it in such a way that I didn't constrain myself from giving you what I consider insights that have come to me whether they were convenient or whether they were flattering to--regardless. I just, that's why I have. You might say I'm opinionated.

Interviewer 2: [laughs]

WC: But the opinions have been bought dearly from experience. Okay.

Interviewer 2: Thank you.

[End of Interview 3]