

Interviewed by Professor Stephen Berk with Lucille Brown
Schenectady, New York
May 1974

In this interview, Kurt Hirschen describes how he left Nazi Germany for Brussels in 1936, his detainment in a French concentration camp and his subsequent escape. He was able to reunite with his pregnant wife and the two hid out in the south of France (where the baby was born) until able to gain passage on a ship from Barcelona to the United States in June of 1941.

Stephen Berk: Would you give your name, please?

Kurt Hirschen: My name is Kurt P. Hirschen.

SB: Mr. Hirschen, can you tell us when you were born?

KH: I was born on June 11, 1907 in [Offenbach am Main](#), Germany.

SB: Can you tell us something about the town? How long did you live in the town?

KH: I lived in [the town](#) from birth until about 1935. The town or city is about the same as [Schenectady](#), the same population, about 90,000; a town of many factories. The main industry in Offenbach was leather goods. It was a world-famous center of leather goods. As a matter of fact, if I remember well, stores like [Macy's](#) and [Gimbels](#), came to Offenbach to buy their leather goods. So, from the point of view of industrial center, it was an important place, Offenbach.

SB: What was the size of the Jewish community of Offenbach?

KH: To the best of my recollection, there lived about 5,000 Jews in Offenbach.

SB: Again, like Schenectady.

KH: About like Schenectady. Now, I don't remember if I'm 100% right there, but I think I'm close.

SB: How long had your family lived in Offenbach?

KH: Well, my father came to Offenbach about fifteen to twenty years before I was born. My mother I think was the third generation. Her family lived in Offenbach three generations.

SB: And prior to that? Had they always lived there?

KH: Well, they lived in Germany. My father originally came from Austria. I think from that [part of Austria that went to Poland](#) and then back to Austria, then back to Poland.

SB: What type of occupation did your father engage in?

KH: My father had a men's clothing store and he had this store for about 35, 40 years until a certain Mr. Hitler put him out of business.

SB: This was a retail store?

KH: Men's clothing store like Apex used to be, if you remember. Or like Vinnick, something like that, a little larger.

SB: How many people were in your family?

KH: I was the only child. I lived with my father and my mother.

SB: Grandparents lived with you?

KH: No. My grandmother on my mother's side died when I was about ten years old. And my father's parents I never knew.

SB: Can you tell us something about where you lived ? Did you live in a house? An apartment?

KH: Well, we lived in what you would call here an apartment building. There were three or four apartments and we had one of them and this was on top of the store. The store was the ground floor and the first floor, and on the second, third and fourth floor were apartments. We had the third floor apartment.

SB: Did your father own the store or did he rent it?

KH: Owned the store and he owned the building.

Lucille Brown: So, each floor had an apartment; one apartment on each floor. Sometimes, here in America you'll have as many as four apartments on one floor.

KH: I call it apartment, actually it was more like a flat.

SB: Were there Jewish families?

KH: It happened in this particular house there were Jewish families. Now, this was the front part of the building. Then you had a side part and a back part of the building. There were very small flats, and there in the back part there were about, let's see, two, four, six, ten flats. Small, very small. And on the side part there was one flat and in this flat was the man who took care of the whole building - like the maintenance man.

SB: Can you tell us something about the Jewish population of the town? You say it's about five thousand? Was it a wealthy community?

KH: Well, no, not really. It was, let's say, medium class.

SB: How did the people make their living?

KH: Well, most of them owned stores, they owned like brokerage firms. In a leather goods city, a lot of leather was being sold to make handbags and things and most of the Jewish people there owned these leather brokerage firms.

SB: Brokerage firms?

KH: Yes, there were quite a few lawyers. They were all Jews. Quite a few doctors - they were all Jews. There were some wealthy people, too, who owned big plants, maybe three or four.

SB: Were these people, in terms of their backgrounds, like your family in the sense that they had been German for several generations?

KH: Quite a few, yes. But there also, later, quite a few Jews from Eastern Europe came.

SB: When?

KH: This was about in the twenties.

SB: After the First World War.

KH: After the First World War. I think as a result of the First World War, quite a few of these families left Poland and Russia and came to Germany.

SB: Before this time were there many synagogues in the town?

KH: Well, there was one synagogue. And there were two congregations. One was the big one which was Conservative and practically everybody belonged to, and then you had a very small

Orthodox congregation which occupied a very small space of this synagogue. The ratio was about ten to one; for every ten members of Conservative Judaism, we had one Orthodox.

SB: There was no Reformed Temple?

KH: No Reformed, no. Not in this city. There was a Reformed congregation in Frankfurt which was the next biggest city - which was a big city. As you probably know, the distance was about like Albany and Schenectady, twenty miles. And in Frankfurt you had a Reformed.

Congregation. We belonged at the time, to the Conservative.

SB: Did the family go to the synagogue much?

KH: Well, telling you the truth, my family was not very religious. I went, I was Bar Mitzvah. My father did not go very much to the synagogue. My mother went, but my father didn't.

SB: You say that you were Bar Mitzvah? Was this a common occurrence for people in the town?

KH: Yes.

SB: Most of the boys were Bar Mitzvahed?

KH: Yes, yes. I would say practically all of the boys.

SB: Did the synagogue provide any Jewish education?

KH: Oh, yes.

SB: Could you describe your education, both Jewish and non-Jewish?

KH: Well, the non-Jewish education was a public school which, well, I don't know how to compare it with here, because I'm not really too familiar. It was, let's say, a little better than what you call high school here.

SB: The gymnasium?

KH: Yes, it was. And there I went for ten years and the Jewish education was about like here.

SB: Tell me about the gymnasium. There were both Jewish and non-Jewish...

KH: Oh, yes.

SB: This was for boys and girls?

KH: No, for boys only. Girls were separate. My wife went to a strictly girls school -about the same level as this one.

SB: And did most of your contemporaries go to this school?

KH: Most of them, yes.

SB: Was there a Jewish neighborhood in Offenbach?

KH: No, no. They lived all over the city.

SB: In terms of your friends, were most of your friends Jewish friends?

KH: I would say half and half. I had as many Jewish friends as I had non-Jewish friends.

SB: What about the acquaintances of your mother and father, if you can remember?

KH: They are mostly Jewish, but there were some non-Jewish. But I would say 75% was Jewish. With me it was fifty and fifty.

SB: And again, most of the Jewish boys and girls would go to the gymnasium?

KH: Yes, yes.

SB: No one would go, for example, to a Jewish day school?

KH: No, there was none in Offenbach. There were some in Frankfurt, but in Offenbach there was nothing.

SB: Could you say something about your Jewish education?

KH: Well, my Jewish education, I would say, was about the same as here. You had a religious school. Well, it was more maybe. We had every day. Every afternoon we went to religious school; we learnt Hebrew.

SB: You went after the gymnasium?

KH: Yes. We had religious school. We learned Hebrew and then before I became Bar Mitzvah it was like here; about three years of climbing.

SB: Was there any provision for education beyond the Bar Mitzvah?

KH: Ah, no, not really. It was about like here. You see, here at least in the Temple they are trying to keep the young people until Confirmation. Now this was not in Germany. After the Bar Mitzvah, this was it unless you went into a Jewish school in Frankfurt, but very few people who I knew did that.

SB: So you would be receiving some form of Jewish education up until approximately the year 1920; the first 13 or 14 years of your life.

KH: Right, 1920.

SB: Lot's of things were happening at this time, both in the world at large and in the Jewish world. Do you remember, did Zionism mean anything to you at this point in time?

KH: Not to me. It did not mean much to me, but it meant a lot to a lot of people. There was a Zionist movement in Germany at the time and a lot of my friends belonged to it. I did not, at the time.

SB: I'm talking about in your early life.

KH: In the twenties, say. I mean when we were fifteen, sixteen years old.

SB: Yes.

KH: Of course, as you say, a lot went on in Germany at the time and it was very difficult to concentrate on some of them because too many things took place. Like, for instance, there was a very terrible inflation.

SB: Yes, I was aware of it. What about the war? What did the war mean to you in Offenbach?

KH: Well, the war... You are talking of course about the First World War. Well, when the First World War broke out I was seven years old and I remember that everybody thought the war was going to be over by Christmas, which of course, it was not. Then the war meant to me air raids, because Offenbach is about fifty miles from the French border. So towards the end of the war, 1917 and 18, as a boy of eleven years or so, it meant to me a lot of air raids and my father had joined the army, although he never went in the front lines. But I had an uncle who spent the whole war in the front lines, you know, and he came home on furlough once in a while and the war meant not enough to eat. Then there is one interesting thing which was, in 1915 my mother and me, we went to Switzerland because my mother had a sister living there. And we went to Zurich, which is the biggest city in Switzerland. The main reason was that I, a young fellow eight years old, and I remember that very well, should get something to eat. And in Germany there are

four weeks summer vacation from school, and because of some technical difficulties with regard to our passports, instead of four weeks, we stayed ten weeks in Switzerland. And of course, I had a good time. Then we came back to Germany. Of course, then the routine started again.

SB: What about anti-Semitism? What are your earliest recollections of anti-Semitism?

KH: Well, my earliest recollections of anti-Semitism were that I had a classmate who was a Jewish boy whose father was let's say a [shamash](#) in the synagogue and this poor boy had to take a lot of abuse from Offenbach. I had very little, although I'm very Jewish looking. I know it, but in Germany, you see, I think the Germans can recognize Jews much more than the average American non-Jew. The Germans could point out Jews from ten miles away. I don't know what that is but this is true, what I'm saying.

SB: You yourself did not experience...

KH: I did not experience too much, but this poor boy, he was really... He had a tough life during his school years.

SB: You said that you didn't experience too much. Did you experience any?

KH: Some, yes. There (were) always some guys who would make fun of Jews.

SB: What about anything physical?

KH: No, not really. I did not personally experience anything physical, no.

SB: Do you remember when you were growing up, did your parents speak of anti-Semitism?

KH: Yes. My father was very conscious of it. He saw, in fact, anti-Semitism when there was none in my judgement. But my father was a very popular man in this city. He was a good man in advertising and he advertised for this clothing store he had, and his type of advertising was so that after a certain time he put ads in the newspaper and he didn't even put a name of the firm and everybody knew it was his ad. So he was a very popular man and he did not experience much of anti-Semitism at all.

SB: But he did speak of it?

KH: He spoke of it more than he experienced.

SB: Did he speak of it in terms of Offenbach? In terms of Germany?

KH: Well, sometimes, of course, we talked about Germany, yes. But mostly in terms of Offenbach. Offenbach was not a very anti-Semitic town, a Socialist town, a Social Democratic town. Like the Social Democrats in power right now in Germany. Offenbach was very, very much Social Democratic, so not much anti-Semitism in Offenbach.

SB: This, I assume, flowed from the fact that there must have been a fairly large number of factory workers.

KH: Of course, we had. There are these leather goods factories. In Germany you had certain areas where the anti-Semitism was so that a Jew couldn't even go there.

LB: Where would that be?

KH: Well, this was mainly in the north, like in Mecklenburg. Now, I think, it's all Polish. They had certain areas in the heart of Germany; in the [Harz mountains](#) or so, they had certain areas where it was very dangerous for a Jew to go.

SB: Did you know this when you were young?

KH: Yes.

SB: I mean, this was common knowledge? By the time you were fifteen years old your parents told you this?

KH: Yes.

LB: Was it in the papers?

KH: No.

LB: How did they know?

KH: They knew from people. I mean, you talked about it and, like here, what did you have in Darien, Connecticut? You know that Jews were not allowed to go into... (?)

SB: Did you ever have political conversations with your parents? With your father?

KH: Yes, very often.

SB: What were your father's political views?

KH: Well, I think his political views were the same as many other Jews had. They were not, let's say, real good Germans.

SB: Why?

KH: Because they felt that the Jew was not considered a full German. So did I. I felt that way too. Let me give you an example. When I came to the United States, and somebody played the national anthem, my heart was leaping - was part of it. When they played in Germany, "Deutschland, Deutschland, Uber Alles", I could not feel that I belonged to it.

SB: Now, you've got to be careful that you don't project backwards. Your experience in the thirties, of course, would make you feel that way. I understand that. But I'm asking you now, when you were growing up...

KH: In 1922, I felt the same way as I just told you. It has nothing to do with the Nazis.

SB: In 1922, you're fifteen years old. You say your father shared this view and you also say that many Jews felt themselves not to be full Germans.

KH: Right.

SB: Why was this?

KH: (sighing) Ahh, well, let's see how to get this across. There was a certain type of anti-Semitism in Germany. Even in Offenbach, where there was not much, this anti-Semitism was. As an example, I had an uncle who was a good German and when the war broke out he was a lieutenant. First World War, he was a lieutenant in the German army and when it came to promote, they did not promote him because he was a Jew. And this killed his whole feeling for Germany. He faked an injury. He limped and they let him out of the army. And he was a German. There was certain anti-Semitism. Jews were limited. You couldn't get beyond a lieutenant. You couldn't get a captain or a major. It was impossible for a Jew to be. It was this type of anti-Semitism which was not violent or anything, but which existed. I don't know how to explain it.

SB: I understand what you're saying. Again, you were very young when the war broke out. How did your parents respond to the war? How did your friends respond to the war?

KH: I don't remember this too well because, after all, I was seven years old when the war broke out. I really don't remember that too well.

LB: Did you play war games?

KH: Yeah, we did play war games, sure. As a matter of fact, I had a uniform.

LB: At seven?

KH: At seven, yeah.

LB: Were you a German when you played the war games? Or were you on the other side?

KH: No, no. We were Germans, of course.

LB: So, at least you were that much German. What did you think of the [Kaiser](#)?

KH: Well, I remember a lot of people made a lot of fun about the Jews, about the Kaiser. As a matter of fact, the Kaiser's name in Jewish circles was Lehman, they called him Lehman, like Governor Lehman. This was the Kaiser.

LB: Why was that?

KH: I don't know. I can't tell you why, but I remember that.

SB: Did your father ever speak to you about the Kaiser?

KH: Yes. Well, of course, they condemned him, most of the Jews I knew. They condemned him. They felt that he was the cause. Now, I don't know whether I'm telling you exactly the way it was because it's too vague in my mind, but the Jews did not recognize the Kaiser as the Jews here recognized Roosevelt, not at all. They blamed him for the war. They thought that he started the war and that there was no reason to have a war if it wouldn't have been for the Kaiser.

SB: Let's look at the period at the end of the war and some years after the war. Do you remember when the war ended?

KH: Yes, I remember that.

SB: Do you remember what the reactions in the town were?

KH: The reactions in the town were that we had French occupation. I don't know exactly when that was, if this was in 1918 or if it was a year or two later. I think it was a year or two later, we had French occupation. Then there was this uprising which was - one of them was a guy named

Kapp. [Kapp Putsch](#) it was called and I don't know exactly how this went on but there was in Offenbach, in particular, a big commotion. The police came out, soldiers came out. I don't recall any more more details.

SB: Your schooling was not interrupted?

KH: We had two schools because it was a fairly big city - 90,000 people; two schools on the same level, and when the war started there were troubles with getting coal and stuff like this, so these schools were put together and one session was in the morning and one session was in the afternoon. You see, where before they were in different buildings they put them in one building and one session was from 8:00 until 1:00 and the other session was from 1:00 until 5:00 or something like that.

SB: About the year 1920 or 1921 you must have finished the gymnasium, is that right?

KH: Let me see now, yes. Yes.

SB: What did you do then?

KH: Then I went into a leather goods factory as what you call apprentice.

SB: Who owned the leather goods factory?

KH: The leather goods factory was owned by an uncle of mine and his partner and he was part owner, you know. And he wanted me to join his company and as it was Germany you had to be an apprentice for three years. It meant you did the same work as all the others only you didn't get paid much, in order to learn the trade.

SB: How large of a plant was it?

KH: This was a fairly large plant. To the best of my recollection they had about 700 to 800 workers there and about an office staff of maybe 50 people. It was a pretty large factory.

SB: Let me go back a little bit. In your Jewish education, that is up until the age of 13, did you have any contact with other Jewish boys and girls in other cities?

KH: Yes, yes.

SB: Through the Jewish organization?

KH: Yes.

SB: What type of contact?

KH: Ah, you know, for instance, like soccer was a big game in Germany and we played soccer with other towns, like Mainz, Ludwigstarten, Mannheim. They were all 40, 50 , 60, miles away. We got together, we played games and things like this. There were some cultural things taking place too, where you exchanged views about Jewish life and so on.

SB: You ended your schooling at about the age of 14? Is that right?

KH: No.

SB: No? What did you do? When did you finish your schooling?

KH: I finished when I was 18 years old.

SB: Where did you do this schooling?

KH: In Offenbach.

SB: In the gymnasium.

KH: Ten years.

SB: So you enrolled when you were about 7 years old?

KH: Something like that.

SB: And when did you enter into the leather goods factory?

KH: Let me see, 1907... 1914, wait a minute. I wasn't through with school until after 1923.

SB: And then you went to work as an apprentice in the leather goods factory. In 1923 is also the time of what you spoke about before, [the great inflation](#).

KH: This was in 1923, I think around this time I left school.

SB: What did the inflation mean to you?

KH: Well, the inflation meant to me that it came to a point where you got paid daily. If you did not spend your money the same day and you kept it until the next day it was only worth a

fraction of what it was the day before. And in terms of my father's store, of course they didn't want to give their merchandise away, because if they sold a suit - today they sold it for 22,000 marks and the next morning these 22,000 marks you could buy a loaf of bread for it. That's how fast the inflation. It's very difficult to explain. And then in 1923, I think towards the end or the middle of the year, I think it was stabilized. You see, from one day to the other they succeeded in stabilizing the mark. It was 1 million the day before, it was 1 mark the next day.

SB: Your father managed to continue in business through the inflation?

KH: Yes.

SB: And of course, you continued to work?

KH: Yes.

SB: Did you notice a great deal of dislocation? Were people going out of business?

KH: Not really, no. I wouldn't say that. They all managed somehow to survive. A lot of people, like my age now, lost their life savings because, what a thousand marks before, wasn't worth anything any more. I know my father had saved up a lot of the old 1,000 mark bills and he thought that they would honor them, but nothing. A lot of people lost a lot of money. But somehow they survived. I can't tell you - I wish I could but I can't. I can't remember it so well anymore. I know that a lot of people that lived on pensions suffered tremendously but for one reason or another they all survived to the best of my knowledge.

SB: Were there any demonstrations, do you remember?

KH: Not because of the inflation, no. They watched the dollar. I remember that people watched every day what the dollar was and how much in marks. And every day it climbed. It was 3,000 marks for a dollar, the next day it was 4,500 marks for a dollar and then, as I said before, from one day to the other they stabilized it.

LB: Who stabilized it? The government?

KH: Yes, the German government. This guy, [Schacht](#), he stabilized it. He was later a member of Hitler's cabinet. He was at the time a Democrat. He did the job. I don't know how he did it.

SB: So, then your family seemed to come through the inflation in fairly good shape?

KH: In fairly good shape, yes.

SB: Also, in 1923, Hitler had [attempted a putsch](#).

KH: In Munich, yes.

SB: Did you hear of this?

KH: Oh, yes.

SB: What is the earliest remembrance you have of Adolph Hitler?

KH: 1923, the putsch. Of course, when this happened they gave you quite a few write ups about what happened before which you didn't know until the putsch that took place. In other words, when you heard that he was born in Austria, then he came to Munich and he was a painter, whatever happened. But he was publicized through that putsch, in Munich.

LB: Favorable or unfavorable?

KH: In Offenbach it was unfavorable. But there were places where it was favorable. As a matter of fact, there was one other thing which happened. There was this German Secretary of State who was Jewish, [Walter Rathenau](#). I'm sure you've heard about him. He was murdered, and this in Offenbach. This was something. They were up in arms. They demonstrated at the time.

SB: Who demonstrated?

KH: The Social Democrats. They demonstrated against at the time the party which was called... Oh my God, I forgot... The German Nationalist Party...

SB: The [German Nationalist Volkspartei](#)?

KH: This was Nazi then, the Deutsche Volkspartei. Nazionale Sozialistische Deutsche Volkspartei started later. There was one organization which was called [Steel Helmet](#) which was nationalistic, anti-Semitic and against everything which was connected with Jews in any way. And then there was the German National party - not National Socialistic - this was the Nazis. It didn't exist as a party at the time. I mean it did exist but not to any extent and when this Rathenau was murdered I remember that there were big demonstrations in Offenbach against any nationalists.

SB: What about the Jewish response to the Rathenau assassination?

KH: They demonstrated with the Social Democrats but there was no Jewish. The Jews belonged to the Social Democrats. They belonged either to the Social Democrats or to the Democrats. These were the parties that took in Jews.

SB: What about Communists? Were there any among the Communists?

KH: There were some, but not too many Jews. But there were Jews, yes.

SB: So there were demonstrations together with the Social Democrats. How did your father vote?

KH: He voted Democrat. You see Social Democrats was the workers' party and Democrats were those people who were a little above the workers' party. They voted Democrat. And most Jews, storekeepers, as I said before, lawyers, doctors and so on, they all voted Democrat. But Democrats were not a big factor. Social Democrats were the big...

LB: But weren't there poor Jews in Offenbach?

KH: Very few, very few.

LB: What did the poor Jews do?

KH: I can't tell you. I don't know.

LB: You never were in any contact?

KH: Never. They were very few, very few. Strangely enough in Germany, at least in Offenbach - I won't say Germany- there very few Jews who did not own a store or have a leather brokerage firm or a lawyer, a doctor, or what else was there? Very few.

SB: Were there any Jewish workers?

KH: There were some, yes, but very few.

LB: In spite of all this, you still didn't feel German, you say...

KH: No, I did not. I just tell you the way I felt. Now, my wife was - don't let her hear what I'm telling you now - she was a very good sports girl. She won the German championship in swimming, 1929. And she was active with all those organizations.

SB: Sports organizations?

KH: Yeah. And she felt more German than I did. Because when she won - she had a victory- they played "["Deutschland Uber Alles"](#)", you know, and she listened to that. Now she's the opposite. She's more against the Germans than I am.

SB: Was she from Offenbach?

KH: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SB: You say that in 1923 you heard of the Hitler putsch. Did you hear about, aside from his background that he was an Austrian and so on, did you know that this was also an anti-Semite?

KH: Oh, sure.

SB: Was there any reaction to that?

KH: Every Jew knew that. Every Jew was scared stiff. At the time they were scared stiff but then when the putsch collapsed and all these guys like [Ludendorff](#), were arrested and put to trial. I think they were sent to jail. Then the fear died down.

SB: This is about 1923, 1924. What did you do then? You were now 18?

KH: I was two years in the factory and then I took a leave of absence and I went to London to learn the English language. I went to college for a year.

SB: What school did you go to?

KH: [London School of English](#) language. And I was about a year. It was 1925, I was 18 years old. And then I went to college for a year. It was a medium college, not a high class one, but was, you know. And then I came back to Germany and I went back to the leather goods factory. I went on the road.

SB: What did you do on the road?

KH: Sell leather goods. My trip was Germany, England - after I learned English, Holland, France, Belgium and later on, Spain.

SB: Why did you learn English?

KH: Why? Well, people said, my parents amongst them, that a Jewish boy has to learn foreign languages because they figured at the time, even before Hitler came to power, there was not too much future for Jews in Germany. I can't tell you why.

LB: That was unusual, wasn't it?

KH: Well, at least my parents felt I had to learn foreign languages. As a matter of fact, I went then to France and I did the same thing in 1928. I went to France and learned French the same way as I learned English.

SB: What you're saying is very interesting. This feeling of doubt. This feeling of insecurity in Germany. If you can remember, did your friends feel this way? Were there any other people who felt this way?

KH: I don't want to give you the wrong impression, now. We have a feeling of insecurity - maybe it was not a hundred percent right - it was not a feeling that we would be thrown out in a year or two. That was not it. The feeling was that if you knew foreign languages, and the time would come when something would happen, that you had it easier to establish yourself in another country. I think this was the general idea. Now, whether everybody felt that way, I can't tell you. Most of my friends probably felt the same way. A couple of others did the same thing. I was the first one, in Offenbach, to go to England after the war. Don't forget the war was over in 1918 and they were enemies and in 1925 I went to England. I didn't feel so good, you know, but I went because my parents wanted it and a good Jewish boy listened to what his parents said.

SB: I was just going to ask you, were you a good Jewish boy in that respect?

KH: You mean I listened to my parents? What they wanted I did. Not everything was right that they wanted, but I did it.

SB: Were you political in any way in the 20s?

KH: No. When they had elections I was hoping the Social Democrats or the Democrats would win, but this is as far as my political... In other words, I wanted a left to win which was sympathetic to the Jews at the time. Everything depends on what does it mean for the Jews? You know, is it good for the Jews or is it bad for the Jews? This was even before Hitler. It was the question, whatever happened: Is it good for the Jews? Because us Jews felt insecure in Germany.

LB: (to Steve Burke) Steve, this sounds different from what a lot of the German Jews say. Am I right?

SB: Yes, it is.

LB: Could it be because your father came from Poland?

KH: Could be.

LB: You talk to some German Jews who are here now - they're still German.

KH: I'm not.

SB: You say your father came from Poland? He came from Austria? When did he come?

KH: I was born in 1907, he was born in 1876. He came to Offenbach in 1895.

SB: Did your father speak Yiddish?

KH: No.

SB: What did he speak?

KH: German.

SB: So he spoke no other foreign language?

KH: I think he was born there and when he was very young he went to Munich. There he had a sister. His parents, I think, died; I remember that, when he was very young, so as a young boy he came to Munich.

SB: When did you get married?

KH: 1935.

SB: After the Nazis came. So, if I am correct, you spent the remainder of the decade, the 20s, working as a salesman for the leather goods.

KH: Well, with the interruption of a year in England and almost a year in France; 1925 and 1928. And then I was a salesman on the road. Yes.

SB: And then, of course, in 1929 and 1930, the Depression came.

KH: Well, not the Depression. It started to become bad for the Jews because the Nazis came; the Nazi party grew by leaps and bounds.

SB: What about the economic situation?

KH: Well, I did not suffer too much under the economic situation because I was travelling abroad. I learned all those languages and my parents apparently felt they spent all that money to educate me. I went for this company to England and France on the road.

SB: What about in Offenbach? How were things there? Did factories lay-off men?

KH: To some extent, yes. Of course there was a Depression in the 30s, otherwise Hitler would have never come to power. They laid off people, there were a lot of unemployed people. It didn't affect me because I wasn't unemployed, but a lot were. Yes.

SB: You started to say that things began to get bad for the Jews. Can you remember how, personally? How did you see this?

KH: Well, when Jews went in a restaurant, some people started to pick fights.

SB: This was before 1933?

KH: Yes, oh, yes.

SB: When you say Jews would walk into a restaurant, people would pick fights - would this happen in Offenbach?

KH: Yes. Not too much, but it happened.

SB: So, am I correct in saying that there was a noticeable rise in tension and conflict between Jews and Gentiles in Offenbach?

KH: Yes. I wouldn't say between Jews and Gentiles. I would say between Jews and Nazis. There were a lot of Gentiles that were not at this time sympathetic to the Nazi cause.

SB: How do you know? I'm not being sarcastic. Do you have evidence, for example...?

KH: I had a lot of friends who were not Jews and who told me that they hate the Nazis and - whether they meant it, I can't tell you - but that's what they said. But mainly the tension was between Jews and Nazis. In 1930 it started. In 1930 we had elections, I think, where the German Reichstag had about 50 seats, if I remember well. And in 1930 you had elections where

the Nazi party came up from 21 seats to, I think, 108. I may not be correct, but I think [I'm pretty close to it.](#)

SB: Did this worry you?

KH: Yes. Very much.

SB: Did it worry the people that you knew?

KH: I know, but I think that what you said is right. There were a lot of Jews who felt more German than Germans. Yes, they were. I was not one of them. Neither were my parents and it worried me no end when I looked at the election results and saw 108 seats. It worried me stiff.

SB: Did you anticipate that Hitler would be elected? That Hitler would come to power?

KH: No.

SB: Why?

KH: I figured that the people would not give him this kind of a vote, which did materialize. I figured that the 108 seats which he got were votes from people who were unemployed and didn't know what else to do. I did not expect that the people as a whole would give him that kind of a vote.

SB: January of 1933, Hitler would be [appointed Chancellor](#) by von Hindenburg. What did this mean to you?

KH: This meant a complete change in our lives because people who before used to go out and have a glass of beer with us all of a sudden didn't know you anymore. It was a complete change. Nobody would talk to a Jew. I wouldn't say nobody, but most people avoided Jews. They were afraid.

SB: You were still selling at this time?

KH: I was selling in France. Then I went to France and stayed in France and I came back only once in a while. So I did not actually know too much. But as it happened, on January the 30th I was in Germany. And when Hitler came to power, they had big parades going on, torchlight parades and stuff like that. And on my way to work in Offenbach I saw people who I knew well. As they saw me coming they looked the other way.

SB: Did you do any selling in Germany at this time?

KH: Not after 1933. No.

SB: What about the business? Was this still your uncle's business?

KH: Well, yeah. They still had the business, but I left the business - his business- and I went to France. I left his business as an employee. I became what you would call a representative and I took his line to France and was on my own. And in 1933, 1934, 1935 I had what you call in Germany a double living quarters. I was registered in Paris and I also had my German quarters, you know.

SB: You were a German citizen registered in Paris.

KH: Yah.

SB: When you say you traveled occasionally back and forth between France and Germany, did you have any difficulty when you traveled?

KH: A couple of times, yes. They treated Jews, of course. I don't know when they started, but they had a "J" on your passport, you know, "Jew", of course. And the border patrols and guys who checked your passport, they were not too polite or anything but I didn't experience any violence or anything, you know.

SB: You got married in 1935?

KH: In 1935. Of course, then we saw the handwriting on the wall and we saw that there was no chance for Jews to stay in Germany.

SB: Your wife also came from Offenbach?

KH: Aye. Her brother and me were friends, although her brother was a year older than I was and of course when we were young she was too young for me. I didn't even look at her, but then started in 1930-31 we went together, you know. She was young. In 1914 we started to go together. She was 16, 17 years old.

SB: If I interpret this correctly, this was courting, for want of a better term, in the American fashion. There's no arranged nature here.

KH: Nothing. We like each other.

SB: You liked each other, so you got married in 1935.

KH: We got married in December 1935.

SB: And where did you live then?

KH: We lived in Offenbach for about six months, I think, and then we were wise guys, you see. We figured that Hitler would collapse and instead of going to the United States, a chance which I had then, we went to Belgium.

SB: Now, a number of things here. That six months that you lived in Offenbach - how was life?

KH: Not very pleasant.

SB: In what way?

KH: Well, then you had the [S.A.](#), the Storm Troopers, and they made life miserable for Jews. It was... I don't know how else to call it - unpleasant.

SB: Were you afraid to walk in the street?

KH: I would say yes.

SB: Were you afraid to... Would you go to a movie at night?

KH: I really don't know whether we still went to the movies in 1935. I don't think so; I don't think we went to the movies. And, of course, they started to put up signs that said "Jews are not desired here" so we couldn't go in. If you went in you did something which was against the law, and the sign was there.

SB: When did you think - the first time, if you can remember- of leaving Germany?

KH: When Hitler came to power.

SB: You say that you thought, this was as late as 1935, you thought that the Nazis would collapse. And again, if I understand you correctly, you felt that the best thing to do would be to go to Belgium? Is that right? Wait for the Nazis to collapse and then come back to Germany?

KH: This was the idea, yeah.

SB: What about, in terms of you and your wife, the Jewish friends? Were most of your friends Jewish?

KH: Yes.

SB: What did these people do?

KH: They were all trying to leave Germany. Most of them went to the United States.

LB: In 1935 they were already trying to leave?

KH: Oh, yes. Some left in '33.

LB: Some stayed?

KH: Some stayed, like my parents.

SB: You say that you had a chance to come to the United States.

KH: Yes, I had relatives here who eventually gave me an [affidavit of support](#). They would have given that to me in 1935 also. But I didn't ask for it.

SB: You didn't ask for it because you, again, thought...

KH: Let me recollect there for a moment. We also had friends in Brussels. We had a couple of couples who were friends of ours in Germany and they were in Belgium and this a little bit helped that we want to go to Brussels also.

SB: Because of your friends?

KH: Friends, yeah. We were friends in Germany and so they went to Brussels and so we went to Brussels.

SB: You say that your parents didn't leave. Why? What was your father thinking of this?

KH: My father's thinking was that he was too old to start again, new in life, and he was going to sit it out in Germany.

SB: He was still running the retail store?

KH: No, the retail store - they closed it on him. I think in '35 but I'm not sure any more.

SB: You say "they" closed it on him. You mean the Nazis closed it on him? Do you remember the procedure? Did they just close him up?

KH: They gave him notice that we have to sell out and close the store.

SB: Did he sell out?

KH: Yah.

SB: Did he get a good price?

KH: No.

SB: Who bought him out?

KH: I don't remember any more, but he did not get what he wanted. And they forced him. We owned that house, I told you before. They forced him to sell it at a very low price which, of course, we got restitution after we came to the United States. The store, well, there wasn't much left because he couldn't buy as a Jew. He couldn't buy any merchandise any more and nobody sold him any merchandise. So I think the selling out of the store was not a big deal. There was not much left. So he closed the store and I think somebody else moved in and opened something else in the store.

SB: You say he sold the house...

KH: He had to. He was forced to.

SB: Was he allowed to live in the apartment?

KH: No. He went to some other little place somewhere. They lived together for some time with my wife's parents in a little place.

SB: 1935 you left for Brussels?

KH: No, it was 1936 because we got married in December 1935. So the year was over. I would say that if I remember well, June, July or so of 1936 we went to Brussels.

SB: Did anybody you know in Offenbach leave for Palestine?

KH: Yes. A very good friend of mine whom we visited three years ago went to Israel. And I hadn't seen him in 36 years, I think it was. And he left at the time to go to Palestine.

SB: Did you ever give any thought to leaving for Palestine?

KH: No, I didn't want to. I never had any desire to go there.

SB: Did Zionism seem to grow stronger at this period in time?

KH: Yes, it did. Yes.

SB: And outside of the fact that your friend moved to Palestine, what was the evidence of this growth of Zionism?

KH: People talked about it much more than before, and a lot of people contemplated going there eventually. Now, how many went there? A few others went there. I just gave you an example because he was just as old as I was. We were two weeks apart, you know, and were friends all our lives. But many others went to Palestine at the time, too. I don't know how many, but quite a few. The majority of Jewish boys and girls, for that matter, went to the United States from Offenbach; the majority by far.

SB: Did there seem to be great difficulty in going to the United States?

KH: There was no difficulty if you had an affidavit of support; if you had relatives there, there was no difficulty at all. Even if it wasn't a relative, if somebody gave you the affidavit of support, there was difficulty, no. The only thing was, you couldn't take anything with you. I mean, not anything. I mean no money. They wouldn't give you. You see, you could take some furniture along and so, but you couldn't take any money along.

SB: What about the leather goods factory?

KH: We were all forced to sell out or hand it over to somebody else. No Jew could own anything. I think after [Kristalnacht](#), which was in November 1933 when they burned down the synagogues, no Jew owned any property or anything, no matter what it was.

SB: What did your uncle do?

KH: Well, they left. They went to England. They all left. I mean there were only - as I hear now- 50,000 Jews left in Germany. Not even that.

SB: But you see, half of the Jewish community was there in 1939.

KH: Half?

SB: That's right.

KH: Is that established?

SB: I'm pretty sure that's the figure.

KH: That seems to me high.

SB: That sounds, to me, strange, that from your town, so many people are leaving, but it's possible.

KH: I don't know. How many, I don't know. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say. You want a report of my experience. You see, now, my experience may have been unique. I don't know. But, on top of this, I didn't know everybody in Offenbach though I was born there and lived there all my life until I was 28 or so. In 1929¹ we got married. I think I was 28. We left a year later when I was not even 30, but those friends and girls - we all were aware that there was no possibility for us to remain in Germany. We were aware of that. And we knew that we had to leave the country.

SB: And this you knew relatively young.

KH: We knew that after Hitler came to power.

SB: You said, I think earlier, that you felt that perhaps there wasn't a place...

KH: We knew - this may be contradictory, what I say - but in reality it is not. We knew that we had to leave Germany under these conditions. But we had the hope that these conditions might change.

SB: Let me ask you some questions here, perhaps we passed over. Was your father an educated man?

KH: Not a college man, no, if this is what you mean. He was a little bit of an artist. He was a very good painter. He did not go to college. He went to high school.

¹ Mr. Hirschen misspoke here. He and Gretel were married in December, 1935,

SB: Did he read?

KH: Oh, yes.

SB: What about your mother?

KH: She went to the same school as my wife went.

SB: Did your father have roughly the same education that you had?

KH: I had more. Jewish children had more than the parents. I don't know if what I say makes sense but I had that experience.

SB: You say that in the 1920s you were not political. Do you remember as a youngster, what newspapers your father read?

KH: Oh yes. Well, there were two newspapers in Offenbach. One was the regular newspaper like the (Schenectady) Gazette here, and the other was a Social Democratic newspaper. This was before Hitler came to power. After Hitler came to power, of course, the Social Democratic newspaper was eliminated and a Nazi paper was brought into the city which every Nazi member had to buy and they sold the state paper - I don't know whether you heard of it - which was called [the "Sturmer"](#) which was brought out by [some guy in Nuremberg](#) who was finally hanged...

SB: Der Sturmer was circulated in Offenbach?

KH: Yah, you could buy it. Oh, we read a lot of newspapers. We bought, like you buy here the New York Times, we bought the [Berliner Tageblatt](#).

SB: What about the Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung?

KH: It was the [Frankfurter Zeitung](#), it was not Allgemeine at the time. Now it's Allgemeine. The Frankfurter Zeitung was just a Democratic paper which was about at the level of the Berliner Tageblatt, which was the level of the New York Times here; the high class paper.

SB: Did it come into the house?

KH: No, we borrowed it. Only the Offenbacher Zeitung came into the house.

SB: But did your father read the Frankfurter Zeitung?

KH: Yes.

SB: What about a Jewish newspaper?

KH: There was a Jewish newspaper which was called, if I remember well, C.V. paper. This was a Jewish newspaper which I think was printed in Berlin and was sent all over Germany to Jewish people. We had to pay for it, of course.

SB: This was before Hitler?

KH: Before and after Hitler.

LB: Who printed it?

KH: Well, some Jewish organization. It was a Jewish paper, like here let's say [Mr. Clevenson's Jewish World](#).

LB: Oh, like a general news sheet. It didn't have a political orientation?

KH: It was not as elaborate. It didn't have as many editorials as Mr. Clevenson has. It was more or less ... well, secondary news items. I don't know how else to explain it.

SB: When you were growing up, did you know, for example, of [Chaim Weizmann](#)? You knew that there was a Zionist movement?

KH: Oh, yes.

SB: Was there any sympathy? Did your father have any sympathy?

KH: Not my father, no. Not me either. I mean, I'm telling you the truth. At the time. Today I feel differently, but at the time I did not. But there were many people who were very much in sympathy with them - very much, some of my friends.

SB: What was your father's reasoning? What did he say about it?

KH: No reason, he just wasn't interested. No. I had no reason either.

SB: In terms of religion, did your family go to the synagogue on Saturday?

KH: No.

SB: Rosh Hashanah? Yom Kippur?

KH: Yes.

SB: That's when they went?

KH: Yah, but just my mother and me. My father went very rarely.

LB: And services were conducted in Hebrew?

KH: The services were conducted in Hebrew more than in [your synagogue](#). More Hebrew than [Agudat Achim](#). But there was more Hebrew, much more.

LB: Did your mother read Hebrew?

KH: Yes.

LB: She did. What kind of things did she read?

KH: Only the prayer books. Certain, she was not an accomplished...

LB: I mean other than Hebrew books.

KH: No, she did not read. There was nothing to read in Germany. You couldn't buy anything in Offenbach.

LB: There were no books?

KH: No, in Frankfurt probably yes.

LB: Was there a library?

KH: Yes.

LB: Did people go to the library and take out books?

KH: Yes, probably. I don't know though.

LB: Did your parents do that?

KH: No. Are you talking about Hebrew books now?

LB: No, any books.

KH: Oh, sure, sure we did. You mean what did they read? I can't tell you. Novels and books that were in fashion at the time. I really can't tell you.

LB: When you were growing up, did you talk with your parents about books?

KH: Not too much.

LB: About politics?

KH: Politics we talked a lot. It was too much on our minds on account of the uncertainty for Jews, in our mind. We may come out differently from other Jews. I don't know how many German Jews you interviewed. I think we felt a little different from many others.

LB: What else did you and your parents talk about? What would be a general subject of conversation?

KH: Well, there were lots of things. Business was a big subject, of course. And my progress in school, my progress as a salesman on the road, and our own problems, of course, were closest to us.

SB: You mentioned earlier that a number of Jews were employed in the leather brokerage business.

KH: Well, there were some employed, yeah, but some owned them. Most of them owned these brokerage businesses.

SB: What did they do?

KH: They bought raw leather, had it prepared and sold it to the leather goods factories.

SB: But they themselves did not prepare it? They bought the leather, gave it to a factory and then sold it?

KH: Yes. Now, of course, Offenbach was maybe different on account of this leather goods industry. You see, there were probably different conditions. For instance, there was a place, not too far from Offenbach, where there was a concentration of men's clothing factories. You see,

you had certain cities that had nothing else but one particular kind of business, like this city called Chartenburg (Aschaffenburg?). They had only men's clothing factories. Like in Offenbach we had practically only leather goods factories. So most of these men's clothing factories were owned by Jews.

SB: When you were younger had you ever visited Berlin?

KH: I went to Berlin for the first time in 1928.

SB: What about Frankfurt?

KH: Every day. Not every day, but every second day, let's say. You want to have a good time you went to Frankfurt. Offenbach was 90,000 Frankfurt was 450,000 at the time. You know it was a big city. And if you were looking for some kind of a ... you were young, you went to Frankfurt every second or third day. There was a trolley car going back and forth between the two.

SB: In 1936 you moved to Brussels?

KH: Right.

SB: Again, you said that life was beginning to become very unpleasant in Offenbach...

KH: Very.

SB: And you were reluctant to walk in the streets and things like that. Did you hear of people getting beaten up?

KH: Yes.

SB: And were the Nazis visible? In evidence?

KH: Yes.

SB: How?

KH: First of all, they wore brown uniforms, that's number one, or black which was worse; [S.S.](#) And then, to insult a Jew either by words or by physical contact, nobody stopped anybody. If somebody wanted to beat up a Jew, he just beat up a Jew.

LB: So it would be an open incident on the street? It was not something that people just did not see?

KH: Oh, they all saw it, but didn't want to see. They closed their eyes to it.

LB: The reason I asked you is that so many said, well, they didn't know.

KH: What do you mean? Who didn't know?

LB: Germans would say they didn't know.

KH: Well, they didn't know what the cause was, why it happened, you see, but they saw that Jews were beaten up. And Jews were hurt and windows were broken and merchandise was taken out of windows and they all saw it. But, like we were afraid as Jews, they were afraid as Germans. If they wouldn't side with the Nazis they would... Here, I want to give you one example. As I told you before, the sign had to be on the Jews, "Jews are not desired here". "[Juden sind hier...](#)" I don't know whether you speak enough German to understand.

SB: I understand.

KH: So they had to. They were forced to put those signs on. So there was a barber and he didn't want to put the sign on, you know. So, they came to him and they said, "You put that sign on." He says, "No, I'm not because 80% of my customers are Jews and I'm not going to put the sign on." Well, two weeks later they put him in a concentration camp.

SB: That was my next question. Did you know of the concentration camps before you left Germany?

KH: Of course.

SB: You did know? You knew that people were being taken there?

KH: Yes.

SB: Where?

KH: [Dachau](#). This was the best known, Dachau. There was the other one in... I have the best memory in the Capitol District!

SB: But you knew before you left?

KH: Oh yeah. Let me give you an example: We left. We went to Belgium, I told you, and my parents were still in Germany. And in the year 1936 and 1937 in order to be sure that my parents were all right, I came to Offenbach once in a great while, stayed there for a day or two. And one day I came to Offenbach and I slept, of course, at my parents house and very early in the morning, the telephone rang. So I answered the phone and there was a voice on the phone and it said to me, "Don't ask any questions. Take your father and take a walk into the woods." That's it. "Who's calling?" "Never mind. Take your father and take a walk into the woods." Well, I tell you, I did it. I woke up my father and said, "Let's go out for a walk", and we came back about 10 o'clock. It was about five. In the meantime, they had rounded up, I don't know how many, but I think ten, twelve Jewish men and never anybody saw them any more.

SB: Did you ever find out who made the call?

KH: No! Hmm! Quite a deal.

SB: Yeah! So you went to Brussels in 1936?

KH: Yeah, middle of '36.

SB: And what did you do there?

KH: Selling.

SB: Who did you sell for?

KH: Well, one was a German company.

LB: Owned by a Jew?

KH: No, no, not by a Jew, no.

LB: So, out of Germany you could work for a German company?

KH: Oh, yes. Out of Germany I could do anything. Of course, I shouldn't have done it, but I had to make a living. Well, and then I had an English friend who I sold for, you know.

SB: And how long did you stay in Brussels?

KH: We stayed in Brussels until, tomorrow, 34 years ago. Which was May 10, 1940. And when Mr. Hitler decided to [invade Holland, Luxembourg and Belgium](#).

SB: So when did you leave? You left Belgium on May 10, 1940?

LB: He didn't say he left. He said Hitler invaded.

KH: That's when Mr. Hitler came in. Of course, then the whole thing started over again. The Germans moved in, after two days or so we were declared enemy aliens because I still had a German passport and we had to report to a certain place, and then they took us and put us in cattle cars and...

SB: Who put you in cattle cars?

KH: Belgians.

SB: The Belgians put you in cattle cars.

KH: To them I was a German citizen. That I was a Jew, they couldn't care less. So we were brought to France. And we were there for 13 days and 13 nights in a cattle car and I didn't ever doubt the whole thing. I didn't know where Gretel was. You know they took me away and my whole baggage was like I am here; this was everything I possessed. And then we ended up in [St. Cyprien](#) which is in the south of France about ten miles from Spain. There was a concentration camp which was run at the time that we got there by the French. This was one of those camps where they held Spaniards during the [1936 Civil War](#). And there we stayed.

LB: You met Gretel there?

KH: No. Well, later. She was in [another camp](#). She went to another camp near. She went to near Toulouse.

SB: You did not have any children at this time?

KH: No, but Gretel was pregnant at the time, and I didn't know that she was. And, of course, there was about eight months or so and then it was around time for my son, Tom, to be born. And I had the funny notion that I wanted to be there when he was born, so I escaped from the concentration camp.

SB: How?

KH: Well, there was a guy there was allowed to buy for the camp canteen.

LB: A Jew?

KH: No, he was not a Jew. He was one of those Germans who fought in Spain and he was something like an honor concentration camp inmate. And he was allowed to buy for the canteen because in these years - this was after France lost the war - there was no cars, no bicycles, no nothing, you know? And he was allowed two people with him to carry things and this guy made a business of it. He took two people along and one he left outside and for some reason the French did not check on him - the authorities - whether he brought these two guys back. So he made a business of it.

SB: What year was this in the camp?

KH: This was 1941.

SB: This was 1941 and your wife was in the camp?

KH: No, she came to the camp... She was in Gers which was another camp. They released her because she was pregnant.

SB: Did you have any difficulty in this camp because you were Jewish?

KH: There were only Jews there.

SB: You said there were a few from Spain.

KH: A couple, not many. Maybe 30. Thirty people were there from Spain; 8,800 Jews. They were all from Belgium.

SB: They were Belgian Jews?

KH: No.

LB: They were German nationals from Belgium?

KH: Mostly German Jews, yah, German Jews.

SB: You escaped, and where did you go?

KH: We went first to - the next big city was [Perpignan](#), and there was a little place. Jesus, I forget. We rented a little house. Of course, we lived what you call underground. Any gendarme who would come would be able to put me back in the concentration camp because I had no papers, no nothing.

LB: And you were trying to get to Gretel at this time?

KH: No, Gretel was with me.

LB: Gretel was with you?

SB: How did you find her?

KH: Well, we found each other through - there was a service. You mean, how did I find her?

LB: Yes.

SB: You escaped from the camp.

KH: Through the Red Cross, you know? We wrote to a certain spot and they then sent the mail on to us. And then I found out where she was and then I wrote back - she gave me her address - and she came to the camp where I was. See, she had been released from her concentration camp on account of, as I said, she was pregnant.

SB: You said you lived underground. How did you get the money? How did you survive?

KH: Borrowed.

SB: From whom?

KH: From friends of ours who had money.

SB: These were French people?

KH: No, they were also Germans, but fortunately enough they had some money and we didn't have any at all.

SB: Were they Jewish?

KH: Jewish, yes.

LB: How did they get money when they... When you left Belgium, for example, when they took you from Belgium, were you permitted to take anything with you? Any money?

KH: No, because I was picked from the streets, so to speak, you know?

LB: But these people managed to bring some money with them?

KH: These people had somehow or other, they come out of (?) and we met somebody. Matter of fact, a fellow who unfortunately was killed in an airplane accident. But he gave me all the money. Now this was the only way, what they did. The reason behind this was, they had money in France. They all, or some, escaped from the concentration camp and some were released, for what reason I don't know, but when they would leave France they couldn't take any money with them because they had monetary restrictions, you know. So, what they did, they gave money to people like me, hoping that we would eventually end up in the United States and then we would give them back the money. This is how they transferred the money from France to the United States.

SB: So you're living underground on money borrowed from friends.

KH: Right.

SB: Eventually, I assume soon, you are going to leave for the United States?

KH: Well, we are there, as I said, in Perpignan. Things became hot. There were raids and we didn't feel secure any more. So we travelled from Perpignan.

SB: Raids by the Germans for Jews?

KH: In the meantime, while this was still unoccupied, you see, the Germans weren't there yet. The Germans supervised the camp where I escaped from - the concentration camp. But they had not occupied [Vichy France](#), you know - the southern part of France. So, we went and I can't tell you how we succeeded, but we did - we went from Perpignan all across southern France to a place called [Cagnes-sur-Mer](#), which is between Nice and Cannes where Gretel had a friend who was in the concentration camp together with. And this friend of Gretel's put us up.

LB: What was the name of the town?

KH: Cagnes-sur-Mer.

LB: Where was that? In Brittany?

KH: No, no, no. In the south of France between Nice and Cannes.

LB: On the border?

KH: On the Mediterranean Sea. From where we lived to Monaco, Monte Carlo it's about 20 miles. And there we stayed until we went to the United States.

SB: How did you get to the United States?

KH: We wrote to our relatives and they sent an affidavit of support to the Consulate in Nice and the Consulate in Nice called us and we got our visa.

SB: When was this? When did you leave for the United States?

KH: We left for the United States about June 10, 1941. We got here July 13. We were about four weeks on the boat; on the sea. But this was not as easy as that. This was quite complicated, but I don't think you'd be interested in that.

SB: No. I would be, if you don't mind.

KH: No, I don't mind. But number one is that, of course, I escaped from the concentration camp and there were lists out. And, as I heard from somebody who saw these lists later on, I was number two on the list. Just to illustrate to you, at the concentration camp where I was we were 8,800 people. Out of these 8,800 people, about 500 escaped. Out of the 500 who escaped, 250 were caught and brought back. Out of the 250, 50 succeeded to finally end up in the United States. We were amongst those 50 and we didn't have a nickel to our name. This is number one. Number two is these lists existed where I was number two on the list; out of 500 people who escaped I was number two. And, of course, every gendarme who came your way had that list and if he stopped you, you were lost. So, when I say we lived underground, that means we did not dare to go out during the day. We are out only in the night.

LB: Before the Germans occupied that part of France, were the French gendarmes unsympathetic?

KH: Um hm.

LB: Why? Do you know?

KH: I don't know. There's a few exceptions. There was one guy who, when my son was born - this was in Cagnes-sur-Mer- that's where he was born - I was under the erroneous impression

that if a baby is born, he becomes a citizen of this country in France. So, I went to the police department and there was this... First of all, we had to fake papers.

SB: Where did you get them?

KH: We got them from a friend of ours, see, he gave us the papers. And so there was this sergeant Griffes. I'll never forget his name: G-R-I-F-F-E-S, that was his name. And I came to him and I said to him, "I hate to go first" - and on our false papers we had to register, you know, and I knew already at the time when I registered, I was under the impression that this man knew and didn't want to know. So, but I didn't think about it, you know. So when Tommy was born, I went to him and I said to him, "My son was born, and I was wondering if I could make an application for citizenship for him", hoping that him being a citizen we would be able to establish ourselves there. At this time we didn't know that we would be able to go to the United States. So he said to me, "Let me tell you something," he says to me, "in order to make this application you have to tell me where you were during the last five years. Do you really want to do that?" "Okay," and I left. So, in other words, he knew exactly that I had escaped from a concentration camp and didn't want to. But otherwise, the other gendarmes I didn't really see much sympathy. This was the only guy who I really saw sympathy.

SB: You say this camp that you escaped from - this was run by the Germans?

KH: It was supervised. At first it was run by the French, then, after the Germans won, a German delegation came in one day and insulted us and when they left they were supervising the camp somehow. I don't know how.

SB: All right. Let me just ask two questions going back to your younger days. Did you have a telephone?

KH: Yeah.

SB: You remember growing up with a telephone in the house?

KH: Yeah, I remember, I think I must have been... shortly before the war. Probably I was about five or six years old when we got the phone.

SB: What about cars?

KH: No. Very few cars.

SB: What about a radio?

KH: I judge it not until... the first radios were in 1923 or 24 or so, or even later than that. Sometimes you had something and most times you didn't.

LB: Crystal sets?

KH: Crystals, that's right, crystal set.

LB: He doesn't remember them. It's only to him I should be talking.

KH: He's young. He's young. Good for him, good for him. He's young.

SB: Do you have any questions?

LB: Yeah. In 1918 you were 11. You didn't ask anything about the Russian Revolution.

SB: No, I didn't. Did it mean anything?

KH: Well, to some people it did. To us - to me, I don't think it meant too much. They had a lot of sympathy for that [Kerensky](#). Kerensky was his name, wasn't it? There was a lot of sympathy for him in Jewish circles, I remember that vaguely. But, otherwise the Russian Revolution... I mean the Russian Revolution meant in 1917 that Germany had won less power to fight. That's what it meant mainly. And we all hoped that this would end the war fast when they made that [separate peace treaty at Brest-Litovsk](#) which ended the Russian-German war and everybody hoped that this would shorten the war. That was all the reaction I can think of. In Jewish circles, I know there was a lot of sympathy for Kerensky. I think he died recently, didn't he?

SB: Yes, just a few years ago.

KH: That's all I can tell you about the Russian Revolution for now.

LB: Do you want to tell your story?

KH: Yeah. I told you before I was on a list as an escaped concentration camp inmate. And I knew that every gendarme - gendarme is like, let's say, the state police - had that list. And when we left Cagnes-sur-Mer we travelled with what you call a convoy; this was a whole group of Jewish people who went to Spain to catch the boat in Barcelona to go to the United States. And we travelled in that whole convoy and there was one man in charge. And we had to go to Perpignan which was the last French town and then we went to the first Spanish town. And on

the border between France and Spain, of course our papers were checked. We travelled on a kind of passport which was given us by the American Consulate, which was a legitimate paper...

SB: Which name was on it?

KH: Regular, our regular...

SB: Your name?

KH: You know, the fake papers we had just got and the American consulate gave us the paper, and we had the baby, Tommy, at the time was 5 months old and the closer we came to the Spanish border and we knew we were going to be checked, the more worried I got because I knew that this gendarme there who was going to check our papers had a list and my name was number two on that list. This I knew because I was told that by somebody who was there and who came back in Nice. He knew that I was number two and I got worried. So close before, and I should be caught and brought back to the concentration camp? So, we had about 3 or 4 hours to go. I went to the guy in charge and I said to him, "I got a little problem. This and this and this and this." He says, "Have you got any money?" "I got not much, fifty francs." "That's all right, give it to me." Which left us with nothing, but of course everything was paid in Spain. In Barcelona we stayed in a hotel which was paid for by our relatives. So we come to the checkpoint there and there we stood in line. And I saw there was a mean looking guy who looked at the papers and he opens some files to look. And we came closer and closer and Gretel with the baby. And he looked, and then he came to me and I gave him my passport and he looked at the passport and he looked at me. (claps hands) He put the stamp on it. He didn't look at any files or anything. So this guy had bribed him that he would let me through. I tell you, if he had chased through Spain - Gretel with the baby and I with some little, you know... We didn't have much to carry. We came to Spain and in Barcelona, and we have to get our tickets for the ship that was going to leave. We came two days before. And I go to the agency - the shipment company - and, "My name's so-and-so." "Oh," the guy says, "I have been waiting for you." "Oh," I said, "Fine. What's the problem?" "We have no money here." I said, "There's no money here?" I said, my relatives sent the money which was at the time \$860 for the two of us. What was this? I'm sorry. So we sent a telegram to the United States. When we got the answer, we found out the money, by error, was sent to Lisbon instead of Barcelona. So we called Lisbon and they said to us wherever the money was sent to or the kind of monetary restrictions; we cannot send you the money too much more. It's impossible. So we are sitting in Barcelona. So, I went to a ship company, to the agency there, and this was, I think 10 o'clock at night. I think 8 o'clock. Anyway, he said to me, "If you haven't got the money by 3 o'clock this afternoon, I will have to hand you over to the Spanish authorities because the visa you have is only a transit visa and you cannot stay here and they will have to bring you back to France", which would have meant back in the concentration camp. We went back to the hotel. I think it was very early in

the morning and there was this woman who was on the convoy with us; she came from Belgium. She was a Belgian Jew. And she said to us - of course I think I must have lost ten pounds at that point already, you know. She says to me, "What seems to be the problem?" So we told her. "Well," she said, "let me see what I can do." In three hours she collected \$870 from people who I had never seen in my life before; all people who were with the convoy, who went on that boat who had a hundred dollars, a hundred and fifty dollars, two hundred dollars. The one who had \$150 gave \$20. We collected \$870 by 3 o'clock in the afternoon from people who I have never seen in my life before. I gave everybody a note and told them when we get to Lisbon we are going to get the money. Trust the money's there. Well, we come to Lisbon. We are two days or a day or something like that. Back to the place, the [HIAS](#), and the man said to me we were lucky, we found the way how to send the money back to Barcelona. I tell you, the way from the HIAS agency back to the boat, I don't know how I made it because I had to tell all these people that I couldn't give them the money. Somehow or other I managed. And then we came back to the United States and do you know when these people got their money? In October. It took until October to get the money back.

LB: They got it from Barcelona?

KH: Yes.

LB: They were lucky they got it at all.

KH: But doesn't that show that there are very nice human beings in this world? People I have never seen before gave me ten dollars, fifteen dollars, twenty dollars.

LB: Yes. I want to go back to when you were living in Germany and you were still young. Did you hear about the Russians at all and the Russian Jews there?

KH: Well, of course we heard about Russian... also Polish Jews. We heard more about Polish Jews in Germany than about Russian Jews.

LB: What did you hear?

KH: Well, that there were a lot of [pogroms](#) there. And we heard that a lot of them had been killed and a lot of them had to leave and some of them came to Offenbach, and so on, and lived there.

LB: How did you feel about them?

KH: The German Jew looked down on them.

LB: Why? And how?

KH: I don't know why. This I don't know. I can't tell you, but I did look down on them.

LB: Did they dress differently from you?

KH: Well, of course. First of all, they spoke German with the same accent as I speak English, you know?

LB: Did they speak German?

KH: Yeah, they spoke German but most of them spoke with an accent. Oh, listen somebody speaks with an accent. To some people it sounds funny, you know? And some of them, of course, were poor. I don't know. There was a gap between Germans and...

LB: Did you have feelings of antipathy towards them or just difference?

KH: I wouldn't say that, no. Just different.

SB: Did you have any contact with them?

KH: Yes.

LB: What kind?

KH: After Hitler came to power we had the Jewish club - like, let's say here the Temple Ti's (youth group), only it was bigger. And we played soccer - amongst Jews, you know, and there were a lot of these Jews on our team and after Hitler came to power we were out and so everything was all right.

SB: But before Hitler came to power did you have any contact?

KH: Yes, yes.

LB: What kind of contact did you have?

KH: Oh, we went out together.

LB: You did go out together? Was it with the poor Jews too?

KH: Yes.

LB: But there was still a feeling?

KH: There was a feeling, sure. But, you see, the feeling was probably more between the parents than it was between the children. You know, we went out - I don't know where it was but it was quite a few - we went out together and we did a lot of things together. We went to the Jewish Organization, even before Hitler had ever been to Offenbach.

SB: What Jewish organization was that?

KH: It was a youth club, a Juden Volk. And there you had plays and cultural things and played soccer and stuff like that. It was all in the synagogue. [Offenbach had a beautiful synagogue](#) which was converted into a movie theater by the Nazis. But it was a beautiful synagogue.

LB: Did you feel as if they were like creatures from another world or just...

KH: No, no.

LB: Did you feel a real distaste for them or is it just as if they were strangers?

KH: Yes, it was strange. I mean, they are different people but we went out. It didn't go to an extent like you say. We went out together.

LB: I have heard Jews from Austria-Hungary who expressed violent distaste for the Eastern European Jews.

KH: Well, there were some people who did. This was the truth in Germany, yes. But I didn't see too much of that. Not violent.

LB: Were they helped?

KH: Yes, they were helped.

LB: They were not pushed, either back or sent on?

KH: No, they were helped to the best of my knowledge. Of course, I wasn't in Germany as active as I am here in Jewish things.

LB: How about the non-Jews? When these Polish Jews came, how did they feel about them before Hitler came?

KH: Well, to them probably - I'm just guessing now because I really don't know - I would say to them Jews were Jews. I don't think they cared too much where they came from. Somebody who disliked Jews, disliked Jews whether they came from Poland or whether they were born in Germany. I'm just trying to put two and two together; I don't really know. Our circle of friends before Hitler, they were about fifty-fifty. There were about eight or ten Jewish families and altogether eight or ten non-Jewish families. We were together day and night, so to speak.

SB: And when the Nazis came to power all these people moved away?

KH: Yeah, they moved away, yes. Some moved away in a very offensive way and some of us... You could see that they felt very bad about it.

LB: I'd like to ask whether in your family were there certain roles assigned, like who was the head of the household?

KH: In Germany the father was the head of the household. There were no ifs, buts and whens. Not like here with the wives control the cash and everything. (laughter) In Germany, the husband did all that. (laughter)

LB: Did your mother have anything to say about it?

KH: Very little.

LB: What was her function in the home, your mother? As you saw it, because you were a boy.

KH: Well, she cooked, of course, and she also helped out in the business when we had busy days. She waited on customers and when my father was away, she handled that.

LB: Did they socialize as a couple? Did they go out together of an evening?

KH: Yes, but sometimes my father - he liked to play cards. Of course, there he went alone. It's not like here that you get together and play bridge. You know, they go into one of those cafes, and there they play cards and this is what they do in Offenbach.

LB: What did your mother do for an evening?

KH: She went to movies with her women friends. Of course, you had Frankfurt close by where you had the opera, you had the playhouse, you know.

LB: Did she go to these?

KH: Yeah, once in a while.

LB: Did you have other family in Offenbach besides this uncle?

KH: Well, this uncle was my mother's brother and he moved to Frankfurt. Then later he got married and otherwise, we had no family in Offenbach. Nobody.

LB: Would you say family ties were strong in your family and in general? You said you were a good son; you did what your father told you. Did you always agree with what he told you?

KH: No, no. Like for instance I would have liked to be a doctor, you know, and he wouldn't let me. Let me give you the reasons why. He was afraid. Anti-Semitism was very heavy on universities and colleges and he was afraid that I should go to a German university and that I would be harassed by the others. This was his reason he wouldn't let me.

SB: What about the possibility of going to France or to Switzerland?

KH: This didn't even come into the picture. I went to France and England just to learn the language, that was all. I didn't go any further.

LB: But you did want to be a doctor?

KH: Yeah, I would have liked to be, yes.

LB: But when he said no then you accepted it?

KH: Then it was no, of course. What else could I do? At least, that's the way I felt at the time.

LB: Did you know about the [Hasidim](#)?

KH: Very little, very little.

LB: Did you do any reading on Jews at all?

KH: Some, some, but I wouldn't say extensively.

LB: So your reading and conversation about Jews was mostly local and German?

KH: The conversation I wouldn't say was local. The conversation went beyond local. We talked about Jews in general and we did not confine ourselves to just Jews in Offenbach. We discussed in general, Germany, also other countries. Of course, anti-semitism was always a big subject.

SB: When you were growing up, who were your heroes?

KH: I was one of the ones that were very much involved with soccer. I played about ten years and, of course, some of these guys were big stars in the soccer were heroes of mine. A fellow like this Rathenau who was murdered, German Secretary of State - I admired fellows like this. I did not admire guys like Hindenburg or guys like this. Coming back to sports, we had my uncle's big tennis class at the time. We had these guys like Fulton(?) and other French tennis players. Any of you? I don't think you remember them.

LB: I know Tilden.

KH: Tilden. But there was Lacoste and Jean (?) that big French tennis star who I admired. But I would think the only one who I really had high regard for was this Rathenau. He was a very capable man and he did a lot for Germany, but unfortunately, because he was Jewish, it wasn't publicized enough. He was something like Kissinger is over here.

LB: Did you know of the riots and so on that took place in Berlin? [The ones in 1919?](#)

KH: Oh yes, sure.

SB: You say that you and your father - you knew about the Nazis in 1923 - worried about the Nazis. Did you ever worry about the Communists?

KH: No.

SB: Your father owned property, didn't he?

KH: Jews were sympathetic to Communism, like here too. I was not. Communism didn't appeal to me. I can't give you the real reason for it. I don't know the reason but it didn't appeal to me.

... a German nationalistic Jew, and these people they confess to be Jews but they are much more Germans than Jews. I was a German too, but I never felt at home when they started singing German national songs. Not national songs - not the right expression. When they started singing songs about the glory of Germany, you know, Fatherland. I just couldn't get into it. Now, there's a funny thing: here in the United States I could. I could.

LB: Do you know whether your parents wanted Germany to win the First War?

KH: Yes, I would say they wanted Germany to win the war.

SB: If I remember rightly, there was a song written during the First World War which came to be known as the Hasen Lied?

KH: Hasen Lied?

SB: Yeah, the song of hate against Great Britain. And it became a very popular song during the war in Germany. And it was written by a German Jew.

KH: It's possible.

SB: Again, the Berlin community seemed to be...

KH: Well, not everybody. I mean, I don't think the whole Berlin community... I mean, I give you the way how I will call my feelings. I felt never at ease. I never felt at ease. I don't know.

LB: So if you didn't want Germany to win, what were your feelings then about the war?

KH: Well, don't forget there's one thing: I was only eleven years old when the war ended. There are some smart eleven year olds, but I don't think I was one of them. Sorry.

LB: But in your family, this must have been talked about. Did your father...?

KH: My father was in the army then and I don't want to say. Really, I don't remember. I don't know whether we ought to discuss something like that. I don't remember.

LB: Thanks very much.