

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Herbert Kohn Interview

Conducted by James Newberry

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Transcribed by Lauren Hohn, MHHE Summer 2015

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, six-year-old Herbert Kohn was forced to leave public school in Frankfurt, Germany. The Nazis imprisoned Kohn's father in Buchenwald concentration camp after Kristallnacht but released him a few weeks later due to his service in the First World War. Kohn and his family immigrated to the United States in 1940 after waiting three years.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: All right, this is James Newberry. I'm here with Herbert Kohn on November 12th, 2013 at the Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University. Mr. Kohn, do you agree to this interview?

Kohn: [*nods head*] Yes.

Interviewer: All right. When and where were you born?

Kohn: I was born in Frankfurt Am Main, Germany. September 27th, 1926.

Interviewer: And what was life like for your family and friends in the years before World War Two?

Kohn: My family and my friends were upper middle-class family. My father had a good job. We had a very nice home, it wasn't a house that we lived in but an apartment, but we had the whole floor of an apartment, its many rooms well furnished, nice library with many, many books, a whole abundance of art. My mother had very nice clothing, beautiful jewelry. We all were well dressed, most times, and we lived a good life. I have a family tree that goes back to 1490, so we lived in Germany a—500 years my family, over 500 years. We were steeped in German culture, European culture: music, art, literature, Goethe, Schiller. Both of my grandparents and my father fought for Germany in World War One. My grandfather was a doctor; he was—became a first field-grade officer in the German army. Jewish. In World War One. My father was a front soldier in the front lines. We were raised and brought up not as German *Jews*, but as Jewish *Germans*. A big difference. And all of that, of course, changed.

Interviewer: So what role did your Jewish faith, Jewish identity play in your life up to 1933?

Kohn: Well we...we were Observant Jews. We were not Orthodox Jews. We didn't observe all the rules and regulations and *Kashrut* laws, but we went to services once a week on Sabbath, we observed all the holidays, we...celebrations in our home...with family...and we—my brother was bar-mitzvahed and I remember being there and it was...a

very...there was no denial that we were Jews. We were proud to be Jews, and we were active in the community, in the Jewish community.

Interviewer: Was your neighborhood mixed—non-Jew and Jew?

Kohn: Yes, a completely mixed neighborhood.

Interviewer: So what level of Anti-Semitism would you say was there in Germany prior to 1933?

Kohn: W—

Interviewer: How visible was it?

Kohn: Well there probably was Anti-Semitism. My grandfather was telling me more about 'cause I spent a lot of time—that's on my mother's side, my maternal grandfather—I knew him well cause he lived with us...and...we, he-he liked to walk, and we used to walk all...to town, everywhere together, so he was telling me, he was a— belonged to the democratic party...in Germany at that time, which was in power before Hitler became chancellor, and from World War One on, Germany became a—had a democratic government, and he...he told me some of the instance where there was confrontations on the streets and things, but I never observed any myself. It all changed.

Interviewer: So how did your life stay the same or change when the Nazis initially came to power in Germany?

Kohn: Well, that is...I wanna tell you about that is because it really changed with one—in one incident where it really became a very dramatic change. In 1933, in March, I went to school, public school. I was in the first grade of public school. The Clauberg[?] School, that's the name of the school, and we...the parents made arrangements of everybody on—in the block that we would walk together because we had to cross two major thoroughfares and didn't have any school busses then, any—any crossing guards, anything like that. So we walked together, and that particular day we walked to school together two miles. We got to school, got in our seats, and remember I was six years old. The teacher said "Are there any Jews in this class?...Raise your hand." I raised my hand proudly, and looked around and there was one other person in the class, it was a girl, raised her hand. The teacher said, "You two get your things and go home....Jews are not allowed in public schools in Germany anymore." I didn't know what she was talking about, remember I was only six years old, I really didn't quite understand it cause immediately, I started thinking about *How'm I gonna get home?* I never walked home by myself. I did get home, managed to get home. And when I got home, my mother immediately said, "I knew something was wrong, because—just today, our neighbors told me she couldn't talk to me anymore, and I couldn't talk to her anymore, or she would lose her job." The next morning, I was standing by my gate and waited for the group to come by, and sure enough the group came by, and the leader of the group was my best friend who I played ball with in the empty lot every day. And he saw me standing at the gate and he says, "What are you looking at, you dirty Jew?" Twenty-four hours after I

got kicked out of school, everything had changed. He was converted. From that moment on, my life changed completely, and not only for me, but for life of all Jews in Germany and later on in Europe. Life became more difficult. It was a period, actually involved four different periods, the Holocaust. It lasted from 1933 to 1945. The first period was Discrimination, and then it turned into Segregation, and it came on when the laws passed when Jews couldn't do this and Jews couldn't do that, and they couldn't be there and they couldn't be here. And then it went into Persecution, every day, something happened, Jews were abused because they were Jews, for no other reason. And then came the final stage, which began with *Kristallnacht*. It was a test, actually, to see if the world was ready to accept the final stage, and that was Extermination stage, the killing of people and Jews.

Interviewer: So, you had referred previously to your middle name at that time, and what—what was your middle name, you said it became your middle name in these early years, with the rise of Nazism?

Kohn: My middle name was Israel. I didn't know anything about that. It came to me after I left, escaped from Germany, after *Kristallnacht*. And I saw where my name was officially added, Israel were added to my...name, all Jews were given the middle name Israel, identifying that—to be ready for the final stage.

Interviewer: So, how were these Anti-Jewish policies instituted in Frankfurt at this time, starting with the Nuremburg Laws in 1934 [*Transcriber's Note: they were passed in 1935*]?

Kohn: Every park bench in Frankfurt had a marker on it, "Jews cannot sit here"... a sign, and there are lots of park benches in Frankfurt. Every store had signs on "*Juden Sind Hier Unerbench[?]*," that means "Jews Are Not Wanted or Allowed Here." Every public place, theater, restaurant, had the same signs on them. Jews were segregated completely, cause after I was kicked out of school later on, a year later, about six months later, I went to a segregated school. There were—they established two of them in Frankfurt, one more for the orthodox group of Jews, and the other one, anybody who wasn't—very orthodox. My brother and I and my father went to that school. My father had lost his job because he was a Jew, he had a very good position, and he became active in the sports department of the school, and this school, specially this particular school, the *Philanthropin* in Frankfurt was—the building is still there, the school is still there, but it's now being used for other things. I was...disappointed. Go forward a little bit. I was invited by the city of Frankfurt in 2003 to have a program to heal the guilt of their grandparents, and I was invited to come there, and my wife and I for two weeks, all expenses paid, stayed in the finest hotel that had actually been destroyed but was rebuilt again and, during the war, and then we had a docent that with us and took us everywhere and I could show my wife where I was born, where I lived, and where my ancestors were buried in cemeteries, and it was a powerful trip for us really. But, for everybody, and we saw where it happened, but the reason I'm mentioning it is, a meeting, the initial meeting was held in that school, of that group, there was a group of people it had a program, but on that particular program had about thirty-five people came. And it was held in the school. It was a very

emotional moment for me, cause it was right in the—in the school, right where I had been before, where we, where I went to, and where I was kicked out of.

Interviewer: So your father lost his j—

Kohn: And not where I was kicked out of, where I went to after I got kicked out of school.

Interviewer: To the Jewish school?

Kohn: Yes.

Interviewer: And you said your father lost his job—

Kohn: Yes.

Interviewer: And worked in the sports department at the school.

Kohn: Yes.

Interviewer: And so, he had, did your family have to live, you know, on the sort of...through less means at that point, cause your father had lost his good job?

Kohn: We had a, we were still...we had some savings that we lived on, and money, and w-we managed, we...just one thing...very...Germany is very different, the German mindset is very different, it's...you live on what you—you manage on what you've got. And there's a whole lot of other principals that are...that are different, that I learned in my life, it's a mindset of Germany that—absolute obedience to government, to parents, and to teachers. The word, it's a bad word, and it is the word *Absolute*...because, like for instance, in Germany, it doesn't say "Please, Do Not Litter," you know, and "Place Your Trash in the Appropriate Containers." It says "It's *Verboten* to Litter, it's Forbidden to Litter." I don't know if you've had an opportunity to be in Germany, but to this day, when we went back in 2003, one thing you couldn't find is any trash, or anything like that...everything is clean, and it-it's a mindset, that part of the Absolute mindset is good. The other one that you, the absolute obedience to parents and teachers, which I was brought up under, is...thank God in America we believe that students, in an appropriate way, can speak to the teachers, and can speak to their parents in an appropriate way.

Interviewer: So, continuing on that same vein, what do you, why do you think the Nazis were able to come to power in Germany?

Kohn: Just recently I saw a movie that, a film, that— at the Bremen—that showed the propaganda that Germany used to sell their principal, the thing that I found out the day I was kicked out of school, that from that day on the Jew was a nothing, that was the policy of the German government and that led on to the final stage of discrimination, segregation, persecution, and extermination. That was—that was what happened; however, that film shows propaganda was another one of their specialties, they were able

to con—to make that...by the way, I don't know if you know the statistics that Germany had 60 million people and had actually only 460,000 Jews, and how they can make that small minority such a center point was—Goebbels was in charge of this, he was the minister in charge of that. He developed a propaganda system that convinced the people overnight, see when Hitler spoke and he said “the Jew is a nothing,” and when any of the others spoke “the Jew is a nothing,” the German people, almost 99 percent were with him. *Heil Hitler*. We're with you. Because they followed that principal “the government is always right and we gotta obey” and they were with him, and “they gon—he's gonna take care of us.”

Interviewer: So where did you see this propaganda on a daily basis?

Kohn: Daily basis was from the day I was kicked out of school and my best friend called me a “dirty Jew”—he didn't call me a “dirty Jew,” it was a worse name, but I don't use that in public speaking—from that day on, I couldn't go on the street anymore. You talking about segregation, we segregated ourselves, and that's the reason when we went to school, and my father was involved in the sports program and whatnot, we had a whole social life and sports life and outside activities, were all centered just among Jews. When I—because when I went on my street, right outside the door, which I always used to go and play with my friends, my friends beat me up cause I was a “dirty Jew,” so I stayed away from them, and we, and my brother and I, we just segregated ourselves, and my parents, they completely broke away from neighbors. You asked if we were segregated or integrated in our neighborhood, we were...she—my mother was very active, knew everybody in grocery stores, you know, like you know your neighborhood people, that all stopped. And it stopped and it was difficult, and we had activities and our—only our family members and our synagogue activities and Jewish community.

Interviewer: And what did you think, what did you feel, when you saw propaganda posters put up on city streets, you know, different things like that, how did that make you feel and how often did you see these images?

Kohn: Well, what can I...tell you a little story about this, a good story. Right down the street from us, about two blocks, three blocks, was a school, a big public high school, and it was called [?] school, named after some famous German person, and it was changed to Adolf Hitler School, and since we walked a lot with my grandfather, my brother and I walked a lot, we'd go down that street to go toward town, my grandfather, in defiance of what was going on, you couldn't do be publically defiance, when he walked onto the—onto that block, when he stepped up onto the sidewalk after crossing the street, all along the school, that school, he would whistle a Jewish song that we sang on the festival of Hanukah, he would whistle it, and stop when he stopped off. He did that regularly, all the time, every time, in defiance. And we whistled with him, we knew the song well, and that was the only thing that we could do to—to do it, but we were opposed to what was going on, and, well, we couldn't do much about it anymore.

Interviewer: So in those years between 1934 and 1938, what were the conversations between you know, Jewish families who had sort of segregated themselves, what did they think about doing, what did they expect in the future?

Kohn: Well, when the Nuremberg Laws were passed that really made Jews second-class citizens, my father made a family tree, and that was most people what they did. *How can we maybe get out of here? This is our country, but how we gon get out of here?* Lived here 500 years and fought for it in World War One, that's the reason I told you this in the beginning. So my father made a family tree and wrote letters all over the world to people that he could find, now how he got addresses, I don't really know, but I've got that family tree still, by the way. Big family, and a third cousin from, finally a third cousin from Birmingham, Alabama, sent us a letter that they wanted to sponsor us for a visa to America. We finally got that visa, but it didn't become in 1937, but it didn't become valid 'til 1940 because there's a quota system that's still in effect, how many people can come from each country to America each year. And we were able to get out, we had to get, course, we had to get out in 1939 because I haven't told you that part of the story yet, we'll come to it a little later, but when my father was arrested and after that we had, we decided to go to England if we, we tried to escape to England, and, but in the meantime, our visa did become valid and we were able to leave England for America in April 1940.

Interviewer: What was your experience during *Kristallnacht*?

Kohn: November 9th, 1938. 75th anniversary was last Saturday. It was a night that I will never forget, now, I was twelve years old now. Three things happened on that night, and the Nazis, by the way, said it was the discontent, of the opposing of the Jews, of the German people against the Jews of all the terrible things that the Jews did to them, that was a spontaneous reaction, well, I will just tell you something, when it absolutely has been proved since then, it wasn't a spontaneous reaction, it was an organized, systematic con—process, because in a four hour period, these three things happened: Every synagogue in Germany and in Austria got destroyed, every one of them—desecrated, burned. Every store owned by a Jew, the class was broken in all these street places, all over, every store that was owned by a Jew, the glass was broken and it was looted, ransacked, and destroyed. And number three, every Jewish male person between the ages of 16-60 was arrested, who hadn't been arrested before, was arrested, and put in a concentration camp. I was there. I was twelve years old. And all this happened in a three or four hour period. I saw our synagogues the one I went to, and all the others, because the next morning, my grandfather walked me by there, by 'em, I mean all the way to town. It's a big city. Four miles to go just to go to town. Four or five miles. I saw the synagogues burn. I saw the fire trucks standing by, and the police, and...not to put the fire out, but to keep the fire from spreading. I saw the glass on the street of all the stores. There was streets, many stores, and all of them, we call it *Kristallnacht*, well interesting enough, it was in Germany, the Jewish community of Germany, just changed the name to *Pogrom Nacht*. Just changed it recently, 'cause *Kristallnacht* sounds too pretty, and it was supposed to denote the glass was everywhere, broken glass. And I was there when the Storm Troopers came to our house, knock on the door, standing next to my mother. When she opened the door, I can see him with his Nazi uniform on: swastika

on his arm, leather boots, leather belt, leather shoulder straps... And he came in and pushed her to the floor of the foyer, and stepped in the middle of the foyer and says "Are there any dirty Jews here"—and I'm using again the word "dirty" for another word—"dirty Jews here between the age of sixteen to sixty, male?" Now I was twelve, my brother was fifteen, my grandfather lived with us, was sixty-four, and my father was thirty-eight. My father came out of the back and says "Here I am." Grabbed him and took him away. No explanation, no—nothing in the media, the media was all controlled by the Nazis, and nobody knew exactly what was going on, I—we didn't know, but my mother said "if he ever should come back, we gotta get him out of this place immediately, out of this country." We had the visa to come to America, but it didn't... had no way, so she remembered we had a distant cousin in London, England, which we didn't know, but we'd heard of him. And she called him, how she got the number I can't tell you that, but she called him and was able to talk to him and he sent a telegram back and said that he would sponsor my father back for a *transit* visa, under a transit visa you can't work, but you could put the money up so we had a place to live for a year, for one year. My mother took that visa, that telegram, to the English consul in Frankfurt, and the English consul in Frankfurt told my mother to put in front of him my father's passport, her passport, my brother's passport, and my passport, and he took his visa stamp, transit visa stamp, and stamped each one of them with a visa. And I dwell on that sometimes is because he was a Righteous Gentile and he also was *not a bystander* because during this whole period of the Holocaust when later on millions of people were murdered, men, women, and children killed, exterminated, without any question, he was not a bystander. He tried to save lives, and he saved our lives.

Interviewer: And your father was held at Buchenwald?

Kohn: My father actually came back three weeks later, I happened to open the door and I didn't recognize him at first. His hair had turned white, he had lost thirty pounds in three weeks. He had been subject to unspeakable abuse. Yes, he was taken first to an assembly place in Frankfurt, and from there to Buchenwald concentration camp, which is at Weimar in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps. Three and a half hour train ride from Frankfurt. And he was there and he told, he said when he first came in he was glad to see us, hugged us, and was glad to hear the next morning we could go to England, get out. But he said "I have to talk," and I thought he talk for half an hour. He talked all night. A terrible story of abuse: physical, mental, personal abuse in this concentration camp. For example, I'll just give you one example, he—they had to stand in formation every morning at 5:00 and it was in that part of Germany, especially in December, was twenty below zero. They stood—had to stand formation naked, without clothes on, and the Nazi guards made fun of them and took away all their personal dignity and abused them right there while they were standing there in formation. And then one day while he was standing in formation, they called him out because they found in his wallet a document that showed that he had been awarding the honor cross for front soldier in World War One, and it was awarded by the *Führer* and chancellor, which happened to be Adolf Hitler, under a rule passed after the war, after he came to power. In their warped sense of justice, they took away his prison uniform and gave him back his raincoat, nothing else on, and said "Go home." How he got without hardly any clothes on from Weimar,

Germany back to Frankfurt I don't know, but here he was. Left the next morning for England, first my brother, then my mother and I several, three, four months later, joined them in England.

Interviewer: But who did you leave behind in your extended family?

Kohn: My grand—my maternal grandparents. My paternal grandparents had already passed away. My grandfather and my grandmother and... When we went on this trip to Frankfurt, Germany in 19—in 2002, I showed my wife where they stood when we, in the train station, when the last time I saw him and we waved at them. My grandfather—my grandmother died a natural death in 1940 in Germany, and my grandfather was walking on the streets of Frankfurt in 1942—after the Wannsee conference had been passed, and the final solution stage was in force—he was picked up and put in a cattle car and shipped to an extermination camp in Poland, where he arrived DOA—Dead on Arrival—because they put in a cattle car that's made for eight cattle or forty people, they put 140-160 people in [*voice breaking*] *to murder them*, to kill them, to exterminate them in an extermination camp. He was one of the six million and I lost many more relatives and friends.

Interviewer: So, what was life like in England when you fled to England?

Kohn: In England, my mother and father lived in one room, my brother was able to get a job learning a trade, and room and board that way, and I was in a refugee boarding school run by the B'nai, B'rith organization... and went to public school from that and got my religious schooling from there, but public school, I went from there... a group, we went together. And that was a very interesting experience because that gave me a taste of Orthodox Judaism, that's where I was really, and I was bar-mitzvahed in that school, a very interesting event in my life. But... we left there, we were able to leave there one year later, in April 1940, because our visa became valid, and were able to come to America and started life from the beginning in America.

Interviewer: And where did you immigrate to in the United States?

Kohn: When he first came to America, we came across New York, and we were greeted by a representative of the family of that—that brought us over here to begin with, my cousins in Birmingham, third-cousin from Birmingham. By the way, there's a family that's still in Atlanta, Georgia, Heiman family, the wife was my cousin... Actually, she married a Mervin-Stern, neither one of them living anymore. But they brought us over here and they suggested, after we were a few days in New York in a hotel stayed somewhere, and they paid for all of our expenses because we couldn't take any money out of Germany with us. We had—we left that for my grandparents, the little we had left... We couldn't—we took some of our furniture and things that were shipped—right when we first got our visa, to—and stored in New Orleans in a warehouse by our sponsors, they took care of that. But we couldn't, we took, we were able—when we went to England, the only thing we could take with us was the equivalent of about ten dollars each, one ring and one watch... each. If we had—I mean, we were children. I had—I think—I

didn't have no rings, but I had a watch. So we came here to this country, really, with nothing, and our sponsors helped us get started. And my father, just out of a concentration camp, says, "Yeah, we going down south t—because they suggested, "Come down to Alabama and learn how to farm." Never been on a farm before, none of us, but we...h-he, as a man fo—the sp—built a small house for us, and we lived on his farm and we learned how to farm. Every morning at 5:30, when I was thirteen years old, I was at the barn, milking cows. But I—I learned a great lesson when I went to school from...this place outside of Demopolis, Alabama, we were—that's where we actually c—actually were coming, this was outside of 'Mapolis on a farm. Went to school at Demopolis, Alabama every morning, and I learned my life lesson right there in America, my first life lesson. In some way or another, it instilled me what I needed to do. I was only thirteen years old, but by milking in that barn and by going to a segregated school and noticing in the little town of Demopolis, Alabama, which had 5,000 population—3,000 African-Americans and 2,000 white...and in the barn where I milked the cows, all employees were black. They were actually one year out of slavery in 1940—slavery was abolished in 1865 in America, the Fourteenth Amendment...I made up my mind then, it's important to help the underserved, somewhere in my head, and my entire career in America was built to—worked in that direction. I—we were on that farm, stayed on it. Later on, my father got a job as a manager of another place in Uniontown, Alabama. And...then late—then later on, they moved to Demopolis, Alabama...

Interviewer: How did the people receive you and your family?

Kohn: Hmm?

Interviewer: [*louder*] How did the people in Alabama receive you and your family at that time?

Kohn: Well, we were...accepted by certain people, but...the people that we—we knew they had a congregation in Demopolis, and we...met some people there and went there to pray, and—but it was not easy. We were kind of outsiders, we—we had to learn how to farm, cause we were...we moved to another place and had our own farm, rented a farm and did our own farming, and that was really, what came out of that. My mother had...chickens. She took care of the chickens. My brother and I and my father, the cows. And—I was in charge of the cats. And...from there we went to school every day, and I had to walk a mile, a mile and a half to get to the place where the school bus picked you up. And went to school and...in Demopolis, I went all the way through high school there, I graduated...and thank God, I went to my fiftieth anniversary of my graduation and it was now totally integrated, the school, a new building, and it was...everything had changed, thank God.

Interviewer: So when did you join the military?

Kohn: I...volunteered for early induction. You can't be—couldn't be drafted 'til you were eighteen years old. That was a rule then, and I joined for early induction, so on the day I was eighteen, I was inducted into the military. And I actually became a citizen afterwards, in the military, in a place outside of Jacksonville, Florida, I was sworn into

the—as an American citizen. I stayed in the military through basic training, and I didn't choose it, but they sent me to Germany to join five—and I was back in Germany five years after I'd left. I arrived in [Le Havre?], France to join my assignment, which was the 78th Infantry Division, and go to the front lines, to be shipped—to be taken to the front lines with—cause—another groups of people, and it was a camp outside of [Le Havre?]. Two days after I arrived there, the war was over. Everybody cried—everybody cheered, and I cried on this day. Everybody was cheering, and I cried, because I couldn't fight the Nazis, and I...Did so much damage to my family and my friends and my people. But I wanna tell you something: when I went back in 2003 as a guest of city, and I'd been back several times before that, business and several other trips, but 2003, I wrote an article in local—in a local paper after I came back, and I said—in it, I said, “Germany has changed” because I spoke—what I'm—like I'm speaking to you here right now—I spoke to a group of people...to schools in Germany, where I speak now to schools here, schools in Germany, and I saw the young people was totally changed from the ones I left, who beat me up on the streets. And I wrote an article that says “Germany has changed,” that's what the thing we have noticed mostly, I noticed, “and I'm taking...the word of 'hate,' 'revenge,' and 'retaliation,' three words, out of my vocabulary.” There was a lot of my fellow Holocaust survivors who speak at the Bremen and some of them speak here, and one of them was just interviewed here recently, who don't like that, who still don't like that, cause one of them don't speak to me anymore after that article came out. I see him often, I shake his hand, but...he doesn't look at me when he shakes my hand, but...doesn't speak to me anymore because...but I don't believe, personally, I have a very *strong* belief that hate is c—is the cause of these problems, and still causes these problems, and discrimin—and segr—and I hope the two other items that I mentioned...are...need to be removed. We need to find ways to make this a better world, cause that's how I end up m—all my presentations to young people, how I end them over and over again. We have a common obligation, all of us...and it's not only written in the Jewish *Torah*, the *Bible*, but it's also in the Christian *Bible*, as well even in the Muslim *Qur'an*. We have a common obligation to make this a better world for the privilege of living on this earth, of living in this world. And we gotta work at it to do that. We gotta make things happen to make this a better world. We gotta serve the underserved. We gotta bring them up. We gotta educate. And this is the lessons of the Holocaust, I believe in that, that is the lessons of the Holocaust. And that's the reason after 40 years speaking about 40 times a year, I still do most of that routine, and I'm sitting here right now for this interview, because I believe we have an obligation to make this a better world, and we gotta work at it.