

Ralph Berets Testimony Transcript

Both of my parents were born and raised in Krefeld, Germany, an industrial city about seventy miles south of the Dutch border. And my parents lived there in an upper middle class lifestyle until the Nazi regime became more and more powerful and my father I guess intuitively recognized that some imminent problems were going to emerge with the Germans and he very cleverly I think managed to sell most of his assets and convert them to diamonds and gold. And he ultimately ended up escaping from Germany in 1935. He tried to persuade his parents and my mother's parents to join him but at that time they didn't really see the imminent danger. They were very reluctant to come along. There'd been a number of incidents that my father had experienced that he talks about quite frequently about how the German youth used to march through the city and mark the doors of the German, excuse me, of the Jewish merchants and break the windows and steal the merchandise and pick on the Jewish children and my father was beaten up quite a few times.

And again, relatively cleverly, decided that he would have a gentile friend who would end up defending him. He ended up making friends with probably the at least the way he described as the strongest young man in his class and my father was fairly smart and he was relatively dumb and so my father used to help him with his homework and he used to help my father in his fights. There were a half a dozen incidents before my father finally decided to leave Germany. In terms of racial slurs. He had been accused of seducing a young woman in his father's store. And it was a trumped up charge, and very fortunately, the young woman who had been persuaded by the police to press the charges, when she got on the stand she refused to accuse him. That was sort of the last incident. He finally decided he was very lucky to escape that time that he'd better get out.

And so it was the summer of 1935 they decided to leave Germany and they moved to the Netherlands. My father went back to Germany I think six times, each time bringing along either a friend or a relative to Holland and it became over a period of about two years more and more dangerous to really make the trip. But he was convinced that it was the right thing to do and, ultimately, I think our family have remained intact. Yet, most of the more distant relatives did not survive the war. All but one of the people who remained in Germany ultimately died. So I think in the long run it was obviously the right choice.

My father did have sufficient foresight of bringing a sufficient amount of assets which were easily convertible. So he had worked for several years with my grandfather who ran a type of grocery store in Germany. They not only sold groceries, they also sold some items of clothing and things. So my father had always been involved in merchandising. And he had also studied in Germany fabrics. So when he went to Holland he bought an existing fabric store and actually did a very good business there, setting up with a person that he had known from Germany from about five years earlier who had already settled in the Netherlands who wanted to expand. And

so he went into partnership with this man. For the next four or five years he did very well, and settled in a Dutch city named Amersfoort and had a fabric store in the downtown area, and made a very good living at it. He bought a half of a duplex in Amersfoort, which we lived in until the invasion took place and then we went into hiding.

I was born in December of 1939 and all my earliest memories are from about eighteen months old, which is very strange to me that I can remember some incidents. But I remember nothing prior to the war, since the war began when I was about a half a year old. Certainly, my parents have talked about their life and how peaceful and happy they really were to have escaped the oppression in Germany, and how supportive and wonderful the Dutch people were in taking them in and not discriminating against them. They really felt like they had found a haven.

I might mention, they did try to come to the United States from 1936 until 1939 but the I guess the quota system prevented them from making entry into the United States. Although my mother's brother volunteered to join the American Army and he did manage to get out as a result of that.

Both sets of grandparents came to Holland with my parents. So, as I mentioned, my mother's parents were very reluctant to leave. They didn't see the need. My grandfather had fought with the German military in World War I. And was a decorated hero and he thought that nothing could happen to him and that the Germans would protect him. He had a fairly good life in Germany. Saw no reason why he should leave. My grandmother had some more ambivalent feelings, and my father did try to go there twice and both times they refused to come but the third time they finally did agree to leave Germany.

Both grandparents, spent much of the time during the war in hiding with us, although they also spent a lot of time finding their own places to hide. At one time we had as many as twelve members in a chicken coop where we stayed during most of the war. But much of the time it was just our family, my parents and my sister and I together. Most of the time it was difficult to find hiding places especially hiding places large enough to accommodate everyone. But the Dutch underground was very helpful and did provide us with a lot of leads and names and resources, although you also have to recognize that I think my parents were very lucky because they did have money and I think the assets really did help them to survive. My father, besides the diamonds and gold also, because of the fabric store, had a lot of silk. And that seemed to be a very prized possession. So whenever somebody went out of their way for us, he would pay them with either diamonds or gold or the silk. And I'm not sure that people just for that reason would risk their lives, but I'm sure my parents felt better being able to do something in return.

We did belong to a synagogue in Holland that gave us the information about how we might try escape from the oppression. The synagogue did give people the option of going underground and following their recommendations and they were very helpful. Although my

father never just accepted one solution as a way out and he himself had made a number of contacts and the first place where we stayed was really a Christian friend of his who had a cottage out in the middle of the woods and he asked him before the invasion if something should ever happen, whether or not he could use the cottage as a retreat. And the man agreed very wholeheartedly that certainly that was available to them. And as soon as the Germans invaded we did go to his cottage and stayed there for about six or seven months until somebody gave away our secret and we were caught. And it's at that time my father took advantage of the underground and took some of their leads to try to find an alternative place to hide.

Well, this is the first incident that I remember. We were in this cottage, which I would say, was a couple of hundred yards removed from the farmhouse. And we had been living there in relative peace, and it was a very nice kind of a retreat, and just the four of us, my mother, father, sister and myself were living there. And one evening one of the farmer's children came and told us that they had heard that the Germans had been told of our existence and that they were looking for us. And that we had better get out. And so we tried to put together some things and it was I mean one of the things I remember distinctly was how it was raining I mean unbelievable sheets of rain and thunder. And we were very reluctant to leave the cottage because we didn't have any umbrellas or anything and didn't know where we were going.

But anyway, he seemed quite agitated about the imminent possibility of us being caught. And so we put together a small little suitcase. And so I think we were maybe fifty yards from the house when we heard these cars and trucks pulling up and we heard screaming and yelling and the German soldiers came to look for us and we were like in a little ditch below the level where the house was. And I mean I can remember what I wore the sounds that were going on and they were screaming and yelling that here was all the evidence and they knew that we were hiding there. And where were we. And they sort of went marching around and I think the only reason we survived was because of the weather was just so terrible and it just didn't seem worth the effort to them to keep looking. They marched around a couple of times and then set the cottage on fire and it burned up. And they left, fortunately, without finding us saying something like they'll come back and find us another time.

And the most distressing thing about that whole incident, although it all was pretty distressing, was hearing the Germans and seeing the house go up in flames. But the next morning when the sky had cleared and we were trying to clean up and find an alternative hiding place, we walked past the barn and from the farmers and, I guess, one of the sons of the farmers, he had three sons and one of the sons had betrayed us and his two brothers had taken him and stuck a hook up in his chin and hung him from the rafters in the barn and you could just see all the blood dripping down. And it was after we had to leave the cottage that we were split up for a while, and my sister and I stayed with one family for about three months. And my mother stayed with another family and my father stayed on the top of a garage. And it was very difficult for us to really get to see one another.

We were in the same city, but it was pretty precarious to travel. My father has I'd say fairly typical Jewish features, so he felt like he couldn't go out at all. My mother did not, and so she was the one who usually went out to make the contacts and find 1. food and 2. resources. To be able to find another hiding place. And she used to take me on her bicycle she thought that having a little child along would probably protect her to a greater extent than if she travelled by herself. And I just remember going on the back of the bicycle all of the time and not really knowing where we were going, but trying to find some way to find shelter for the next day. I remember my mother used to dye her hair or bleach her hair and also bleach mine so that we would look like gentiles rather than Jews. And I remember my name was Wimpy (laughs). I guess it was a typical gentile name.

The next real incident I remember we had found this hiding place on top of an ice cream store in downtown Amersfoort. Actually, it was a wonderful place for us because one of the things we got to eat was ice cream every day. But the most horrendous thing, and here I think we only stayed there for about three weeks and one afternoon there were two German soldiers who came in to supposedly buy some ice cream, but they had also heard about the people who were living upstairs and they wanted to look around. And fortunately, the woman who ran the ice cream store managed to go up the back way and to warn us that the Germans were coming. They had built a little trap door inside the closet so that you could go up this ladder in the closet and then lie down in the rafters above the second floor and that was sort of what we had planned as an escape route. And so when she told us that the Germans were down there, and we'd better go upstairs, we did that. And we could hear the Germans talking and probing and said, "well where do these people go." And she said, "Well, I really don't know. They come here every once in a while but they don't stay here and they're not here now." The Germans wanted to inspect the upstairs because they heard some movement.

Fortunately, I guess my sister was very attached to this little pussy cat that the people downstairs had and when we went up to crawl up in the attic she took the pussy cat with her. And when the Germans said they were going to come up and inspect, I guess my mother got so upset that she peed in her pants and water, I guess, came trickling down the ceiling. And the Germans said well we knew there was somebody up there. And so when they opened up the passageway, the pussy cat came jumping out and it seemed, I don't understand why they didn't look anymore, except that there was very little space. You couldn't stand up. You could barely crawl through there and they seemed to be satisfied with the fact that the cat was up there and that the cat had been responsible and, therefore, they stopped looking. And so luckily, we managed to survive a second time.

But we also felt like it wasn't secure there any longer so we also had to find an alternative place again. The only I know that we were hidden in several other places in between including an incident that I don't remember at all. But my parents talk about quite frequently. They talk about this couple, in fact two couples, one couple that wanted to buy me where I had been hiding and one that wanted to buy my sister, and I don't remember or have any sense of who those

people were. But they ultimately decided it wasn't fair to split the two of my sister and I up and one of the justifications was well each one wanted to take one but neither wanted to take two. And the other thing was that they had to sign an agreement never to see us again, if they agreed to this. They decided they could not live with that, even though it might be safer for us they didn't think that that was the right thing to do. So we did try to keep the family together.

And the last three years of the war we stayed in a chicken coop outside of Arnhem. And there were twelve people. I think eight of us were close family members and then there were some distant friends and distant relatives as well. It was a rather small chicken coop and there were basically two places to sleep. So we just slept in shifts. It was very stark. There were just some wooden planks and I can remember just a terrible smell. Although, the chickens weren't in there anymore, the odor was certainly there. And the other thing I can remember was there was a huge bunker. I'd say a couple of yards from the chicken coop and every time we would hear planes flying overhead, we were told to run to this bunker as a kind of shelter. And even though we felt fairly isolated in the chicken coop, when we were in the bunker, there must have been, now I may have a distorted memory, but it seems to me fifty sixty people that used to be in the bunker and it always felt like sardines. I mean to be stuck in the bunker was like I mean you couldn't do anything but stand where you were because everything was so crowded that you couldn't sit down or bend over or do anything.

I can remember a couple of incidents in the chicken coop. One night, we were being attacked, a lot of shooting going on in the area. And there was one little window that we had and something came through the window. It looked like a large acorn and dropped on the floor and we sort of woke up. We had no light, couldn't really tell what it was and nothing happened afterwards. And we woke up the next morning we discovered it in the middle of the floor and it turned out to be a hand grenade. It just didn't go off. I mean if you recount all the incidents, it seems like I don't know if it's destiny or fate or just pure luck, but we managed every time when there was this kind of danger, we managed to escape. The thing that allowed us to survive in the chicken coop, I remember the farmers basically said, "We can't give you any food, but anything you find you are entitled to." And the thing that we used to eat all year round was potato peels, the outer leaves of the cabbage, and I remember the great celebrations we used to have for birthdays, when we used to get an egg. That was the big thrill. But basically all we ate were potato peels, peels from apples and the outer shell of white cabbage. And I guess the white cabbage was the main form of sustenance.

And about three months before the cease fire was signed, there were some Germans that were stationed a couple of miles from where we were hiding out and they knew about us and we knew about them. They didn't really do anything. One night they came over to the chicken coop and asked my parents if they would play bridge with them. The funny thing is that I remember throughout most of the war, my parents always told us you gotta be quiet, you can't make any noise. You've have to behave yourself and control yourself. And when this particular incident occurred, they said to my sister and to me please make as much noise as you can, cry if at all

possible. We don't want to play cards with these Germans. We would like to get rid of them, but we can't do it and maybe if you make it uncomfortable, they'll leave. And of course we had not been used to making noise or crying and even though my mother told us to do that, I remember not being able to. It was a most uncomfortable evening. 'Cause my parents, pretty good bridge players, were afraid if they would win they might be executed, and if they would lose, they might be accused of cheating. And so they really didn't know how to respond. But fortunately the Germans stayed for about three hours and then left.

The only other thing I remember, is when we were liberated from the cottage, there were Canadian soldiers that came marching through. And the funniest thing I remember two things. One they were handing out chocolate and chewing gum, neither of which I'd ever eaten before and I remember taking the chewing gum and chewing it and swallowing it, 'cause I didn't know you were just supposed to chew it.

After the war, we tried to go back to a normal life, although I think that that was very difficult. My parents really felt like they had lost five years of their life. As I mentioned earlier, my parents had wanted to come to the United States before the war ever occurred. They continued to try after the war, managed to get their name on a list to emigrate to the United States. My mother's brother as I mentioned was in the military and so he was an American citizen after the war. They also had some cousins who lived in New Jersey and a number of other distant relatives who lived on the east coast. We were on a list and had an opportunity to come to the United States in 1948. And ultimately did end up coming here for about nine months on a visit. The problem at that point was that even though they had these relatives and friends, not one of them was willing to sign an affidavit for them taking, I guess, financial responsibility for the family. I think my parents were very upset, that after all they went through, there wasn't one person who was willing to go out of their way to take that risk. Anyway, we came here and visited the family and ultimately persuaded some cousins to take that on. Even though my father said, "You'll never have to use this. I've always managed to take care of myself. We have enough resources.

We did have to go back to Holland in between. So we didn't really emigrate to the United States until January of 1951. I think they really wanted to get out of Europe. Because of the, actually, they had a wonderful life there. My father, by the time he sold all of his assets, he had seven stores in Holland and the businesses were going very well. Although, my father has a tendency to overdo things. I think he would have been better off with five stores. By the time he had seven, it was like he couldn't really manage them all. He used to go to one each day, but nothing was open on Sunday, so in a sense he clearly had one too many already at that point already. But I really think that they wanted to get away from the past. Everything reminded them Holland is a very small country and no matter where you go something always had some bad associations and bad memories and they really wanted to begin anew and especially give their children an opportunity to grow up in a freer society without the past haunting them. And

so I think they really felt like they had to get out and the United States seemed like the best place to go.

Source: Ralph Berets video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/beretsralph/>