

Werner Hartwich Testimony Transcript

Well, it all started in 1933, when Hitler came to power. But at the beginning, there was no change in our life. And we all thought, it will go away. We lived in a small city of about 20,000 people. We had the grain business and the flour mill. And everybody knew everybody in the little town - for generations, I would say. So, we didn't know. There was no difference between us and them.

I had my business, our grain business, through 1938. But it was very hard because they came with new laws every other month. They had new laws – you can deal in this and you can deal in this. And then they got after the farmers and told them, “You better break up your business with the Jew.” That’s what they said and they got scared. And they said, “Werner, we know you and we knew your father and we just can’t do it because we are in danger, if we continue to make business with you.” So, at this time I had already in mind to close up the shop.

But Kristallnacht really started this whole deal. They destroyed all the synagogues, most of them, I would say, and they busted the apartments and the houses where Jewish people lived and threw their stuff out on the street. Of mine, they dumped the refrigerators and everything from the third floor down to the street. They had knives in their hands and cut every picture on the wall to pieces. They acted like animals and not like human beings.

One day before the Kristallnacht, my brother-in-law died a natural death in a very small town in the province of Pomerania. And there was no way that we could bury him there, because all the people in this little town were afraid to help Jews and do something for Jewish people. So what we did was, we lived in a small city close to Berlin and my nephew and I decided - my nephew at this time was in Berlin – and we decided to get him buried in my hometown. So we went by car, 160 miles to his hometown. And I had ordered the undertaker from my hometown, which I knew very well for years and he said, “I will do it for you.” But unfortunately, it was the same night as the Kristallnacht. The SS came in the morning by five o’clock, knocked at the door and took me and my nephew to the city jail. We didn’t know what’s going on – why they did it. And after about one day we all boarded busses and went to little towns in the area, where they picked up more Jewish people and then they took us to the concentration camp – Sachsenhausen close to Berlin.

Well, since I was very friendly with this undertaker, he still went to this little town, and transported my dead brother-in-law to my hometown and they buried him in the night without anybody there, because they were afraid to help Jewish people.

Well, I stayed in the concentration camp two months. And my folks from my hometown, they were lucky to get out after three or four weeks, but it took, for me, two months, because I was not taken in my hometown. I was out of the district and it took them paperwork and all that took them two months before I got out. And I got out only because my folks in my hometown

could prove that we would leave Germany in one or two months. They bought tickets to Shanghai. This was the only place in the world where you could go without any visa. All you needed was a passport with a “J” in it. The authorities stamped your passport with a big “J”, which means Jew.

Interviewer: Can you tell us what life was like for you in Sachsenhausen, when you were taken there?

Werner: Well, at this time, I have to say, they didn’t kill any people, like in gas chambers. They didn’t have those at the time. They beat some Jewish people, I knew some, to death that happened once or twice, but not execution - like they did later. And we all hoped that we will get out.

Interviewer: Was this a work camp?

Werner: Oh yeah – hard work. We had to carry cement bags, we had to unload ferry boats on the river with cement bags and they throw it on our back. And people collapsed and died on the spot. Oh yeah, that wasn’t easy. They told us at the beginning – I have to mention it, when we got in “You never will get out of here. Don’t figure that you’ll ever get out alive.” That was what they told us the first night. We had to stand 48 hours after the bus trip outside on a big compound. Before they had everything organized to get us into barracks. Now, I have to say that at this time they mostly took the men and not women. So there was no family like in later years. Here and there when someone escaped, if you got caught, you was dead. But it was almost impossible. They had fences – electric fences. They had guards. They had dogs all over. There was no way to get out. Besides, everybody knew, if you get caught, you was dead. At this time we all had the hope, we will get out somehow.

As we got in the camp, we had to strip completely and got the suit with stripes – the garment, you know what it was – and they cut the hair completely off. So you looked like a monkey and not like a human being. And the food, you could live on, but it was not too good, I would say. Some guards didn’t like certain persons and that was bad. If this happened, he was almost dead. They beat him to death, sooner or later. At the work place, and labor we had to go out every morning we had to march out and you had to sing. For them, music was everything. They had a band in the concentration camp too. And you had to sing songs, and walk out, and then you got your pick and your shovel and everything. And you had to work all day long. If you stopped working, the guard was standing right close, he came with his dog and whip and you got something to knock you down. It was bad. I don’t like to remember it. But I survived.

Interviewer: How did you get out of the camp?

Werner: I got out of the camp only because my folks got the tickets to Shanghai on a ship and proved it. They had to prove that we’d leave Germany in two months after my release.

Interviewer: So did your parents come to get you from the camp? Or did you leave the camp and go to them?

Werner: No, they called us this morning and said, “You go home. You are released.” But it took hours and hours before they gave us the papers. And they gave us the money to go on the train back home and everybody looked at us in the train, because we had no hair, you know. And they knew right away, “They, these are Jews. They’re coming from the concentration camp.” That was terrible. I still remember, I was sitting in the train and everybody was looking at me because they knew, “That’s a Jew. He comes from Sachsenhausen.”

Interviewer: So how long was it before your family left for Shanghai?

Werner: About two months, see we had to sell the real estate, property, and pack up everything. And we left – I got out of the concentration camp January 10, 1939 and we left about two months later for Shanghai.

Interviewer: And what was life like for you those two months, how could you live?

Werner: The first four weeks, we stayed in my hometown, because we still had the house. And we sold all the furniture and everything out and then we went the last four weeks to Berlin, which was 60 miles away from us. And there we lived in a rented apartment for four weeks until the time came to leave for Shanghai. Something else I have to mention, we packed a big what you call now containers - they had the big containers which at this time they had them only made from wood, and we put in all the stuff you could take - furniture which we liked, special things and we took this with us to Shanghai. But unfortunately, before the freighter with our container, got into Shanghai, the war broke out and they took them to a friendly port – to Japan instead of to China. Japan was friendly with Germany. So they took our container to Japan and notified us in Shanghai, “You have to pay for the freight from Japan to Shanghai.” And this is where our last money went - \$100, I remember, at this time it was a lot of money, to get our containers, our furniture and stuff to China.

We were twelve members of the entire family and my mother and my sister bought tickets for all of us to Shanghai - first class, because there was nothing else available. So they had to take first class and one niece of mine had a boyfriend in Berlin and wouldn’t leave. He told her, “We going to South America pretty soon.” And they never made it out and when she got the deportation order, she committed suicide. That’s what you heard after the war. Otherwise, all eleven went to Shanghai.

Now Shanghai was international at this time. It had an international settlement – French, and British and American. We could not afford to live there because it was too expensive. I would say that all the – 90% of the refugees who came from Europe – had to live in a district which was the way – they had a war there before we came and everything was destroyed – houses, they were burned up and this is the area where we had to live, because otherwise we

couldn't afford it –to live in the international settlement. We all lived in row houses, I would say, which were owned by Chinese people. But everybody had only one room – that was all. We all lived in one room. My mother and I and my father, we all lived in one room. When the container came, we didn't know what to do with it. We had no room to put the stuff in and it had to disappear from - they dumped this big container in front of the apartment house, and it had to disappear in a few days – you couldn't leave it there. So we stuffed this one room with what we wanted to keep and then we started to sell and the Chinese people were very eager to buy European stuff – furniture, crystal, you name it. They were very eager to buy it. It was a lucky deal. So we sold most of the stuff and we needed money anyway - because we got out with \$10 out of Germany.

So, I saw a business in that. And the first thing I did, I got Chinese, they came along. They walked the street. And I said, “Would you buy this container?” And they were very eager to buy it, because they needed wood. So I started to sell those empty containers to Chinese. And then it dawned on me, maybe I could sell other stuff too. And I got into business.

After I was two months in Shanghai, I heard that there was a Shanghai Volunteer Corps, which is patrolling the international settlement. And when I approached an officer there and he said, “You are a Jewish refugee. Why don't you join the Jewish Company?” They had a Jewish Company inside the Shanghai Volunteer Corps. So I joined the Jewish Company, which were mostly Russian Jews, which were in Shanghai from 1917-18, after the Revolution in Russia. They had to get out of Russia, like we had to get out of Germany. They went to China and Shanghai, mostly, and they opened up businesses – export, import and all that stuff. And I joined this company and I got this British uniform and they trained us and I never in my life will forget – two months ago I was in a concentration camp under guards close by, and two months later I was on a shooting range in Shanghai training for the Shanghai Volunteer Corps. This is something I never ever will forget. And we had a good life there. We had first of all good food, which was very important. And they didn't pay us for it, but they gave us food and we went home in the evening and they called us whenever there was something going on and we had to be there. But then when the Japanese came, we had to dissolve this whole volunteer corps immediately and get rid of uniforms and everything, because the Japanese would go against us. So, I destroyed everything, every proof that I was ever a member and they destroyed the membership list too.

As the Japanese came in in 1943, at that time they had learned from the Germans that we are the enemies of the Germans. And they told them, “These are Jews and we threw them out.” So, the first thing the Japanese did, they put us in a so-called ghetto. That means you could stay – some people lived already in that area and others which lived outside that area, had to move in. And nobody could leave the ghetto without a special passport, special permission from the Japanese high command. So we had to go there and get their permission and we had to tell this officer and he was very tough and very rough. He beat Jewish people when they came there. You had to prove that you had a reason to get out of the ghetto in order to make a living. So, my

partner got this little permission/passport they called it and he could go out in order to sell this stuff in the French and international settlement. Otherwise we couldn't have made any business. Luckily he could prove this and they gave him the permission to go out – you had to show your passport and you walked out and when you came back they had Jewish guards there at the entrance to the ghetto. But it was not like a ghetto in the way like in Poland. We had restaurants there. The Jewish people started to open up stores there – bakery stores, butcher shops, little clothing stores, restaurants, everything. In fact, we went dancing on weekends on the roof garden – there was a movie with a roof garden. So, it wasn't too bad, even under Japanese occupation.

Shanghai got bombed during the war. And unfortunately, they hit close to our ghetto – the radio station – they were after radio stations to destroy it. And we had quite many losses in our community from the bombing in Shanghai. And then when the Americans came and the war was over, I got a job for about two years with the American Army as a civilian employee, because American officers and GI's were not allowed to drive in Shanghai because the speed limit was 15 miles per hour. Because everything is on the street – the bicycles, people they walking not on a sidewalk – on sidewalks, they cook their meals. They walk in the street. And everything is on the streets – the rickshaws and everything and too many accidents happened because Americans were used to driving faster so they said, “This is it. No American soldier or officer is allowed to drive. We hire private people.” And they hired a lot from our refugees. And I took a job and was a jeep driver for a year and a half. I did this until my papers were ready for the United States.

We were listed before, when we went to Shanghai, we were listed already for the USA. But since there was a quota system, you might know what that means, certain quotas. It took two or three years before your quota is there. So after the war, they opened up the American Consulate in Shanghai, which was closed during the war. And we went to the American Consulate and showed them the papers that we applied for the United States in Germany and they took this up for us and it took about another six months before we got ready to leave for the United States. But I had bad luck again. My mother and my sister and brother-in-law, they all belonged to the Polish quota, if you know what that means. The Germans had a German quota – I was German quota – but my mother and sisters and so on they all belonged to the Polish quota. Because when they were born, in that area, it was under Polish government. You have to know in Europe it changed. The time several years it was Polish, then it was German then it was Polish again. It's not like here in the United States. So unfortunately, they fell under the Polish quota and it was impossible to wait. There were hundreds of thousands of people waiting so what we had to do, is I had to go to the United States on my quota – the German quota. And they had to wait in Shanghai. But then the Communists came to Shanghai. And they had to flee again from there. And they promised to bring them to Italy – a whole shipload of refugees – this Polish quota and then a German quota, they took them to Italy and told them, “We'll put you in a camp in Italy and you wait your turn and then you go to the United States. The ship never

stopped in Italy and took them right to Israel. And they stayed in Israel and they were very happy. My, mother died there. I went there several times to Israel and this was a good solution.

Interviewer: So who went to the United States with you?

Werner: My wife – I married in Shanghai, and my son was born in Shanghai. He was fifteen months old when we left Shanghai. I went with my wife and my son to the United States. And we came to San Francisco. We all were registered and then I visited the authorities there, the Jewish community. They said, “What is your profession?” So I said, “We had the grain business and a flour mill.” So they said, “Oh, this way you have three choices in the United States. It’s Kansas City, Minneapolis or Chicago.” Well, Chicago was well known in Europe as a gangster town at this time. So I said, “I’m not going to Chicago and I’m a small town boy and I don’t like big cities anyway.” Then there was Minneapolis and they said, “You know it’s a cold place.” And I said, “No, I don’t want that either.” So, Kansas City was the only choice and I made the right choice. That was the right choice to do.

Source: Werner Hartwich edited video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/hartwichwerner/>