

Kurt Levi Testimony Transcript

I am Kurt Levi. I was born in Germany in Wiesbaden, a beautiful town in the year of 1910. My family has lived in Germany for many generations. I cannot trace it back to really strictly speaking how many, but in the early eighteenth century, up to the eighteenth century, the Jews in Germany were not allowed to live in big cities. So my forefathers lived in small villages surrounding Wiesbaden and then after the borders opened they moved into the city.

The years from 1909, when my parents got married, were very prosperous years. My dad, may he rest in peace, used to say, whoever will not make a success at this time and age Germany, is either a fool or lazy. Well, my dad was neither one. He quit school at the age of 14. He lost his father early and he took over the business to support his mother and his three sisters. And he did a good job. He was an extrovert, a man who was liked by everybody and who was successful in his business- cattle business, dairy cows- Holstein cows. And he lived in those years in a city about 35 miles from Wiesbaden, Limburg an der Lahn, also a historic city with a beautiful dome. And the house of my forefathers was right at the bottom of the dome. Strangely enough, there was also a church right next to the cow stable of my father's, which is an indication that the Jew in Germany was well-integrated, was well-accepted. The Jew remained a Jew, but as far as we were concerned, we were observant Jews – Orthodox, but to us Judaism was just a religion. We were Germans, Germans, Germans all the way through and nothing could interfere with that.

Things changed after the unfortunate First World War. The once flourishing country became poor. They had reparations to pay to the Allies. They did not have enough money. So many of the Allies, especially the French, instead of getting money, took some machinery out of the industrial part of Germany and deprived Germany of the ability to produce. This lack of production, in turn, caused poverty – unemployment and poverty. It came from bad to worse.

In 1923, which was my Bar Mitzvah year, the railroads went on strike. There was no communication. My parents had a big party planned but our relatives, who would have to come by train, could not come. So, it fell flat. And in the years to come, very shortly, things in Germany became very bad. Antisemitism at that point was not pronounced. There was always a certain kind of antisemitism but, more or less, under the skin. It had not come out.

My school years were very pleasant. Our school was only a couple of blocks away from our home. I could come home for lunch and go back to school. And we had a very relatively small Jewish population in my school of about 250 boys. The girls had a separate school – in Sion. There were about in all the classes maybe five or six Jewish boys. And what made it kind of unpleasant, in a way, was there was two hours every week of religion. And the Protestant boys and the Catholic boys went into different classes and had their religious lessons. And we

Jewish boys, were sitting by ourselves in a separate room. Well, when that lesson was over we went back in our regular class, there was always a certain feeling of strangeness.

Our family life was very important and our religion was very important to us. When I first decided to go to law school and became a lawyer, my dad was very much against it. He said, “You stay home in our business and you lead a family life as beautiful as our life is, which cannot compare to the high class Jews who live in the big city and are not Jews anymore in a religious way – are completely assimilated and don’t have the beautiful family life that we have.” Well, like all boys, I didn’t listen to my father and became a lawyer anyhow.

Money constantly lost its value. But this is an indication of how bad the economy was – how people could not plan anything, and how things went to the dogs. No government could succeed. One Reich Chancellor failed one after the other and was replaced. Hindenburg, who was a great military leader in the First World War and was well-known, and well-respected, became Reich’s President. In his desperation, he appointed Adolf Hitler to lead the nation. Well, that was the beginning of the end. The Jews again, being good Germans, didn’t believe he would last, like no other Reich’s Chancellor had lasted before. My dad used to say, “Give that jerk 60 days and he’ll be gone.” But he didn’t go.

In those days, I was practicing law in my home town, *am danndest Gericht*. I was pleading a case one morning and all of a sudden we heard goose steps, hard heels on the stone floor of the courthouse. The judge, who was a wise man, knew what was happening. He knew the Nazis were coming. He pulled me by the arm behind the bar and pushed me into his chamber. At that moment the storm troopers came in “Judens raus!” – “out with the Jews.” I disappeared through a back door and a few weeks later, the lawyers – all the Jewish lawyers were decreed were [unclear]. So that was the end of the career that I had planned and worshipped all my young years.

But were just a few of us who were affected. Business was good. My dad’s business was flourishing. He couldn’t see what was happening. He just didn’t want to see it. Being an only child, when I talked about leaving the country, my mother would cry. So it became impossible to say goodbye. Nobody molested us. We were very respected in the city. Everything was fine. So I struck a compromise. I went to Basel, Switzerland for my doctorate. After Basel - those years you could go back and forth to Germany. You could even take a few Reichsmark out to carry you for a few weeks. I had the idea, being a religious Jew, to go to Palestine. Agriculture was an important item in what today is Israel, but was then Palestine. And I knew a lot about it having lived with it in my young years. And you were able to export machinery from Germany to Palestine. So I lined up milking instruments the whole machinery that you need to run a dairy farm. And just as I was getting ready to materialize it, they clamped the law down – the Nazis said nothing can be exported anymore. All anybody could take out of Germany anymore was his personal belongings. Well, I guess I was not enough of an idealist to start as a farm worker or

anything else in a hardworking difficult country, which Palestine was in those days. So Palestine fell by the wayside too.

My closest friend of my school years, Alfred Halberstadt, emigrated early, maybe in '32, to Johannesburg, South Africa. And he kept on writing me how nice it is, "Why don't you come?" So that was another project and just as I was getting ready for it, the newspaper reported, "Antisemitic Outbursts in Johannesburg". So I said, "What do I do? Go from the fire in the frying pan?" And that eliminated Johannesburg.

Why didn't I go to the United States? 'Cause I couldn't. That was my first choice right along. My parents were against it. But I would have overcome that. But you need an affidavit to get into the United States. I had no close relatives in this country. I had one distant relative – a second or third cousin of my dad's to whom I wrote and who turned me down because his brother and sister were still in Germany and he felt that he had to bring them out and he did not want to weaken his affidavit for his brother and sister.

So, what to do? How do you get to the United States? I made myself a partner in my dad's business – changed the records and everything. And after a few months of running it that way, I went to the German consulate in Frankfurt, which was not an immigration consulate. The immigration consulate was Stuttgart. But there was also a consul in Frankfurt. And I told them I wanted to go to the United States on my way to Santo Domingo and Haiti where I want to visit some friends. And I want to stop over for 10 days in New York to visit a friend there. And on that basis, showing my books as a partner of a business, and definitely returning to Germany, he gave me a visa for 10 days – a transit visa. But before he did, he made me sign a declaration that I would not remain in the United States illegally nor immigrate through another country. In my desperation, I would sign anything. And I did.

I got to New York. The man who turned me down by letter, gave me the affidavit. I went to the Council of Jewish Women for directions. And the worker said, "That's fine. You go to Havana and see the consul in Havana and you stay there for two days and then you come back as an immigrant to the United States." I said, "But I signed a paper that I would not immigrate through another country." "Forget about it," she said, "how would the consul in Havana know about what you signed in Frankfurt? Forget it." But I didn't like it. I went back to her. She almost threw me out of the office. She said, "If you want to go back to Hitler and get killed, be my guest." Ok, I found out her days off was, Wednesday, let's say. I went back to that office and talked to her supervisor and she said – I told her the story and my feeling – and she said, "my colleague is right, go ahead, you have no problem." Well, I had two good opinions and went to Havana, had my physical. Next day I saw the Vice Consul for my papers and he said, "What made you come to Havana to immigrate to the United States?" I told him, "I was on a pleasure trip to Haiti and Santo Domingo - and my friends in New York (that's what the women had told me to say) convinced me that this is no time for a German Jew to go on pleasure trips. 'Stay in

the United States.’ So I changed my mind about the pleasure trip and here I am to immigrate to the United States. “

“Well,” he said, “I’ve got to verify that. I’m going to write for your papers to the consul in Germany.”

“How long will that take?”

“Oh, about three months, because all consulate papers will go from one consul through Washington to another consul.”

I said, “Can’t you speed it up?”

He said, “What’s your hurry? You wanted to go to Santo Domingo and Haiti anyhow.”

“But now I’m in a hurry.” Well, I convinced him to wire Germany, but still the papers had to come through Washington. The papers came and he called me in. He pulled out this paper – not to immigrate from another country. “Did you sign this, Mr. Levi?”

“Yes I did.” He sat back in his chair.

“I have to turn down your application.” That was the end of the road. He got up, showed me to the door. I didn’t. I sat. I kept on talking and my English wasn’t all that good. Well, he didn’t understand me and he couldn’t physically throw me out, I guess, so he said, “I’ll let you talk to the consul. He just came back from a six year stint in Hamburg, Germany and he speaks German” – a nice man and he said, “You’re lying to me. Your papers show that you had an immigration visa to Haiti and you’re telling me that you wanted to go on a pleasure trip.”

I said, “That’s wrong, never did have any intention to go to Haiti.”

“That’s what it says.”

I said, “Let me prove to you that I didn’t.”

“I don’t know what difference it would make,” he says, “but be my guest.” So I went to the Western Union office and cabled my dad to get me verification from the consul in Haiti that I never had an immigration visa. I made that cable and it was very short because every word cost money. And my dad, may he rest in peace, read my cable the wrong way. He thought I wanted a certification that I had a visa to immigrate to Haiti. Went back to the consul, the consul said, “I don’t know any Kurt Levi.”

My dad said, “He was here, you gave it to him.” He called his secretary, “Do you know of any Kurt Levi?”

“Never heard of him.”

Well, my dad was a good salesman and he said, “What are you doing to me? My son’s life is at stake in Havana. You’ve got to help me out.”

So, he said, “Fine” – being a businessman, just a consul on the side, you know. He wrote a letter and that letter had to go to the consul in Havana, at which point he called me in when he got it, “You’re the biggest liar I’ve ever seen! The country of what you’re telling me is true.” I told him of the predicament. And he talked to me for about an hour to verify, to believe what I was saying. Whether he believed it or not, I don’t know, but his heart came through.

“Have you got your papers?”

“Right here.” And he gave me my immigration paper. So it took three terrible months in Havana. Luckily, I made a little money and could eat and live. But it was rough. Then I got finally to the boat back and the immigration officer on the boat looked at my papers and said, “Ellis Island.” Because the message of a turn down of an immigration from any Consul in the world goes – it’s inter core office – I don’t know which – and he saw my name as a turn down – so sent me to Ellis Island. Well, it took a few days for me to get the proper information to the immigration authorities from Havana and then I entered New York a free man.

Interviewer: [Can you tell us what date it was when you immigrated into the United States?](#)

Kurt: I immigrated into the United States in March of 1937. My parents came to visit me in the fall of 1937 and they left the United States. They didn’t like what their lawyer son was doing, because I was fortunate enough to get myself a job as a stock boy, making good money - \$13.50 a week - which was good money in those days. But a stock boy was saying too much – I swept floors, I set mousetraps, I packed merchandise and all that stuff. And my dad couldn’t understand that his only son, the former lawyer, would take a job like that and be as happy as I was. But most of all, he said, “I’m not going to speak the language - learn the language - anymore.” He had just a grade school education. He quit school at the age of 14. “And I’m not going to leave my fortunes to Hitler. I’m not going to come to the United States.” And crying like a baby when I took him to the train, they left and went back to Germany. Well, in November of ’38, things changed his mind. The Nazis came in on Kristallnacht, took him to concentration camp, destroyed our home completely, took the pictures – all the pictures from the wall – cut them to pieces, picked the carpets up from the floor and cut them to pieces. My mother had the most beautiful cabinet with crystals. They put it on the floor and stamped on it with their boots, took my dad away. And my mother was left in the ruins. Strangely enough, my dad also said when he went back, “Nobody’s going to touch me.” In a way he was right. He was a smart guy. None of the Nazis - the storm troopers – in our town would come to take Joseph Levi to concentration camp. They had to bring people in from Frankfurt to take him.

Interviewer: [Where did they take him?](#)

Kurt: Theresienstadt. So my mother was sitting in the ruins and then she moved in with her brother and sister –her sister-in-law – the two of them who lived together for the 30 days that her husband and my dad were in concentration camp. In those days we still had influence and through pulling different strings, I was able to get them both out of concentration camp with a promise that they would turn everything they had over to the Nazis and leave the country within 30 days. That they did but the quota to come to the United States was not up. We had to get them out of Germany. I was fortunate enough to get them to England. England required a \$20,000 bond as guarantee that they would not become a public burden. I was fortunate to borrow that money and got them out in 1938 to England. So they stayed in England through the Blitz. And in 1941 their quota came up and they came to the United States.

Source: Kurt Levi edited video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/levikurt/>