

Ernest Simon Testimony Transcript

Interviewer: We're interested in any comments you have, Mr. Simon, on your experiences during the war and perhaps starting with your family prior to the war. Where you were, who they were.

I was born in a suburb of a city called Karlovy Vary or Karlsbad, a resort town in the Sudetenland, which is now the Czech Republic and used to be Czechoslovakia since 1918. My parents were business people. We had a wholesale business with all sorts of things. Also retail, but wholesale was the primary function. And I was born in 1923 and brought up as a ten-year-old – ten-year younger brother of my sister and, consequently, spoiled considerably. Czechoslovakia was an extremely progressive country with several nationalities living in it together in peace. It looked like the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Germans, the Hungarians, the Poles and the Russians could live together in peace in one country until about low '30s. 1930's when Hitler came to power in Germany. And after he started to re-arming the country, which Germany was prohibited from doing by the Peace Treaty of Versailles. He started to advertise, combine all Germans into one country beginning with Austria, the Sudetenland, and I believe there were some Germans in western Poland, and some Germans in eastern France. He wanted to bring all the Germans back under his regime.

Interviewer: You said “advertise.” Does that mean that you saw actual advertisements when you were a child?

That's all I heard on radio, well, since, well 1933. I was ten years old at the time and as much as I could understand about international politics. The thing I remember was Germans belonging to Germany and Jews don't and we want to get rid of them.

Interviewer: So you remember actual radio propoganda then?

Oh, that's all we heard. When Hitler gave a speech, which usually was a major occasion, everybody listened to the radio. We could... We didn't have television, of course, in those days but we saw it in the newsreels in the movies and we could just picture it just by hearing it on a radio. We were in fear from 1933 on. We didn't know what was going to happen until the Munich meeting when it was decided that the Sudetenland would be adopted by Germany and the borders redrawn. As a matter of fact it happened, the official date was October 1, 1938 for the adoption.

Interviewer: And where were you living on that day?

I was living at home with my parents. Our business was functioning. I was going to school.

Interviewer: And this was in Karlsbad.

Yep.

Interviewer: That's very near the German border.

Yeah, it's about 20 miles. We used to go skiing every weekend right on the German border. I think it was around the 15th of September, I came out of school to go home for lunch when a swastika was hanging on the building across the street from the – a swastika flag was hanging from the building across the street from the school – a sign that that's the way it's going to be. So I went home and my mother had one of my favorite dishes boiling on the stove and we just let it boil. And took a briefcase - we were afraid to take a suitcase, walked to the railroad depot and take the next train to Pilsen. Moved in with my sister. My sister, who was ten years older, was married and moved to Pilsen.

Interviewer: When did she move to Pilsen?

Well, she married in 1933. That's when she moved. So Pilsen was inland and it was not part of the Sudetenland. Then it cleared up that the Germans want – actually came in and took between the 1st and the 10th of October so my father wasn't too well. He had bad case of rheumatism. So my mother and I rented a truck and we went back once more and took a few essential things to Pilsen, but most of it stayed there. And, as you know, all Jewish property was confiscated.

Interviewer: So your father lost his business?

We lost everything. We lost furniture, we lost business. We had a few essentials that we threw on and took with us. My sister had a very nice apartment in Pilsen and we lived with them for about a year until one morning when I got up and looked out the window and about half a block from the building we lived in – there's a bridge across one of the rivers in Pilsen - and I looked second time when I noticed German soldiers guarding the bridge. So I screamed a little bit and my folks came to window and looked out too and they said, "Well this is it." And that's how they created the, the Czech Protectorate with a puppet government. Anyway, it was pretty clear where this was going. So my parents signed me up for what was called the Youth Aliyah – *Aliyat Hano'ar*, in Hebrew, which took about a year before it develop into something concrete. In the meantime, they sent me to all kinds of camps – Jewish camps – to prepare for different kind of life.

Interviewer: How did your parents sign you up for the Youth Aliyah?

We had to pay for it.

Interviewer: And what preparation did you receive?

Well, you sent your children sometimes to a farm for four weeks. Let them work there, and find out that life is not all school and fun. So I couldn't go to school anymore. So, first I

found a job packaging some, some powder. And then my brother-in-law had a friend who owned a candy company and he got me a job there. And I learned how to make candy. Well 1940 was the year that we got notified that there was a place for me in one of the transports. And I don't quite know how it was organized but it was an organized, illegal transport from Prague to Tel Aviv. It went on a train to Vienna, from Vienna to Trieste in northern Italy. It's right on the Yugoslav border, Trieste is. And there we, we embarked on a ship and we stopped in— we made two stops – one was in Pire... Piraeus, which is the port for Athens. Second stop, Cypress. And from there we wound up in, in Palestine – in Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv didn't have a harbor. I don't know if they have today but they didn't have a harbor so we just anchored down near the coast and they picked us up in, in boats.

Interviewer: Do you remember how many kids were in your group?

Around 20. We had a good trip, yeah, fun on the ship. I used to play the accordion and we had all kinds of programs there.

Interviewer: Were they all Czechoslovakian?

No, no, no. We had well, most of them were from Czechoslovakia. We had some Viennese and some Germans. Once we got on land we were sent to a place called Ben Shemen, which is the, was at the time the one and only agricultural school in Palestine and living there was based on a kibbutz life. The odd part about it was that there were some people with money who could have gotten out one way or the other, but they didn't believe that the future was gonna be as bad as it turned out to be. My uncle happened to be one of them. He, he was financially better off than my parents were. He had contacts all over the world. He was in the in the china business – making china and dishes, the very decorated stuff. And he had customers all over the world – from India to the United States, South Af..., South America, South Africa. He told me if I would be interested in taking over his business that after I get done with school he would send me to some of these countries to learn the trade. So he had the contacts. He had the money. He even had the money abroad. It wasn't all in Czechoslovakia. And decided not to leave. So they all stayed there with the exception of my sister who got out miraculously and I really don't know how she managed it in 1941. There wasn't anybody leaving anymore. 1940 was the last year that they let the illegal transports out. They all stayed there. Everybody went eventually to Terezin – Theresienstadt, and were sent out to the various camps in most cases.

Interviewer: Did not return?

Not very many. You can count them on your hand. Your fingers. When I came back – now I'm jumping here a little bit – when I came back in 1945 as a soldier that was the first trip I made to Terezin. And walking up the main street I ran into two people who were very, very close friends of mine in Pilsen. Well, we embraced, very happy to see each other and they told me – if I mentioned a name, they told me exactly when they went, what they went, and what

happened to them. In most cases, don't look. My parents, don't waste your energies. The rest of my family, the same thing.

Interviewer: Your uncle included?

Uh hmm. Yes, well I had several uncles and none of them, none of them survived.

Interviewer: Why don't you tell us then what developed during the war - your war time experiences?

Well, I graduated after two years and right about that time I got this postcard from my mother. From Warsaw. And at the same time Rommel was advancing toward El Alamein. And I was looking for a job in Tel Aviv and couldn't find anything that would pay for food. They started to cut diamonds in Tel Aviv at the time and I tried to learn the trade but they were only paying about half of the minimum that you need to live on so with that postcard and the news about the Germans coming close to Egypt, I went back to Tel Aviv and enlisted. And I went in the Jewish Brigade of the English Army. So you go through basic training. We had several, we had several people from Czechoslovakia in that group. And we got together once and most of them thought they wanted to go back for one reason or another. And I wanted to go back because of the family, primarily. So we decided to apply for a transfer into the Czech Army-in-exile, who had 4,000 men in the Middle East and 4,000 men in England, and about 8,000 men in Russia. Well, it took nine months to get processed and after nine months they approved the transfer and all of us went into the Czech Army. The headquarters of the Czech Army was in Haifa, although the army itself was in, in Libya. They were fighting around Tobruk and Benghazi. I didn't quite get to that point because they decided they were going to ship the 4,000-men Czech Army to England, combine us with the 4,000 men in England.

Interviewer: Where was your duty?

We wound up in, in Dunkirk.

Interviewer: You were there after the D-day invasion?

After the D-day invasion, yeah. We went over about the 15th of June. Now the invasion started the 6th of June. We went over about the 15th of June. Crossed the channel and had to jump from the ship into the landing craft and could break your leg real easy. But, somehow we managed to survive.

Interviewer: Were you infantry?

No, I was in the artillery – was pulling a cannon. When the end of the war came, I think it was in May – May 8th I believe it was 1945, we were extremely happy and we stayed there only long enough to pack up and then the whole 8,000 men went through Germany back to Czechoslovakia. Our first stop was in Luxembourg and we were greeted as lib... greeted as

liberators every place we went other than by the Germans. In Luxembourg, they were extremely friendly. Invited us to go to the homes and eat. We didn't know how long we would stay there, so... And then we saw all the destruction of Germany and we jumped for joy because there was hardly a building left intact.

Well, I stayed in Czechoslovakia for almost three years. And when I saw that the Communists will take over the country, which was January, February of 1948, I decided to leave and I looked for ways to get out. And so I met a, an English war-bride who had some contacts in Prague with the basement of the American and the English Consulates. They ran the underground movement from there. And she got me in contact with them, gave me the phone number and I called up. And they said, "Well, go back home, when the time comes we'll call you." And they called me the end of May 1948. I had to take essentials that I could carry on my back and put them in a suitcase and go to Prague, which was east from where I lived. From there we took a train to Pilsen, from Pilsen to Klatovy. From Klatovy another train to two stations before the border. We left the train, went into the woods, repacked the suitcase into a rucksack, put it on the back and started walking. And we walked about eight hours. We got to a farm. The owner of the farm was part of the underground and he put us up in the barn till midnight. Gave us something to eat and then the, the guide came. The guide turned out to be a German smuggler who smuggled goods into Czechoslovakia and people out of Czechoslovakia. And he had his contacts with the German border police. So he took us straight to the police station in Bavaria. The first thing they did is check what we carried, for weapons, and they confiscated two of mine. One was a carton of Lucky Strikes and one was a salami. And then they called the American military police. They picked us up and took us to a transit camp to be deloused. I wasn't any dirtier than I am right now, but that's what they did. And I was with a student – a Czech student from Prague. And they asked us – they asked me – if I want to go to a Jewish camp or Czech camp. I didn't know the difference. I asked him, "What, what is the difference between the two." And he said, "Well, you get food from America and you get clothing from America and the Czechs are kind of poor right now because they just started this." I went to Czech camp anyway.

Interviewer: Where was that?

The camp was in, the first camp was in Regensburg in a school building. A week later I met my wife and it took a while but we eventually got married. In the meantime, they transferred us to, from Regensburg to Murnau, which is ten miles from Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Beautiful country, absolutely gorgeous country. It's like Aspen or Vail here. And we spent about a year in the camp.

Interviewer: Can you describe the camp a little bit - the living conditions, food, clothing. What you did?

Well, the conditions were poor. It was a military building. The married people got a room. The single people moved in, you know, 20, 30 people in one room. And food was the poorest. We had potatoes. We had what they call soup. It was the bare minimum of calories to survive. It was figured out that way. I was very fortunate. Somebody told me there's a Joint office in Munich and if you go there, not only can you get some food, but you may also get a job. So I went on the next train, went to Munich, applied in the transportation department of the Joint.

Interviewer: What's the Joint?

The Joint is the... They oversaw the distribution of the food and the clothing in all the Jewish camps in Germany. And, of course, they had big bureaucracy and they had cars and they had trucks and they needed drivers for this and I figured that would be something I could do. I found out the transportation officer, the head man was a, an ex-soldier – a Czech soldier that I served with in England. So I went in and I got the job. And so Monday morning I would go to Munich and Friday evening I would go back to Murnau, for about a year. My job was, eventually, that was not in the beginning - to start with I had to drive a big truck. Eventually, I wound up being a movie projectionist. I had movie cameras, sound equipment on an army ambulance and I drove around all the Jewish camps shooting movies – American movies, Yiddish movies. And I got to know a lot of the people and most of the camps. The Jewish camps were better off than the Czech camps. They got shipments from, from the Joint – food and clothing. And the Joint also had a big immigration department. This friend of mine in the transportation, his wife was the assistant of the immigration department. So we signed up with them to immigrate to... Well, as long as I was single I wanted to go to England to be with my sister. But once we decided to get married, we changed it to go either to the United States or to Australia. And also decided that whoever comes through first, that's where we going to wind up. And we wound up in the United States.

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