

>> Interviewer: Mr. Schiller, could you tell us your full name?

>> Schiller: Hugo Schiller, no middle initial.

>> Interviewer: Where and when were you born?

>> Schiller: I was born in Germany, southern Germany, a little town called Grünsfeld in 1931.

>> Interviewer: Could you tell us about your life before the rise of Hitler?

>> Schiller: Well, we lived in a very small, kind of sleepy little town. My mother's family had been in that town since 1540. I didn't find that out until recently. But grew up playing with the kids in the area and hearing my father and uncles discuss this crazy guy, that he wouldn't last -- of course talking about Hitler -- and really not paying much attention to that until 1938. It was a normal childhood up to the age of seven.

>> Interviewer: Could you tell us about your family life before the rise of Hitler? Do you have brothers or sisters?

>> Schiller: No brothers or sisters. I had a grandmother, lots of aunts and uncles, lots of cousins, many of them living in the same town.

>> Interviewer: What kind of schooling did you have?

>> Schiller: Well, the first grade and part of the second grade, I went to school in this little town, Grünsfeld, the public school. 1938, when Kristallnacht, or Crystal Night, came into

being, the first indication that I had, during recess at 10:00, the teacher and principal called me over and asked me to pick up all the papers in the area, which, you know, I was seven years old. I thought it was a little strange, but I didn't think too much of it. And by the time I got home and was explaining this to my mother, she had already heard that they were picking up the heads of household, the men, and putting them into trucks. At that time, we didn't know they were going to Dachau.

Shortly after that, they came to our house and arrested my father, who, incidentally, had just gotten a belated medal for -- he had several medals from the First World War. This one, through some bureaucratic snafu, had been lost, and he'd got that just a few weeks before they came to arrest him. One of the troopers that arrested him asked what that was, and he explained it to him. He seemed to be shocked that a Jew could have gotten this high a medal. At that time, it was kind of ironic.

But that was the end of my public schooling because, at that point, there was a decree that Jewish children couldn't go to public school. I was then sent to Offenbach, which is a city close to Frankfurt where I had relatives, to go to a Jewish school.

>> Interviewer: Could you tell us about your experiences there?

>> Schiller: Well, there we were sort of a little enclave. Now, at this point, this was after 1938. It was very difficult for Jews to emigrate, and there were more and more restrictive laws passed. So we really -- the kids in that school were sort of -- the only friends they had were the kids in that school, and we sort of kept by ourselves, mostly because we were afraid to go out and mingle in the general public. There was open hostility at that point. I was there for a year and a half and was home on vacation when we were deported.

>> Interviewer: What happened to your father during this year and a half?

>> Schiller: Well, he had been taken to Dachau, and he was there about six weeks, and then he was returned. And at that point, we were forced to sell the family business because Jews were not allowed to own and operate businesses anymore. They were, at that point, trying very hard to find some way to get out of Germany. They had had opportunities before that but, because of economic reasons, always felt that they would wait till when they could take more of their net worth with them. As a result, they were still there when the deportations started, which, by the way, was the first deportation of Jews outside of Germany.

>> Interviewer: How did your family cope with these changes?

>> Schiller: Well, of course, at that point, when we were deported, there was just my father, my mother, myself, and my aunt. We were picked up that day, and we were put on trucks and didn't know where we were going, taken to an assembly point, and then put on a train. We knew we were heading in a given direction because we could see where the sun was. We ended up in France in a camp called Gurs, which was the first concentration camp to which Jews were deported out of Germany.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember the date?

>> Schiller: It was in October of 1940. I don't know an exact date, but it was in October. We were on the train for two days, and it wasn't until we came out of the train that we knew where we were specifically. The camp is located at the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains in France near the Spanish border. And we were guarded by Vichy police at that point. That had been one of the agreements that France was forced to accept when the armistice was signed.

>> Interviewer: I'm wondering if you could give me a description of what it was like to arrive there at the camp.

>> Schiller: Well, of course, there was considerable terror on the train itself simply because people didn't know what was going to happen next. This just came out of the blue. I mean, at 5:30 in the morning, we heard a knock on our door, and four storm troopers came in and said, "You have an hour to pack. We're told to take you to an assembly point." That's all we knew. Then we were put on a train, and we weren't told anything else. So there was great apprehension.

Once we got settled in the camp, then people began to say, "Well, you know, maybe they'll deport us to some other place." No one, at that point, had any idea that it was going to be a holding camp, waiting for the extermination camps to be built in Poland. Like I said, we were the first ones to go, and no one had ever talked about the fact that he was going to try and destroy all the Jews in Europe.

>> Interviewer: When you talk about "we," I just want to clarify for myself, you're referring to you and -- who was with you?

>> Schiller: My mother, my father, and my aunt.

>> Interviewer: When you first got to the camp, what did it look like to you?

>> Schiller: Well, it was a sea of mud, I guess maybe because of where it's located and also because there's no paving or anything. And they were fairly crude barracks surrounded by barbed wire. Being a nine-year-old, I was with my mother in the women's part of the camp. Men were separate. I think the distinction was somewhere around 14 or 15, is where they broke it off. Conditions were very crude, food was very sparse, and pretty quickly after we got there, dysentery began to spread,

and people were dying. It was kind of bewildering for a nine-year-old.

I remember, I had a good voice for a little boy. It got ruined when my voice changed. But I went around other barracks singing, and people would give me food, which I would take home to my mother and my aunt. So I guess that was my first job!

>> Interviewer: What was daily life like for you in the camp?

>> Schiller: I guess first thing in the morning, you'd go to what was a washroom barrack, where there were rows and rows of bars with holes in them that water came out of, and you did the best to wash up there. Then they would issue you coffee and a piece of bread, and that was your breakfast. The other meal was, as best I can remember, about 5:00 and usually consisted of soup and bread. So food became a very important item. We were able to get some packages from relatives after a while.

They didn't let too many people into the camp. They weren't exactly broadcasting what they were doing at this point yet because they were still building the camps in Poland, and we were the first ones. They were just holding us.

There was an opportunity for some children to be let out of the camp. There was a group of very active Quakers from Scandinavia -- Sweden mostly -- that came specifically for the purpose of saving Jewish children in the camps, and my parents signed for me to go out. They figured anything was better than staying where we were. And we were taken to a...like a boarding school, called Maison des Pupilles in a little town called Aspet, A-S-P-E-T. There were 48 of us there, and we were put in there with the French kids and went to the school in the local village.

About a year later, we heard that the Germans were going to take over Vichy, France, southern France, also, and an effort was

made to try and save us again. Eight of us were picked to be sent to the United States, and I don't know exactly how they picked it, but all eight of us had relatives in the United States. I had an uncle. My father's oldest brother lived in New York. We were sort of spirited to Marseilles and then hidden there until they could put us on a boat.

We stayed out of sight down on the fourth deck with the sailors until we reached Casablanca. Then we were taken out, and we stayed there for about a month. We were put on a Portuguese ship, Portugal being neutral, and it was called the "Niassa," and we were on our way to the United States. We were supposed to go to New York, but we ended up in Baltimore because mines had already been laid -- this is '42 now -- in New York, and I don't know whether the captain wasn't sure that he knew where they were placed and so on, and so we ended up in Baltimore.

>> Interviewer: I'm wondering if we could backtrack just a little bit. I want to talk with you about the experience of leaving the camp and going to the school where the Quakers took you. Could you tell me more about that?

>> Schiller: Yeah. Well, we were put on a truck again. You know, life was a series of transportations in trucks, but this time, at least we knew where we were going. I was among the younger kids. They ranged anywhere from 9 to 14, 15, and it was pretty evenly divided, boys and girls. When we got there and the Quakers got us settled, we were then under the supervision of the director and the teachers that were at this school, which had originally been a boarding school. I think, at one time, for tubercular kids, it was a health kind of a thing since it was in the mountains.

But we very quickly organized ourselves into a group. We had older kids who sort of became the natural leaders and took charge. And I don't know whether it was the Germanic in us or

not, but we were pretty well organized and fairly disciplined for little kids, especially since we were sort of on our own. Interestingly enough, the French kids weren't too happy with us. They called us *sale Boche*, which is sort of a slang term for "dirty German." It took us a long time to explain, we didn't like 'em any better than they did, for even better reasons than they had!

But people would visit us. We got visits from several Jewish organizations at that point and one young rabbi, and we began to find out that this was going to be temporary too, that the Germans were coming and that they were going to take over all of it. And at that point, efforts started to be made to save the 48 of us. We were the first eight to leave.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember what daily life was like for you there in hiding?

>> Schiller: Yeah. We weren't really afraid there because we were in a more normal setting. There was very little to eat, so our big preoccupation was with food. And we played, and we were kids, but we knew we had this thing looming over our heads about, you know, what's gonna happen next. Having been pulled out of our homes, that was always something that was in our minds -- you know, where do we end up -- and we were old enough to know this is not a normal existence. And when I left, the other 40 were quite concerned, and most of them were older. The eight of us that left were among the younger ones.

>> Interviewer: Did you form relationships with the other children while you were in hiding?

>> Schiller: Oh, yeah. You become very close. And as a matter of fact, my best friend came over to the States with me, and I lost track of him and only recently found him. But you tend to depend on each other, and you sort of form a bond against the cold

outside world, I guess. So it was...it was very disturbing to me that I never was able to find out what happened to the other 40 until about a year ago when, placing my name on a list, I got a letter from a lady in Switzerland who remembered me, and we began to correspond, and through her, I found out the fate of the other 40, two of which returned to the camp to be with their parents and were subsequently sent to Auschwitz and killed with everyone else that was in that camp, including all of my family.

But 38 of 'em were divided up among various French underground groups and made it through the war. And just recently, I've been able to get in touch with 'em in various countries, including some in the United States, which has been quite a thrill. It was quite a joy to find out that they were alive. I think one of the things that happens to us is, with lesser or more degree, all of us tend to feel slight guilt about having made it while others didn't. So when you find out that they made it also, it's sort of like a burden being lifted.

>> Interviewer: Do you know what happened to your parents when they left?

>> Schiller: They were deported to Auschwitz, and they were gassed and burned in Auschwitz, along with my aunt. And then I had several uncles that had left Germany earlier. That was one of my earliest recollections that I hadn't thought about until just now. Before 1938, two of my uncles, who were active in the Social Democratic Party, had to suddenly leave one night while my father stood there confronting a crowd of people with torches in their hands. They were after them. They left the back door and made their way to France. Unfortunately, one of 'em ended up in Gurs with us, and he and his family were sent to Auschwitz. One uncle survived. He was with the underground.

>> Interviewer: You mentioned a little bit before about a crowd coming with torches. Do you remember that night?

>> Schiller: Yeah, it was a Saturday night. It was the first night of Passover. And we heard this noise. I guess I was about four or five.

>> Interviewer: What year was that?

>> Schiller: That would have been '35 or '36. And then someone called on the phone. My father was very active in the running of this little town, so he still had some friends at that point. They said, "They're coming after your brother-in-laws," and by that time, we heard the noise. So he got up from the table, and he went out there, and he made a speech, literally a delaying speech, while they grabbed their few belongings and headed out the back door and made their way to France. They left that night, and we didn't hear for four or five days, and next we heard, they were out of the country.

That was the first violent or potentially violent thing that I had experienced, because, at that point, I was still playing with my friends who were not Jewish, you know, and it never occurred to me that I was different, except, you know, that we observed Shabbat and we kept kosher and that kind of thing. After Kristallnacht, my best friend, who lived across the street, had joined the Hitler Youth and had to tell me that he couldn't play with me anymore, so that was another thing that sort of drove it home.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember how these events impacted on your family?

>> Schiller: Since we sort of hesitated to leave early, or my parents did, there was a lot of scrambling going on towards the end trying to -- I mean, I heard all kinds of possibilities: South America, Madagascar, any place that was a possibility. But at that point, it really was tough already, and I don't know

whether there was financial problems or not. I don't think so because, although they were forced to sell the business to who they were told to sell it to for a given price, our family was fairly well-off and, therefore, there wasn't a want as far as food and that kind of thing.

But there was great -- you know, they would sort of whisper and try not to get me involved, but I was old enough to have an intuition that things were not too good. It was very upsetting. Particularly, I could tell -- my grandmother, at that time, they put her in a senior citizens home in another part of Germany just to get her out of that area, and there was great concern -- my father didn't talk much about it, but I could tell it was taking a toll on my mother. And she was more concerned about me, really, than she was about herself at that point.

>> Interviewer: Could you see how the events were changing her?

>> Schiller: Yeah. You know, she was very...outgoing, happy kind of person. Suddenly, she was fairly subdued. You know, we had this thing looming over us, not knowing what's going to happen, expecting the worst, and the worst is what actually turned out to happen, ultimately.

>> Interviewer: I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe we can move forward now. You were talking about how you eventually left for America.

>> Schiller: Right. We spent four weeks in Casablanca, where, incidentally, I got exposed the first time to Arab hostility, almost inadvertently. In order to be able to walk around Casablanca, they assigned us a policeman. And it was about five or six of us, we were old enough to walk around by ourselves, and we went to the park, and the policeman went with us. We spoke French at that point, and he spoke French. During the conversation, he found out we were Jewish. Suddenly, we found

ourselves by ourselves in Casablanca, the six of us. He'd disappeared! And it was only after we made our way back -- we weren't -- after what we had been through, being alone in Casablanca wasn't exactly a punishment for us, you know. But when we got back and we asked, "where did this guy go?" they said, "well, when he heard you were Jewish, he just didn't want to take care of you guys anymore, and he left." So I got a little taste of that.

The Portuguese ship that we got on was a regular liner and was really a big treat for us. We ate copious portions of food, and matter of fact, we were sick just about every day. But as soon as we felt a little better, we ate again! And it was -- we were -- food was just a miracle to us, to have all you could eat, you know.

And we ended up at a children's village, to be processed and deloused. We weren't too clean at that point because we didn't have facilities until we got on the ship. We were hiding in Marseilles, it was pretty -- they hid us in an old house on the outskirts of Marseilles until they could get us on the boat. And I was then picked up by my cousin and taken to my aunt and uncle's home where I grew up in New York.

>> Interviewer: What was life like for you, having to adjust to America?

>> Schiller: Well, everything was a...was a revelation, I guess. I'm trying to think back now. Language was not a problem. I picked that up quickly and really sort of plunged into being an American kid growing up. I was 11 when I came to the States.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember the date?

>> Schiller: It was in June. And at that point, I was so anxious to do and try everything that the first two years was sort of a

blur of activity, you know, like grabbing with both hands and things. And of course the big problem, or the shadow that was looming over me, was the fate of my family, which we didn't find out anything about until after '45. I think it was '46 before we found out that they had gone to Auschwitz.

>> Interviewer: What was life like for you in America? What were some of the differences?

>> Schiller: Well, of course, if you compare it to the two years in France, safety, you know, going to sleep at night without worrying about what tomorrow would be like, I guess, probably was the biggest thing, the fact that we were secure. Now, this was in the middle of a war, but the war was far away. You know, the war was in Europe and the Pacific. It really wasn't a real war to an 11-year-old kid, other than reading the comic books and watching war movies and so on. I think that probably the one thing was complete safety, you know, peace of mind about not having to worry what's going to happen to you.

>> Interviewer: How were things with you and your aunt and uncle?

>> Schiller: Good. They were much older -- not much older, but, yeah, they were considerably older than my parents, and they had gotten to the United States in '38. And they had two sons, my cousins, both considerably older than me, so I was sort of, you know, an addition that came along at the age of 11. And it was difficult for them, too, because they didn't speak English very well, and I was very anxious to partake of every part of American life. So often they didn't understand what I wanted, but they tried to guide me as best they could, keep me out of trouble, and for the most part, I think they succeeded.

They, thankfully, both lived to a very ripe, old age. My uncle died at 87, my aunt at 95, so they saw me grow up, and they saw

my children, and, you know, they enjoyed some of the fruits of having watched out for me. I lived with them until I went into the service during the Korean War. Came back and finished my education, and right after graduating, I left for Baltimore. I had a job opportunity in Baltimore. But they came to visit, and we came to see them. We were very close all the way to the end.

>> Interviewer: I'm glad to hear it. And what career did you pursue?

>> Schiller: My first job was as an industrial engineer, but I ended up in plant management, ran three factories in Baltimore, and then finally moved south in 1967 and ended up as vice president of manufacturing for a company, a New York-based textile company, and I had a satisfying career, adapted very well to Southern living. My kids, when we moved, were ten and six. My son who was six even ended up with a slightly tinged Southern accent, which I think he's lost since then.

But we made a very nice life for ourselves in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and didn't really focus much on the past until I realized that I was going to be one of those left when most of the people that had witnessed it had gone. And at that point, I sort of felt the urge to let people know, particularly since it's started to disappear from people's minds. I think one of the things that triggered that was when I was told that in Germany the whole reference to it in high school history books was less than a half a page.

>> Interviewer: Well, I appreciate very much your sharing with us your information and your story. I'm wondering if there's anything you feel that you would like to add that I haven't asked.

>> Schiller: Nothing other than that I think the fact that as long as there are people like us around, the Holocaust will

exist in the public mind because we'll keep telling. I think it's important. The work that you're doing is very important so that, after us, there'll still be this evidence. When the last of us survivors are gone and the last of the American liberators of the camps are gone, there'll be no live witnesses, and I think when this recedes into the pages of history, as it loses its horror, it creates a greater possibility that it could happen again.

>> Interviewer: Do you have some photographs that you would like to share with us?

>> Schiller: Yes. I have some pictures, pictures of my mother and father taken in Gurs. These were the last pictures. They gave them to me before I left. And I have pictures of the children that I came to the States with and some pictures of all the kids that I was with when we were hidden away in Aspet, France.

>> Interviewer: Could you show us that first picture? I know that you are in that picture. Could you point --

>> Schiller: That's me right there. I was 10 1/2 at that time.

>> Interviewer: And the pictures of your parents, could we see those again?

>> Schiller: Yes.

>> Interviewer: Maybe one by one.

>> Schiller: This is my father and my mother. This was taken in '42.

>> Interviewer: And you said they were taken in the camp.

>> Schiller: In the camp, yes.

>> Interviewer: Thank you very much.

>> Schiller: Thank you.

>> Interviewer: I appreciate your help.

00:32:00