

Transcript:

Clark Blatteis

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Interviewer: If you don't mind, I'm just going to ask you just a couple of key things. First, are you Jewish?

Clark Blatteis: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes. And you were born in 1932 in Berlin.

Clark Blatteis: That's correct.

Interviewer: What did your parents do?

Clark Blatteis: My father was a traveling salesman and managing traveling salesmen for a large shoe firm in Germany by the name of, I think it was called Klausner.

Interviewer: What did your mother do? She's a stay-at-home mom?

Clark Blatteis: She didn't work. Yeah, she didn't work.

Interviewer: OK. 1932. You were young of course. You were born...I meant 1938, you were young, which was 6 years later. Do you recall any of the commotion going on towards the end of the '30s? I know you were a young boy.

Clark Blatteis:

Well, let me give you a few things that might sort of give you a little – put a little color on things because I'm one of those who was very well protected by my parents so that I was not exposed in a way that would cause me fright or cause me to be upset. But I do have a few events that I can recall. We lived in a neighborhood in Berlin that was very fashionable. You may have heard the name, Dahlem. And we had a lovely apartment in a complex of apartment buildings that had just been built shortly before I was born and my parents had moved in. And I do remember that we had to vacate those apartments around 19...I think it was 1936 or 1937 because they were being taken over of course by Nazi officials. And we moved into town. The only recollection I have of the old neighborhood as a child were the streets because my mother would take me out for walks and what have you and less of the apartment although I revisited it with my family years later just to see. But I have a better memory of the other apartment because I was older already. I have a memory of 1936 when the Olympics were celebrated in Germany particularly in Berlin, and the reason I have a memory of that is because of the enormous number of flags that flew everywhere. Both the Nazi emblem, but also the Olympic emblem. And I remember that Olympic emblem and never saw it again until many, many, many years later. And it was a funny thing because I didn't realize it was the Olympics, you see, and I didn't understand anything about that, but I do remember that. And another event I recall was when Mussolini came to Berlin the first time, and I don't remember what year that was, but I remember that I was on my way from our house with my mother to my grandmother's, her mother, who lived in a different part of the city and you had to get there by subway. In Berlin, there are two types of subways: some that run over the ground, and some that run under the ground, and to get to her is we took the over the ground but that train was stopped under the famous Unter den Linden, that big avenue in Berlin because of a parade. And the police had stopped all traffic for security reasons. And I remember that.

Interviewer:

Do you remember experiencing any kind of antisemitism as a child?

Clark Blatteis:

Well, not personally, but my mother has recounted that somewhere around that time. As a child, I was very blond and very typically German-looking. My mother, too, typical of very attractive German women. And we were somewhere in Berlin and journalists wanted to take my picture as a representative, my mother and me as representative of German youth when my

father showed up. And then they said there's a Yid. And that was the end of that picture-taking session. "He's a Yid." That's what they said. That's what my mother said. Now, I wasn't aware of anything and so I never particularly remember that. Then, at the age of, I think – let's see, this would have been 1938, I guess – at the age of 6, I went to school and by that time, public schools were already closed to Jews. So, I had to go to a shul, a school associated with the synagogue and I just began to go to school, maybe a week, when the Night of the Crystals happened. And that was the end of my schooling.

Interviewer: Do you remember that night?

Clark Blatteis: No, I don't remember that night. I only remember the next day that I think my father and I went to look and we saw the ruin that had been brought upon the place. And I do remember vaguely as a child looking at it and be impressed, but not in particular frightened. My father had been immune from all of these things until my birthday in 1938. When on one of his trips to the north of Germany, which he had visited regularly to see his customers, he went after, as he always did to a particular hotel. On that particular evening, there was no room for him. He was very surprised or at least he understood, but he was surprised. So, he went to another one and another one I think and then he did find a room. And so, he settled into that hotel for the evening and before going to bed, had dinner downstairs in the restaurant. And the next day, he came again to the restaurant for breakfast and he was approached by a policeman who asked him if he had been in the restaurant the night before. He said yes, of course. And so they presented him with a newspaper. This is the story I have from him and in the margin of the newspaper, next to an article that was reporting on a speech that Hitler had made the night before, somebody, he allegedly had written some remarks that were not favorable. He hadn't actually, but that was the accusation. So, he was arrested. And the news of his arrest came on the very day of my birthday. And this I remember because my uncles and grandmothers and so on were in our apartment, in the newer apartment that I was telling you about and we were waiting for my father to come home and there was a knock and my mother went to the door expecting him and I went with her and instead, there were two policemen. Just politely, very politely informing us that my father had been arrested in the town of [unintelligible 0:08:00.4] which is where all of this happened. And, you know, consternation, but I think again I was not particularly concerned, upset, didn't fully understand any of this. And my mother, the next day or the day after, traveled to [unintelligible 0:08:30.6] to see him because he was still in the jail

and I went to my maternal grandmother's, you see. And again, I don't have a good recounting of what actually happened, and I don't remember if I stayed there immediately for several weeks or whether it took a little time, but in any case, my mother from jail was then transferred to Buchenwald. And after some months, from Buchenwald to Dachau. And it was during that period that my mother went about trying to get us out of the country. Evidently, she heard somehow about the St. Louis.

Interviewer: Did your father survive Dachau?

Clark Blatteis: Yeah. He was one of those that was, as you've seen in the movie, probably was released so that we could leave. Okay. And anyway, she managed to get the necessary permits and the tickets. During that time, I think, as far as I was concerned, life went on reasonably normally although I was as I recall it with my maternal grandmother. I think during that period, my paternal grandparents and uncles, brothers of my father, two brothers, were deported to Poland because they originally came from Galicia which that early on was Austria but then became part of Poland, so they were all deported to Poland during the period that my father was in the concentration camp.

Interviewer: How long had it been since you talked to him from the time of his arrest that your mother visited him until this time?

Clark Blatteis: I hadn't spoken to my father.

Interviewer: I'm sorry. Had your mother talked to him?

Clark Blatteis: Yeah. She visited him in the prison.

Interviewer: Right. And by this time that she was getting the papers, how long had it been would you say?

Clark Blatteis: I think it was...well, until the ship sailed in May--

Interviewer: And he was arrested in?

Clark Blatteis: In June of the year before, 1938. When she actually got the papers and all of that, I don't know.

Interviewer: So, it was probably about a year before they saw each other. There was about a year when they were apart.

Clark Blatteis: Nearly a year, yeah. I don't think she ever visited him or could have visited him in the concentration camp.

Interviewer: No, no. That's why I was wondering. After he was sent to camp, what window of time I was talking about.

Clark Blatteis: Yeah, but we received letters from him.

Interviewer: He was able to write from the camp?

Clark Blatteis: Yeah, he wrote from both camps, yeah. I have them here or my son has them. So, there was communication.

Interviewer: Do you recall some of the things he said?

Clark Blatteis: No. I was not able to read his handwriting and it's all German and at that time, remember, I had no schooling. School stopped so I couldn't read any. I'm sure my mother read to me what he wrote to me because a portion of what he wrote was always addressed to me. So, she wrote it to me then, but it would be

the sort of things a father would tell his young son. "Be good," and "Obey your mother," and whatever. And I've not re-read them since actually because I can't. It's difficult for me to read the handwriting, you see, and so because we don't...In Europe, we don't write...you don't learn to write the way we do here, in America. In any case, he was released, but I don't recall that he came back to our house. He must have. I know he came back to our apartment, you see. By that time, all the arrangements were made for us to travel, and everything was packed and so on, what have you. Then I do remember that my mother and I traveled by train from Berlin to Hamburg without my father, that he came separately later. Why separately? I don't know. A cousin of my mother's was living in Hamburg or more than one and we stayed with them until my father came. In the meantime, I think, or shortly thereafter, my maternal grandmother went to South Africa where my uncle and my aunt, that is to say my mother's brother and her sister had immigrated already in 1936, wisely. So, she rejoined them around that time. Maybe, I don't remember whether she left before my father was released or afterwards. In any case, he then followed us to Hamburg and on May, whatever date it was, we boarded the ship together with all the other people and ship sailed.

Interviewer: Tell me about the ship.

Clark Blatteis: Well, the ship as I recall it was a very, very nice first-rate liner.

Interviewer: How were you able to get the money to go? Is it something you had or something--

Clark Blatteis: No, my parents had the money.

Interviewer: Your parents had the money?

Clark Blatteis: They had the money.

Interviewer: Okay.

Clark Blatteis:

Yeah. For me and others, the ship was...I mean the memory of the ship was that of a luxury liner which it was in its day. And it sailed regularly between Hamburg and New York and I think in the summer had cruises just as now in the Caribbean, you see with Europeans or Americans in the Caribbean. So it was a very nice ship. Life on board especially going out wonderful and there were other youngsters on board. And I had an experience with one of those; in that, we were playing and it occurred to one of us to hide in a lifeboat. On those days, the lifeboats overhang the ship. So, we had to sort of climb over a railing to get into the thing. We were having a good time, but we didn't hear the dinner bell. And so then, everyone became alarmed because we didn't show up. They organized a search and I think they even stopped the ship and eventually, we were found by a sailor. I'm sure we were punished, but I don't remember how. Well, that boy I rediscovered just last year and because in the last three, four, five years, there has been a reunion of the passengers of the ship. And I attended one in Ottawa.