

Transcript:

Herman Loewenstein
A45

31m10s

Interviewer: You grew up in Germany. Where in Germany?

Herman Loewenstein: I was born in the little town of Hameln, H-A-M-E-L-N. If you have heard of the Pied Piper of Hameln, that's the story that many children have heard whether they lived in Germany or whether they lived in the United States. You know the story?

Interviewer: I know the pied piper. I didn't know where he was from.

Herman Loewenstein: He was engaged by the city council to rid the city of rats and other vermin. And he didn't get paid, so he took out his little musical instrument, the pipe, and piped all the children of the city into the Weser River. It was a sad story.

Interviewer: The fairytale, the pied piper?

Herman Loewenstein: Okay. Now what...how can I continue?

Interviewer: Keep going.

Herman Loewenstein: I was born in 1927. Therefore, today I am 67 years old. And I grew up in a little village which was approximately 30 to 40 minutes from Hameln called Hess-Oldendorf, H-E-S-S hyphen O-L-D-E-N-D-O-R-F, which was a village that had one or two bakeries and children liked ice cream so they have an ice cream man on the main street everyday, practically. And they had one or two butcher shops and my father was in the cattle business. And his brother, two brothers were in that business together. What did they do?

They imported Holstein cows and Friesian boars to this little town, and then sold them to the farmers in the surrounding territories. So, he was a cattle merchant. Some of the animals were not worthy of being sold to the farmers for milk or for beef and they were sent to slaughterhouses. We, in the beginning, had no vehicles, no motor vehicles. These animals were transported by horse and wagon to the surrounding farmers. Later on, we were probably the only ones or the first ones in business that had a Mercedes truck that would transport these animals. And we had two other automobiles. One was, I remember a Ford Eifel. These were all very small cars, a little bit larger than what were the Volkswagen subsequently. My mother took care of the home and we had a very nice home. As children my brother and I had a nanny and another woman took care of the household work. And my mother tried to drive a car and she was involved in an accident and she never drove again. Now, I, in the beginning, had no fear of going out with my buddies at the public high schools – not high school but grammar school. And, you know, toward '95 or '96 or '97, all of a sudden we were no longer acceptable citizens and people that did business with my parents, with my father, were reported to the Gestapo and soon the business was closed and we couldn't even buy meat at the butcher's shop. And so, my father went to the countryside and got goats and we slaughtered them and we ate them and we had little rabbits, which I hated to see killed but they were and they were eaten. And my father was a councilman, so to speak in the military. But my uncle, my mother's brother was apparently a soldier that deserved the Iron Cross First Class and neither my father or my uncle or my mother's brother never thought that Germany would touch them because they were heroes or soldiers in the First World War.

Interviewer: Was that true for a certain extent for--

Herman Loewenstein: I don't think so. I don't think so. What was your question?

Interviewer: Was there a period of time where he was treated differently because of his experience in World War I?

Herman Loewenstein: My answer to that would be I don't think so. Of course, the uncle, the one that got the Iron Cross lived in a very, very small village called Ottenstein which was approximately two hours away from the village that I lived in, and we visited them occasionally because my mother's mother and son and daughter-in-law and granddaughter lived in that little village.

Interviewer: What was your understanding of what was happening? You got the antisemitism. You got all of the things that are going on with your food and your family. What were you told? What was your understanding at that time of what was happening? Do you recall?

Herman Loewenstein: I just knew that, you know, the brown shirts, they were called the SA. They were the ruffians that on one occasion, I think it was Kristallnacht sometime in 1938. I think it was in September or November, came into the house and shot the lights out and the milk cans were thrown through the windows and one of my aunts had heart problems and was having some kind of seizure and my mother said – there were people congregated outside of the house – and shouted, “We need a doctor,” and there were some comment or some of the public said, “You don't need a doctor. You need a veterinarian.” And we were, of course, afraid that something would happen to us physically. But nothing did happen physically to us at that time.

Interviewer: For some of the Germans, antisemitism was all they remembered. They grew up, born into it, that's all they remembered. For others, they had a relatively normal childhood and antisemitism seem to take them by storm overnight.

Herman Loewenstein: But there are some--

Interviewer: Which side would you feel you fell on?

Herman Loewenstein: I think most of them were passive antisemitic.

Interviewer: More on the latent.

Herman Loewenstein: And maybe they thought that if they didn't participate, they themselves would be persecuted or prosecuted. My brother went to a private high school and considered the principal of that private school a friend. And after the war, we received letters from some of the officials of the community that said, “You know, we were never really Nazis and we want you to give us a written statement to that effect. We would consider that very kind act if you would do that.” And it may be that my father, in some

instances did and other instances did not. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Interviewer: Why would he have?

Herman Loewenstein: What's that?

Interviewer: I'm just curious, to give a statement.

Herman Loewenstein: Well because they probably thought that the military would deal kindly with them and would give these Germans preferred status in business and government.

Interviewer: No, no. I'm sorry. Why would your father have given them the letter? That's what I'm saying.

Herman Loewenstein: Because he thought perhaps they were either forced or kindly disposed toward us. Okay?

Interviewer: Kristallnacht.

Herman Loewenstein: Well, I explained that to you. Really, I don't know why this happened to me twice but when I could no longer go to school in this little village, Hess-Oldendorf, my parents sent me to Dusseldorf which is a town near Cologne which was a pretty big city and my uncle Max Westfield was an artist and he lived there. And they had a Jewish school so I could go to a Jewish school and did go there for maybe 6 or 9 months and while I was there, one night, the Nazis came and threw all of the furniture out of the window and his portraits and other artwork were slashed with knives and they destroyed much of the furniture and other items in the apartment. It was a condo. And when they came to the room that I was in, they opened the door and they shut it. They didn't do anything.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

Herman Loewenstein: I don't know. I don't know.

Interviewer: And you were how old? Maybe twelve--

Herman Loewenstein: Twelve.

Interviewer: --or thirteen. Twelve?

Herman Loewenstein: Uh-huh. I was thirteen when I left for England; it was just before the war broke out and maybe a few weeks or a month or so. I was with the children's transport that allowed me to go not with my parents but with a lot of other Jewish children to England and there I was in London. Then, when the war broke out, almost immediately, the bombers came over there and blitzed London practically every night. And then, the English government decided it was too dangerous for all children to be in London. So, all of the English and all of the children, regardless of their origin, were sent to smaller cities in England and I was sent to North Hampton which was a shoe manufacturing town in England. But even there, the V bombs came over and some of them struck pretty close but it was... Everybody was afraid, even in North Hampton, but these V bombs came over and we said, "Don't worry about when you can hear them; nothing is going to happen. It's when they stop when the motor stops, that's when you'll hear the explosion." Okay?

Interviewer: So, you were sent over on the kindertransport?

Herman Loewenstein: Yes.

Interviewer: Right before the war broke out.

Herman Loewenstein: Yes.

Interviewer: After Kristallnacht.

Herman Loewenstein: Yes.

Interviewer: Where were your parents?

Herman Loewenstein: They came on their own maybe a few weeks later.

Interviewer: How was that? Do you remember being separated from them?

Herman Loewenstein: No, because I was in Dusseldorf and I was sent from Dusseldorf on the children's transport. I don't know whether they would have had children's transports from these smaller villages. I don't know. Maybe some of these children in the smaller villages were sent to Berlin or to Hamburg or to some of the biggest cities and were then combined and then transported to England. Most of them...I mean I don't know what Hedy Lustig said. I don't think she went to England, did she?

Interviewer: No.

Herman Loewenstein: Probably--

Interviewer: Canada.

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah, and, you know, we went from Germany to England and I stayed there for about a year or a little longer. And then, from England, we came through Montreal to New York, to Nashville.

Interviewer: There are survivors who said the holocaust could not have taken place without the help of its countrymen. But the Nazis might have led it but the great betrayal lied in the doctors and the teachers and the neighbors that people lived with everyday.

Herman Loewenstein: Well, I would think that's right.

Interviewer: Do you believe that?

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the Germans that say they really didn't know what was happening?

Herman Loewenstein: I don't believe that they didn't know. The German government invited me to go back and I did go back. And I talked to the citizens of Oldendorf. They invited me and I stayed there close to a week, I would say. And some of the people are remembered. They were schoolchildren at the same time that I was there. And most of them were my age. They were some that were older. But I said – maybe I was wrong, but I said, “You know, you're my age. So, you were 12 or 13 when I left and I can't blame you for what your parents have done.” Okay. And I said, “I'm here not to accuse you. I'm here to try to build some bridges if I can.” Maybe if I had been sent to a concentration camp, maybe I couldn't have said that.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that and I'll expand on that for a second. We have another survivor that had said she feels a great amount of guilt of getting out.

Herman Loewenstein: She lived or he lived?

Interviewer: Getting out.

Herman Loewenstein: Well, why should I feel guilty about that?

Interviewer: So, you don't feel that way?

Herman Loewenstein: No. If I hadn't gotten out, I would be a lampshade. I might have been a lampshade.

Interviewer: What about your family? Did you have any family that...

Herman Loewenstein: You know, there were some people, and I've started to practice law when I came...when I became a lawyer and I took restitution cases for some of the people that you might have already talked to. And they received an amount of money, depending whether they were in concentration camps or whether they were in business or whether they had a loss of education. I had a loss of education so they paid me – I don't know how much. I think it was something like \$10,000.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Herman Loewenstein: So, most people that were my age could have gotten that maybe from the German government under the law that was passed.

Interviewer: Had you any idea at the time what you were actually escaping from?

Herman Loewenstein: I don't know.

Interviewer: Being at the age of twelve, you're still a child yet...

Herman Loewenstein: You know I--

Interviewer: You grew up pretty fast in two years.

Herman Loewenstein: You know, I knew that we were no longer able to associate with what I consider to be former friends.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Herman Loewenstein: It was pretty bad.

Interviewer: Would you say that that's where the great betrayals lied for you was in the friends that had turned...?

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah, and they were indoctrinated. If you have a propaganda machine that constantly say Jews are rats, you believe Jews are rats.

Interviewer: Do you understand?

Herman Loewenstein: And I remember I was told no longer can you go to public movies and things like that but I went anyhow.

Interviewer: You did.

Herman Loewenstein: At that time, Jews were not required to wear the Star of David. If I had worn that, I would not have gone to the movies anymore if the law prohibited it.

Interviewer: German Jews often felt more German than Jewish.

Herman Loewenstein: Well, that's true and I was...they thought that--

Interviewer: A great sense of pride of being German.

Herman Loewenstein: That's what they thought about wearing an Iron Cross first class, that they would not be harmed because they had done their duty to the fatherland.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that? Did you feel betrayed by the entire country? Do you remember being in touch with any of those feelings when you had moved? Obviously, the time you left, there were no death camps but there certainly were labor camps that have started.

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah. They...

Interviewer: Do you remember finding out later what actually took place?

Herman Loewenstein: Oh sure.

Interviewer: For the next 6 years after you left, or 5 years?

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah, I found out, yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember that?

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah, I mean, you know--

Interviewer: Do you remember anything?

Herman Loewenstein: My mother's brother [Otto Kornberg (sp) 0:21:33] and his blind mother and grandchild and brother's wife all went to concentration camps and died. They were killed. I mean, they didn't come back.

Interviewer: What do you think when you think about that?

Herman Loewenstein: Well, you know, I think it's... It's a travesty.

Interviewer: It was absolutely unheard of that there were factories that were killing and torturing Jews.

Herman Loewenstein: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Especially around 1938 and '39 all the way to '44.

Herman Loewenstein: You know, we're talking about a specific episode of history and I can't believe that people could be so indoctrinated that they could actually just murder. That's what happened in concentration camps. From an historic standpoint, if you would go back to... Historically, you'll find that...I think you'll find that religious wars have occurred since history has been kept whether it was between Catholics and Christians or whether it's Christians and Jews. But we remember this because it's just one generation ago. And this is why you're putting this on record so that people won't forget this and that this will not happen again.

Interviewer: Do you think that we remember it because it was so close?

Herman Loewenstein: Yes.

Interviewer: Or because it is considered the greatest act of inhumanity of all time?

Herman Loewenstein: Both, both. Both.

Interviewer: Because there have been genocides.

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: There are genocides going on right now. The systematic murder and torture of 6 million Jews...

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah, that's I mean...it's...I can't understand it but it happened and maybe--

Interviewer: How do you try to understand it? What do you tell your children?

Herman Loewenstein: I don't have any.

Interviewer: What do you tell other children? What do you tell people when they say, "How could this have happened?"

Herman Loewenstein: I tell them that they have to stand up for their rights and for the rights of others because if you don't stand up for the minority, then you may be in the minority sometime in the future.

Interviewer: So, you're subscribed to the famous poem of standing up, not standing up for somebody because they weren't Jewish, they weren't Catholic until they needed someone to stand up for them when there was no one left.

Herman Loewenstein: I don't know. That's sort of general, but probably so.

Interviewer: What do you want people to know about what happened if you were speaking in front of thirty eighth graders?

Herman Loewenstein: I don't know what an 8th grader really understands, would understand what happened and what they could have done as 8th graders to have prevented a holocaust. It's the parents that need a reeducation. But, I know this communication that we're attempting to give to schoolchildren or to be known by the grownups of our generation.

Interviewer: When you meet with those survivors--

Herman Loewenstein: And, but you know, the grownups are the ones that are going to teach their future children. So, I mean, you attempt to teach the children which is fine but if you can communicate the wrongness of the situation to the grownups and you would do a good job for history.

Interviewer: When you talk to other survivors in your community and meet with other survivors, is there a sense of relief? Is there a sense of community? Do you feel a sense of camaraderie with them having escaped or do you feel that because perhaps, you escaped earlier that you somehow survived, some serendipitous style of getting here by luck and...?

Herman Loewenstein: I think it was very lucky for me to have escaped just a few weeks maybe before the borders were closed.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Were you religious growing up?

Herman Loewenstein: My parents belonged to a conservative congregation in Hameln. We had no synagogue except prayer rooms in this village of ours and my father was the, well, a senior member of a small council. And we had three torahs in this little village and I don't know how they were smuggled out of Germany but I had three of them in my home. I gave one of them to the temple here and one of them to a community in [unintelligible 0:028:59] and I still have one and I don't know how they got out because they must... The people that supervised the packing of our lifts... I mean those were big torahs. I mean these were not modern torahs. They must have been bribed or something. I don't know how they got out.

Interviewer: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Herman Loewenstein: No.

Interviewer: Nothing?

Male: Could you talk a little about...I think you said you came through Canada and then New York and then Nashville.

Herman Loewenstein: Uh-huh.

Male: But what got you to Nashville? What brought you to Nashville?

Herman Loewenstein: Well, people had to give affidavits, affidavit meant that you wouldn't fall a burden to the government of the United States and I think my father was able to smuggle some money to some distant relative here in Nashville that had sufficient dollars to cover themselves. You either needed close relatives that would do it without the collateral or you would have to have the collateral in some way.

Interviewer: You came here with your family.

Herman Loewenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you were twelve or thirteen?

Herman Loewenstein: I was thirteen when I was in England. I was either thirteen or fourteen when I came over here to the United States. I think we came over in 1941. The war was going on and we came over here by convoy. Submarines attacked and I didn't see any of the ships go down but we felt pretty safe because there were maybe thirty or forty ships in that convoy and, you know, when you could see so many ships around you, you felt pretty safe. The name of the ship that I was on was called, R.M.S. Antonia.