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## Werner Becker interview for The Survivors of the Holocaust Oral History Project

Werner Becker

Stephen Kahn

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# HOLOCAUST HISTORY

Date of interview 9/13/78

Transcribed by R.K. Feist

Typed by Marla Clayman and RK Feist

SK = Stephen Kahn, the interviewer

WB = Werner Becker, the interviewee

SK It is Wednesday, September 13, 1978 at Werner Joe Becker's home on Elm Grove Drive in Dayton, Ohio. Joe, how old are you?

WB Sixty-three.

SK What was your place of birth?

WB In a little town in Mecklenburg (this is a German province just east of Hamburg. Today in East Germany located 53.30N, 12.00E) of which very few people have ever heard.

SK I see; can you give us the name?

WB Webel.

SK Is it a small town?

WB The population was about 3500 people, and it had been that way for about 1000 years.

SK Do you know anything, in your family history, how your family came to Webel?

WB Not exactly. They, that is both my father and my mother, came from West Prussia.

SK Now of course that is pretty close to Mecklenburg?

WB No not at all. It is now part of Poland, it became Polish after WWI.

SK How many brothers and sisters did you have?

WB One brother and one sister.

SK They both lived in your home?

WB Yes.

SK What was your parents' occupation?

WB My father had a store, a clothing store.

SK How about your education? As a youngster?

WB In this little place there was a private school to the eighth grade. After that I went to another place, called Rostock (54.04N, 12.06E). That is where I graduated from high school.

SK What kind of a high school was that? Was it a "gymnasium"?

WB It was a "Realgymnasum."

SK How was your religious life at home? Did you keep Kosher?

WB Yes, my parents kept Kosher, as much as it was possible, in that little town which didn't have a Kosher butcher. They kept the Shabbat, as best they could. You couldn't close the store. At the High Holy Days, at one time there used to be a Community, a Congregation of some 20 people or so. While I was growing up there were maybe 5 Jewish families there. For the High Holy days there was the little synagogue, and my father conducted the entire service. We invited some people from other little towns. Sometimes we made it to a "minion" (that means that there were the traditional number of 10 men which is required to say certain prayers) and sometimes we didn't.

SK Were the males Bar—Mitzvohed?

WB Yes. There was a Hebrew teacher who made the rounds of all these little towns. Even though he didn't come to Webel, he came to a neighboring town. I went there on the bus, about once a week, prior to getting Bar—Mitzvohed.

SK What was the principle language spoken in your home?

WB German.

SK Did your parents speak any other language?

WB My parents also spoke Polish.

SK Did you feel that you were among the rich or the poor in the community?

WB I never thought of myself as rich. Maybe you could call our family average.

SK Did your parents relate socially to non-Jews?

WB Oh, yes! My father always had excellent relationships with his customers. After the parents, the children became customers; when they grew up.

SK That was more of a business relationship than was meant. Was there anything socially?

WB Not really too much socially.

SK So you had a small synagogue there. To what extent was it the center of Jewish life? Was there anything else?

WB No, the synagogue was used for the High Holidays only, because there weren't enough people to have Services; and even for those days we had to go out of town to get a Minion, kind of import people.

SK What other activities or association did your family participate in? Such as cultural activities? Concerts? Music?

WB There was nothing in that little town. There was one movie house only.

SK How would you describe your childhood?

WB I would say that I had a fairly happy childhood. I lived at home only until I was 14. After that I went to the next town, and from then on I was at home for vacations only.

SK That other town had the school in it, the 'Realgymnasium'?

WB That is right. So I came home on vacations only, and then, when I was 18 1/2 , I went to France. (that was in 1933).

SK We'll come to that later. So you recall any special events in your childhood?

WB Nothing, it was all very uneventful.

SK Did you attend any religious school during your childhood?

WB No. After I went to Rostock, there I had Hebrew school.

SK Something like a Cheder?

WB No. The instructions were given in a public school building. We had the full public school curriculum and when the others had religious instructions, I just went home. Instead of that, in the afternoon, I had religious instruction of my own in a public school building by a rabbi.

SK Did you have any other religious instruction than that?

WB No, that was it.

SK I assume the language spoken in school by the majority of your friends was German?

WB Yes.

SK What languages did you speak, other than German? Reading and understanding?

WB In school we learned French and English and Latin.

SK To what extent did you associate with non-Jewish boys and girls? That is, in school and outside of school.

WB In school I associated with non-Jews to some extent, but not outside of school. I am talking about high school. Now in grade school, that was different. There, in Weibel, I had good relationships.

There were no other Jewish children. We went to each other's birthday parties and such.

SK Now, prior to when Hitler came to power were you aware of any anti-Semitism?

WB In the high school, at one time, there was one NAZI in our class, and the strange thing about him was that he would never talk to me. He ignored me completely, as if I wasn't there. However, shortly before the end of school, of the school year, he got disenchanted with the NAZIs. This was in early 1933. (The school year in Germany finished and started at Easter recess.) Then, all of a sudden, he started talking to me. An incident which I remember happened in our drawing class. Every student had a drawing board. Drawing is not my cup of tea. I can only draw with a ruler. All the boards were stored in one room - that is, the boards of all the different classes. So, one day I picked out my board and there was a big "HagenKreutz" (swastika) on the board. So I showed this to the drawing instructor. He said, "Well, that is very regrettable," and he showed it to the principal. They shrugged their shoulders and said, "That is very regrettable." Nobody else said a word with the exception of my homeroom teacher. He was a conservative. He had fought in WW I and he was a very fair-minded person. The drawing teacher said to me, "Well, this drawing wasn't worth anything before, either." So this homeroom teacher took this thing and he gave the class quite a lecture. Around that time, in this last class, everyone had to give a speech. So I asked him what subject should I choose. He said, "You talk about Jewish customs." I got a few ideas together and I gave a speech on that subject.

There of course,

were some hecklers. He really told them off, in a very nice way, and explained what I said. He was a really wonderful man.

SK Let's get back to the hecklers. Were they malicious?

WB No, they were not malicious. They were just trying to downgrade what I had said.

SK How about that one fellow who ignored you and who later talked to you. Did you ever find out why he became disenchanted and changed?

WB No, I never did. I did not get into that I did not want to talk about it. I did respect this fellow because he was straight—forward and honest. That was his opinion. He never, even verbally, attacked me.

SK These were the only instances of antisemitism which you personally felt?

WB Yes, in school.

SK How about out of school?

WB No not really, except on April 1st. Then there was the boycott of all Jewish enterprises. Then there was a NAZI standing in front of the store. Of course there were people who came into the store just to show that they defied the system.

SK Defied the system?

WB Yes, they did not come in to buy, they just came in to defy these people.

SK How did your family react to this boycott, your father and your mother?

WB You mean in the store?

SK In the store and elsewhere.

WB Elsewhere than in the store there really was not too much which was involved. My father was quite respected and there really never was anything personal.

SK Did he ever show any concern about that boycott?

WB There truly wasn't very much to say. The thing was there and, personally, I realized at that moment that there was no future for me (in Germany). People, I mean just the older people, could not conceive that, all of a sudden, their existence, their working, would have to come to an end. I didn't either, I mean that I felt that as far as I was concerned I had no future, however I still hoped, at that time, that they would leave the older people to continue their work.

SK How old were you when that boycott took place?

WB 18.

SK It was in 1933?

WB That's right.

SK Let's go on now. What were the circumstances of your leaving Germany?

WB After I graduated from high school, the question of college came up. My parents wanted me to go back to Rostock and enroll there, at the university. I went there and there was one fellow whom I was very friendly with. This fellow had graduated the same year. He was a Jewish fellow. One of his brothers was enrolled at the university (of Rostock). Naturally, living in town and having a brother at the university, he knew what went on what the Jewish fellows were doing, and so on. I heard that everyone, even those people with 2 or 3 years of college, were dropping out. I said to myself, "How foolish can you be? In the face of this and in the face of the current situation, to



enroll." So I did not enroll, and when I came home I went to see my brother, he is 8 years older than I. He thought I had messed up because I had received specific instructions to enroll, and I didn't do it. About one or two months later the first laws came out which were making it impossible for a Jewish college student to graduate. That clinched it. Then my parents agreed that I should leave the country and that is what I did. The possibilities, at first, were Austria & England, but then these countries charged twice as much for foreign students. England was considered, but their system was somewhat different, which would make it difficult to adapt to where I was. Finally France was chosen. So that fall, I went to France.

SK There were two things to be considered about France. First of all, how about the language barrier? Were you able to get over that?

WB That took me awhile. I lost one year.

SK The second thing is: Who did you stay with? Relatives?

WB No, this other fellow, whom I talked about & I went together. He went, maybe a few weeks before I did, but we stayed together. When he went there, he met somebody, and there is always the Jewish community, at least in most cities, and they will help you to find a place. We shared a room.

SK I assume, and I may not be correct in doing so, that it was Paris.

WB No, we went to Nancy (the former capital of the province of Lorraine located at 48.41N, 6.12E) that year.

SK So, you went to the university there. One time you mentioned to me that you got into the Foreign Legion, How did that happen?

WB My friend went back to Germany after the 1st year, and as I said, I lost that 1st year. After that 1st year, I left from there also and I

went to Dijon (47.19N, 5.01E). I don't remember why I went to Dijon. In Dijon I met some other fellows, there was one fellow we knew, I mean we met there, also a refugee from Germany who was studying medicine. I stayed in Dijon until, finally, it became more difficult to get money. It was also difficult to find a job (France allowed foreigners to come in to study or live, but not to work), so finally it got to be too much and I just had to drop out. After that, through another family, a Jewish family, which I met in the meantime, I met a French (Christian) family. The man was extremely helpful to me. He got me the working papers which were almost impossible to get. He also found me a job as an apprentice in upholstery. There I started to like the situation. This was in 1937. Two years later the war broke out. Shortly before the war broke out a law came out which enabled people, who declared themselves stateless, would be subject to the same laws as Frenchmen as far as military service went. Since I intended to stay in France, I declared myself stateless. So, when the war broke out I went to the police and I signed a paper and now I wanted to know what I had to do. He said, "Not you, you are German. That applies to Polish Jews. You are German, you have to go to an internment camp. You are an enemy alien." So that where I went, and after one or two months we were told that we could join the French Foreign Legion. They said "You wanted to serve, so here is your opportunity. You can enlist for 5 years. In the meantime you will serve under the French flag." So, I figured, "Who knows, the war may be over in three years, and I will be sitting there for another two years." So I said, "No, but thank you." A little later they offered enlistments in the Foreign Legion for the duration of the war. So I said, "O.K. That will do." On Nov. 27, 1939, I enlisted in

the Foreign Legion. In Jan. 1940, we were sent over to North Africa (France then had Morocco and Tunisia as colonies, and Algeria formed 3 French Departments). Sidi Bel Abbess (35.12 N, 0.38 W) in Algeria was the world center of the Foreign Legion. This only lasted 10 months.

There was the armistice between Germany and France and under the terms of this armistice, the French Army had to be disbanded. That also affected the Foreign Legion.

SK So the French army was disbanded, but the Legion continued to exist.

WB Yes, but those who had enlisted for the duration of the war were not to be kept, because the armistice was the end of the war, insofar as the French were concerned. So they had to let us go.

SK What did you do then?

WB At that time the Germans occupied part of France (they occupied all the North and East and the Atlantic coast, excepting only "Vichy France," i.e., the center of France with Rhone Valley and the Mediterranean coastline). Those who had lived in the Non-occupied part before their enlistment and could prove a means of support either by finding a family to take them in or a job or a certain amount of money could go back to France at that time. Now, Dijon was in the occupied portion, so this did not work for me. However, later on, as things got worse, I wrote to my brother, who was here already, about sending me, at that time it was about \$100.00. He did send me \$100.00, which allowed me to ask for my release. Then I intended to go to the non-occupied part of France. At the same time when this money arrived, there was an incident where one person, having received this money, passed it to someone else, who had also asked for money for his release from the

Legion. I don't really know how many other people were involved, but they were all released, and when they got into the harbor of Oran (the Algerian harbor closest to Sidi Bel Abbess) of course only one was able to produce the money. Naturally, the whole thing was stopped immediately. So, here I was, and I can't be sorry, it may have turned out to be for the best. I know of one case where it was unfortunate.

SK Yes, I know, my uncle turned up in Vichy France and then wound up in Auschwitz (the notorious death camp in Poland).

WB The brother of a friend of mine, with whom I am still in correspondence, had been in Dachau (the concentration camp on the outskirts of Munich). He went back to Lyon, which was in Vichy France, therefore, unoccupied. He shared a room with somebody in the French Underground. They were looking for this other person, they didn't know anything about him, but they found him and held him. Three days later he was dead.

SK So you were in Oran then, when you left the Foreign Legion. When was that?

WB That was in October 1940.

SK What did you do in Oran?

WB Oran was just a transition port, where we landed in Jan. 1940. From there we went to Sidi Bel Abbess, where all the records were being kept, and from there we went to Saida (34.50N, 0.09E), that is where we got our basic military instructions. From there the company went to Morocco. I didn't go with them because I was sick at that time. So I went to Sidi Bel Abbess. That is where all the legionnaires went back to. I went nowhere with the Legion since I had lost my company. I was just wandering around. Then France went to war with Italy for a while

(that was actually for a couple of weeks, just before the French-German armistice). They were just getting a convoy together to send to Tunisia. Right at that time I was working in a forest. There are a lot of forests there except in the coastal regions. As soon as these convoys were formed everyone came back to Sidi Bel Abbess; but, fortunately the war against Italy was over before we got going. I mean the war with Italy which was also stopped by the armistice between France and Germany, still in 1940.

SK What happened after Oct. 1940?

WB Then some were able to go back to France, as I said, We, others were placed in "Companies of Foreign Workers," under the command of former Foreign Legion commissioned and noncommissioned officers. We were now the "Foreign Workers."

SK Was there any discrimination at that time?

We At that time, no, at that time it was not too bad. After a few weeks here and there we wound up someplace in the hinter land, in Algeria, just about where the desert (Sahara) starts. The commissioned and noncommissioned officers had guns and rifles. There were about 15 or 20 of them, whereas we were maybe 300 "workers." Naturally they were not about to start anything with us, even if at times the food was getting so bad, since at the main supply point they took everything they wanted. We just had to make do with the leftovers. Even once we refused to eat the food, and they didn't try to do anything; they just tried to persuade us to eat anyway.

SK What kind of work did you do there?

WB We did roadwork. There was a little road going through the area, which got inundated whenever there was some rain. The road got

literally washed away. Nobody knew what we should be doing or how to go about it. We had no tools other than hand tools, such as hammers to "crush" the rocks. It was make-work. As a matter of fact, when we finally moved further along South it did rain and all our hard work was washed away. They had to leave a team behind to make the road passable. We went further South where there was an abandoned coal mine. Since the coal from France did not come any longer, we reactivated this mine. The coal was of very poor quality and, normal circumstances, no one would use it. However, now they needed it. So some people worked in the mine and other people worked in construction. We put up houses, to house the civilians who worked in the mine.

SK By this time you were no longer in the Foreign Legion.

WB That is right. We were considered Foreign Workers.

SK How was the pay for your work? Did you get paid anything?

WB I don't believe that we did. I don't remember receiving any pay.

SK However, you got paid while you were a member of the Foreign Legion?

WB Yes, about a pack of cigarettes every 2 weeks.

SK That wasn't exactly slave-labour, but it was close to it. Did they treat all Foreign Workers that way?

WE Yes. There was a very high percentage of Jews, but by no means were they all Jews. They didn't treat the Jews differently from the others.

SK Let me ask about the high percentage of Jews; had they all been members of the Foreign Legion?

WB Yes. These were all refugees from Germany (and Austria etc), as I was. They had lived in France. They had been interned, the same as I was.

SK I know that you didn't, but did any of them see combat duty?

WB I don't believe so. Some of them were in different outposts in the Sahara, further South, not far from the Tunisian border. We were close to the Moroccan border. They had much more hardship there, but otherwise I don't believe that there were in any actual combat.

SK Did the Foreign Legion see any combat in WWII, as far as you know?

WB Yes, they went to Norway, at least some of them did! (Some Foreign Legion Units also fought in Metropolitan France and in the Far East.)

SK You mentioned that there were a lot of refugees with you, now what was their status? Were they married? You were single at the time!

WB Yes, but they were not all single. A number of them were married.

SK What happened? Were they in the Foreign Legion also? What happened to the marriages? Did they take their families with them?

WB Oh no! Their families were not along

SK What happened to their families?

WB They tried to manage. In these parts which were occupied by the Germans, of course they didn't wait and they got out as best they could and tried to hide someplace.

SK You realize that most of the Jews were deported from Vichy France, sooner or later. I wondered what happened to their families. Were they deported as well?

WB I know of people who were able to hide. If, for instance, you found a family which would take you in, you had a chance to survive. I know several people who survived.

SK It depended on these families?

WB Yes!

SK Let us continue. That is an interesting side point! When we talked about this project we never even realized that any of these people would wind up in the

Foreign Legion. So you were "Foreign Workers" then ? How did it come about that you came to the US?

WB At the end of 1942 the Allied landings, mainly if US troops, took place in North Africa. I don't recall the details but somebody spoke up in England and got to a Member of Parliament. This finally led to the formation if an inter-allied commission which was seat to North Africa to disband all the camps. In our camp there was one German fellow and a fellow who had been our Company Commander, while we were in the mountains, a fellow from Corsica. They had gotten together and set up a regular concentration camp. They used that as a model! There were people there who were beaten to death.

SK Let us review that because this is something unusual and unexpected! You say that in the Foreign Legion there was a German who established...

WB No, we are now talking about the years 1941-42. There were these companies of Foreign Workers and, in one place, I don't recall the name, in Southern Algeria there was a camp where this German fellow was as well as this fellow from Corsica. There were, I believe, between 70 and 80 people in this camp. I believe that between the two of them they killed about 10 or 12. In every place there was a high percentage if Jewish people, bat they were not all Jewish. There were people who had been in concentration camps in Germany, and they again it into this situation.

SK But what about the authorities? Did the authorities permit this? Did they know about this?

WB They probably didn't knew much and didn't care much!

SK We are talking about the Free French, aren't we? Weren't the Free French the authorities then? (The Free French became the authorities after the Allied landings.)

WB The thing is that in Algeria, the Algerians were mostly Arabs and they were more sympathetic toward the Nazi's then toward the Free French, even though the territory was net occupied. (Right after the Allies landed in North Africa, a deal was made with Admiral Darlan. Darlan had been Petain's second in command and had



been sympathetic toward the Nazi's. This deal froze DeGaulle and his Free French out of the leadership.) The Germans had a Red Cross office in Algiers. At one time there were people from this office who came down to our company, but they did not bother anybody. They only talked to those people who wanted to talk to them. What they were mainly after was to get (Non-Jewish) Germans, i.e. German nationals to enlist in the German army. This was really what they wanted. They did not bother or care what the others, what we did! Now, in our company, there was a fellow, I am not certain whether he was Jewish - I don't believe that he was - he was a lawyer. There was a little incident at the time of the Allied landings in North Africa, in 1943. At the time when the landings took place, some people put the American Flag out in the camp. This created quite a stir, especially since a company of native soldiers, in the camp, was involved. The Lieutenant is quite disturbed about it (as well he might have since the US was fighting against the Axis, which included Vichy - France). That same day everybody had to come back to camp at noon. Normally, when we were outside the camp during the daytime, we did not come back until evening. That day we had to come back and listen to a speech from that man. When we were getting together to listen to the lawyer, this possibly Jewish fellow, he came out and, told us: "These fellows are no longer in charge! Now we have Roosevelt and Churchill, who are in Command and, if you don't want to listen to these fellows, you don't have to!" So several of the people left the camp. So now the Non-commissioned Officers came and tried to talk us into listening to them. So finally we said: "OK, we will listen to you, but these native troops, we don't want them here!" They were actually hidden behind the building. We said: "The native troops have to get out of camp, we don't want them here!" They actually put them away, but they kept an eye on the lawyer-fellow. Later in they put him into another camp, however, after everything was over, he had managed to survive. After everything was over this fellow got a trial started, for the Corsican and the German. Each of them got 10 years, I believe. Over there 10 years is not like here, that you get out in parole after 2. 10 years means 10 years of hard labor!

You don't get out early, especially not from a North African gael. I am quite certain that they finished their sentences.

SK Let me new ask you: "How many Germans, about whom you know, were in your company?" Let me rephrase that to something like: "What percentage of your company, or any other company were actually Germans?"

WB I would guess maybe 20 percent.

SK The reason for my question is that it is surprising that they would enlist in the Foreign Legion when they could get out of the military life or serve in the German Reichswehr (Army).

WB I don't really know. This depends on the individual. Some people may not have cared to serve in the Reichswehr, after all these were people who lived in France. Maybe they weren't Nazi's either. (In any case they enlisted before the defeat of the French.)

SK But if they were professional soldiers?

WB They were lot professional soldiers. They had enlisted the way I did. In this company, in which I was, there were no actual legionaires, they had all enlisted just for the length of the war.

SK Now, getting back to these camps, whether they were official or unofficial, but in any case they were sanctioned. Do you know of any other Germans than the one you mentioned?

WB This was the only camp of its type that I know about. I am quite certain that there were no others because, after all, there weren't that many of us. So then there was that inter-allied commission, which included an American Major, a French Major and a British Major, who went from camp to camp. For instance, we were given the choice to stay down there (in the South of Algeria) with the same rights as any other civilian or to go back to the Foreign Legion and join the Africa Corps, which was 'enrolled in the Foreign Legion.

SK The Africa Corps was a German outfit!

WB Yes; but there was also a French Africa Corps. The 3<sup>d</sup> and last possibility was

that we could join the British Engineer Corps. That was a part of the British Army. About 96 or 97% of our group choose this 3<sup>rd</sup> possibility. I choose this alternative. This was in April 1943. Shortly thereafter we went on a train and, we got to Algiers.

SK What did you do then?

WB There was a British Major who was in charge. He was just like a mother. There was no such thing as punishment. The people who were in charge just said: "You are not going to do that again." They were so nice to us and everything. You couldn't ask for better treatment. Everybody was well pleased. Later on a number of us joined the "Cadre Remy" (This name is not truly understandable in the tape). That was a British Unit which had been formed during the African war, in the desert, when they lost a lot of tanks and other vehicles and had no means of repairing them. So the British developed a whole chain of repair shops. So some of us, who had somewhat of a trade joined them. There were called the "Royal Mechanical and Electrical Engineers" (REMY might stand for Royal Electrical and Mechanical Unit, so that it should be REMU rather than REMY). I was detached to that unit in Algiers. We had a 6 door garage, a tremendous thing and there wasn't a thing which we did not do on a truck. We didn't work on many tanks, mainly on trucks. The engines were completely taken apart and overhauled and everything. We stayed there until the end of the African campaign, then we ran out of business and went to Italy. We did the same thing there.

SK That took you to the end of the war, I assume?

WB Almost! Then, one day, I came home from work, and saw that my name was on the list of people to leave, to get equipment and leave the next morning to go to Palestine. We were to fight for the British there, and shoot the Jews. That was in 1946 so we had an idea of what was going to happen. My British buddies said: "If you are on the list, you are on the list. There is nothing you can do! You just have to go and once you are further, you have to see how you can get out of it." I said to myself: "This is my outfit, I have a Company Commander who is in charge

of me. If I go someplace else they will only have one thing in minds to push these guys out of there - to push them to that next place. There were guys coming here every day and we had to get them out as fast as we can, and this fellow is not different." So I asked to see the Company Commander, I explained to him that I am not a British citizen and that, for me, the war started in 1939 and that I had done more service than the average British soldier. I also said that it was grossly unfair to ship me someplace else. Of course, I knew why there were sending me. It was a matter of interpretation of the law. I had enlisted in the British Army in North Africa and the law said that wherever you enlist, that is home service and if you go somewhere else, that is foreign service. I had not lived in North Africa therefore it was not correct to interpret my service in North Africa as home service. For me that was foreign service. On the basis of this foreign service I was entitled to be discharged, not to be sent someplace else. The Company Commander agreed with me. He told me that, later on in the morning he was going to go to Division headquarters and that he would see what he could do there. He added that he would let me know. In the afternoon he sent a runner down to where I was and told me that I was off the hook. So then I said to myself: "I must not wait for the the next occasion to get into this kind of a mess!" So I asked for 2 weeks of vacation and went to a rest camp in Rome. In Rome I went to the French consulate. Since I had served under the French flag there was no problem. So I asked to be discharged in France. That was that. So 5 or 6 weeks later I was on the train to France.

SK How did all of this affect your religious believes? your attitudes? Did it change anything?

WB I really did not modify my religious believes, not really. I managed to get through it all without too much trouble.

SK Were there times and places where you could have religious observances like the High Holy Days, and such?

WB The little town where we stayed in the South of Algeria was an Arab town. Right at the entrance you were not allowed into it and I would not have ventured to do it anyway. Right on the fringe of this Arab town there was a Synagogue, with the Jews living amongst the Arabs. That was earlier, when I was still in the army, in the Foreign Legion, when we were outside that little town. The Algerian Jews had a regular Synagogue, something like a chapel. However that Synagogue was different. First of all the women were not allowed in at all. They remained outside! It was completely different from anything we had been used to. At the High Holy Days we were causing some problems. We said that we were not going to go in to work, whether they give us a day off or not, it would make no difference. We were not going to work on Yom Kippur So they put us in a prison compound, a place surrounded by fences and a native soldier stood guard. We said: "You can do whatever you want, but we are not going to work." So we went to this Synagogue and it was very interesting. I was amazed how these small children, maybe 3 or 4 years old, how they followed the Service, including the signing.

SK Now these were Saphardic Jews? How did they interact with the other Arab population?

WB There I have no idea. You could recognize them from the other population at a glance because they dressed somewhat differently from the others. After Yom Kipur, when the Service was over, I was going back to camp; but there was this one man who called after me. So, since I did not want to offend him since he was trying to be hospitable, I let him take me to his home to break the fast. His home was very dark. There was hardly any furniture. There was an old woman sitting in a corner. At the table there just he, his son and I. His daughter-in-law was just serving, she did not eat with us. I spoke with him in French. His French wasn't all that good, but we were able to keep a conversation going. He explained to me that an Arab had prepared the meal, so that they could have the meal right after Services.

SK I imagine that the meal was simple by our standards?

WB Yes, very simple. The main part was chicken. I don't remember what else.

SK Did he tell you what kind of a place he had?

WB No.

SK Was he a merchant?

WB No, the merchants were Arabs.

SK So now you are out of the armed forces. You went to Rome and you went to France. How did you get to the US?

WB My brother offered to send me an affidavit (an affidavit of support was required for immigration). It took about 9 months.

SK Where did you go when you came over?

WB To Dayton, because this is where my brother lived.

SK Then you adjusted without any great problems?

WB I wouldn't say that. It was very difficult.

SK In what way?

WB It was difficult mainly because I didn't have any true work experience. I found that things were very different in this country, as you know. Going from Germany to France was an adjustment, but nothing compared, to coming to this country. Everything was completely different. One of the main bridges I had to cross was that I was not fully trained for a profession. I kept this handicap when I got married. So we were both looking for a way out of this trade situation. We happened to know the Uhlmans (of NCR, the National Cash Company) who at the time was not yet President of NCR, but he was a Vice-chairman, at the time. He talked to the fellow who later became my boss.

SK Then you started to work for NCR didn't you? using your foreign languages?

WB Yes.

SK Your brother is here also?

WB Yes he is here. He is a patent-attorney.

SK A patent-attorney?

WB He is not an attorney. He is not admitted to a bar, therefore he can not call himself an attorney, but he is a patent-attorney.

SK You mentioned your brother several times. How did he get out of Germany?

WB He came to the US in 1936. In 1942 he became a US citizen and served in the US Army in WWII.

SK Did you have any other relatives over here?

WB There was the wife of a brother of my grandfather's. This brother died in the very early 1900's. His wife died in the 40's. She is the one who gave my brother the affidavit.

SK Did your brother come right away to Dayton, also?

WB No. He stayed in New York until he got a job in Dayton.

SK Why did Dayton interest him?

WB There was some work to be done on patents.

SK Let me talk to you about the fact that you mentioned that in the US things were so completely different. We both know this as a fact because we both came from Europe but please verbalize it. Where did you feel the difference most? How did it affect you? How did you feel it? In what way did you become aware of it?

WB I had learned the upholstery business. In this business the whole approach is different. In Europe things are made to last. Here things have to be done very quickly because salaries are higher and the prices can only come so high. You have to do much faster. You use anything you can to come up with a finished a product, in a very short time. The way of living also is completely different.

SK How did you feel that?

WB The cars are an example of this case. Things have changed in Europe also. At the time when I came here, which was shortly after the war in Europe the average person did not have a car. I came here and, everybody had a car. It may be battered, it may be held together by sheer luck, but it's a car.

SK Let me ask you this: "Suppose the Nazi's would never have come, how does your life compare now to the life you might have had otherwise? You would have gone into a normal profession?"

WB I would never have left from there. Compared to the general population, I believe that I would have had a fairly good life.

SK Do you think that you have a better life, the same kind of a life, or a worse life in this country, than you would have had in Europe?

WE I would say that for a good part of the time, I was comparing my life to that of the general population, in Germany, I would probably have had a better life over there.

SK Well, thank you very much Joe.

WE There is one point I want to make. There was one fellow who was a Sgt.-Major in the Foreign Legion. He was a Hungarian Jew. He could never become an officer. This was the only Jew I knew of who had been in the Regular Foreign Legion. He had "Sache". His people were always the best. He was actually a Company Commander, although he was not a commissioned officer. When his company went on morning exercises, for example, before getting back to camp he would let them rest for 15 minutes, or even a ½ hour, then he would have them march into camp with music & all. Everybody was standing there and watching. No one could come close to that company in target shooting, for instance. He would yell at those people & shout at them, but he never punished anyone. They all loved him!

SK You say that he was Jewish? How did you know that? Did he act the part? Did he observe the Holy Days?

WE I believe that he let it be known.

SK But he did not practice Judaism?

WE Not that I know of.

SK He was the only Jew who ever made a career of the French Foreign Legion, that you know of?

WE That's right. It is actually a contradiction in terms, you know.

SK Well, thank you again, Joe.