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Robert Feist interview for The Survivors of the Holocaust Oral History Project

Robert Feist

Charles Berry

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HOLOCAUST HISTORY

Interviewee Bob Feist = BF

Date of Interview:

Interviewer 1 Ann Hurst = AH

5/21/79 and 12/6/88

Interviewer 2 Dr. Charles Berry = CB

Typist: Kathy Moore

AH: This is the beginning of the interview with Mr. Robert Feist by Ann Hurst.

BF: My name is Robert K. Feist. I live at 5416 Susan Drive, Dayton, Ohio. I am age 54.

AH: You were born where, Mr. Feist?

BF: I was born in Frankfurt on the Main (referred to as Frankfurt a/M, which is located 50.07N and 8.41E) in what is today West Germany. I grew up in Bingen on the Rhine (49.58N and 7.54E) for the first 5 years, after I left Frankfurt at age 2-1/2. That means that I went for the first three grades to school in Bingen. That little town is approximately 35 or 40 miles from Frankfurt. My father was managing a factory in Bingen. In 1933, when Hitler came to power, in the election of that year (actually he came to power by getting together the most deputies in the Reichstag so that he was appointed Chancellor), my parents moved on to France for the first year. After that my parents had to go back to Germany in order to make a living.

AH: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

BF: I have one brother who is 2-1/2 years older than I.

AH: What was your parents' occupation?

BF: My father was an engineer who was managing a cigar, cigarette, and smoking tobacco factory.

AH: What is your education?

BF: Presently I am an electrical engineer with a Master's degree from Central Michigan University. My undergraduate degree is from the City College of the City of New York.

AH: Now, back to your earlier life. Would you please describe some of the religious practices; that means, did you attend synagogue? did you keep kosher? celebrate the Sabbath? and so forth.

BF: We did not keep kosher. We attended synagogue very rarely, only on the high Holy Days. Our celebration of the Holy Days, as such, was that on Friday nights, usually, my father took my brother and myself, one on each knee, and read us

extracts of the Bible (in German). Other than that, there were hardly any religious practices in our house.

AH: Were the males Bar Mitzvohed?

BF: Yes, both my brother and I were Bar Mitzvohed.

AH: What principal language was spoken in your home?

BF: Just about exclusively German, except that my parents were able to speak some French and a little English. When they had secrets from us, they were able to keep them that way.

AH: Did you think of yourselves as rich or poor, in the community?

BF: Well, I really wasn't thinking about money. We had an adequacy; I don't think that money was ever a question or a problem. My father's factory was one of the larger employers in the small community where we lived.

AH: Did your parents relate socially with non-Jews?

BF: I imagine that they did, I am almost sure that they did. Although I was 8-1/2 years old when Hitler came to power, really wouldn't know too much about this.

AH: To what extent was the synagogue the center of Jewish life in the community where you lived?

BF: I don't think that it really was. It is not customary in Europe, I believe, that the synagogue or house of worship, whatever it may be, was the center of social activities.

AH: What activities or associations did your family engage in, other than religious associations? That is, theatre, politics, music, or other?

BF: They did go to performances of one kind or another. I remember that, as a boy, they took me to a circus or to shows in nearby communities. There was not much of that kind of activity in Bingen. I remember that we did a considerable amount of swimming in the summertime, ice-skating in the wintertime. I imagine that we did the usual boyhood activities.

AH: How would you describe your childhood?

BF: I imagine that my childhood was very happy. I don't believe that it was anything out of the ordinary. I was not in want of anything. I did a considerable amount of playing. My brother and I belonged to a gym club to which we went

regularly. I have forgotten now how often we went each week. That club was definitively non-sectarian. As a matter of fact, they had a Christmas celebration in it. The interesting part, I imagine that one would have to understand, is that Germany was divided amongst various states. It was not unified. We were living in an area which had been freed from princely overlordship, however, just across a creek or small river from us was an area which was part of Prussia. This seems typical of Germany of that time. I remember that when I was a boy we were able to make quite a few excursions. We certainly were not limited about traveling by car or by other means of locomotion, usually trains. My grandfather (my mother's father) was able to come to see us. He lived in Frankfurt a/M. He was able to come to see us just about every Sunday by train.

AH: Now we are talking about what time right now?

BF: That was prior to 1933. Most of my memory (ability to recollect) increased of course. But most of it (the things I remember) would be between 1930 and 33.

AH: Are there any special events which you recall from your early childhood, or in your childhood?

BF: Do you mean prior to '33?

AH: Just during your childhood at any time. We would like to have a date, if you have one.

BF: Certain things remain in my mind. In 1928 I had a double mastoid (inflammation of the temporal bone behind the ear) and I had to be hospitalized for that. The following winter, the winter of '28-29, was a very severe one. That was one of the very few winters in which the Rhine river froze over solidly. Usually the Rhine does not freeze, although ice floes come down the river. The Rhine is a rather swift river and specifically, at that time, it was rather polluted. They had an awful lot of oil and other stuff coming down the river. That does not do for much freezing.

AH: You attended school?

BF: I did attend 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade in Germany, after '33 my parents sent me to school in France. We had the good fortune that an aunt of mine, my father's only sister, lived in France. My father, his brother and his sister were a close family. They had been brought up in Alsace (a province which kept on being moved between France and Germany, depending on the fortunes of war). My father and uncle went back to Germany, after WWI, in order to make a

living, because the tobacco industry was a monopoly of the French government; therefore they could not work in that field (which was a family business). My aunt, however, who had been married to a medical doctor in France, they remained in Strasbourg. So after Hitler came to power it was a fairly easy thing to cross the border and live in France. In France, I went to a boarding school, not too far away, as kilometers go. (Strasbourg is located 48.35N and 7.45E).

AH: When you say "boarding school," was it a public school or religious?

BF: No, it was not religious in France. However, in Germany, at least in the part of Germany where I grew up, there was no such thing as a public school or secular education. There were two schools (with primary grades), the one for Protestants and the one for Catholics. All the Jewish children went to the Protestant school, which was considered the public school, and where Protestant religious education took place twice a week. During that time we were excused and mandated to go to the synagogue, this was the first hour of the school day, and we received our religious instruction there.

AH: Did you feel any pressure from your peers about your religion at this time?

BF: No, I don't think that there was any pressure. If there was, I was insensitive to it.

AH: In other words, you went to your religious classes, and they went to theirs, and it was just accepted.

BF: Right. It was what we would call "Excused time." We were required to be there. How they kept up with the fact that we actually attended these religious instructions, I don't know. However, I am rather sure that they had some kind of way to get that information. I am also sure that they had some kind of way of finding out whether you had a passing grade or not.

AH: In your school, that was a German-speaking school?

BF: By that time, the only language I knew was German.

AH: I see. Alsace was part of Germany?

BF: No, Alsace was more French. Of course, when we were visiting there (before 1933) we spoke German. I was speaking of the language we spoke in Bingen, at home.

AH: After third grade you went to a French school, a private boarding school?

BF: No, The French schools are generally operated by the state or parochial schools (mainly Catholic parochial schools), but the ones which we attended were state-operated schools. The state-operated schools in France are fully equipped to accommodate boarders. That (attending boarding school) is just customary, because in France, mainly High Schools, not too many in Grade School, go to boarding schools. In a county seat are the only first class High Schools. In the sub-county seats they had some secondary types -- inferior types (that is speaking of academic standing of the instructional staff, mainly, but obviously the rest of the school's caliber follows) High Schools -- but even for these it was not very feasible for the average Frenchman who, at the time, lived on farms, to attend there, so going to boarding school in France is no problem at all.

AH: Was this then more for those students who would ultimately end up in universities?

BF: No, this was just general High School. There was no alternative to that, really. Of course, if you did not want to go on with your schooling, you did not have to go to school beyond the age of 13 in France. However, at that time already, most of the students that I knew of went on (using the French free secondary education), not necessarily to universities for studies, but at least as far as completion of High School.

AH: To what extent did you associate then with non-Jewish boys and girls?

BF: In school?

AH: In school and out of school.

BF: I could see no difference. In Epinal (located 48.11N and 6.27 E), which is the place where I finished my grade school and then went to high school, a Christian family befriended us. They had a son who was a classmate of my brother's and they asked to be representatives of our parents. They let us come over to their house on most Sundays.

AH: Now what year was this?

BF: This, I imagine, started in 1935 and carried on as long as we stayed there, in Epinal. We kept track of these people, and I last saw them in November of 1952. So I kept track of them through the years (even to repeatedly visiting the family of their daughter, who by then had 5 children, while

BF was stationed in Verdun, France, as a civilian engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1952-53).

AH: Prior to the NAZI (National Socialist Party, the party formed and led by Adolf Hitler) rise to power, to what extent, if any, were you aware of anti-Semitism?

BF: Prior to the NAZI rise to power, I was not aware of anti-Semitism. I was aware that my parents voted in a local election. How they voted or what influenced them to vote which ever way they did, I never knew. I guess that is not the kind of thing which you discuss with an 8-year-old.

AH: You were in France, then, at the time of the imposition of the Nuremberg Laws? Is that right?

BF: Yes and no. My parents, after 1934, went back to Germany. They did not go back to Bingen, to the small town of Bingen (although they kept their relations with some of their friends from Bingen up), but they went back to Frankfurt because my father had to make a living after all. So we, my brother and I, went home to Frankfurt on vacations, that means summer recess, Easter, and Christmas vacations, whenever we could. I imagine that until 1936, when my brother was deemed too old, and no longer was able to come to Germany, we crisscrossed the border very often at different places; I guess that there was some way of finding out which border station was particularly difficult and which border was particularly easy to cross at. Trains went through different borders, mainly, for us, at Kehl (just across the Rhine from Strasbourg) and at Saarbrücken (49.14N, 7.00E) and 2 or 3 other towns. My parents made sure that we went through the borders where we probably would have the least amount of difficulties. In the beginning, when we were younger, my parents of course took us across the border. Later on, when I guess it became a little bit risky (for adult Jews to cross the border) we traveled, my brother and I, either together or separately. There were several other Jewish boys (from Germany) in Epinal and, in certain years, my parents, for whom it was easier to cross the border than for the parents of the other boys because my father had very close relatives just across the border, took us back and forth on the train, escorting us. Then the other boys, who also were from Frankfurt, were taken to their homes. Then, after the end of the vacations, they were taken back to France. I remember one time, when I had a broken leg, that right then and there my aunt came to Epinal to get me. Later my parents, mainly my mother, was able to join me (at the hospital in Strasbourg, to which I had been moved by train and ambulance). It was only after several weeks (when the cast had been cut down to a walking cast) that I went back to Germany, where I finished my

convalescence. I stayed then in Germany until the walking cast came off.

AH: This was about what year?

BF: That was in 1935.

AH: This was still before the Nuremberg Laws?

BF: Oh yes! Before we go to the Nuremberg Laws, let me just tell one odd story about traveling by train. I of course did not enjoy reading all that much, so I carried a toy with me. I had one of those toys where you are supposed to line up 15 squares in 16 places. At that time, of course, the trains going across the border were very small, only a few cars. I happened to be in the last compartment of the last car (during that one trip). When the NAZI official came in to check the passports and to ask if there was anything to declare (if I was taking anything out of Germany illegally) before crossing the border, he became very enthralled with the toy. He sat next to me and kibitzed. When we stopped at the first railroad station in France, he just had to hurry out and get out. He had just barely enough time to stamp the passport. The reason why I wanted to mention this is to make certain that it be clear that there was not a universal logic in the way the German officials were. Some of them were one way, and some of them another. Discrimination, personal discrimination varied depending on looks, behavior, whims of the individual involved. Very often, I would go shopping to a store for my mother, and I had no problem doing that, so I often heard the remarks: "The Jews are bad, but of course you are different" or "We don't mean you, we mean the others (when we post signs reading "Juden sind hier unerwünscht" - translated into "Jews are not wanted here")." These kind of things by people who thought that they were very well meaning. Now you asked about the Nuremberg Laws.

AH: How did they affect you?

BF: Prior to the Nuremberg Laws, there had been very gradual increasing of tension. The atmosphere in Europe in general and in Germany in particular had been gradually becoming more and more bitter. People were more and more on edge, more and more divisive. To prove that point I want to enumerate various of these things which happened. The reoccupation of the Rhineland, meaning that after WWI the Allies, the British, the French, and the Belgians occupied part of the Rhineland (each occupied a part); they left it, I imagine, shortly before Hitler came to power, however the Germans were not supposed to remilitarize the Rhineland. The Rhine itself, which formed the border between

Switzerland and Germany, between France and Germany, in Alsace and then flows through part of Germany (a heavily industrial part) and then into Holland, was supposed to be an open river, open to navigation, open to everybody. It was not supposed to be militarized and occupied by the German army. Obviously the German police and firemen of course wore uniforms and also guards; they were no problems, but then gradually Hitler abrogated these conditions of the Versailles treaty. He reoccupied, remilitarized the Rhineland. He had some elections (actually a plebiscite) in the Saar area. The Saar area had been severed from Germany at the end of WWI with elections to be held in 1935, I believe. These elections were to decide which way the Saar people were to go. The Saar province, after that time, after a very heavy political campaign -- very much like our style of campaigning -- voted very heavily to join Germany (it was a coal mining area). Then, later on, Austria was annexed to Germany (also after a plebiscite). Later on the Germans in the Sudetea land (of Czechoslovakia), with encouragement from Germany, rebelled against the Czechoslovak republic. They were ceded to Germany in 1938 the Munich accords) and later on that same year, or early in 1939, the rest of Czechoslovakia was split up between Germany and Russia. Later than year, the crisis over Poland started to come up. The Nuremberg Laws fitted right in there, as an ever increasing tempo, as an ever increasing propaganda machine. In the 1936 Olympics, of which we, of course, know quite a bit in this country, also fitted in and were also part of the overall aggravation. In Germany you could see more and more copies of the Sturmer and other propaganda sheets. We more or less expected Germany to be more and more anti-Semitic as time went along. Part of the Nuremberg Laws of course escape me due to my youth.

However, other parts of this gradual build up, of course I don't exactly remember which were the so-called Nuremberg Laws and which laws came afterwards (as per World Book Encyclopedia, the "Nuremberg Laws" forbade Germans to marry Jews, deprived Jews of citizenship, and made the swastika the national flag) or came before that, it was more of a gradual progression. However, part of that was a question of the amount of freedom, of the amount of things which Jews could do. I mentioned earlier that my brother, in the last few years, no longer went to Germany. It was considered too dangerous for him to go because he was considered too old. Also, there were ways of knowing that denunciations had been made. My uncle no longer was able to go to Germany.

All: He was in France?

BF: He was in France. Although he had been a German citizen (prior to the Nuremberg laws, and he had served in the German army during WWI), he had been born in France

(actually in Strasbourg at a time when Strasbourg was German). This fact later on allowed him to come to the U.S. rather easily.

AH: Would you like to identify him please?

BF: Ernst Feist. In 1938 my parents decided that it was high time to leave Germany. They had made the arrangements to leave prior to the Kristallnacht (the night from Nov. 9 to 10, 1938 when synagogues and stores owned by Jews were ransacked and burned and Jews arrested at will). At that time I was able to help them leave Germany. By an odd coincidence, the Germans had been allowed to open a consulate; of course, consulates are opened by international treaties, in Epinal. A secretary to that consulate had a son who attended the same class I did. She wanted me to take the boy under my wing. Obviously she knew that I was Jewish and obviously she knew that her son was not Jewish (during the first several weeks of his attendance he had been given a hard time by our classmates because of his nationality). Nevertheless, she felt at that time that I could be helpful. So she facilitated the papers for my parents to leave Germany at the time. She also facilitated my way of getting a German passport (I needed such a passport because I had passed my 14th birthday). Actually, when we came to this country, in 1941, I traveled on that German passport. I was the only one of the family who had a valid passport at that time. That was due to that secretary. (The other members of the family traveled on one-time travel documents furnished by the U.S. consulate.)

AH: Now, the family, that is your family, that is your father and mother, were in Germany at the time of Kristallnacht?

BF: No, I believe that they left immediately prior to that.

AH: I see.

BF: I wanted to mention one other thing prior to that. When the rumors came around about the denunciation of my uncle and about the fact that my brother should not stay in Germany any longer, the family got together. I never will forget that family get-together at a hotel in Basel, Switzerland. We had rented a set of rooms -- you see, there was a whole group of us -- we had three adjoining rooms, and the family council, to which I was not invited because of my age, took place in the room which was considered the secure of the rooms, the center one, so that no eavesdropping could occur. I guess that it was prominently known that eavesdropping occurred and that stories were carried back and forth.

There was no secrecy at all. Private letters were, of course, opened routinely, and telephone conversations were

listened to at random, that is whenever it pleased the authorities.

AH: Now the family gathered in Basel (47.30N, 7.30E)?

BF: Yes, for a short time before my parents, my brother, and I were scheduled to go on a vacation, when the word spread around that my uncle had been denounced. My brother was taken to Basel very quickly and, a few days later, my parents and I left on our scheduled vacation. It went as scheduled except that we stopped in Basel for a few days to be with the family, which meant my uncle and aunt, as well as my parents.

AH: Now, what kind of papers were your parents on at the time?

BF: On German passports.

AH: What was the response to public and private instances of anti-Semitism by people of your immediate community, where your parents lived and to which you went back to in Germany?

BF: I really do not know any more than what I said before, such as that in the stores (where they had signs that they did not want Jews, but that they said: "Of course, you are the exceptions"). My parents lived in a house, an apartment house, which was owned and operated by non-Jews.

AH: What was their relationship with your parents? Were they sympathetic?

BF: Well, sympathetic, of course, is saying quite a bit! My parents were, of course, known for their own qualities, not as the members of a group. I remember that at the time, through my father's business, one of the fellows who was in High School with us, a non-Jew, completed a High School student exchange program with the son of a customer of the firm's in Frankfurt. We saw the boys a couple or three times while they were in Frankfurt. The German boy was a member of the Hitlerjungend (the young people training to be full-fledged members of the party of Hitler), so contact was very limited. I don't imagine that my parents, at that time, had contact with anybody other than Jews, at least social contact. I guess that I should clarify that the story of Basel about which I just talked, was not really of any great importance timewise. The only limitation which it did create is that, after this time my brother and my uncle no longer came to Germany, but my parents still went back to Germany and I was even Bar Mitzvohed after that time in Germany. The Bar Mitzvoh ceremony was rather small due to the pressure of the time, including pressure for me to learn what I had to know in order to conduct the part of the

services which are part of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. My parents, as I had mentioned earlier, had made arrangements to leave Germany in 1938. At that time, I was able to make it easier for them, to get the permit due to the fortunate circumstances of the German consulate in Epinal. Then they did come to France, however they went further on (in France). At that time my father went to Saumur (47.16N, 0.05W), which is located on the Loire River. There a bank in which a cousin of mine was involved needed some trustworthy soul to make sure that the safes would be in good shape. At that time, when my parents left Germany, they moved right into the center part of France. That part (the area around Saumur) was the area which the French authorities had designated as the location to which the people from Strasbourg were to move to (in case of the outbreak of war) because there had been very substantial evacuation plans made for civilians living at the German border. The Maginot Line (the prepared fortification built to stop a German invasion of France in WW) was within France and the area in front of the Maginot Line was considered expendable and all the civilians were supposed to leave it.

AH: Now this was about what time?

BF: This was in 1938, in the fall, I imagine in October, maybe in November.

AH: Now the family of your aunt and of your uncle Ernst, did they also evacuate Strasbourg?

BF: The family of my aunt lived in Strasbourg and they were not evacuated. After all, France was not involved in the war until September of 1939. (At that time evacuation plans were changed and the civilian population of Strasbourg was moved to Perigueux, 45.11N, 0.43E -- however, the bank had established its "war quarters" in Saumur and moved there.) My parents moved on from Strasbourg in 1938 and I know we, my brother and I, moved to Saumur at Christmas time of '38. I can remember the time because I had a broken arm. That is how I remember these things.

AH: You must be accident prone.

BF: I am. We lived then in Saumur, which is a very small, pleasant neighborhood on the Loire River.

AH: Now, that was your mother and father?

BF: Yes, and my brother and I. My brother was about finishing high school at the time, in July '39. The French High School goes somewhat beyond our High School. Actually,

later on, he got credit at Columbia University in NYC for more than 2 years of college work for what he had actually done in French high school.

AH: And you attended school there, in Saumur?

BF: I attended school in Epinal first, until the year was finished, then starting with the fall of '39 I started in Saumur.

AH: Did you live at home during this time?

BF: Yes, I lived at home during that time, which was a very short distance from the school.

AH: How long did you live there, in Saumur? You and your family, that is.

BF: That is a different story. Soon after WWII started, which was Sept. 1, 1939, my father, brother, and uncle were interned.

AH: On the last tape you were talking about the internment of your parents and brother.

BF: Not of my parents, the internment was of my father, uncle, and brother. For the French bureaucracy, anybody between the age of 17 and 60 was to be interned. They were then to be examined and processed to be freed. At the same time the British did it quite a different way.

AH: Just a minute, I want to clarify something. Who were the French interning?

BF: That is a very good point. The French interned my family as being German citizens. Although the Germans had stripped them of their citizenship (by the Nuremberg laws), they had to be examined (before being freed individually). Later on they were reinterned and reexamined because the French wanted to make sure that they had no traitors, no foreign agents, in their midst. Otherwise said: everyone of German birth, who did not have any other citizenship -- specifically making sure that Americans, who did have US citizenship, even if they were born in Germany, were not part of that. However, all of those who had lost their German citizenship were interned, if they were males born between the crucial years. So my father, uncle, and brother were interned, then they were examined and with specific affidavits and personal examinations, and personal contacts when people could vouch for their not being security risks and so on, they were freed.

AH: What kind of interrogation? Was the interrogation sympathetic? Was there any (anti-Semitic) flavor to this?

BF: I am sure that that had to do with the specific people doing the questioning. If the people who did the questioning were resentful of the particular people they were questioning, of course the questioning was used with different force and different emphasis. In general, however, it was just supposed to ferret out the German agents and remove them from the circulation. At that time, also, we were not allowed to move from the city in which we lived. We had to report to police authorities twice or 3 times a week. We couldn't even walk to the outskirts of the town we were living in without getting prior permission, although we often did that. We considered that to be of no great consequence. We did of course speak fluent French. We felt very much, especially my brother and I, as if we had been Frenchmen. At the time, my parents had been wanting us to come to the US, however we did not want to. We felt that France was our country and that we wanted to be there.

AH: Did your parents also speak French?

BF: Yes, my parents also spoke French, but of course not fluently. When we were boys, as I mentioned earlier, they spoke French together when they had secrets. At that time we thought that they spoke good French. In the meantime, due to our capabilities, of course, we thought differently about it and they were reduced to talking some English with each other to keep secrets. This wasn't very farfetched but if they wanted to keep us from understanding, they no longer could do it in French. At that time we also got into the habit of talking French to the family. Actually, that came about throughout the years. When you were in Germany you could not talk a foreign language; you would stand out too much, so we talked German of course when we were in Germany. However, when we were anywhere else we talked French to each other. We did that all through the years. Later on, when we were in the US, soon we talked English to my parents. At first they talked French back to us, but later (they took the road of least resistance) and talked German back. The language problem never occurred -- it just seemed to be a natural state of affairs, as far as we were concerned. The year of 1939-40 was a rather important one for us. My father, my brother, and my uncle were away, interned in a camp, where they may not have been personally mistreated but they were certainly not free.

AH: What camp was that?

BF: A French camp, an internment camp, where most of the people were German Jews who had been living in that area of France.

AH: This was done by the French government?

BF: By the French government and by the French military.

AH: By the French military?

BF: Yes, they were in charge.

AH: Was this prior to the invasion of France?

BF: Oh yes, the day after the declaration of war. The invasion of France did not occur until the middle of May, 1940.

AH: In other words, your male family members were put in a camp at the time of the declaration of war (early Sept. 1939) or prior to the declaration of war.

BF: At the time of the declaration of war or within a couple or 3 days afterwards. As a matter of fact, my uncle and brother were taken first, and then my father was taken as an amendment was passed to the French law (or most likely, a governmental edict) which extended the age by 5 years. I believe that originally it was only up to the age of 55, and then later on it became the age of 60.

AH: Just before we go on with this, just prior to the declaration of war you had been living in Saumur, in France, and what was life like there, roughly at that point in time? Was your father working?

BF: My father was working for this bank.

AH: How long did he work for that bank?

BF: From the time he came to Saumur until he was interned.

AH: Now the declaration of war came, and your male family members were taken to this camp. How long did they remain in that camp?

BF: That varied. They were then personally examined and individually freed, after a period of time. During that time period I had been the only male member in the household.

AH: What was your life like? There you were with your mother?

BF: I was going to school, High School that is.

AH: Your mother was in your home?

BF: My mother was home living together with my aunt from France and with the wife of my uncle.

Otherwise said, there were 3 families which were living together.

AH: That is the female members of the family and you? That was your household at that time?

BF: No, that included also a cousin, a first cousin of mine, my uncle's daughter who had been born in 1933.

AH: At this time, what was the economic status of the family?

BF: I believe that they were fairly well-to-do. They were not in any particular need, financially. We had no problem meeting the expenses of daily living that I know of. I saw no curtailment of that.

AH: In other words, when the male members of the family left the home, there were still adequate funds?

BF: Yes, there was adequate sustenance. That had not been cut into. So that was no problem.

AH: Now there was the declaration of war and then the invasion.

BF: The declaration of war was in Sept. of 1939. The "phony war" lasted until May '40. The only thing which occurred during that time was the invasion of Poland, which took 2 weeks or so; then the invasion of Denmark and Norway in April 1940, and then on May 10, 1940, Germany invaded the Low Countries. At that time, my uncle's wife's parents were living in the Low Countries (in the Netherlands, to be specific). My aunt, my uncle's wife, was expecting. She gave birth to her second daughter on that May 10, 1940, the day of the invasion, and also, I guess within 3 or 4 days after my uncle's wife's -- I intentionally want to separate that (my uncle's wife) from my aunt (i.e., my father's sister) -- parents and 3 sisters disappeared (they were later traced to several concentration camps where most of them were put to death, one of the sisters was caught during an attempt to escape to Switzerland and killed on the spot). They were in Holland and were heard of no more (at least until the previously quoted information was dug out in the 1950's).

AH: Their names, please? Names of the family.

BF: Strauss. Richard Strauss was his full name. He had been a lawyer in Bingen. He had 3 unmarried daughters with him.

AH: How did you receive this news? How did you know that this happened?

BF: I don't know. I have no idea how we knew that (nor how the family Strauss was traced to their death back in the 1950's).

AH: The family received the news some way, shall we say.

BF: Well, possibly absence of news, that is more likely. (The aunt's mother had been visiting with her daughter in Saumur less than one month prior to the May 10 events, but returned to Holland once the Germans invaded Norway and Denmark.)

AH: I see. This was then as a result of the invasion of the Low Countries?

BF: This was as a direct result of the invasion of the Low Countries.

AH: In other words, the disappearances started immediately in the Low Countries.

BF: Oh yes! Oh yes. By that time, of course, there had occurred the following. An aunt of my mother's had been deported in Germany. Oh yes, by that time the disappearances of Jews in Germany was done very mechanically.

AH: Now, let us go back to the invasion of France.

BF: I would like to make mention of two things before that. I believe that I mentioned that individual examinations allowed freeing of individual internees from these concentration camps.

AH: Now are you talking about German or French concentration camps?

BF: None of my immediate family was ever in a German concentration camp. I am talking about a French internment camp, as I called it earlier. There they were interrogated to make sure that they were not German sympathizers. People were then individually examined, including character witnesses and so on. One of the people who was instrumental and brought pressure to bear was my uncle, that is my aunt's husband, who was a Medical Doctor.

AH: What was his name?

BF: Paul Asch, who had been a Professor at the University of Strasbourg and who was a Colonel in the French Army at the time. Later on, he was called back to active duty, in spite of his age. He had actually been a medical officer, I don't

know of what rank, for the Germans in WWI. He was fairly prominent and was able to get his two brothers-in-law and his nephew examined with consideration. This did not mean favoritism was shown, but most of the people who did not have much influence in France were never even heard from by the examiners, they were just left in the camps until papers could be filled out and such things. There never actually was time for papers to be filled out. It took some influence and some pressure to be able to have your papers examined. Now at the time there was pressure on the individual internees to get them to sign up for the French Foreign Legion. That was the way for individuals to get out of these (French) concentration camps.

AH: You are speaking of the French internment camps?

BF: That is right. One of the French army divisions which went to Norway to recapture Narvik (68.26N, 17.25E) and which was fairly bloodied over there was one division of the French Foreign Legion. Also the examinations did not take place on an individual basis if you enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. Then you were vouchsafed from further internment. You were then certified a loyal Frenchman, that is loyal enough to fight for France. [See the story of Werner Becker in these archives.]

AH: Now these persons who remained in these internment camps, was this in the part of France which was overrun by the Germans at a later date?

BF: Yes, madam! Actually this camp where I said my brother, uncle, and father were freed after individual attention and individual examination from the camp, housed them again right after the invasion at the end of the so-called "Phony War." They were taken right back again to be re-examined to the same camp. (It is most likely that this internment camp where BF's male family members were was only one of several, however BF does have no information about these others.) However, at that time of the second internment, they decided that they were going to intern the women also.

AH: What was the name of this camp?

BF: Camp du Ruchard. It was located not very far from Tours (47.23N, 0.41E) in the Loire region of central France. The women were supposed to be interned also (they were to go to Camp Gurs, located somewhere in Southern France not too far from Toulouse, 43.36N, 1.26E). The women, for my family at that time, would only include my mother. My uncle's wife had just given birth to her second daughter, and her older daughter who was then about 8 years old (actually 7 years old) had been born in France, therefore was a French

citizen. My mother was supposed to be interned and sent down to the later on notorious Gurs camp. You may have heard about it from other people, if you haven't you will probably. My uncle (Paul Asch) tried to get her freed from that internment camp, and the best way of getting her freed is never to get her sent there. So he went with her to the city of Angers (47.28N, 0.33W) -- that was my aunt's husband, the French doctor -- and coached her in playing mental incompetence. That, I imagine, considering the state of affairs of not knowing where your husband and son are, now knowing what would happen next, was not all that hard to play. Later on, however...

AH: Now that is your mother?

BF: Yes. Later on, however, the French forces crumbled and my uncle thought that, maybe, he had done her a very bad disservice, because the camp de Gurs was very much in Southern France, and we, in Saumur, were only in the middle of France, and -- as mentioned earlier -- we were not allowed to leave the town where we were. So he went right back and attempted to get her put back on the internment list to camp. However, in that he was not successful and for that I am very grateful. This meant that when the Germans actually came to Saumur, my uncle, the doctor, aunt, and my cousin, my uncle Ernst's daughter, left Saumur in a car -- after all, they were Jews, and they knew what would happen if the Germans would come. My mother, my aunt with, by now, two-week-old baby, and I were left with bicycles.

We put all the belongings that we felt we needed on the bicycles. Similarly, my father, who was by then considerably above 55, my uncle, and my brother were in this other camp -- of course, we did not know where they were -- we had no knowledge of what would happen to them, but we knew that the Germans were coming right down the Loire area.

AH: No, just a moment, I want to ask you something.

BF: OK, go ahead.

AH: Your father and his name, please.

BF: Oscar.

AH: Oscar Feist.

BF: Oscar Feist.

AH: You had an uncle...

BF: Ernst.

AH: ...and a brother.

BF: My brother is John Feist.

AH: Were in a camp at this time?

BF: Yes, in Camp du Ruchard.

AH: A French internment camp.

BF: Yes, a French internment camp. Later on, I found out that they allowed all of them to walk away from the camp -- actually they escorted them away from the camp -- a few days before the Germans came there. These people had to hike and by final counting, I guess they hiked something like about 200 kilometers to Limoges, which happened to be in the area which the Germans did not occupy, at least not at the time. They hiked with all of what they owned on their backs (actually they carried it in the suitcases which they had taken with them when they were driven to camp for their second internment. These possessions were thrown away about the time they were strafed for the first time by planes of the Italian air force).

AH: Now, this part of your family, you did not know where they were?

BF: No, we did not. I will tell you later on how we found them.

AH: When the French interned them, they did not tell you where they took them? Is that right?

BF: We knew where they first took them, but later on we realized that the Germans must have overrun the Camp du Ruchard. We knew nothing else. We, ourselves, decided between the three of us, because my cousin was only 2 weeks old, that we were not going to report to the police; we were just going to take, if you excuse the expression, French leave and go on the bicycles further into France, looking for a village which the Germans may not get to. Of course, they did pass through the village. Later on, on our bicycles (the baby was in a small basket on her mother's handlebars) with all our belongings we went further south into France. Just by a whim we decided to go away from the coastal plain. We had originally planned to go down the coastal highway which would have taken us through Bordeaux into the Pyrenees, where we knew that my aunt with her husband --

AR: Please identify them by name.

BF: The Asch family -- with my cousin were. Naturally we wanted to get together somewhere. However, the

Germans came right down that road, so on a whim we made a turn, east, away from the coast. We were fortunate enough, shortly after that turn, to cross where the German guards were setting up a checkpoint on the road. (The German soldiers did not stop us at all, but one of them made remarks, in German, about my aunt's legs, which we understood, of course.)

AH: Now give me a date for this point in time.

BF: That must have been during the latter part of May, 1940.

AH: So you continued into the area which was never occupied by the Germans?

BF: That was not occupied by the Germans until after our invasion of North Africa. Then we got to the town of Perigueux (45.11N, 0.43E), to which many people from Strasbourg, whom my parents had known, had moved. [See previous remarks on the evacuation of Strasbourg.] We were very fortunate in being able to find an attic area where we could sleep on a cot. After a day or two, to our great surprise, my mother and aunt were out. I guess they went shopping and a Rabbi whom they knew saw them, and in a crowd -- I guess they were not shopping but had gone to a Jewish center to try get news -- and he went right through the crowd and told them that he had just seen their husbands, my father and uncle, in Limoges (45.51N, 1.15E), which was actually only about 35 or 40 miles away (actually 60 miles) from where we were. They were, at the time, rather without means and so were we, frankly, but we had much more than they had because we had transported things on our bicycles and they had nothing but what they could carry away from a camp where they had nothing to start out with (what little they carried in their suitcases had been thrown away).

AH: Now, did you have any money at this time?

BF: That is what I was referring to.

AH: I see.

BF: My mother and aunt had some money. I did not know exactly how much. However, my father and uncle did not. My mother and aunt were able to hire a taxi to go to Limoges. I do remember that the taxi had a couple of flats on the way to Limoges. We were able to find them (the three male family members) in the area of a soup kitchen in Limoges.

AH: Now was this a part of a general evacuation movement of any kind?

BF: That was a part of the French opening the doors and allowing the Germans to move out, that is the German Jews who had been interned. Because they knew that if they were going to stay there (at Camp du Ruchard), that would be the end of their lives. So some of the French guards just decided to allow them to go out. First they escorted them, and then, I guess when the Italian bombers came overhead, they just left them. They happened to go to this town of Limoges where we were able to find them, in that soup kitchen. Then they were able to come down to Perigueux. There we lived and there we were able to take the necessary steps to come to the

AH: Now, how did you live there, in Perigueux, for as long as you were there?

BF: My parents rented what in standard downtown apartment houses in France, which very often have a doorman, which doorman would have apartments, would have been a doorman's apartment. (That was the doorman's apartment of the house where we had, at first, slept in the attic.) We were able to be in that apartment from June or August 1940 to May 1941.

AH: That was almost one year.

BF: That is right!

AH: Now, how were the bills met?

BF: I mentioned that my mother and aunt had had some money with them. They got back in touch with my aunt and uncle (the Asch family) and they were able to come up with a sufficiency of money to meet the bills, to buy the groceries. I continued to go to High School. I only finished High School in the US (in June 1942). I went to a semi-boarding school. This meant that I got the main meal in school, at lunchtime (and that I had a place where I could study and store my books). My brother did whatever studying he could by going to a (public) library. My parents did the best they could to get permits for all of us to leave. At that time, at first, it would have been possible for me, because I was still under 17, to leave with a so-called "children's transport" to come to this country. However, I did not want to go. I did not want to be separated from my family. So we stayed together. My mother made repeated trips to Marseilles (43.18N, 5.24E) the one city in France which had the various consulates. She did the best she could to get us visas to come anywhere we could. Finally, she found out that you could get visas to Panama, for Shanghai, China; of course, I don't think that you really could go there, I guess that visas for Cuba were

also available. Then, finally, through the influence of some Quakers who were extremely helpful at the time, she got to meet officials from the US Consulate. Then we got the necessary affidavits from this country, mainly of people who said that we would not become burdens to the American State. We were able to leave France by the port of Marseilles on a French ship. German and Italian officers were on the deck of the ship checking over the passports, to make certain that nobody who was individually wanted was leaving Europe. I mean that certainly you had to get your passport and papers in order, but anybody whom they wanted just was not about to leave. Marseilles was very crowded with people. The French, who at that time were Vichy France, had repeated police raids where people were just taken off the streets; here people meant Jewish refugees. They were just taken off the street and taken to a camp.

AH: Now this was by the authority of Vichy?

BF: Yes, it was by the French under Vichy (that is the town where Marshall Petain set up his government when the Germans occupied Bordeaux). So, in order to survive there, we stayed in Marseilles for about 6 weeks, until our ship left, the ship's departure had been delayed, you had to be sure that you were not on a street at a time when streets were being raided. When we got aboard ship under the watchful eyes of the German and Italian officers, the ship proceeded to go down the coast of Spain; Spain was (nominally) on the side of Germany at the time; to Barcelona, and then made a quick run to Mers El Kebir (35.44N, 0.43W), which is the harbor near Oran. There, I guess, they unloaded some stuff from Vichy France. Then we went through the Straits of Gibraltar (35.57N, 5.22W), that means that we attempted to the first time, then we went back (to Mers El Kebir) and went through the next day. Later on we found out that that day they fought one of the naval battles between the Italian and the British fleets. When we went through the Straits of Gibraltar a little cutter turned around our ship to inspect us and then let us proceed. We went down to Casablanca (33.36N, 7.37W). There again we were Germans and therefore not allowed liberty to go into the town. In Casablanca they loaded the ship up with cork. There we went with a convoy of three passenger ships and one frigate of the French navy to a point near Dakar (14.40N, 17.28W) where the frigate and the other two ships went further south. We headed across the Atlantic (at night all the lights were blacked out). We got to a point about 27 nautical miles off Fort de France (14.36N, 61.05W), Martinique, which is in the French West Indies, when we were captured by a Dutch cruiser working for the British. The French West Indies were of course working for Vichy-France, that means for Petain. The following day, the French came overhead with a plane, which fortunately

didn't do anything to us or to our ship. We were taken to Port of Spain, Trinidad (10.39N, 61.31W) where our papers were examined. Fortunately for us, the British (this was in the British West Indies) did not call that an internment camp but just an examination place (we were in that camp for about 3 weeks before permission was granted for us to move on) because, if it had been a British internment camp, we could not have come to the U.S. We left Trinidad then, in early June of '41, and we were on board the SS Acadia of the Alcoa Line when the Germans invaded Russia. That was just prior to our landing in New York.

AH: I would like to ask one question about back in Marseilles. Vichy was picking up Jewish persons on the streets?

BF: They picked up all persons and examined them. They picked up all persons, they did not care particularly if they were Jewish or not.

AH: I see.

BF: They just arrested anybody they wished.

AH: Would you say that this was martial law?

BF: I don't know about martial law, it was just military occupation.

AH: I see, and after a certain time nobody should be on the street. Was that the way it went?

BF: No, they looked in the cafes and everywhere in daytime. The time of day had nothing to do with it.

AH: I see, it had nothing to do with it. In other words, it was not just a seeking out of Jewish persons?

BF: No, it was mainly seeking out people who did not have really specific occupations, who did not contribute anything specific to the welfare of France. Of course, that included all the Jewish refugees, they were in that condition.

AH: Papers were inspected at all times?

BF: That is right.

AH: You had to have certain papers on you at all times.

BF: That is right. Now very often you could hear about these raids coming and you could get out of the way. They had checkpoints and you knew how to get around them. We were legally in Marseilles. We did report to the police in

Marseilles at regular intervals. I mean that our papers were in order but, still, no one wanted to be taken in for papers to be checked.

AH: This may be a very stupid question and I probably should know the answer. Were you required to wear the star there, in Vichy France?

BF: No, I never was in my life required to wear the star.

AH: Was any of your family?

BF: Not as far as I know.

AH: I did not know whether that was required in Vichy (France) or not.

BF: No, they did not, particularly not at that time. After all, they were still claiming to be the legal French authorities and that would have been specifically a German thing.

AH: Yes! Right! OK! Now, you landed in New York when, please?

BF: On June 27, 1941.

AH: At your landing in New York, please name the members of your group at that time.

BF: Our group consisted of eight people, that is: my parents, my brother and I, my uncle, his wife, and his two daughters.

AH: You had family in New York?

BF: Yes. My mother had a brother and my uncle's wife had a sister.

AH: Give me the names, please.

BF: My mother's brother, who is still alive, is Hugo Mayer. My uncle's sister-in-law was born Strauss and is now Ruth Schmalz. My uncle Ernst with his wife and two children moved in at his sister-in-law's. My parents sublet an apartment for that summer in New York City. My parents did have quite a number of friends in New York. They were able to live and make a living soon, however my father was unable to earn an adequate salary, so my mother supplemented the family income (as did my brother and I).

AH: In what way?

BF: She first started sewing (at customers' houses); she had learned making alterations and such in Germany (with

specifically the possibility of earning a living in the US in mind). Then she helped a doctor -- a pediatrician -- by being his receptionist and office help. My mother had studied medicine before she got married, although she was not a nurse. She had actually studied pre-medicine. She had never finished her medical studies, since it just was not done at the time for the wife of a fairly well-to-do businessman to work. (My brother and I started working in the garment industry.)

AH: Now, the family settled in New York City?

BF: Yes.

AH: And the date on which you feel that the family settled there was what?

BF: Well, my family got to New York on June 27, 1941.

AH: And that was a journey of how long? From the time you left Marseilles.

BF: We left Marseilles on May 10, 1941. We spent a couple weeks in Trinidad.

AH: Otherwise said, a journey of about 6 weeks.

BF: That is correct. In New York City, in my particular family, my father had a little problem getting adequate work, due to his age. My mother was able to earn money by sewing (as stated previously). My brother and I both worked in a leather goods factory (in the garment industry). I completed my High School education by going to school at night in June 1942. While awaiting my entrance into the US Army in 1943, I started attending the College of the City of New York . As I stated previously, I got my degree in electrical engineering from the College of the City of New York in 1949. After a while, in which I looked for jobs, which at the time were not plentiful for young engineers, I got a job for the Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior in North Dakota. I wanted to mention about the wherewithal for the college education. It was, of course, gathered by the "G.I. Bill of Rights." Obviously this G.I. Bill of Rights fully covered studies at the free City College of New York. After a little over a year, about 15 months, in Bismarck, ND (46.48N, 100.47W), I transferred to the Corps of Engineers, Department of the Army in Omaha, Nebraska (41.16N, 95.57W). From Omaha, I served as an engineer for the Joint Construction Engineer in Europe, for 6 months while on TDY (Temporary Duty, while still assigned to the job in Omaha). Then, after my marriage to Ruth (in December 1953), I got an offer for a job here, at Wright

Patterson Air Force Base, still working for the Corps of Engineers. I came here, as an electrical engineer, in January 1954, and we have been here ever since. In 1956, I left the Corps of Engineers and started working for the US Air Force as a civilian electrical engineer.

AH: Now, I would like to ask a question about your service in Europe. At what place did you serve in Europe?

BF: England, France, Belgium, and Germany.

AH: What were your feelings when you went back?

BF: The best example of these feelings may be that after I was wounded in the area not too far away from where I had grown up as a boy (in Kaiserslautern, 49.27N, 7.45E). On my way back to rejoin my platoon, I told the truck driver not to stop the truck, whatever I did; but not to mind if I talked his ear off because we drove right through the city of Bingen, which I have mentioned earlier. We crossed the river, the Nahe, over there in the area which I described earlier as having been Prussia. Due to the artillery shelling (or aerial bombardment) I could see the house where we had lived because things toward the river from where we lived had been leveled.

AH: Your basic feelings at this time were?

BF: The country (the geographical area) had done nothing to me, but I certainly was not particularly anxious to speak to people (who may have known me). I guess I am no more courageous than the next guy about wanting to turn people down, when people asked for help. I did not want to do that, we were of course still in the time period where it was illegal, the so-called \$64 question, to talk to Germans except in line of duty.

AH: Fraternization?

BF: That is right! Of course I had to talk to some Germans, on duty time.

AH: You feel that you were sent back because you had been there?

BF: Absolutely not! My being sent back had nothing to do with it. That had absolutely nothing to do with it. It did come in handy at one time. Our company split up in platoons and, of course, I was able to translate at that time for various things. One of the things which happened was that in cleaning up a house which we took over for one of our platoons in one of the little towns in Germany, I believe that it was in Bad Kreuznach (49.50N, 7.52E), I had a

little trouble thinking of it, we found that the house had been occupied by NAZIs, SS (Schutzstaffel or Protective Units, i.e., the blackshirted elite troops who provided the concentration camp guards). We saw the documents. At that time, while we were cleaning the house and getting it ready for our usage, the wife or widow -- I had no idea which and had no intention for finding out -- of the owner or occupier of the house who had been in a rural villa, a hunting lodge I guess, in the mountains, came and wanted to get some possessions. Of course I did not let her take any possessions, I sent her to the authorities to get proper papers (to take specific items) which I, of course, knew she was not going to get.

AH: That was in Germany?

BF: That was a German woman, the wife of an SS colonel or whatever (judging from the photographs we had found). I don't know whether he was a colonel or general.

AH: Did you, in your line of service, or were you required to go to or near to any of the camps?

BF: No, I did not. We were strictly in Western Germany. We never did cross the Rhine River, and to the best of my knowledge there were no extermination camps on the West part of the Rhine, in Germany. There was of course Camp Gurs, which I mentioned, but it was not an extermination camp (this is not quite true since some such as the notorious extermination camp of Stratthoff in the Alsatian Voges existed and are documented). Gurs was just a camp which had existed in France and which was overrun by the Germans. From there people were then deported into extermination camps. To the best of my knowledge these camps (west of the Rhine) were not extermination camps.

AH: In your stay in Europe, your tour of duty was how long? BF: In Europe proper, it was about 6 months.

AH: Then you returned to this country?

BF: No, we did not. We went directly to the Pacific (theatre of operations).

AH: Now, before we conclude, let us talk a little about your present day life, if you don't mind, here in Dayton, in the area. You came to work here for the government, at Wright Patterson Air Force Base. That is right?

BF: Yes, that it right. I am still working for the Air Force Flight Dynamics Laboratory, at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, as a Senior Project Engineer.

AH: In your present life here, how much of a part does the synagogue play?

BF: I am fairly active in Temple Israel. I am presently serving on their Board of Directors. I have been active pretty much since we came to Dayton. Our children were raised in their Religious School. I am a Past President of the Men's Club. I am still active in the Men's Club. I have also been rather active in the Professional Engineering Society. I am a Past President of the Dayton Society of Professional Engineers. I have served the Professional Engineering Society at the State level, including a term as Secretary of the Engineering Foundation of Ohio. As I mentioned earlier, I did get a Master's Degree of Business Administration from Central Michigan University. They were teaching courses at Wright Patterson Air Force Base.

AH: What is the principal language spoken in your home?

BF: English. Just about exclusively.

AH: You attend synagogue then on a regular basis?

BF: Well, not as often as some people feel we ought to.

AH: To what extent do you feel that the synagogue is the center of Jewish community life?

BF: I don't really think that it is the center of our life. We have friends of different faiths. Now, we go there (to synagogue), we do attend some functions. We do feel an obligation to participate. As long as I am on the Board, I guess that I should.

AH: With whom do you usually associate? Jewish or non-Jewish persons?

BF: I don't really know. I imagine that we have more Jewish friends than non-Jewish friends, although I have a little problem really scaling it down to that.

AH: Have you found Jewish and/or non-Jewish community life and association different or similar to those of your European experience?

BF: I don't think any comparison is really possible since I was rather young when I came to this country.

AH: What activities or associations do you engage in other than religious activities?

BF: As I mentioned to you, I am fairly active in the Professional Engineering Society and association. I am not as active as I should be with the Electrical Engineering Society, of which I have been a member for many, many years.

AH: How about music?

BF: My music is limited to listening. We like to go to concerts, operas, other musical events.

AH: How about theatre?

BF: We have been members for many years in the Dayton Theatre Guild. I enjoy swimming, and when the season comes I am there (at the swimming pool) just about every day.

AH: Study groups?

BF: We do have some study groups, one of them particularly, which endures.

AH: Do you ever think of your former life, and how do you feel about it? Of course I am referring to the life you had before you came to this country.

BF: Well, like any fellow would feel about his youth. It is finished.

AH: Do you have any bitterness?

BF: Oh, I don't think so.

AH: Do you think about your childhood more often or less often because of the instances?

BF: I don't think so. I think that I have had as many pleasant experiences in my childhood as most people.

AH: Have you ever returned to your former home? Well, you have almost answered that.

BF: Yes, I believe that I have.

AH: Will you go again?

BF: Well, if I go, the trip probably will not include much of Germany. My home is truly in this country, and I see no reason why it should be anywhere else.

AH: How do you view your children's lives as different than your own?

BF: My wife and I both hope that our children's lives will be a little bit easier, a little bit more formative than ours have been, a little bit more regulated, but I am sure that they will have their problems.

AH: Do you feel that your feeling toward, and your participation in, your religion and your religious activities has been influenced and/or changed by your experiences?

BF: Oh, I really don't think so. I think that, like anything else, by doing a little, you get a little bit more willing to do a little bit more, up to the point where you feel that it is up to someone else to. No, I don't think that that has had any influence on it. I think that the thing which probably has had an influence is that we came, my wife and I, to Dayton members of a religion. We joined a similar organization, Temple Israel, than the one we had been members of in Omaha, Nebraska. We continued our activities. We were able to make friends through that and through other ways, specifically through professional activities. We don't think that this is in any way a retribution for what I had done previously. After all, I did come here as an established person in my own right, like anyone else making a home.

AH: Do you think, in religious terms, about what happened in the NAZI era?

BF: I don't think that it has anything to do with religion or not religion, as far as I am concerned personally.

AH: As far as you are concerned personally. I see.

BF: It didn't drive me toward religion or away from it. They did not consider it a religious thing, they considered it a racial thing.

AH: I was thinking in terms, did you feel that your God had deserted you or anything of that sort?

BF: I knew what you were thinking, and I don't think that God was, one way or the other, concerned with desertion or not desertion. I don't think that God is that involved, personally, with the details of human behavior.

AH: In other words, then, this did not affect you personally as to your religious beliefs?

BF: I don't think that it did.

AH: In any way? I see. Now, there is one final thing I would like you to do for me. Would you please, tell me what experiences of your life you would choose to pass on to future generations.

BF: I think that I would like to pass on to future generations the last 25 years of happy married life which I have had. I still hope that most people, especially my daughters, would be able to live similar experiences.

AH: Thank you very much, Mr. Robert Feist.

CB: It is Tuesday, Dec. 6, 1988, and I am in the home of Robert and Ruth Feist; on Susan Drive in Dayton. This is a follow-up interview. The first interview was conducted by Ann Hurst in 1979. This interview will deal principally with the Feist trip back to Germany this past summer and their impressions of it.

In listening to your tapes once more, which Ann Hurst made of you 9 years ago, one of the things which impresses me most is how very perceptive your family was, and how perceptive Ruth's family was in seeing the direction that events were taking and in coming to the conclusion that it was time to get out. It seemed to me, from the information which was on these tapes, that most of your immediate family was able to escape.

BF: That is basically correct. We were able to do so, but much of it is not to the credit of the perceptivity of the family, because people were able to do that, as some of the other "Oral History Project" interviews revealed. Many people got the same kind of hints, some of them, even more violent, than my family got, but very often the means of escaping did not occur. As an example, my parents left Germany within a few months after Hitler came to power in 1933. They went to France because that is where an aunt of mine, my father's sister, lived. My brother and I from then on went to school in France, rather than in Germany. This saved us a lot of heartache. We were in the position, in 1934, that when things did not progress quite so violently as "Mein Kampf" (Hitler's book written in the early 1920s which outlined his and the NAZI party's plans) had said they were going to go, that my father found out that he ought to make a living. So he went back to Germany (he was not allowed to work in France) and stayed in Germany until 1938 earning a living. Then he went to France because, really, there were no affidavits available (the pledges of support which were needed to immigrate to the U.S.) to go anywhere.

Although my parents wanted to go on to the U.S., in that they were even more perceptive than my brother and I were (also the quota for would-be immigrants from Germany to come to the U.S. was so filled due to heavy demand that the anticipated waiting period to obtain immigration visas in 1938 was stated in years). My brother and I were very much in love with the French theory of "Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity." That is where we wanted to make our home, little realizing that in France we could not earn a living. You could not work unless you were a Frenchman. However, we found out that there really was no alternative. We could not come to the U.S. because the quotas (set up by the immigration and naturalization laws of 1921, revised in 1927) were already filled. My parents did not make a serious attempt to come here. They had relations, as stated above, in France, and so life would be a lot easier. The French language is one which we knew. Therefore this would have been a nice way to make a go of it, to stay there. However, when France fell in 1940, pretty much without a battle, however, disappointment followed. The French (army) fell all to pieces, to the point where at some time some of the people felt that it (the fall of France) was really a victory because the French were not under the, if you excuse the expression, the overlordship of England, because there were always French people against the British. However, some of them thought that now that the church was set up (Petain's government cancelled the laws of separation of Church and State which had lasted through the previous Republics) in power, it was a victory for the French Right, the French people of the persuasion of Laval. Laval became Prime Minister under Marshal Petain (the head of the Vichy French State who assumed power after the French defeat). Then, of course, our illusion of France as "the Liberal Country," as a Democracy, faded, it went to pieces, and we seriously tried to emigrate. So we applied for a visa to come to the U.S., or anywhere else. My mother was very instrumental in getting the visas. Some of that is in the previous tape (the interview with Ann Hurst) to which I listened again. Finally we got visas through affidavits from friends of ours. Affidavits meaning that people were willing to keep you from becoming a burden on the American State; obviously they were not enforceable, in terms of law, but people assumed a moral obligation and very few of these refugees did become a burden of the state. We were able to immigrate in 1941. We were on a ship leaving Marseilles which made an overnight run to French North Africa; probably there were some papers, or something, which they did not want the British to have. We stayed a couple of days in Oran (actually Mers El Kebir) in a French harbor in Algeria. We embarked (actually this should be sailed), twice, the first time we returned to Oran. Later on we found out that there was a naval battle going on. Then (the second time)

we went through the Straits of Gibraltar -- as I stated in the earlier tape -- and we stopped in Casablanca for 3 days while they were loading the ship up with cork. Then we went south to the area of Dakar, with a French convoy. Then we set out to cross the ocean by ourselves, keeping the lights doused. We were about ready to land in Martinique (the larger of the islands of the French West Indies) when our ship was captured by a Dutch cruiser (or destroyer) working for the British. We went to Port of Spain, Trinidad, From there on, after the British checked our passports and observed that we were really who we claimed we were, we were able to sail to New York City on a ship of the Alcoa Line.

CB: That is quite a fine story. Quite an eventful trip.

BF: Yes, it was.

CB: What I wanted to ask you was, can you give an estimate of numbers in both your family and Ruth's family (Ruth is the wife of BF) who did not get out and who were caught by the Holocaust and suffered the consequences? I am talking about cousins, aunts, uncles, and such.

BF: I am aware of what you are talking about. I cannot tell you for Ruth's family. As far as my family is concerned, the closest about which I know who was deported (and murdered) was an aunt of my mother's. (Since the time of this second interview, BF received fairly detailed information about the descendants of one of BF's great-great-grandfathers, a Michael Mayer who died in Germany in 1870. Fifteen of the descendants of Michael Mayer, or their mates, were murdered by the NAZIs, and one survived a stay in a concentration camp. These 15 include the grand aunt mentioned above.) We were most fortunate. Even the part of the family which lived in France, and therefore lived in the area which was overrun, were able to escape by going into the Alps and walking into Switzerland, when the Germans finally overran France. So, in my immediate family I am very glad to say -- it has nothing to do with pride -- that there were no casualties and actual exterminations.

CB: So, when you went back to Germany this past summer, you really don't have a lot of relatives there?

BF: No, I did not, as a matter of fact I was in Germany first as a soldier in the U.S. Army. At that time I went through the same small town of Bingen which I revisited this time. We were also in Trier (49.45N, 6.38E) where we were this time also. We also revisited some of the other areas where I was (while in the U.S. Army). There were no personal acquaintances and whereas, in 1944 or 45, I don't remember which (actually it was 1945), I wanted to be sure that our

truck would not stop so that I would not be put in the position of either having to talk or to ignore people whom I used to know. I would have had to make a momentary judgment as to whether they were "good" or "bad" people. I guess that I am more of a coward than to be willing to do that. This time there really wasn't any involvement like that. Time has passed. Most of those people were not around anymore (by June of 1988) after close to 50 years (actually 55 years since BF left Bingen), so we had no hesitations.

CB: What size family does Ruth have in Germany today?

BF: I don't think that she has any family, any cousins or anything like that. As a matter of fact, this is a very interesting thing. When we were in Germany this last time, we stopped in Mannheim (49.29N, 8.28E), where Ruth was born. We went to the Friday night services in Mannheim. Not only is the synagogue rebuilt but also all of the members of the community are from the Eastern part of Europe except for one family. The actual Jewish families which lived in Germany (prior to 1933) are just about completely gone. I stopped at the synagogue where I used to attend in Bingen. Of course the synagogue was gone and I read from the signpost (actually a memorial tablet attached to the building wall next to the front door) the following statement which I will read, I translated it so don't worry about it being in German; I copied it as it is engraved: "Hier stand die Synagoge der Judischen Gemeinde, Bingen, erbaut 1905, zerstört in der Pogromnacht 9/10 November 1938. Seit dem XII Jahrhundert bis zur Auswanderung & Deportation in 1942 lebten Juden in Bingen." This translates into: "Here stood the synagogue of the Jewish community of Bingen which had been erected in 1905 and destroyed during the Kristallnacht, the night of the pogrom, 9th to 10th November 1938. Since the twelfth century until emigration and deportation in 1942 there were Jews living in Bingen." There are no Jews living there now or in the immediate neighborhood of Bingen either. (About 30 miles from Bingen in the old imperial city of Worms where Martin Luther defended himself in front of Charles V is the location where Rabbi Rashi preached. Rashi lived from 1040 to 1105. The synagogue where he is said to have preached is today a museum which Ruth and Bob Feist visited. Again no Jews are living there since 1942.)

CB: How long did you live in Bingen, as a boy?

BF: From the age of about 2 or 2-1/2 until age of 8-1/2, about 6 years.

CB: So do you have strong memories of your boyhood?

BF: Oh yes! Very much so! When we were back there, I am sorry if I anticipate the questions but I know what the questions are going to be. That is of course the beginning of my memories, so I don't have total recall. I knew exactly the school where I went, where it was located. I knew the road I used to walk as a boy going to school from where we lived. I saw the factory which my father used to manage. I recognized the houses where friends lived. (I saw the hill where my grandfather carried me up the hill the day before he died.) Memory may of course not be solid but memories certainly of a 6-year-old are well-established (BF was 8-1/2 years old when he left Bingen). I even remembered the house where we used to live until I was about 4 or 4-1/2 years old. We stopped in Bingen and we stayed overnight in a hotel where my uncle used to stay whenever our guest room was not free. We went to a community building close to the Rhine river where we used to go to see plays prior to the time Hitler came to power. When Hitler first assumed power we marched from school to that community building and listened to the official speeches. Oh yes, memory is very persistent and very much present from that period.

CB: How long did you stay in Bingen this visit?

BF: Overnight.

CB: Did you make a point to revisit and look up all of these things? Did your memories come to you, as you walked on the streets or did you go to specific sights, just to see that house or that school?

BF: I would say some of each. Of course we did not come to Bingen that cold. We drove to Bingen through the Rhine Gorge. It is a gorge and that is what you call it in this country; over there it is a "valley." It is a fairly narrow strip which contains the Rhine river, which is by that time more than halfway down to the sea. The river is constrained to be only 90 feet wide so it flows rather rapidly. It is the area of the "Mausem" (the tower on an island where, the legend has it, mice went to devour a wicked bishop who had taken refuge there from his flock), the Niebelungen rocks and the legend of the "Lorelei" (the maiden who sat on top of a rock and enchanted the boatmen to forget about the rocks and so he hid drown in the river). I had done that many times as a boy and therefore remembered all of that, so the memory did not come back all of a sudden. Also (as stated earlier), I had been back through Bingen once, as a young man when I was in the service, however, that was just driving through.

CB: What were your feelings in this summer trip of 1988? You said to me, not on tape, that you felt that there was no

attachment, that you had more or less cut that out of your mind or your thoughts.

BF: I think that this is effectively correct. This trip, this summer, came up as a get-together possibility between my wife and me, on one side, and my brother-in-law, her brother, and his wife from Israel, on the other. We had that in mind but it did not materialize. Their daughter got married. We later on met them in Spain. It evolved from that. It also evolved from my present connection with the Oral History of the Holocaust project. I have transcribed about various people who went revisiting and I became interested to find out what my actual experiences would be, what my actual connections with this would be, mentally as well as really. I found that geographically it is a very beautiful area. Geographically I saw a lot. I remembered that some of the things, Dr. Berry, I have been talking about, by actually being there, not realizing that they would be there, until we got there. Other things, especially in that little town which I knew very well, having been 8 years old when I left, I really went to the specific places. I knew the particular streets. I knew where to go to, for example; when I wanted to go to see the synagogue; I knew where to go to when I wanted to go to the school; I knew where to go to when I wanted to go to the house where my parents had lived, to the houses where the friends of my parents lived.

CB: Sometimes that kind of trip back into the past can be a very wrenching experience and sometimes it doesn't mean very much. How would you describe it emotionally?

BF: This is exactly why we did it, because it was, not only for Ruth, in a different city, but it was for me in both Frankfurt and Bingen (a new experience). I lived in Frankfurt (50.07N, 8.41E) only for the 2-1/2 first years of my life, but later on, after my father went back to Germany in 1934, he lived there until 1938 and I went there during summer vacations and winter vacations and whatever (including convalescing from the broken leg), after all that was where my parents lived. I recognized Frankfurt, was very familiar with Frankfurt (except when driving out of town at rush hour when BF couldn't find the way back to the motel). However, meaningful relationships with the cities is really not something that I was talking about.

CB: Did Ruth feel the same way about Mannheim?

BF: Yes! Very much so. The first night we arrived in Europe, we flew via TWA from Kennedy Airport to Rhein-Main. We picked up our car and I drove to Mannheim right away. So it was about noon when we checked in and when we got a room in

a hotel (located just across the street from the synagogue). We checked in and we walked all over that city. It is an industrial city. She recognized it and saw many of the things which had been rebuilt since Ruth's time there. The city had been destroyed fairly completely (by aerial bombing) like most German cities, however they like to rebuild in the old style. We saw it, or at least much of it, we walked through it. We could not walk to the house where they used to live because she couldn't really locate it. Her brother had done that. We saw some very beautiful scenery but psychologically we were not there.

CB: The house where she grew up, her girlhood home, had not been destroyed during the bombing?

BF: We did not see it, but from what my brother-in-law tells me, it had been rebuilt. The house that I used to live in, during my boyhood, I was not able to tell whether it was destroyed or not (the factory which my father used to manage was in ruins when I drove through Bingen in 1945, was in ruins from bombings, but it had been rebuilt as a distillery-warehouse) since I did not see it that closely since it was located in a garden.

CB: Did you talk to a lot of people?

BF: No, we did not (no more than was necessary during a vacation trip). Hotel people, waiters, (people to give directions).

CB: People whom you encountered as a tourist.

BF: That is all!

CB: You didn't question people about their experiences during the war? What their attitudes or such were? When you went to the synagogue for the Friday evening service, you said that most of the congregants were from the East (of Europe).

BF: Yes!

CB: There was only one Mannheim Jewish family there. You did not strike up a conversation with them?

BF: Yes, as a matter of fact we did. We talked to them just casually. Actually, Ruth did more talking than I did. That night I was not particularly keen about striking up a conversation, but Ruth did. That was our only relationship (at least it was in Germany). Later on we wrote them a note, but other than that we had no connection.

CB: Now I am going to change the subject and ask you a question which pertains to something which I have been very curious

about; about conducting these interviews. That is, the U.S. policy in the last years of the war, 1943, 44, 45, after the invasion of Africa, then Italy and Normandy, when there were a lot of U.S. troops on the continent, and Jewish soldiers were amongst those troops. I don't believe that this appears on the tape which Ann Hurst made of you -- I have often wondered why the U.S. would put Jewish soldiers in such danger by sending them to Europe. It seems to me that the policy should have been maybe to send Jewish soldiers to the Pacific and not to Europe, because I always wonder about the danger of being captured by the Germans, and if the Germans found out that the captured soldier was Jewish, would the treatment be harsher or would there be fear of execution? and so forth. Were any instructions ever given to you soldiers in 1944 about these kinds of things?

BF: The answer is not going to be a clear, straightforward yes or no. Let me go back a little and talk about the policies of the various allies. In France, I had some first cousins who were in the military service. One of them was in a Prisoner of War camp for 4 or 5 years, as a dentist-officer. As far as I know, during all of that time he was afraid that his religion would be found out. In France, the only place where foreign soldiers, foreign citizens or nationals could be in the service was in the Foreign Legion. There you gave them any which name you wanted to. Of course, then the Foreign Legion was put in the front lines since they obviously had no next of kin to notify. In England, on the other hand, they took all these servicemen and gave them different names, to make it difficult to trace (ex-refugees from Germany, in particular). In the U.S., we got our dogtags with the religion stamped on it and I had the "J" for Jewish (that was to insure proper burial or other assistance from chaplains). Naturally you could have any religion you wished stamped on it, but you wore the dogtags and that was it. That was permanent equipment and you were supposed to have it. Obviously the Geneva Convention was supposed to protect Prisoners of War. As far as citizenship is concerned, in spite of various rumors you did not get an automatic U.S. citizenship when you went into the US. armed service. You did get a right to petition for your U.S. citizenship earlier, however you did not necessarily become a citizen before being shipped overseas. Now I never left the U.S. before I became a citizen. My brother, however, was in service in the South Pacific for a year or so until finally a (U.S. District) judge caught up with his island, at a time when he was available, so that he could take his oath of citizenship. However, once you were in the service you were supposed to receive the protection of the U.S. government. The Germans did not do much to the American soldiers due to religion because they did not have a quantity of them, until fairly late in the war (and by then

we had many Germans, mainly from their army, as Prisoners of War). (Actually, the U.S. government did not officially give credence to the stories of German atrocities, including extermination camps. Furthermore, no U.S. officer, other than chaplains, were to be aware of any serviceman's religion.)

CB: That would have been 1944.

BF: No, they had airmen earlier.

CB: That is true. The airmen were in Stalags (these were the camps for the enlisted men or Soldaten).

BF: Or Offlags (these were the camps for officers). However, they did mistreat the Russian Prisoners of War very much, that is very apparent in one of the tapes which I transcribed.

CB: It just seems to me that the Jewish soldiers fighting in Europe in the U.S. Army were put in harm's way by the U.S. government, and I often wondered if there was any conscious policy or conscious thought about the possible dangers. If this was done just by a fluke or if there was some awareness that there might be some extra danger to the Jewish soldiers fighting in Europe.

BF: As far as our country is concerned, there was no such thing. As far as our country is concerned, we relied on the Treaty of Geneva (actually BF means the Geneva Convention) to protect our servicemen. However, by the letter of the law anybody who was a German citizen or Italian citizen or Japanese citizen, whatever, was a traitor against their country. This, of course, exists. We had the same thing in the war of 1812 (mainly with sailors). It certainly happened quite often that in military profession the naval people were pressed by the British who claimed that they were British citizens.

CB: When you were in Germany on your summer vacation of 1988, did you make the resolve to go again sometime? or never to go again? or you didn't think about it?

BF: No, we haven't, especially since it really means very little to us. Sightseeing is about all it is now. We established that after being there. We covered rather little territory during that trip, just in order to be able to cover the territory we did rather in depth, so that we would find out if there were any particular emotional ties. We have not found any emotional ties to Germany. We have ties to France where my cousins live. We stopped in the cemetery where

Ruth's grandparents are buried, but we found it not to be emotionally relevant.

CB: Have you talked to other German Jews about this particular aspect of your lives? I mean, cut off from your background, living in the U.S., with or without relatives in Europe. What I am asking is, do you think that your reactions from this vacation in the summer of 1988 were typical of what most German Jews would experience or do you think that they were atypical?

BF: I don't think that either one of these ideas applies. I don't think that there is such a thing as a typical relationship. I have talked to various people and I heard via conversations about other people. Some are much more emotionally involved with that part of their lives than others are. That is particularly the case as I am listening to the Oral History of the Holocaust project, like I have been doing. I find that it goes the entire gamut.

CB: So it depends upon individuals and upon individual circumstances, individual personalities.

BF: It also probably depends whether they lost any people of their immediate family. I think that that would have more to do with it than any other thing.

CB: Also how much surviving family one might have, whether they are immediate or distant, still living in Europe.

BF: Such as some of the people who are on your Oral History of Holocaust project go periodically to revisit some surviving family. We have in the past gone repeatedly to visit cousins in France. we were there in 1979, we were there in 1966. So, as far as that is concerned, that is more as an answer to your question (Ruth and Bob Feist have also gone to Israel in 1966, 1979, 1984, and 1989.)

CB: Thank you very much, Robert. I appreciate the time which you have given and I want to say officially on tape that I certainly appreciate all the effort and the time which you have devoted to transcribing these Oral History tapes.

/typed by Kathleen Moore, 3/31/90