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11-5-1978

## Kurt Fish interview for The Survivors of the Holocaust Oral History Project

Kurt Fish

Rose Mary Lawson

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In November 1978, Rosemary Lawson interviewed me twice about my personal experiences during the Holocaust. Upon receiving the print-out in April 1991, I decided to re-edit and revise it for several reasons: 1. typographical errors, 2. misunderstandings and omissions caused by the lack of clarity of the tape recording, 3. style, i.e. repetitive and idiosyncratic phrasing common in oral interviews, 4. correction of erroneous statements, data, etc., 5. updating and recent insights.

I adhered to the original text whenever possible.

September 1991.

Kurt R. Fish  
Tilford A-14  
Deerfield Beach, Fl. 33442

## HOLOCAUST HISTORY

Date of Interview: November 5, 1978

History given by:  
Mr. Kurt Fish

Finished: August 1989

Revised: September 1991

Transcribed by: R. K. Feist

Typed by : Maureen Barash

I am 74 years old. I was born and grew up in Vienna, Austria, where my family had lived for quite some time. I had one brother who married when I was 10 years old. I left Vienna on January 26, 1939, and came directly to the United States. My grandfather had two brothers who emigrated to the United States in the 1890's, while he stayed in Vienna. One of these great Uncles visited us in 1932, and offered to take me to the United States. I told him: "Let me finish school and after graduation I will be only too glad to come! I planned to study medicine. When the Anschluss took place (March 1938) I wrote to the uncle: " Now is the time to send for me" and I immediately registered at the U.S. Consulate. The procedure was that visas were issued based on the registration date and the availability of quota numbers. Based on a 1921 law, revised in 1927, yearly immigration quotas were set depending on national origin. The distribution of these quotas depended on the number of nationals living in the United States at the time the law was passed. The result was that some countries such as Great Britain and Germany had large quotas while others had smaller ones, e.g. Hungary had only 750 immigration visas available. The events apparently so upset my uncle that he died of a heart attack a few weeks later. A delay occurred until one of his children sent me the affidavit of support. In it you had to prove that you are financially capable to support the immigrant so that he would not be a public burden. There was, however, a vice consul who did a thriving business in selling quota numbers to the highest bidders and mine was amongst them. In September 1938, I finally succeeded to get an appointment where I found out that my papers were "lost". This vice consul was incidentally "punished" by transferring him to Naples. The episode caused a further delay in my departure and I finally left in January 1939.

Rosemary Lawson:

Then you came alone and your parents stayed?

Kurt Fish:

My parents never made it. They were born in a part of Austria that at the end of World War I was made part of Poland. The Polish quota was relatively small and the demand was great. The average waiting time for a quota number was several years. (The Hungarian quota under which my wife immigrated was 750 persons annually). My wife spent the war years in Great Britain and came here at the end of the war. Hitler's action against the Jews can be divided into two periods: 1933-41 and 1941-45. In the former, while there was harassment, mistreatment and constant deterioration of the living conditions, there was no organized mass killing. This only came after the world had given Hitler a clear signal by their unwillingness to rescue Jews. The mass murders started with the invasion of the Soviet Union where the Germans captured large numbers of Jews. Prior to that Hitler had made every effort to get rid of them. Early on he had the idea to ship them to Madagascar. Uganda was also considered. The important point is that everybody who had a place to go could do so. After 1941, it became a logistic problem: In addition to the hatred he also did not want to waste his limited food on them even though they continued to receive high priority on the transportation system. There is now a guilt feeling about the lack of help. In 1938, President Roosevelt called for a world conference to deal with the refugee problem. The Canadian representative, when asked how many Jews his country was ready to admit, answered: "One is too many". Antisemitism - the word should not be hyphenated since it has nothing to do with Semites per se - was and still is pervasive. For 2000 years every child was taught that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. The hatred that this libel engendered was used for commercial and political purposes. The Romans drove the Jews out of their country and they first settled in the Middle East, particularly Babylon and Egypt. Gradually they spread along the North African coast. The advent of Islam forced them to move into Spain and Southern Europe where they flourished for several centuries. The Inquisition caused their expulsion and they spread over Europe and finally to Poland and Russia. They were not permitted to own land and were restricted to Ghettos and to occupations that were unpopular with the host countries such as moneylending, tax collection, innkeepers and similar occupations. The secular ruler often invited them, protecting them from the church - for a price - borrowed money from them and when it came to repayment started to spread rumors that they killed a Christian child to drink its blood - the notorious blood libel that is still being believed in some parts

even today. The only difference between the Auto-da-fe's of Madrid and the chimneys of Auschwitz was the German efficiency. They succeeded in incinerating larger numbers but it was religious fervor that was the driving force in both cases. How else can you explain the priority that the extermination trains had even over the war effort? In "Mein Kampf", Hitler's biography, he stated: "In punishing the Jews I am really doing the Lord's work".

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you finish your education in Austria?

Kurt Fish:

No. At the time of the Anschluss (March 1938), I was in my first year of medical school.

Rosemary Lawson:

Were you already married then?

Kurt Fish:

No. We had been high school sweethearts and latter were both in medical school.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was she able to leave Austria at the same time you did?

Kurt Fish:

Yes. She left the same week I did. She went to England where she had arranged to go into nursing. England needed nurses at that time and that is how she got out. I had an uncle and aunt who emigrated to England as butler and maid. My niece also went to England, as a pre-school child (Kindertransport). She was less than six years old, was taken in by a Jewish family and came to the United States in 1946.

Rosemary Lawson:

Let me go back, since I do not believe we have established how long your family had lived in Austria and what your father and mother had been doing.

Kurt Fish:

As I pointed out earlier, my parents came from a part of Austria that was partitioned off to Poland. Their families had lived there for a long time. I could only trace them back to the 1830's but we may assume that they lived there at least one hundred years prior to that. My parents came to Vienna in the 1890's.

Rosemary Lawson:

What did your father do in Vienna?

Kurt Fish:

He worked for a stockbroker at the Vienna Stock Exchange. After World War I, when economic conditions were chaotic he sold meat wholesale and later he worked in a bank.

Rosemary Lawson:

So he was able to constantly have a prosperous life?

Kurt Fish:

It was more like lower middle class. For a while we had a maid. That was not as expensive as you may assume. These were mostly farmer's daughters who came to live in the big city and hired themselves out for room and board and some pocket money, about \$5.- a month. We also went to the country for vacations. We rented a room at a farm house and helped pick fruit and vegetables. These were some of the frills as it were. Basically we had the necessities but not much more than that. My father retired when I was in high school and the income was consequently smaller.

Rosemary Lawson:

You were talking about an education...You had schooling?

Kurt Fish:

The curriculum was different from the one here. After four years of elementary school those that intended to pursue an academic program took a test for high school. The latter consisted of four years of junior high and four years of high school. The program was, however, so concentrated that when you graduated you had about the equivalent of two years of college. I actually went to a parochial junior high school where, in addition to the regular curriculum, I also studied Hebrew and the Bible. I came from a strictly religious orthodox Jewish home. I went to the synagogue every Friday night and Saturday. They had an excellent cantor and choir and in retrospect I was mainly attracted by the singing which I still remember in great detail.

Rosemary Lawson:

I would like to talk to you about your other relationship with gentiles.

Kurt Fish:

The Nazis - Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei -and I were contemporaries. Most of my friends were Gentiles.

Some of my class mates were party members. Austria was 96% catholic. Religious instruction in school was mandatory. When you met the priest in the hall you had to greet him with: "Blessed be Jesus Christ". This was in elementary school and in the 1930's it was omitted. Each religion had their separate classes. There were so few Protestants that they had to form a class from several schools. I lived in an area which had a high concentration of Jews. The children were taught to hate the Jews and even though most of my friends were Gentiles this hatred surfaced at the slightest bit of friction. In Eastern Europe the situation for students was much worse, particularly at the universities where they had quotas for Jews, beatings were pretty regular and consequently many Jewish students from Poland in particular came to Vienna where things were better for them. They got by mostly by tutoring. Tuition was very low. Admission to the university was mandatory provided you had a certificate of maturity, proof of high school graduation. During the 30's, with the rise of Naziism the situation gradually got worse. There were professors who made no secret of their dislike of Jews. Oral tests were notorious where professors occasionally made sarcastic remarks.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you have any direct contact after Hitler came in? Was that discrimination greater or less?

Kurt Fish:

They all came out of the woodwork. Whereas before only the radicals practised it, now everybody did it for fear of being accused of being a Jewlover. It can be compared to the situation in the South where you had a range from the Klan to the "Nigger-' lover". Imagine for a moment that the Klan is the government what would the conditions of the Blacks have been? When Hitler came even the non-antisemitics had to put on a show because they were known to be "traitors" and had to redeem themselves.

Rosemary Lawson:

So your own life became much more difficult.

Kurt Fish:

Life became unbearable. If you went out you did not know if you could make it back or in what condition. Before the Anschluss chancellor Schuschnigg had called for a plebiscite to let the Austrians decide if they wanted to remain independent. The Jews supported this with big contributions. The Nazis then made the Jews clean up all the signs, graffiti, etc from that campaign. They just knocked on doors, drafting the people to go out in the streets and clean up with a bucket of water and a toothbrush. This was done with taunting, beating if you seemed to lag. Big crowds stood around and cheered.

Rosemary Lawson:

How old were you then?

Kurt Fish:

I was twenty. Random arrests of Jews were frequently carried out. They stopped a bus or a trolley car and arrested all Jews. My brother's brother-in-law met this fate in May 1938 and was sent to Dachau (the notorious concentration camp about ten miles outside of Munich). His wife who had relatives in the United States secured affidavits and he was brought by the Gestapo (Secret police) from Dachau to the U.S. Consulate in Vienna, was put on a train and we met aboard the SS "Queen Mary" our way to the United States. The point is that those that had a place to go survived. Some background about the political situation in Austria between the two wars is in order. At the end of World War I the Austro-Hungarian empire was broken up and Austria was left with the German-speaking population of about seven million with Vienna, a city of about two million, as its capital. There were two political parties: The Christian Socialists and the Socialdemocrats (Sozis). The country at large was predominantly Christian Socialists while the cities were largely Socialists. From the beginning there was bad blood between the parties and each formed their own militia and demonstrations by each was the order of the day, often deteriorating into riots and fights. By 1933 the country was politically paralyzed. Chancellor Dollfuss dissolved parliament and ruled by decree. There was an armed uprising by the socialists in 1934 and by the Nazis in 1935. In the latter they killed Dollfuss and Schuschnigg took over. The Nazis and the few communists were declared illegal in 1933, and if apprehended were imprisoned. The government tried to kindle a national sentiment among the people, not very successfully except during the few days preceding the Anschluss when it was too late. The Austrians despaired of making it alone and some favored union with Germany without being Nazis. The son-in-law of my next door neighbor was such a Nazi who was ...for union\_ as the solution. I knew that he was a Nazi and I also knew that he was not antisemitic. I did not denounce him to the authorities and this most likely saved my life because he sent word to me whenever a raid was planned and I took off and did not stay home that night and, sure enough, they came looking for me. I spent the night in a garden or walking the streets or in places where it was unlikely for them to go.

Rosemary Lawson:

So they did not bother your parents?

Kurt Fish:

They were primarily interested in younger people with whom they could have "fun". My mother was recruited during the clean-up episode. She was taken to a Habsburg palace to clean the floors.



You had to be lucky to survive. My grand father who had a long beard went to services every day until one day he was spotted by a bunch of youngsters who went around with scissors looking for bearded Jews. They chased him and he ran into his house and up the stairs where he had a stroke that left him totally paralyzed. He was 75 years old and he slowly recuperated. Then came the notorious "Kristallnacht", November 10, 1938. A young Polish Jew killed a German diplomat in Paris and the Nazis decided that this was a good opportunity to make an example. They destroyed all synagogues and most Jewish-owned shops, they broke into houses and threw dishes and silverware (hence the name) out of the windows where it was avidly collected by the people. This went on in all of Germany and Austria. Needless to say, there was a lot of looting going on, people were assaulted in the streets. The entire episode was planned and carried out with German efficiency.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did this happen with your own synagogue and your own neighborhood?

Kurt Fish:

Yes. I went out and I saw the looting myself. They were throwing dishes and candlesticks out of upper story windows and women were standing underneath and catching it in their aprons. By that time the synagogue next door had already been dynamited. The police looked the other way. On that day, incidentally, I heard from the consulate that my visa would be issued in 60 days.  
(end of side 1 of tape 1)

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you do any traveling abroad before you actually left Austria?

Kurt Fish:

I visited Germany in 1937. I had an uncle and aunt who lived in Hanover and they invited me. The situation in Germany was different from the one in Austria where antisemitism had the highest priority. In Germany they slowly strangled the Jews economically. In 1937, my uncle still had his business although he had started to liquidate. My aunt was able to visit the U.S. on a visitors visa -their son was already here- and return to Germany. They emigrated at the end of 1938. On November 10, 1938, my uncle's arm was broken when he was attacked by some SS (storm troopers). Their son could not attend school after 1935 and they sent him to the U.S. He was thirteen years old at the time. Still, the excesses that occurred in Austria were worse than anything in Germany. There was a Nazi quote that said in effect: "We are going to show the Germans how to treat the Jews." An incident that happened when I was about 10 years old illustrates the Austrian attitude. I went to a tavern in the same house

I lived in to buy a glass of beer for my father. While I was waiting, one of the patrons reached out and slapped me in the face. When I asked what that was for, he answered: "That is because you are a Jew"! I did not know him but apparently somebody must have pointed me out to him. The feeling was pervasive. There was a Jewish team in the Austrian soccer league. A win by that team was always followed by some antisemitic demonstrations. Students were known to walk down the street singing songs about "Saujuden"-Jew pig-. Before the Nazis were outlawed some came to school carrying daggers and if the teacher said something they did not like they stuck the dagger into the desk. Some teachers were intimidated even without the daggers.

Rosemary Lawson:

When the Nazis came into Austria was your own home actually destroyed?

Kurt Fish:

We lived in an apartment house. I had a friend who had apparently wanted our apartment because one day he came and told me that he would take over our apartment because "If I don't, somebody else will". This was just as I was about to leave and my parents had to move into my grand father's apartment. Our furniture were "bought"- requisitioned is a better word - by relatives of another neighbor. Jews were fair game, they could do whatever they wanted without any recourse.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was that your mother's father?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, he was actually recuperating from the stroke at that time. In June 1942, my parents were deported to Theresienstadt (Teresin, a concentration camp, north of Prague, Czechoslovakia), my grand father arrived there a short time later. My father died there in August 1942, of "natural causes", whatever that means, probably dysentery, lack of medication or similar "natural" causes. My mother was deported from there to Auschwitz in January 1945.

My grand father died there in March 1943. I visited Theresienstadt recently (May 1991)and found the probable grave where my father is supposedly buried. It is a mass grave but since we know that the crematorium was not yet in operation at that time we may assume that he is buried there.

Rosemary Lawson:

I am interested in your own immigration. I do not believe we have covered that.

Kurt Fish:

Before I go into that, perhaps a few observations about U.S. immigration policy would be enlightening: The Immigration act of 1921 and 1924 set up quotas, based on the percent of the nationality, e.g. there was a big English quota and a small Hungarian quota. As previously mentioned, my wife who was born in Hungary had to wait seven years before coming here. The State department and in particular the Department of Immigration were outspokenly hostile. The consul was known to ask trick questions to exclude undesirables, e.g. they asked about your plans once you come to the United States and if you said "work" you were turned down: "We have enough unemployed". There was pressure from the Unions who feared scabs and strikebreakers. Overall, Germans and Austrians had little problems with quota numbers in contrast to Eastern Europeans.

The British closed Palestine and while they admitted relatively small numbers into England, the official attitude was negative. The few exceptions were Belgium and the Netherlands who opened their border for one weekend in August 1938, but since this came on short notice only young single people could take advantage of that. They were put into camps and had time to make their way to a final destination, in most cases to the United States. My brother-in-law was among this group. France and the Swiss were known to round'up illegal refugees and send them back to Germany. The movie "Voyage of the Damned" dealt with a similar incident right here. Some Southamerican countries were ready to admit - at the price of conversion. A classmate of mine took advantage of this. Some went to the Far East and became prisoners of the Japanese. But there was basically no large scale emigration. Contrast this, if you will, with the Hungarian revolt in 1956, when the United States admitted almost 200,000 Hungarians without any quotas. (The Displaced Persons act of 1948/50, and the McGovern-Walter act of 1952 made that possible). This could have saved a lot of lives in 1938.

Rosemary Lawson:

But you came in fairly easily.

Kurt Fish:

Once my "lost" papers were replaced there was no problem. The visa was issued in January 1939, and at the beginning of February I arrived in the United States.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you go to school after you were here?

Kurt Fish:

No. When I arrived here I knew very little English. All I did was reading the "New York Times" and reading books I was familiar with, e.g. The Three Musketeers\_, My cousin

with whom I lived forced me to speak English only. Within six months I passed a college entrance examination in English with an 88. Circumstances prevented me from going back to school until 1945.

Rosemary Lawson:

We never have established what your brother had been doing?

Kurt Fish:

My brother was a Rabbi but he always wanted to go into business, not very successfully. He was 12 years older, was born in Vienna and had gone into business administration. He worked for my uncle who had an umbrella factory, married in 1927, and they had two girls. My initial efforts after my arrival here was to bring him over. With the start of the war in September 1939, Hitler started a resettlement program to deport Jews who had no means of leaving to Poland. This should not be confused with subsequent deportation; to the death camps. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call this the first step in the "final solution". Be that as it may,

I sent my brother a telegram telling him that the affidavit was on its way. The mail man delivered it to him as he was leaving for the train station and the deportation was cancelled on the strength of that telegram. The paper work took several more months and he arrived here in February 1940. I could only obtain papers for one, his wife and daughter had to stay. I mentioned earlier that his other daughter was sent to England in May 1959. The affidavit of support was a guarantee that the immigrant would

not become a public burden. The guarantor had to prove that he was financially capable to support that person. The guarantor had to supply his tax return, bank statements, etc. and not many people were able - and more importantly - willing to do this.

By the end of 1939, I finally succeeded in finding a sponsor for my sister-in-law and niece. You may judge how ill-starred this endeavor was from the following dates: I sent the papers by air mail on December 31, 1939. The British started mail censorship in Bermuda where the plane stopped. It was kept there for three months and arrived in Vienna in April 1940. A new rule for prospective immigrants required them to show proof of transportation before a visa would be issued. Some visas were wasted because some had no means of leaving I booked passage for them on the "Volendam", a Dutch vessel. On May 10, 1940, Hitler invaded

Holland. I next booked them on the Italian SS "Rex". In June 1940, Italy entered the war and that came to naught. I even tried to have them come via Siberia and the Pacific. It became a sad joke among my family and friends. They asked what my plans were so

they would know in advance where Hitler would next invade. In the meantime my brother had arrived and as soon as the consul found this out he declared

the affidavit void and that my brother had to prove that he could support his family. He had started to work for our uncle who had opened an umbrella factory.

He gave my brother proof that he was earning forty

Dollars a week and that he even had saved three hundred Dollars.

The consul found that to be insufficient! I might add that I knew several families of four people who lived on \$25.-per week quite adequately.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was your sister-in-law still in Vienna?

Kurt Fish:

She was still in Vienna. You have to realize that this was war time and letters took a long time. My uncle gave my brother a "raise" to \$75.- with \$600.- savings and the consul still found that insufficient. It was chicanery and I wrote a letter to the Secretary of State, Cordell Hall, describing the circumstances and asking him what he considered a salary sufficient to support a wife and child. It was then about Thanksgiving 1940. In January 1941, I received a letter from the State Department that a visa will be issued. By then it was too late and she and the child had been deported to Poland. Through unusual circumstances we kept track of them until August 1942. They lived in a small town near Lublin and they were able to correspond with my parents until Pearl Harbor. The latter forwarded their letters to us and I have letters from my niece that resemble the letters of Anne Frank. They were about the same age. They lived there under rather primitive circumstances. My brother succeeded even in sending them food packages through Portugal. Once we entered the war all communications came to an end. My sister-in-law had a maid who was considered part of the family. When Hitler came the maid could no longer work for Jews and she found another job. But she kept up the correspondence with them even though this was dangerous. When I came to Vienna after the war I met this lady and that is how I found out that they stopped' writing at the end of July 1942.

Rosemary Lawson:

Now we just have you and your brother in this country.

Kurt Fish:

I mentioned earlier that the other daughter was sent to England with a pre-school children transport. These children were taken in by Jewish families. She was 5 1/2 years old, spent the war in England and came to the United States in 1946. She lives now in Philadelphia, is a grandmother many times over and is doing fine. She recently went to a reunion of the children who - were on those transports. We only found out recently what emotional turmoil she underwent being separated from her family, alone with strangers, speaking a foreign language.

Rosemary Lawson:

Now when you came to the United States, you said that you passed the College Admission examination, however, instead of go-

ing to college, you went for a job.

Kurt Fish:

I had to make a living and had to have time to find ways and means to bring my family over. I therefore postponed college and worked. My first job was at S. Klein on Union square in New York City. I had to pick up merchandise that customers dropped. I lived with my relatives in Jackson Heights, Long Island, during the first year. I moved into a rented room where I stayed until I left New York City. The job at Klein's lasted only for three months. When the season was over we were laid off. The relative I was living with then offered me a job in his dry goods store as a salesman. The store was near the garment district and we were busy only twice a day: At lunch time and after work. In between my boss went to a nearby movie to take a nap. For ten cents you could see a triple header, usually cowboy movies. He complained that the shooting woke him up. I listened to baseball games and from the description I learned the rules so that I was quite knowledgeable by the time I first went to a ball game. I heard Lou Gehring make his farewell speech at Yankee stadium. My uncle had an apartment on Grand Concourse across from the stadium. I was on the lookout for a better job and when the Jewish Refugee Committee asked whether I was willing to relocate I accepted a job offer in Philadelphia in February 1941. I learned to operate a sewing machine and was hired to make sleeves, just that one operation. It was piece work and I gradually improved my financial status. I had to join the Amalgamated Clothing Workers union. The work was seasonal, there were always weeks without work but that changed when the war started and we began making uniforms. I stayed there until I was drafted in 1945.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you become a United States citizen at that time?

Kurt Fish:

At the end of basic training, before being shipped overseas, I became a citizen. I wanted to enlist before but was turned down because I was not a citizen. I was drafted in September 1945, and took my basic training at Ft. McClellan, Alabama. This was where I first encountered the Negro problem. I also became acquainted with people from different parts of the country as well as from different economic and racial backgrounds. It was really a pressure cooker education and I began to appreciate how heterogeneous this country really is.

Rosemary Lawson:

When did you go to Europe?

Kurt Fish:

I was originally slated to go to the Pacific. They drew an arbit-

rary line across the map and anybody north of Philadelphia was assigned to the Pacific, those South went to Europe. I appealed to the commanding general of the camp to let me go to Europe and he agreed. My knowledge of languages actually helped very little. In the battalion that I was ultimately assigned to we had a soldier who was a specialist in Southeast Asiatic languages but since he came from Virginia he went to Europe. We left in March 1944, and landed in Casablanca, Marocco. From there we went by train to Oran and then by ship to Naples, Italy, to a replacement depot. I was assigned to an I & R (intelligence and reconnaissance) platoon of the 88th Division. We went on frequent patrols behind enemy lines. I was the interpreter and translator. We started a few miles West of Cassino and walked up the Italian peninsula. My unit was one of the first to enter Rome. Rome was the first Axis capital to be liberated and the reception we received was unbelievable. We continued North to the Arno river and after some rest we crossed the Arno and started up the Appenines where we encountered fierce resistance. On one patrol we lost our way and were spotted by the Germans at daylight. I was hit by a sniper and the wound was not serious but good enough to get me out of the infantry. After recuperating in a hospital near Rome I was reassigned to a Postal Directory unit. We were located at Allied Headquarters at Caserta, not far from Naples. We had card files of everybody in the theatre of operations and we had to find soldiers whose address had changed, be it transfer, wounded, killed, or any other reason. This was interesting detective work. We had 10,000 John Smith in our files and it took a lot of deductive reasoning to find the proper person. I worked there from November-1944 to March 1945. I noticed a new unit nearby: Military government, (Austria). I found out that this was the nucleus of the future Austrian occupation force. I applied and was accepted. I was in technical intelligence and we were charged with supervising the demobilization and disarmament of the German forces in the U.S. zone. We first went to Salzburg and in August 1945, we established headquarters in Vienna. And so I came back to Vienna, literally a "conquering hero". My mood was, however, far from exuberant because by that time the "final solution" and all it entailed was known and any hope that any of my family had survived was dashed.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you visit your old home? Was it well kept?

Kurt Fish:

Vienna was bombed and there were a lot of damaged streets and houses. My house was intact but there was only one former neighbor who recognized me. When the Russians entered Vienna they looted and raped and generally terrorized the people. They put them on 250 calories rations and people literally died from hunger. They just collapsed in the street. This, however, failed to give me satisfaction even though they richly deserved it. It would not bring the dead back and I was disgusted when the Viennese claimed that they did not know what Hitler did to the Jews.

The files, however, were intact and they showed that my parents were deported to Theresienstadt, a small town North of Prague that the Germans used as a showplace to demonstrate how "humanely" they treated the inmates. My grandfather arrived there shortly thereafter - July 1942 and he died there on March 3, 1943. My mother was deported from there to Auschwitz on January 23, 1945. My father died in Theresienstadt of "natural causes" on August 18, 1942, probably from dysentery, typhus or similar "natural" causes. As I mentioned earlier, he is presumed to be buried in one of the mass graves.

I returned to the United States in February and we were married in April 1946, and lived in Philadelphia. I mentioned earlier that I had taken a class in General Chemistry before joining the army in 1945. This enabled me to go back to Temple University because I could claim that the war had interrupted my studies. Schools were filled beyond capacity at that time because the G.I. Bill enabled the discharged soldiers to go to school. The amount of time you received support depended on your length of service. I had slightly less than 2 1/2 years of service so I had to graduate within that time period. Temple was not familiar with the Central European school system so they did not give any college credit. I went day, night, and summer to classes. I also eventually succeeded in taking tests, e.g. they would not give credit for German literature even though I had Majored in that. They agreed to a test and the professor asked me to read a certain page in "Faust". I recited it by heart and he quickly saw that there was no sense going on. In one semester I took 38 credits or double the normal. I majored in chemistry because I realized that it would not be realistic to continue Medicine. Even if I were to obtain the financial support I would be nearly 40 years old before I could earn a living. By the summer of 1948,

I lacked only 1 point for graduation and I started to apply for a job. I soon found out that the welcome mat was not exactly out. The answers I received were monotonously the same. Sorry, but no dice. I soon found out that Jews were not exactly welcome in the industry. The only positive answer came from the Civil Service and I accepted a job as a research chemist at Frankfurt Arsenal in Philadelphia. I worked in instrument lubricants for the Army. My wife worked as a registered nurse in the Graduate hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. We stayed there until the end of 1959, when I found another job at Wright-Patterson Air Force base in Dayton, Ohio. I worked there on polymer research for the Air Force and we stayed there until retirement. My wife became the head nurse at the Coronary Care Unit at Good Samaritan hospital. In April 1976, three months before my planned retirement, I had a heart attack and by-pass surgery. Shortly after our meetings regarding the holocaust interviews - November 1978- we moved to Florida. We have three children, our oldest daughter lives in Dayton, our son lives in Cleveland and our other daughter lives near us in Deerfield Beach.

Since we were covering my family I would like to add an interesting story about an uncle of mine. I referred to him earlier in connection with the papers that my brother needed. He was the umbrella manufacturer and he was rich. He owned the largest um-



rella factory in Europe and exported, particularly to England. He, therefore, had a permanent English visa because he went there frequently. It so happened that he and his daughter were in England when Hitler came to Austria. She stayed in London and went to the U.S. later on. My uncle, however, had to return to Vienna. A few weeks later he was called during lunch at his home and told not to return to the factory. The Gestapo (secret police) had come looking for him. He immediately left home in shirt sleeves, without saying good bye and went to the airport. He took a plane to Berlin which was leaving within the hour. He knew that this plane stopped in Prague. When they approached Prague he pretended to be sick and asked for a doctor. He then took the next flight to London and arrived there without clothes and money. He was by then about 55 years old. His wife followed him later and they arrived in the United States about four weeks before I did. I had to give him a tie, the very same he had given me as a gift. About four weeks later I visited him at lunchtime in an umbrella factory in Brooklyn where he had found a job. He was drawing on his lunch bag and I asked him what he was doing. He replied that he was laying out his factory. I thought he had lost his mind. Suffice it to say that six months later he did have his factory, selling umbrellas to all the famous department stores, Macy's, Gimbels, etc. end this with broken English. His wife had a set of ear rings which he used as collateral for a loan and by the time the war ended he was again a rich man. He also died of a heart attack in 1948. What he accomplished, however, was unbelievable.

Rosemary Lawson:

What were you able to bring with you? Did the Nazis rob you of anything before coming to the United States?

Kurt Fish:

Not really. I had to declare everything down to shoe laces and they inspected it but the only thing they did not let me take was my violin. Since I could not take any money with me - \$10.-was all they permitted - I took extra clothing and underwear with me. I still have some handkerchiefs that I brought with me. I left on January 26, 1939, and after a few days in Paris, arrived here on February 9, at 9.30 pm. It was like a fairy tale, Manhattan all lit up, an unforgettable sight. The first year I lived with my relatives in Jackson Heights, L.I. then I rented a room nearby until I left for Philadelphia in 1941. New York City is a wonderful town but you have to have money to enjoy it. My income during the first year was \$15.- per week. If I managed it carefully I could afford an occasional movie.

Rosemary Lawson:

You were talking about leaving your violin and you mentioned about your musical education. Had you actually played with a group?

Kurt Fish:

Not really. I learned to play the violin but was too lazy to

practise. Music is, however, a very important part of my life. I could not imagine life without music. My stereo is on eight hours a day.

Rosemary Lawson:

What about here, do you have a very close association with the synagogue here?

Kurt Fish:

We were more active while the kids were smaller. We are still members.

Rosemary Lawson:

Your children had religious training?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, they did. In retrospect it was not very successful. My daughter's children in Dayton are attending a Jewish day school. So there is hope. I have been and still am largely asocial. I have few friends and they are carefully selected. My faith in mankind has been somewhat shaken and my general outlook is that you have to be proven innocent. My friends are not all Jews. In any case, people are not my most favored avocation. And speaking of avocation: I paint, I write, I have translated some German poetry into English.

Rosemary Lawson:

I am interested in whether or not you have been back to Europe?

Kurt Fish:

Several times. We travel a lot. I like the 3M: Music, mountains, and museums. I take pictures and then I paint some of them. The Austrians have not changed, incidentally. They are just as antisemitic as ever. We have been there several times. I like to go there to revisit the area where I spent my youth. There is no one there whom I would care to contact, just memories.

I would like to complete the picture with the experiences of my wife's family. She had one brother and I mentioned earlier that he went to Belgium on that weekend in August 1938, when they let everybody in. Their mother who remained in Vienna went to the U.S. Consulate and copied from U.S. telephone books people's addresses who had the same name as she, Strauss. She wrote many letters in which she asked for help in her son's behalf. A couple in Cleveland went to the Jewish Family Service at: about the same time and asked what they could do. Their name was not Strauss but someone had given one of the letters to the Family Service and so it came about that the mother's letter writing campaign was successful and this couple brought my brother-in-law over. The mother herself was not that lucky for she was under the Hungarian quota. She finally went to Auschwitz. My wife's uncle who lived in Hungary was sent to Dachau (concentration camp near Munich), he survived and is still alive at 94 years! He had

twin sons who were sent to Auschwitz as part of the notorious genetic experiments which Dr. Mengele conducted. They were spared by a miracle and after the liberation in 1945, they walked from there to Southern Hungary where their home was and where they were ultimately reunited with their father. His wife and daughter died in Auschwitz as did several other family members. The twins were 12 years old at that time.

Inasmuch as I may be considered an expert on Antisemitism I would like to add my opinion on that subject: There are several kinds of antisemitisms and they vary in their manifestations. There is, foremost, the brutal kind that results in beating and killing, there is a social-economic kind that results in discrimination, there is a xenophobic antisemitism which is hostile because the Jews are "different", and there is a political antisemitism which uses the issue to promote various, goals, such as the Soviet Union used to curry favor with the Arabs or that by black and other demagogues. From my personal observations I have concluded that the major cause of the brutal kind is the teaching by the Church of deicide, that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. This was retracted by Vatican II, but this and the blood libel, that Jews killed Christian children at Passover in order to drink their blood contributed chiefly to the Pogroms. It is worthy of note that these Pogroms took place in predominantly Catholic and Orthodox areas where these tenets were preached. Even within Germany which is split into Catholic and Protestant regions the former were considerably more virulent. The same applies to Czechoslovakia where the Catholic Slovakia region was more hostile. There are exceptions and foremost among them is Italy, a totally

Catholic country without any significant antisemitism. The Protestant antisemitism was mostly a socio-economic phenomenon, e.g. you can't live here, work here, go to school here, etc. It was common experience for Jewish children in the United States to be called "Christkillers" and beaten up if they ventured into the wrong neighborhood. It is interesting to note that no Jews are necessary to have antisemitism. In the Army we had "tentbuddies", i.e. each soldier carried one half of a pup tent so that it required

two to put it up. My buddy came from South Carolina and by his own admission had never seen or met a Jew in his life. This did not prevent him from hating them.

He would not at first believe me that I was Jewish because I was not "typical". "If all Jews were like you there would not be any antisemitism", was a standard remark I often heard. There are countries today that are without any sizeable Jewish population where antisemitism is pervasive, nonetheless, Poland being a prime example. The Soviets used antisemitism as a political weapon, calling it euphemistically antizionism. American educational institutions abound in instances where it is politically correct to be antisemitic but aside from religious and social reasons there is one more important cause

for the perpetuation of antisemitism: Prior to the Industrial Revolution the Western world was agrarian. Originally only land owners

had the vote in this country. The Jews, however, could not own land and were forced to live in Ghettos. This was an urban society and there the Jews acquired urban skills. This put them, when the rest of the world followed suit, in the forefront and is the reason why their record in science, finance and other urban skills

is so out of proportion to their numbers. They were at it longer. Almost fifty percent of the German Nobel Prize winners were Jews,

at least by Hitler's standard which did not recognize conversions. The presidents of Princeton, Dartmouth and Harvard are Jews which is remarkable when you consider that fifty years ago Jews had problems with being admitted to these schools. There is, however, a negative side to this coin. The agrarian world did not appreciate these skills, so alien to their way of life. The stereotype of the city slicker was born and the comparison to Judas who sold the

Lord for thirty pieces of silver was easily made. The immensity of the Holocaust shocked the world and created a feeling of guilt which indirectly led to the creation of the state of Israel. But with time this feeling of guilt is slowly fading. As a result, fewer people will remember and that raises the possibility of a repetition. There actually was another holocaust which, while not rivaling ours numerically, exceeded it in brutality. In 1648, the Kossacks staged a series of pogroms in the Ukraine. Thousands were slain in the most inhuman fashion, only one example should suffice. The belly of a pregnant woman was ripped open, the fetus torn out and a cat was sown in which naturally tried to bite its way out. This was witnessed and reported by a priest and was by no means unique. The possibility of pogroms is not as far-fetched as it may seem. All it needs is a big depression with a lot of desperate people and a demagogue who can take advantage of the situation just as Hitler did.

One word about revisionists: These are people who deny the existence of the Holocaust or, at the very least, reject the six million figure. Instead, they say: "at most there were 500,000 killed." These people are pseudo-Nazis, i.e. they espouse the Nazi philosophy while inwardly cringing at the immensity of the Holocaust. They, therefore, try to deny it or, at least keep it within -what is for them - respectable limits. I call them pseudo-Nazis because no real, dyed-in-the-wool Nazi would ever deny what was 'the Führer's greatest achievement. Eichmann did not, Barbie did not, on the contrary, they boasted of it and regretted that they could not complete the job. The revisionists would have been summarily shot had they 'lived under Hitler who would have considered them traitors.

## HOLOCAUST HISTORY

Date of Interview: November 3, 1978

History Given By: Mr. Kurt Fish

Finished: August 19, 1989

Transcribed by: R. K. Feist

*Typed by Maureen Barash.*

### Rosemary Lawson:

This is an interview with Kurt Fish at his home at 4924 Broadbush in Dayton, Ohio.

### Kurt Fish:

I am 61 years old. I was born in Vienna, Austria where I grew up. My family had lived there for quite some time. I had one brother who was much older than I. He left home when I was 12 1/2 years old. Therefore, I lived alone with my parents. I left Vienna on January 26, 1939 and came directly to the United States, where I had many relatives. Perhaps, I should point out that my grandfather had two brothers who emigrated to the United States in the 1890's. My grandfather stayed in Vienna. One of these granduncles came to visit us in 1932 and he wanted to take me to the United States with him. He said, "What are you doing here? Come to the United States. Life is much better there." I told him: "Let me finish my studies and when I graduate I will be glad to come to the U.S.." So my plans were already set ultimately to come to the United States when Hitler came and the occurred. I simply wrote him a card which said: "Now is the time to send for me", which meant send me the affidavit. The events apparently so upset him that eight weeks later he died of a heart attack. A delay occurred until one of his children sent me the affidavit. That got consciously misplaced at the American consulate. There was a vice-consul there who sold quota numbers (would be immigrants were issued entry visas according to a quota as per the law of 1921, revised in 1927, which set yearly immigration quotas to the United States depending on national origin) for money. Mine was amongst the application papers, so I was waiting to hear from the consulate, i.e., to be called for an interview. That call never came until the end of December, 1938, nearly six months after I applied. Then I finally got an appointment, which means that I stood in line for a whole day to get in. When it was found that my papers were amongst other similar papers, this vice-consul was punished, but he transferred to Naples. This was how he was punished for taking in thousands of dollars, which people paid him to get quota numbers. That delayed my coming to the United States until January, 1939.

Rosemary Lawson:

Then you came alone and your parents stayed?

Kurt Fish:

I came alone. My parents never made it. That is another of the ironies of the events. Just two days ago, somebody called this radio station -you know, the ones where you have the talk shows - WAVI. I listen to this station only when I am in the car on short trips. Somebody wanted to know: How come that the European Jews could not take care of the German and Polish and Russian Jews, those who had been overrun by Hitler, after the war, why did they have to go to Israel. That is what someone wanted to know. As a natural reaction, I called in - I normally do not on something like that, but from the reaction of the talk master it was evident that he had no idea either what went on during all this time and that the real crime was not primarily committed by Hitler - that it was committed by the rest of the world. That is why, subconsciously, at least in my opinion, everybody is so uptight about the Holocaust - since there is a guilt feeling in there. It is not that Hitler killed off the Jews. We have to be very cautious - I am digressing a little here but it is a point which is very close to my heart, about Hitler's actions. Hitler's actions against the Jews consisted of two parts: pre-Pearl Harbor and post-Pearl Harbor. Between 1933 and 1941 there was no organized killing of Jews. It was harassment, mistreatment -all kinds of stuff making their living harder, even impossible, however, there was no official organized killing. The killing first came after Hitler first realized that the rest of the world would not absorb them. He made every effort - and I am emphatic on that - every effort to let them go, if they had a place to go. He tried to send them to Madagascar. There was a project that he had set up where he would take all the Jews of Germany, put them on German boats and drop them off in Madagascar. I do not know, but it was a serious project which Hitler considered at that time. Uganda and some other places were being considered. He just wanted them out. Another point, which people overlook, is the Prussian spirit. What people do not realize is that the Germans treated their own people, those who were in the Army, or in the prison, just as harshly as he treated the Jews. It was a common Prussian trait, like some of the Marine Sargeants in Paris Island, for instance, to be overzealous. The minutest infraction is punished out of proportion with the crime, even misdemeanor. So this was a normal trait, it just naturally was allowed to run its course, no one would stop that. No one appeared to realize that you are not dealing here with soldiers or strong people, but with people of all kinds of walks of life. Some of them were weak physically, emotionally, etc. And they were mistreated, however, not by the standards applied by Hitler's followers. You see the soldier in the boot camp was treated in the same way; so this is a point to be considered. Only after Hitler realized that there is not another way to get rid of the

Jews, the "Final Solution" was derived at. Hitler stated: "Now you did not solve the problem, so I will solve it my way." Then, however, without defending him in any form or shape, the simple war economy came into being: "I have no food for my own people, so I will have no food for these people." So they did not "waste" any on them and kept it all. That is as simple as it was; it was just a problem of logistics. Of course, there was the anti-Semitism and the hatred; but that was only the frosting on the cake. The main problem was that he had a segment of the population that he had no use for and "they had to go" because the war effort came first. This is basically what happened to the "Final Solution."

Rosemary Lawson:

Don't you feel sometimes though that, even the "Final Solution" took precedence over the war effort?

Kurt Fish:

For some fanatics, surely. Goebbels, Eischmann, and Hitler and Himmler - for them surely! This became a primary "raison d'être", surely. It took precedence over all the things, including the war effort. However, there, again, this was a religious fervor.

Rosemary Lawson:

This came later on, didn't it?

Kurt Fish:

It was the development of at least a thousand years of teaching by the church. It was a problem which existed not only in Germany, but also all over Europe. The problem was simply that the King, or the secular ruler, versus the church. The secular ruler has use for Jews, the church used them as a pawn, and the secular ruler had to pay off the church to leave them alone. If they owed too much money to the secular ruler, they were persecuted in order to get rid of them. That went on throughout Spain and France and Germany and Austria in earlier times, and in the other countries also. It started with the coming of Islam to Southwestern Europe in Spain (in the 8th century) and washed over Europe to the farthest point of Russia. Even today it is being slowly regurgitated against the remnants. However, I digressed.

Rosemary Lawson:

Yes, let me get to facts. Did you finish your education in Austria?

Kurt Fish:

No, I didn't. I was on my way. I was at the time in my first year of medical school.

Rosemary Lawson:

Were you already married then?

Kurt Fish:

No. We had been high school sweethearts. We were both in medical school. That stopped just about immediately when Hitler came in on March 13, 1938 and I never went back to school anymore.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was she able to leave Austria at the same time you did?

Kurt Fish:

Yes. She left Austria about the same week I did and went to England. She got some sort of an arrangement to go into nursing since England needed nurses. They made some exceptions. Maybe I should say a few words at this point about the policies which the various European countries had, as far as the Jews were concerned. Who allowed whom in and where, if you believe this to be pertinent to the Oral History Project.

Rosemary Lawson:

It is probably covered in general letters here, but in this we might be more interested in your specific experiences.

Kurt Fish:

I realize this. However is this some information that you have in the general literature? I truly doubt that this is available, at least, to my knowledge since I read just about everything which is available. If you want it for general research this might well be worth it. Let me give you some examples. First of all nobody let anybody in. One notable exception was in early August of 1938, the Netherlands and Belgium, in unison, opened up their borders for one week-end. That was Friday at five o'clock. Due to the suddenness of the action, it came with only two days notice, only youngsters who could pack a rucksack and take off took advantage of that. An example was a brother-in-law of mine. A brother of my wife's. Aside from that, I repeat, nobody let anybody in. It got to the point where France, in raids, pick up illegal immigrants and sent them right back to the Gestapo (Geheime - Stats -Polizei, i.e., the Secret Police which was in charge of the camps). They notified them in advance. "Wait for us. We are bringing Jews back to you." This happened all over. Switzerland did more or less the same thing, maybe not as blatantly as France - but their actions were well known. There were certain South American countries, this was researched also .....which let you in after conversion. They said: "We have plenty of room for Christians, but not for Jews." There was a former classmate of mine who came home one day;



he met me in the street and laughingly showed me a cross he was wearing and said: "Look, I am a goy" (the slang expression for a non-Jew) a Gentile!" I said: "What happened?" He said he was going to, I believe, Ecuador. Of course it was a big joke for him because the moment he got there the entire thing was forgotten. (This type of "utilitarian conversion" has been used in the Spanish provinces during the times of the Inquisitions on and contrasted to the NAZI demand that you produce the name of at least three Christian grandparents, not to be considered a Jew. However, the Inquisition, burned at the stake, Moslems or Jews or Pagans, who returned to their former religion after baptism). This will give you an idea what the atmosphere was.

Rosemary Lawson:

How did your wife get to England then?

Kurt Fish:

My wife got to England strictly on that basis. I had an uncle and an aunt who went to England to work as butler and maid. They issue a small number of Service Contracts to cover the requirements of whatever they needed.

Rosemary Lawson:

Your wife was willing to train as a nurse?

Kurt Fish:

She was willing to train as a nurse. They took her in and put her into a hospital and she became a nurse. She spent the war in England and after the war, due to my efforts, & those of my brother-in-law, who, in the meantime was also in the United States, she came to the U.S.

Rosemary Lawson:

Let me go back, since I do not believe we have established how long your family had lived in Austria and what your Father and Mother had been doing.

Kurt Fish:

Let me go back to that. That is another chapter. I was born in Austria in 1917. My parents lived there twenty to thirty years prior to that.

Rosemary Lawson:

In Vienna?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, in Vienna. They had originally come from an area which, under Hitler, was Poland, but which today is Russia. It was the eastern part of the Austrian Empire (Poland had been taken apart and recreated several times - in 1772, 1793, 1795, and between Napoleonic times and 1919 between Russia, Prussia, and Austria). As far as I can gather from my roots, my ancestors from my Father's side - probably my great, great grandfather - they came from Russia, another lived in Rasenlick, on the Russian-Austrian border (I am not at all certain that the spelling here is even close to the geographic name). Apparently, they just crossed the border and stayed there. The next one, there was some transition into Rumania from part of the family. I was not able to pinpoint all this down because no one truly kept records. This comes from hearsay and from stories. Then my Father came to Vienna, in the 1890's.

Rosemary Lawson:

What did your Father do in Vienna?

Kurt Fish:

My Father was a businessman. He was for the longest time a stockbroker. He actually had a seat at the Vienna stock exchange. He later changed his occupation to wholesale meats - you know at the end of World War I economic conditions in Austria were chaotic. There no longer was an organized stock exchange. He stayed in wholesale meats for a while and then ended up in a bank.

Rosemary Lawson:

So he was able to constantly have a prosperous life?

Kurt Fish:

I would not call it prosperous life. I would say that it was adequate. I mean that we had the necessities, which in Europe included a maid and going, on occasion, to a place in the country. However, we were not able to make big jumps and nothing like that. Now I had a very rich uncle who was a millionaire, even by today's standards; that hardly affected us in a substantial way. Maybe he gave me some pocket money occasionally.

Rosemary Lawson:

You were talking about an education...You had schooling?

Kurt Fish:

I could go to any school I wanted to and which I felt I needed. I went to a Jewish High School. Hebrew was taught as well the Talmud and other similar subjects.

Rosemary Lawson:

You did, therefore, have a specific religious training.

Kurt Fish:

I came from a strictly religious, orthodox Jewish house. I was brought up that way. I went to synagogue every Friday night and Saturday. In retrospect, I must say I went of my own free will; no one had to send me. What attracted me was the singing. Music always had a great appeal for me. I had friends and classmates singing in the choir. I was always attracted by beautiful voices in the choir, and the cantor had a good voice. There also were some nice musical programs, as they do in show business.

Rosemary Lawson:

However, you and your family had an active part.

Kurt Fish:

Oh yes! There was no question about that. In our circle, there was nothing but strict orthodox behavior, amongst all the Jews we knew.

Rosemary Lawson:

I would like to talk to you about your other relationship with Gentiles.

Kurt Fish:

Of course, Gentiles got used to anti-Semitism almost with Mother's milk. This was a way of life which started in the early 1020's. I sort of grew up with the NAZI (National Sozialistische Partei = Hitler's party which stood for National Socialism party) movement.

Rosemary Lawson:

That party was very strong in Austria?

Kurt Fish:

It had been my experience, at that time, that the strength was mainly For Catholics. Austria was about ninety-six percent Catholic. You went - and I did, even under Hitler in the thirtieth - to visit relatives in Germany. When you came in a Protestant area, it was noticeable that amongst the population, that spontaneously expressions of the hatred was much more subdued, as compared to Catholic areas. It all came down again to the teachings of the Church. I can read chapter and verse about it here in the copy of Mein Kampf (Hitler's political philosophy and program which was written down while Hitler was a political prisoner after the failed coup d'état in Munich, in the early twentieth), where Hitler credited the Parish Priest as the most important person in his younger days. The Parish Priest had the greatest influence upon his subsequent development. It is very true and I am very familiar with the situation because I moved in these circles. I actually participated in church services because I knew Latin and our Parish priest utilized me to translate the hymns which they were singing into German so that the "thunderheads should know what they are singing." That is a quotation from what he said, not my expression. Therefore, I was truly familiar with the situation. The way the service was set up - it was the duty, not an optional thing, that the greeting in school was "blessed be Jesus Christ" and the mandatory answer was "amen". Everyone was to use that greeting and response. Of course, in Austria, religious instruction was mandatory. Each religion had its own instructions, that for our school meant nothing but Catholic instruction for which there was a priest and Jewish instruction since the school was in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. The 2nd and the 20th District in Vienna were predominantly Jewish. They happened to be located on an island between the Danube and the Danube Canal. The Danube Canal had been dug to relieve flooding. That island was called the "Matza-Island" for our unleavened bread. This is where the Viennese Jews were concentrated.

Rosemary Lawson:

This was a public school?

Kurt Fish:

Oh yes. That was the obligatory greeting in the public school which had to be used by the Jew and the non-Jew alike. If you did not use this greeting you layed yourself open for punishment. The priest always looked out for some infraction of the rule. He was just waiting for it. I am again digressing but that appears to be inevitable - but the situation was that we were taught in school, as had been done for at least a thousand years, that these were the people who killed Christ. This was drilled into each child from the time they were nursing on. Therefore, it became second nature

The story which was quite common when I came here in 1939-40 and which was used as a title of a book was: Some of My Best Friends Are Jews, was the veiled excuse of the anti-Semites. You know that the fellow denies being an anti-Semite because "some of his best friends are Jews."

Rosemary Lawson:

You felt this very strongly, but did it present a problem getting into medical school?

Kurt Fish:

No. You see this is the difference between the educational systems. If we get on that subject I can talk about it another entire day. But, there at least, there was no such thing as we have here to apply to get in. If you had the "Certificate of Maturity" (the Matura), which was the graduation from high school, you automatically had to be admitted to any school where you wanted to go. There was no question whether they were full or not -they had to take you. That is why a lot of Jews came down from Poland and Czechslovakia and other countries where discrimination was the order of the day. The Jews came, penniless, and went to school there because they were admitted without any questions. They had to pay three times as much as Austrians did - we payed only a nominal amount like \$15.00 a semester or a similarly minute fee, since the schools were state supported. Once in school the foreign students could support themselves by tutoring. They came to school in Vienna and they lived, at least some of them, marginally but happy because there was no question of admittance. Today, I understand that that has changed because the city has grown and now they are limited by how many people can get in. However, at that point, there was no question about getting in, if you wanted to get in.

Rosemary Lawson:

The anti-Semitism did not enter into this?

Kurt Fish:

It did not. Once you entered, however, you were exposed to teachers who made no secret about their dislikes and openly spoke excathedra about the problem they had to associate with Jews. You can also imagine that the tests were properly tougher for the Jews than for the others. I would say that about one-third of the teachers were virulently anti-Semitic. Some others were also anti-Semitic, but they did not let it influence their grades and their daily give and take.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you have any direct contact after Hitler came in? Was that discrimination greater or less?

Kurt Fish:

Of course. They all came out of the woodwork! Before that individuals did as they wanted to, now out of fear of being left behind - you see discrimi-

nation was now the order of the day - they all did it. Actually, there weren't that many NAZI's around, now tht the Anschluss (official name for the incorporation of Austria into Greater Germany) was an accomplished fact they all fell into line because they knew that any laggards would be punished. You know, they all wanted to have a piece of the pie. So, all of the sudden everybody was pro-NAZI, if for no other reason, but for self-preservation. This pragmatism has always been a trait in Austria - every body was singing the song of whoever was in power. You know - "to get along."

Rosemary Lawson:

So your own life became much more difficult.

Kurt Fish:

Our lives became almost impossible. The moment Hitler got in, raids against the Jews became almost the order of the day. Of course, there had been an election campaign which Hitler interrupted. Chancellor Schuschnigg and his Austrian government were opposed to the Anschluss: they campaigned for a mandate on the plebiscite under: "Are you Austrians or are you Germans?" Hitler stopped that plebiscite because he knew he would not win and imposed the Anschluss by force. Unfortunately, the Jews supported the Austrian government rather heavily with money. After all their lives were at stake. So one of the first things the Germans did when they came in was to put up posters and a lot of grafitti on the walls. The next thing was that they knocked on doors and drafted whoever opened the doors to clean that up. This was, of course, done with some harsh treatments and excesses depending on the nature of the "knocker", and the enthusiasm with whomever did the clean up. I was caught and I went to a big monument on which they had written election slogans. I had to wash this off- rub it off is a better way of putting it.

Rosemary Lawson:

They had just knocked on the door and just "drafted" you?

Kurt Fish:

Not knock on the door - they broke the door down. That was their exhuberance.

Rosemary Lawson:

How old were you then?

Kurt Fish:

At the time I was twenty. The order of the day became: Raids with arbitrary arrests of Jews... In the middle of the day, they could stop a trolley car and go through it and whoever could not prove that he was Aryan was taken off. Of course, after a while everyone ran around with a swastika in his lapel because of that. Of course, Jews did not do that because that was a death penalty if they found a Jew with a swastika on him.

Rosemary Lawson:

If you left home, you could never be positive what was going to happen?

Kurt Fish:

That is right. You never knew if you were going to come back. Let me come back to what I was saying earlier, as an example. My brother's brother-in-law was a businessman. He had a dry goods store way out in an outlying district. He was picked up in one of these raids. He took the trolley car to work and they stopped it. They took him off and sent him to Dachau (the notorious concentration camp about ten miles outside of Munich). He was at Dachau from about May 1938 on. His wife, in the meantime, who had relatives in the United States, secured affidavits for them, from that they got the U.S. visa, he was taken out of the concentration camp to the American consulate underground, he picked up his visa on his passport - the passport had been supplied to him in the concentration camp by the Gestapo. So he was taken to the United States consulate, put on the train so we met on the same boat, the SS Queen Mary on our way to the United States. It just so happened that by sheer luck that we were on the same boat and that was the first time I had seen him in eight months. I want to stress the point that if you had a place to go, you could go.

Rosemary Lawson:

You are coming back to your original point.

Kurt Fish:

Yes, back to my original point. However, the raids went on almost continuously after the Anschluss. I happened to be in a very good position. First and foremost, my next door neighbor was a high ranking Nazi, but he was not the rabble type; he was idealistic. He had been in Austria illegally since years earlier. The Schuschnigg government had outlawed communists and Nazis - more or less all political parties with foreign connections. Actually they had

set up concentration camps for them. So he had been under danger of being exposed and I knew about it and never gave him away. He was a decent fellow who then did repay me - by warning me. He was high up in the Nazi hierarchy because he had been a party member for a long time...so he knew about forthcoming raids. He would knock on my door, about 10:00 p.m., to say: "Kurt, do not stay home tonight." Then I took off and spent the night in a public garden, or walk the streets, or whatever. They did not bother the older people all that much. When I came back I found out that, sure enough, they had been there.

Rosemary Lawson:

So they did not bother your parents?

Kurt Fish:

They did not bother my parents too much. They were pretty much looking for young people with whom they could have fun. You see it would not do any good to hit an old man and he collapses, that is not much fun. So I got by a lot of times. A lot of times we had dates. I called my wife, then my girlfriend, "it is a good idea not to stay at home tonight, let's go to the park or wherever else..." That is how we managed to survive. It was almost a day to day question of survival of the fittest. Then came, of course, what is commonly known as the Krystall Nacht; that November 10th, when they killed that Von Radt, that German attache at the legation in Paris (all the Synagogues and shops owned by Jews were torched, Jewish homes raided, Jews arrested, and all the glass broken).

Rosemary Lawson:

Was that only in Berlin or was that all over?

Kurt Fish:

This was all over the country. It was everywhere. The fellow who killed Von Radt was a little Polish Jew whose parents had been deported and tortured. Hitler used that as an excuse to make an example to "teach the world a lesson" as to what would happen if German lives were threatened. During the Krystall Nacht they burned and wrecked most, if not all, the Synagogues and Temples within Germany and Austria. There was a lot of looting going on. People were standing, and that I witnessed myself, Krystall Nacht was continued through the next day.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did this happen with your own Synagogue and your own neighborhood?



Kurt Fish:

Oh yes, yes.

I stood in the street around the corner from our apartment. Women were standing there with their aprons stretched out - women in general wore big white aprons - and people threw candle sticks and such out of windows from the upper stories. People walked away with the candlesticks, etc., just as happened during the blackout in New York City. As a matter of fact, if I could sum up the situation of the Jews under Hitler, it was very much like that of the Negroes of the South. When the Klu Klux Klan wanted to do something - the Black Man was never sure whether they would get away with their lives. The police looked the other way while the lynching or looting took place. It was all very, very, similar.

Rosemary Lawson:

Let us now stop. (This is the end of Side 1 of the Tape 1).

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you do any traveling abroad before you actually left Austria?

Kurt Fish:

Before I had left Austria, I had visited Germany. I was there the year before, in 1937. I had an aunt and an uncle living in Hanover. They were very well to do. He was a businessman. They invited me to come upon graduation from high school. I went there on the way to Paris where they were having a World's Fair in 1937. What happened in Germany was slightly different from what happened in Austria. In Austria, the emphasis was mainly on anti-Semitism with the excesses of the Nazi's compared to what they were in Germany.

Rosemary Lawson:

What do you mean by excesses?

Kurt Fish:

I mean as far as actual mistreatments were concerned. In Germany, it was a very businesslike approach. they just made life impossible for the Jews. They started making it impossible economically for them to stay. They induced them to leave. They said: "You can not stay here, go somewhere else." A lot of the Jews did just that. Now, my aunt made a trip to the United States and had the right to come back to Germany and did. So, in order to lay the groundwork for their eventual arrival here she brought a little bit over - they could not take too much along - but fur coats and stuff like that. Whatever they could put on

She left it here and then they sold it, so that they had a few dollars when they arrived here. They also sent their son over here, who at the time was about thirteen, fourteen years old and who had been beaten up several times in school by classmates. In any case, he could not stay there any longer and still go to school. They sent him ahead to the United States. He stayed in Brooklyn with a relative until they arrived. They arrived approximately when I did - about four weeks earlier than I did.

Rosemary Lawson:

But you knew what was going on although you lived in Austria?

Kurt Fish:

Well I knew because I had been there. However, I was not prepared for all the excesses which actually occurred later on in Austria. These excesses were actually joined in with enthusiasm by the population. The population was actually, potentially, anti-Semitic per se - and now they got a free reign. They felt that they were in heaven. They could do what they felt like. Before that it was common practice - not really common - but it occurred almost weekly, if not daily, that a Jew got beaten up in the streets under one or the other pretext. I almost went into a tavern to buy a glass of beer for my Father - actually the tavern was in the same house in which we lived. They had a garden in the back, where people could sit outside and drink beer and wine. I went in there to get a beer. Out of the blue sky, one of the patrons who was in there, reached over and slapped me in the face. I said: "What was that for?" He said: "That is because you are a Jew."

Rosemary Lawson:

How did he know that? Did he know you?

Kurt Fish:

He apparently knew of me. Somebody had pointed me out to him, That was enough. There was that feeling there that you were always on a powder keg. That you never knew when it was going to explode. This feeling was infused into the population. It was there all the time so that Hitler had a ready made situation. This was like the Messiah as far as they were concerned. He gave expression to what was in everybody's heart. The anti-Semitism was there all the time. What distinguished this anti-Semitism from previous anti-Semitism was that in the nineteenth century it was largely socioeconomic. It was very similar to what existed here, they, the Jews, were not allowed

to do this or that; they could not join something or other. They made it very tough in the professions, by keeping Jews out of highly regarded positions, but with all of this they trusted us. Most of them could live separate lives, there was very little mingling with the Gentile population, but they could live.

Rosemary Lawson:

In the twentieth century, of course, it was legal.

Kurt Fish:

Oh, but it was in good taste. Of course, the students were leading all the time. The high school students, that goes back hundreds of years, were always giving expressions to anti-Semitism as a matter of course. They were singing scurrilous songs about the "sau-Jude" (Jew pig) as they were going down the street without additional concern.

Rosemary Lawson:

Now in your own high school, which was predominantly Jewish, was this also true?

Kurt Fish:

Oh yes it was true. Predominantly does not mean that it was one hundred percent. There were actually, what later on become Stormtroopers (uniformed Nazi's) from my class. Some of my classmates came to school in uniforms before Nazi's were outlawed. They actually came to school in their black uniforms with weapons. They carried guns and knives (not pocket knives, but weapons). Big ceremonial knives such as the SS carried, and if the teacher said something that they did not like, they would pull out the knife and stab it in the desk. Just as if they were saying: "Teacher, I dare you to follow up on this"! You see what I mean?

Rosemary Lawson:

That was when there was still an Austria?

Kurt Fish:

That was in Austria, at a time the Nazi's were still legal. Before Schuschnigg got the law passed to make Nazi's and Communists - after that they became illegal, then they had to drop all this. However, while it was going on, it intimidated the teachers. They used it to demonstrate that they did not have to do homework, implying what they could do to the teacher with a knife and gun.

Rosemary Lawson:

When the Nazi's came into Austria, was your own home actually destroyed?

Kurt Fish:

They came, of course, and they searched and so forth. What happened was that our apartment was actually taken away from us by a neighbor, by my quote "friend" with whom I grew up. He had lived downstairs and he gave the simple excuse: "Look, if I don't take it, somebody else will. I have had my eyes on it ever since I knew". So they kicked us out.

Rosemary Lawson:

Where did you go then?

Kurt Fish:

We went to my Grandfather's. Actually I was not there anymore. This did happen actually in the week I left. My Father and my Mother were forced to move out of the apartment in which my Father had lived over thirty-five years.

Rosemary Lawson:

Were they able to take furniture and pictures?

Kurt Fish:

We had some nice furniture. That was "sold" to the relatives of another neighbor who had seen it and coveted it. So they came in and offered my parents a ridiculous price, but they had no choice but to say yes. Maybe the furniture was worth several thousand dollars and they offered one-hundred dollars for it.

Rosemary Lawson:

Your parents then had to leave the same time you left.

Kurt Fish:

My parents moved to my Grandfather's apartment. He was a very old man. His wife was actually dying at the time already. She was nearly senile by then. She died several months after I left.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was that your Mother's Father?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, incidentally, he suffered a stroke on that Krystallnacht. He went to Services. You must realize that for Religious Jews services come first. Hitler meant nothing to them. In the morning, in the midst of the riots, the Religious Jews went to Services. He actually made it to the Services That was a miracle. However, on the way back, he was spotted and he was chased by some youngsters. He was over seventy at that time. He ran, and even ran up the stairs, then he collapsed with a stroke. He was completely paralyzed. He no longer had any speech or anything else. He just gradually recovered in the month after I left.

Rosemary Lawson:

I would like you to continue with the story about your parents and your grandfather.

Kurt Fish:

Yes, but I wanted to make some points about the immigration policy of the United States. It consisted of a quota system, which quota system was not very equitable. No-one at that time did anything about it. What I wanted to point out was that there, also nothing was done to facilitate the immigration of these people, as a matter of fact, everything was done to hinder it. Let me give you some examples. The Commissioner of Immigration was the most outspoken anti-Semite in this country. His name was Breckenridge Long. He did everything in his power to make it as tough as possible for Jews to come to the United States. It was a well known fact, and when you went to the consulate you were warned about it from friends who had gone through the mill, that they were going to ask you: "What are you planning to do when you get to the United States?" Those naive persons which said: "Work, of course," , were automatically excluded. When asked for a reason the reply was: "We have enough unemployed. We don't need you". I was in a very good position because all I had to say was the truth; I wanted to go back to school. As a student I was welcomed. You know there was nothing wrong with that. So, I passed, but a lot of my friends got turned down because they simply said: "Work". So they put all kinds of handicaps out for the people. What I wanted to get at was that in 1956, when the Hungarian thing happened, the country opened its doors, all of a sudden to the poor Hungarians who were persecuted (by then the Immigraton Act of 1921 and 1924, the Quota Laws, had been changed by the Displaced Persons Acts of 1948 and 1950 and the Immigration and Naturalization Acts of 1952, that was the McGovern-Walter Act). What happened in 1952 is that Congress lifted the quotas and they let in One Hundred Fifty Thousand people, including a good many Nazis amongst them. To my way of thinking there was a lot of extreme right, to say the least, element amongst the people who were admitted in 1952. That, of course, is besides the point and I am just contrasting this with the earlier set-up. The reason is very simple and very

economical. In the thirty's, you had a depression. President Roosevelt would have liked to do something because of political reasons. His wife was concerned about suffering humanity. He was concerned about votes. Let us give credit where credit is due and take it away from where it is not due. However, pressure from the Unions was such - that included Jewish controlled unions such as the Garment Workers - that they did not want to let in any more workers. Of course, it was a short-sided policy, because the more people come in, the more jobs they provide for others. They have to have food, etc... But that was the policy at that time: "Don't let them in, they are scabs and they are competition for us." So the policy was not changed. It was consciously made very, very tough. I want to give you one example out of my own family. I came here - and as I said - we had a great number of close relatives - some of them were even influential. A cousin of mine was a Commissioner of Education for the State of New York -this was the son of the man who came to visit us back in the early Thirty's. This man had eleven children, everyone of them graduated from college. There was this Commissioner of Education, there was the ranking Social Security Officer in New York, there was a lawyer, and a doctor, etc.

Rosemary Lawson:

When you talked about coming in. You came in fairly easily.

Kurt Fish:

Once my papers were found, there was no problem.

Rosemary Lawson:

What about your Father and Mother? You thought they might have come.

Kurt Fish:

Yes, but they were prevented from that because they were put under the Polish Quota (because of the places where they had been born, then being located in Poland, as defined by the law) where there were only about three thousand people a year being admitted. They would not deviate from that and therefore there was a waiting time of five to six years.

Rosemary Lawson:

Do you think that your Mother would have left her Parents?

Kurt Fish:

Well at that point? There was truly no difference between the parents - at least my grandfather - my grandmother was already dead by then - would have

come, but again he was in the same position of the Polish Quota. My present wife - my girlfriend at the time - was under the Hungarian Quota. There were seven-hundred a year being admitted to the United States under the Hungarian Quota, with about fifty-thousand people applying. So you can see that she was waiting and she finally came in 1945, waiting her turn under the Hungarian Quota.

Rosemary Lawson:

She still came under the Quota?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, she still came under the Quota.

Rosemary Lawson:

I am interrupting, but you were saying that your grandfather had had the stroke, but he somewhat recovered from that?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, he did in the meantime, only to be sent to a camp.

Rosemary Lawson:

He was sent to a camp?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, actually my Parents and he were sent together. Actually, my parents - and I did talk to survivors of the camp, when I was there with the army of occupation - these survivors had seen them there, they had met them there. I was told, for instance, that my Father died of "natural causes", due to the lack of medication. He got dysentery, due to the lack of medication. He got dysentery, or one of the other diseases, which were prevalent in the camps. They were shipped to Theresienstadt, which was the showplace of the concentration camps. They took the Red Cross and visitors from other countries there to show how "humane" they treated the internes.

Rosemary Lawson:

What happened to your own Mother and Father interests me and I am also interested in your own immigration. I do not believe that we have covered that.

Kurt Fish:

That went pretty smooth and straight forward. In January of 1939, I went to the consulate and I got the visa. Two weeks later, since I had already

made arrangements, I left actually. I stopped in Paris for a couple of days and had a great old time. Then I simply took the Queen Mary and came over. I was received at the boat by lots of relatives. I stayed then with one of these relatives for over one year. They finally got me a job. As far as I was concerned, there were no problems.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you go to school after you were here?

Kurt Fish:

No. I did something what, at that time was a matter of course, but in retrospect was interesting. When I came here I knew very little English. I had taken French in school. We had had the choice between English and French and I chose French. When I came here all I knew was how to count and a few phrases like "hello", "good day", "good night", etc. Not much more than that. Within six months, I passed the College Entrance Examination in English with an 88 - without ever having gone to an English school. I took that examination in Brooklyn College. I did not follow up on this because I moved then. That however, is besides the point.

Rosemary Lawson:

When you actually left in January then, you left your Parents at your Grandparents home?

Kurt Fish:

Yes. They stayed there from January 1939 until June 1942. I will get this from a different approach, but now I want to come back to the immigration. I want to give you an example as to how the United States Government conducts the business. After I came, I started to drum up support to get my brother out.

Rosemary Lawson:

We never have established what your brother had been doing.

Kurt Fish:

My brother was a Rabbi, businessman. He really was a Rabbi, however, he tended to go into business all the time, against the advise of everybody. He was not very successful at his business.

Rosemary Lawson:

He had been born in Vienna?



Kurt Fish:

Yes. He got married in 1927 and they had two children. He was in business at the time. My first efforts, in the United States, were concentrated in getting him to come over. It worked out to the point that in September 1939, when the action had already started to get the Jews from Vienna to the East. That was not to the death camps, that was bonafide deportation to live in Poland as a resettlement. On September 1, 1939, Germany started the war by bombing Poland. Everything was to be fine. They took the Jews out block by block by announcing: Jews report to the train station at that and that time. (Polish resistance lasted about three weeks and by September 28th, Poland was divided for the fourth time, this time Germany taking both German and Austrian sections.) My telegram, and of course I sent it as soon as I got the affidavit for him, reached him at the last minute - that means that the letter carrier was going up the stairs as he was going down the stairs to the railroad station. He was already packed and ready to go, in order to be deported. That telegram saved him. He could go back and the moment he showed the papers that he was going to emigrate, they let him stay. I want to mention these things that should not be overlooked. They let you go when you could emigrate. So he stayed in Vienna. It took several months to get all the papers in order. I had gotten the affidavit in September and he arrived on Washington's birthday in 1940.

Rosemary Lawson:

With his family?

Kurt Fish:

No, no, alone. I could only get the papers for one. The person that gave me the affidavit had already given affidavits to fifteen other people. She said that she can not take the responsibility for more. After all the affidavit (any affidavit used for immigration to the United States) said that, "I will support these people and I will guarantee that they will not become burdens to the State". She said, "suppose these peoples cannot or will not work, I have to support them, I cannot do that to more people." So she balked about giving me any more. I had to be satisfied to just get my brother out. I also and here I want to tell a little story, which I hope the papers see. It is important to watch the dates. Let me concentrate on it so that I do not forget it. I sent to my sister-in-law, an affidavit from another person, from a friend of the family. It went out New Year's Eve of 1939-1940, in other words two months before my brother arrived here. Of course, I again sent a telegram. This was the first action by the British of mail censorship. The telegram went out on December 31, 1939. At the time there was "clipper service"

these planes, the "Yankee Clippers" stopped in Bermuda, which is British. They took off all the mail destined for Germany and censored it. It was there for three months. So it never reached her. This was the first step. You cannot say much - that was war. It eventually arrived there and everything was fine - then they found out that my brother, her husband, was here. The moment they found out that the husband was here they said that the affidavit was null and void, since the husband is the prime, responsible provider. So he had to send the affidavit. He had only started to work, however, through an uncle of ours who was now a wealthy man. He had left Austria quite penniless, but now was rich. That is a story into which we can go another time. He left on the spur of the moment because somebody tipped him off that the gestapo was on the way to arrest him. He never went back to his business; he went to the airport and utilized the permanent visa to England and he escaped that way. All he had were the clothes on his back. He had arrived here four weeks before me from England. In 1940 he had opened up a shop manufacturing umbrellas, on 28th Street and Broadway in New York City. He gave my brother papers certifying that he worked for him and that my brother was making, I believe, forty dollars per week. That was a very good salary then. He also certified that in three months, he had already saved three hundred dollars. There was a bank book to that effect, even if it was phony, because my brother did not have any money. The uncle loaned my brother the money to open the bank account. They took a picture of that and mailed it to Vienna. The consulate wrote back that this was not sufficient to support a wife and child.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was your sister-in-law still in Vienna?

Kurt Fish:

She was still in Vienna. Of course, this was war time, so these letters take weeks and even months. When my uncle heard about that, he gave him a raise and made my brother the representative for the entire New England area. The salary was now seventy-five dollars a week, which was a princely salary. They also certified that my brother had already six hundred dollars in the bank. Again the consul said that it was not enough. Again, I want to point out that consuls are made friendly to the country where he is posted, so that you have no friction. These were mainly "America Firsters", who were posted in Germany. They were pro-Hitler. They tried their level best to delay granting visas and to make it as tough as possible. When this letter came back, my patience snapped. At the time I was making twenty-five dollars a week and I considered myself very fortunate indeed. Here that consul had the impertinence to say that seventy-five dollars a week is not enough. It was out and out chicanery. I wrote a letter to Secretary of State Cordell Hull. I asked him to let me know what the Department of State considered a sufficient salary to support a wife and a child. I detailed what happened in the correspondence

with the consulate in Vienna. By then it was about November of 1940. In January of 1941, I got back a letter from the State Department stating that the Secretary of State has directed the consul in Vienna to issue a visa to Mrs. and Miss Fish. That letter reached her too late. She was on her way to Poland by then. I mean that the letter reached her but, by the time the paper work was ready, she was gone. While this exchange of letters with the consul was going on, almost a whole year went by. In order to even be considered by the consulate, at that time, you had to show proof that you had tickets for a ship to come over with. A lot of visas got lost because the person could not leave the country, and the visa lapsed. What happened was almost a daily joke. I booked a birth for her, in early 1940, on a Dutch liner - the Botendam, for that she was to go to the consulate at the end of May. On May 10, 1940, Hitler started the blitzkrieg against Holland and Belgium, so there was no more Dutch liner. Then I switched to the Rex, an Italian ship, for June. On June 10, Mussolini attacked France and Italy entered the war, so there was no Italian liner. It was a bitter joke already. My friends and relatives asked me, "who are you going to book with next, so that we can know who is going to enter the wale". So we had planned for her to go through Russia and Shanghai and have her come over the Pacific. However, all this came to nought because all the delays which went on to simply get the visa. So finally she got deported to Poland and never came back. We heard through somewhat unusual circumstances, and I have here some letters from them which should have some historic importance - they came to Poland while the death camps were already open.

Rosemary Lawson:

What about the child?

Kurt Fish:

That is it. I had mainly letters from the child. The child had been born in 1929, so she was about thirteen or fourteen years old. That story was similar to what happened to Anne Frank.

Rosemary Lawson:

Where did they go to in Poland? Did they go to a camp?

Kurt Fish:

No. They actually went to where they had a resettlement taking place. There was an area in Poland which they had reserved for Jews who were shipped there. They were dropped off there and they were left to fend for themselves. They were not very popular because the people who had been living there before the Jews came were half starved; so then there were even more people to feed.

The reason why I obtained the letters, I truly mean my brother obtained the letters, was that they had had a servant, that is my sister-in-law - in her house where my sister-in-law grew up. This servant was a Gentile maid who stayed with them ever since the children were born. That means that this maid was there more than thirty years, actually she was more like part of the family. She was obviously intensely loyal to the family. For example, for Holy Days, she sat down at the table like everybody. She was an old, grouchy, old-maid. She did business for them, she took care of packages, just anything. Of course, they were permitted to write from the resettlement to Germany, naturally, no where else. So she wrote to this maid, and she, as an Aryan, could forward the letters to us, although at considerable danger to herself, should her letters have been censored. She sent the letters without return addresses - and these letters then finally reached my brother. So he did receive a bunch of letters out of Poland, which was very unusual, since there was no direct communications, with any one who was resettled.

Rosemary Lawson:

You really do not know what actually happened.

Kurt Fish:

Oh, we have a pretty good idea. We heard from them until the summer of 1942, actually August of 1942. So, from that you can draw your own conclusion. They probably ended up in Medenica (located in the Ukraine, 49.21N, 23.45E) or in one of the other extermination camps.

Rosemary Lawson:

Were they together?

Kurt Fish:

They were together until that time. The problem was that you could not even mail them packages, at the early stages. Later on they developed some service through Portugal, where you payed here and they delivered from Portugal which, again, was a neutral country, packages to Poland. Actually they received some sardines and mostly other canned stuff, so that it would not spoil. However, once Pearl Harbor happened, all that ended. Again, to repeat my point, as far as immigration was concerned, everything was done to make it as hard as possible.

Rosemary Lawson:

Now we just have you and your brother in this country.

Kurt Fish:

One of his children, the younger one - my brother had two children - was shipped to England with one of these "Children's Actions". At that time, England took in pre-school children for a while, shortly after I left. This was in 1939 yet. In the late spring, probably May, of 1939, otherwise said a few months before the war started. This means that the British government allowed it, however, it was done through the Jewish organizations. The children were taken up individually by sponsors. This child was of pre-school age. The other was already too old to go. So she survived. She went to England and spent the war years with a family in England. After the end of the war, my brother brought her over here. She lives today in Philadelphia with her family and is doing fine.

(At this point, the transcription is confusing about the sex of the children, but both were apparently females due to the rest of the story.)

Rosemary Lawson:

Now when you came to the United States, you said that you passed the College Admission examination, however, instead of going to college, you went for a job.

Kurt Fish:

My personal experiences were simply these: I spent about two years in New York in various occupations. My first job was as a clothes picker upper. I worked in a department store to pick up the dresses which the women dropped. It was S. Klein, on Union Square in New York City, where I found the job in the first few weeks after I arrived. My job was strictly of hanging up dresses, which women had tried on and then just dropped.

Rosemary Lawson:

Were you living with relatives?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, I was living with a distant relative, with a cousin of my Mother's. She took me in. They had a room since one of their sons had died a couple of years earlier. After I started working, I paid for my upkeep. I spent one year with them. Then I moved into my own apartment. In the meanwhile I had changed jobs. I worked only three months for S. Klein, then I was unemployed, then I worked for the man with whom I lived. He had a dry goods store. I worked for him as a salesman. That was a rather interesting

experience. It got me into contact with the American public. I learned baseball there. The business was on 9th Avenue near the garment district in Manhattan, 9th Avenue and 36th Street. The business was busiest at lunchtime when the girls come out of the factories and quickly bought some underwear or a pair of stockings. Then the business was quiet all afternoon until the day's work in the factories was done. In that quiet period we had the radio on; he went to sleep out of boredom. When he dozed off, I switched to the baseball station. I listened to it and learned about it. I actually became an expert in baseball - just listening to Red Barber and the Brooklyn Dodgers. This job looked like it was at a dead end job. I could not get ahead, of course, and I could not find anything else. Then, through the Jewish Refugee Organization, I was asked if I was willing to relocate. I said yes. They had a job open as a sewing machine operator in Philadelphia. They would teach me how to work a machine and then I went to work. I actually became a union member (many of these jobs were closed shops, i.e., union membership was mandatory after a few weeks or months). I joined the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Then I did rather well, economic conditions were changing due to the war getting closer (there was a peacetime draft in effect). It was the beginning of 1941 and everything was switching to a war economy. Sure enough my job involved making uniforms. However, the work was seasonal work. There was always a slack period for two or three months and then you were layed off, and you had nothing to do. You had to save money to tide you over until the work started again. From there I was drafted into the Army. That was actually interesting because I wanted to enlist in 1939 since I knew this big country would be involved.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you become a United States citizen at some time?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, surely after a while. While I was in basic training. The waiting period was waived and I became a citizen. I wanted to enlist because I felt I ought to be in there. I went to the Army and Air Force. I wanted to enlist. Of course, without being a citizen, they all turned me down. When I was drafted, I was still living in Long Island, that was the largest draft board in the United States. They had some tens of thousands of people in the same draft board, but they never called me, and I was anxious to go. That is the opposite of a lot of other people who were anxious to stay out. I asked to go in the service and they looked at me as if I was crazy. They told me: "Everybody is trying to stay out, and you are one of those who want to go in. Well O.K.!" I finally got drafted in 1943. That was rather late since I registered in 1940. It took them three years to finally get to me. When I was drafted

I was shipped to Fort McClelland, Alabama and that is where I got my first experience in the South. Then I began to study the country as a whole, all the good, and, all the bad. Of course, the cross section you are exposed to in a war, as one of the recruits who came in, with all the other recruits, gives you a complete cross section of the country and that was invaluable to me. For the first time, I got exposed to Minnesotans and Nebraskans, etc., to the different type of people. That way you get to appreciate the immensity of the country. You get to realize that the United States is not one person. In other words, I began to get a perspective. At the beginning, I was very hostile towards local customs. I was looking down on them and I could figure out that "we" could do this better. You know, I felt on the other side of the Atlantic it was done in a different way and it was better. This was the interesting part where I gradually became Americanized and started thinking, not only in the English language, but also in an American way. This, of course, took years. It was a slow, gradual process. I am critical of other people anyway - by nature. Anyone who gets close to me gets criticized, since I feel that nothing is ever done right and that there is always room for improvement. This was no exception. One area that I am still disturbed about is education. For that I have not changed my mind in thirty-five years, actually close to forty years by now, which I have been here. That, however, is not within the scope of this project.

Rosemary Lawson:

I think that we have pretty well covered your life to that point.

Kurt Fish:

I believe so. We could come back here, point by point, and make some points, but I believe we have gone over the large points pretty well.

Rosemary Lawson:

Why don't you tell me then, what happened after the army. When you actually came into the Miami Valley in Ohio.

Kurt Fish:

Oh, that happened much later. As I said I lived in Philadelphia when I was drafted. I had worked in Philadelphia and I had established a circle of friends there. Actually this circle of friends have stayed with me all the way, until today, although I have been away for almost twenty years. We still correspond and visit each other. When I came out of the war, my wife had just arrived here, in the United States. It was actually almost ironical. I went over to Europe during the war and she came here.

Rosemary Lawson:

When did you go to Europe?

Kurt Fish:

I landed in Casablanca, Morroco, and then I went into Italy. I was in the infantry and later in the combat-intelligence. The intelligence and reconnaissance was referred to as I & R platoons. We spent our time mostly behind enemy lines. There my languages came in very handy. I was the interpreter and the translator. We were on about thirty patrols behind enemy lines. As a matter of fact, we were in areas where the United States Army was not presumed to have been. So we did not get any battle stars. We did not get any battle stars for it because we did not have any battles there!, so how can you get a battle star? We generally went out to reconnoiter and bring back information. One day, everybody got killed, except for me. I was the only survivor of the entire platoon. That came about through a quirk of circumstances about which I will talk. I was sitting on a hill, on a steep hill. We had just come back from a night patrol from which we had lost our way. It was in the Appenine Mountains near Florence, Italy, actually about thirty miles north of Florence. It was very tough territory. We were, all of us, sitting on that steep hill, trying to get our bearings. I happened to be wearing a belt slung over my shoulder, and I had a little pack on my back.

(Note from the transcriber: The tape ended at this point abruptly - probably the interviewer did not notice this. So the story was not picked up on any of the other tapes and therefore, will not be part of the records in the Wright State University archives. Kurt Fish returned to this story later but, from a slightly different track so nothing got lost.)

Rosemary Lawson:

The first interview with Mr. Fish was at his home, Thursday, the 9th of November 78 , at 1:30 p.m. (this is at variance with the information on Tape 1 which talks about it occurring on November 3, 1978, however, that is not crucial.) This interview is also at his home at 4424 Broadbush in Dayton, Ohio at 2:00 p.m. on November 14th, 1978. The interviewee is Mr. Kurt Fish and this is Cassette No. 2. I am Rosemary Lawson.

Kurt Fish:

As I stated last time, the tragedy of the situation was not so much that Hitler eliminated or killed the Jews, but that the rest of the world, was either apathetic or outright hostile to any concrete help. They payed lip service, but no more than that. The situation was such, I would like to take it up country by country, or nearly so...there are a few notable exceptions



in August of 1938, for one weekend (as stated in Tape #1) the Netherlands and Belgium opened their borders. A brother-in-law of mine and several other young people who could leave with just a rucksack on his back, availed themselves of this opening for one weekend after a notice of forty-eight hours. Once across the border, they were put into camps. Then they were supported by international, charitable organizations, such as HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) - mainly Jewish organizations. Later on the people tried to make their way mainly to the United States. After all, one year later the war in Europe broke out, so there no longer was any help in Europe. France was outright hostile. I stopped in France on my way to the United States, for a weekend in Paris. While I was there, raids were going on, continuously, so I was told where the police swooped down on places where it was known where refugees were hiding out. They rounded them up and sent them back to the border. They told the Germans such a thing as - "we have a shipment for you, come and get it". A few Jews could escape into Czechoslovakia. That was short duration for the escape because the Germans moved into that country six months later, after Munich. So with the exception of the United States, there was nearly no concrete offer, and the United States itself did not modify its laws at all. It was strictly the Quota System. This Quota System was discriminatory and completely ridiculous. There were for instance, 3,300 places under the Quota System for British people per year, and they were not being used. Nobody even thought of transferring them to Austrian or German born people, or Polish or Hungarian. These were all countries which were involved and there would be refugees who could have used these spaces. As I mentioned last time, in detail, it was not exactly a picnic to go to the American Consulate. They made it as difficult as possible, and some people were rejected outright, for trumped up reasons. I also mentioned last time that there were some South American countries which admitted people at the price of conversion. Hanna Earlan, who was a German writer, she became briefly famous during the Eischmann trial, she wrote about the Deniability of Evil. It was a very apt description of what went on. If you analyze the situation, as it existed then, you will find that there were very few monsters, out and out monsters. There were just people who did their jobs, as they understood them, bureaucrats. Eischmann was a bureaucrat who enthusiastically subscribed to what his superiors told him and carried it out to the best of his ability. He was a family man who loved his children and came home and played with them. He also sent millions of people to their death, without batting an eyelash. He just did his job. He did not involve any emotion in it. You were to do the job on the basis of orders who came from high above. "It had been decreed from Mt. Sinai, that these people had to be eliminated". You can almost compare it to a religious fervor. I do not see any difference in the net outcome between Auschwitz and the Spanish Inquisition. It makes no difference whether it was Jesus, or the German Reich, or Hitler. It was exactly the same idea. The finality of evil would also apply to the good guys. Take for instance, President Roosevelt certainly wanted to do something, even if not out of his own conviction, then for political purposes, since it

would bring in votes. That is just as much as President Carter supports Israel right now; it is not because he loves Israel, it is because the New York votes are important. At that time, in the late 1930's, the same thing would have applied. However, also at that time, the unions refused to agree to admit anybody if it meant that their own members would be out of work. Actually, such immigration would bring in potential strikebreakers, at least that is how they looked at it. To be sure, once they were in the country, a lot of unions supported these refugees. They gave them jobs. They taught them trades, and so forth. I, myself, became a member of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. They taught me how to operate a sewing machine. I worked in a clothing factory and operated a sewing machine until I actually went into the Army.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was it difficult to get into that union?

Kurt Fish:

No. No. The whole thing was open and shut. This was one and one-half years after I arrived here. I had drifted around New York City with jobs that paid around ten dollars to fifteen dollars weekly. This was barely enough to get by. I was not satisfied with this so I made one of my periodic visits to the Jewish Refugee Service which they had and I looked for other jobs. They asked me: "would you like to go out of town?" The interviewer had some jobs, but not in New York City. I said: "sure, where to?" He said: "We have some jobs in Philadelphia." So I took him up on this and I was sent down there. I went for four weeks to a sewing machine school. Actually this was run by the union and they taught you how to work. Again, there were politics involved. This was a Jewish-Italian union. The Jewish branch was interested in increasing the membership of their group to increase the membership of their people on the Board.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you then establish yourself in Philadelphia?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, I rented a room from a Jewish family. Actually, all the time I lived in that room, and later on, after the war, I came back to Philadelphia and got married there. These people were very nice to me. These people were actually witnesses at my wedding. What I tried to point out is that no one actually tried to outright prevent taking in refugees - they just said: "We cannot do it because..." The "because" sometimes made damage. In retrospect people say: "I had no idea that it would deteriorate into such a situation". I knew that the Jews got mistreated in Germany - I thought that they would survive.... You see no one figured, even the Jews themselves, did not figure

that it would come to the extreme it did. The whole thing was one of these "let's wait until tomorrow" scenarios. You know the idea of the Lord will provide situation and no concerted action was actually taken at that time - there was no emergency. When the emergency actually arose, it was too late. You no longer could do anything. The emergency did not arise until 1942, until after Pearl Harbor. This was when the diplomatic services between the United States and Germany stopped. Nobody else was even remotely able to do anything, and from then on the situation deteriorated; almost overnight. It was no accident that the Wannsee Conference, the conference that was credited with starting the "Final Solution"; that was a one day conference, it was held on January 19, 1942, so about six weeks after Pearl Harbor, that is when they got together and decided that the Jews have to be exterminated. Before that conference, before the entrance in the war of the United States, they still had some expectations that something would happen to take the Jews off their hands. So, as far as the operation of the world is concerned, it was a very shoddy performance. I have a strong feeling that the revulsion of this Nazi mass murder, of the six million who were gassed or otherwise liquidated was more or less the guilty feeling of the rest of the world. Everyone said: "Hitler did it! Don't blame me. Hitler was the one!" He killed the six million and there is no question about it. I do not want to glance over that. But, maybe one of the future generations will listen, and their innocence is not established very successfully, at least in my opinion, come up with that solution to the problem.

Rosemary Lawson:

You believe that we have that sense of guilt, or there would not be a State of Israel?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, yes. It happened once before that we had to go through the Red Sea in order to arrive in the promised land. You see history repeats itself again.

Rosemary Lawson:

I am interested in your experiences in the United States.

Kurt Fish:

I arrived here with ten dollars in my pocket. That was what they let me take out. Ten dollars, that was all; nothing else. I had lots of relatives here as I mentioned earlier. Two brothers of my Grandfather emigrated to the United States in the 1890's. Their families were here. I also had a couple of aunts and uncles precede me here. They arrived at approximately the same time I did, maybe a few weeks earlier. I had some friends here. Therefore, I did not come into a vacuum, I was not deposited here with nobody around.

I had people to whom I could go. For the first year I stayed with a cousin of mine, a school teacher who came to visit us just two years earlier, in Austria. She invited me to stay with them. They had lost a son, he had died from a sudden disease, some infection disease. They had had a tragic experience. They had an empty room. Their putting me up for one year was very nice, particularly since she was a school teacher and she spoke English with me. I was conversant in Yiddish - I could speak Yiddish fluently. In New York City that is, of course, the "lingua-franca" with which you could get around any place. I was amazed. What comes to my mind right now is that I walked in the Lower East Side to find some relative of mine who lived down there and I got lost. So here I was standing with my non-existing English and somehow I got to a policeman. I tried to make him understand where I wanted to go, but I could not. By some chance I made a Yiddish remark and he said to me in Yiddish: "Ah, you speak Yiddish?" I said yes and from there on we could talk and he was helpful. For me, coming from the area of the gestapo, and Hitler, anyone in a uniform was from another world, that was such a traumatic experience. That a policeman could speak Yiddish - that was just too much. This is something that just came to my mind right now. However, in any case, language became a very major problem for me; a psychological problem because I could not communicate. For me that was the end of the world so to speak. I had always been good in languages - I had spoken several languages earlier, but never English. The way I learned English was by reading the New York Times religiously every day while commuting to and from work. You know that you could not do much else during a subway ride, at least they were useful for that! Later I devised a method I also heard from someone else about a similar method, I picked up a book with which I was familiar in other languages such as Alexander Dumas The Three Musketeers, which I knew by heart. I knew all of the action of the book. I practically knew what everyone was saying. It came to me very easily. I could reconstruct what was going on. Once I could pick my way through that, then I progressed to more difficult things. The one which helped me the most was my cousin who, while she could speak both German and English, refused to speak German to me. She always said: "unless you speak English to me, I will not answer you". It was absolute terror for about six months. I really applied myself and I do not know if I mentioned this to you very briefly last time. After six months in this country - I arrived here in the beginning of February - in the beginning of August I took the College Entrance Examination in English. While I did not take it up immediately since I did not have the means to go to college, it served me as a morale builder. It showed me that from here on in I could talk. My vocabulary was still full of holes. You know, sometimes I had to describe what I meant - but that did not bother me. From then on, all that trauma, more or less, healed. At least in so far as my personal, emotional state was concerned. Before that I had really been insecure. To meet people was the worst thing in the world for me. You know, I felt isolated. Imagine wanting to say something badly and not being able to make myself understood. During that time I worked for

for about three months for S. Klein, picking up clothes. These clothes were silk dresses, usually, which fell off the hangers if you just looked at them. Each morning we could see, through the windows, outdoors, of the store, a horde of wild women standing outside, about twenty deep, waiting for the sale to start. When you opened the door, they stormed in like locusts descending on a field. Within five minutes, everything was on the floor. So we had to pick the dresses up. It was a very mind numbing job, but we were happy to make the money at the time, when jobs were scarce everywhere. Then I got layed off in the summer when the slack season started. Then I was unemployed for about three months. Then in Septmeber or October, the Father of the girl who taught me English and the man in whose house I lived, hired me to work in his dry goods store. I worked in that store as a salesman for over one year, until just before the war broke out. The work there went on with interruptions. I left in February 1941 for Philadelphia and I was there for almost one and one-half years. My boss in the dry goods store could not pay me much, because he did not earn much himself. Actually, the store was a losing proposition. He was just in the store because he did not know what else to do with himself. So he kept the store going. He also was not a very good salesman. He had a very short temper and he lost his temper frequently, with people who came in to be his customers. If they did not do what he wanted them to do, he just told them to leave. I had to come in and quiet the situation. The whole thing was a joke. Then I went to Philadelphia where I took up the sewing machine class. Then I started making what, at the time, was pretty good money. I joined the union. After a while, I made something between thirty dollars and fifty dollars each week. Then I bought a suit and started to have what we call today, necessities, and which at that time were luxuries.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you eat with these people? The people you boarded with.

Kurt Fish:

Yes. In both cases, on Long Island and in Philadelphia, I ate with my landlords, that means breakfast and dinner.

Rosemary Lawson:

Then you stayed in Philadelphia until you went into the Army?

Kurt Fish:

Yes. I was registered for the draft in Long Island and I had to wait until they drafted me. I was very anxious to go. I got drafted in Septmeber 1943. I was, of course, inducted and I went to Alabama, to Fort McClelland. That was my introduction to the Southern United States. I spoke about this before. One day, I was nearly beaten up because I sat down in the black section in a movie. I did not know anything about segregation. I was used, from New York,

that there was smoking in the balcony and I was smoking at the time. So, I did go to the balcony automatically. In Alabama, the balcony was reserved for Negroes. So someone tapped me on the shoulder and said: "Soldier, you are sitting in the wrong place". I said: "No, I am fine". So he said: "Step outside", and he made it plain to me that I should either leave, or sit where I should be sitting. This was a new experience. It was for me a particularly traumatic experience because I saw the parallel, immediately, with the similar situation in Germany. There you could not sit in a public park on benches, you could not go to a movie - of course, there you could not go at all, not only in special sections. In Germany, various other things were also forbidden such as swimming pools. So I drew the parallel and I decided with my fellow soldiers whom I told about my experiences: Lets fight with the forty-seven States and let's turn Alabama over to Hitler. They deserve him and he deserves it.... Of course, the Army infinitely widened my horizon, as far as getting to know the United States. That was invaluable, I could not have done this anywhere else, even if I tried travelling all over. I had somewhat of a kaleidoscope of the entire country in my barracks, or nearly so. So this was a very interesting experience as far as my Americanization was concerned, such as learning about various walks of life and locations. There was a Pennsylvania coal miner and a farmer from Nebraska. I guess that I had not mentioned that in the last six months, before I was inducted, I mean drafted, I went back to school. I had registered at Temple University (that university is located in North Philadelphia) in a night course in chemistry. I do not really know why I chose chemistry except that later on I became a chemist. I had, after all, been in medical school in Vienna, when Hitler came in. Incidentally, my wife also was in medical school in Vienna. Later on, when I was discharged from the Army, the situation was that all, or nearly all schools were filled with students. You could not just get in because nearly all the GI's were trying to get in. The schools which would have accepted me on my previous European record were full. Princeton, for example, I wanted to go to Princeton - which was close to Philadelphia and had a good reputation - where I applied to the medical school. You know you are qualified to go in they told me, but you can not get in until 1949 since we are filled up until then. It was then 1946. Now, Temple University, in Philadelphia, had to take me back because I had taken that class before I went into the service. So the war had interrupted my studies and I had first priority. They did not recognize the European studies, they actually were not familiar with European studies, so the way they evaluated it they were not going to give me any credit for it. That was almost ridiculous. They did not even give me credit for German Literature, which is a major in Germany. Finally, I told them - fine - If you do not want to give me credit for German Literature, I will take English as my foreign language! How about that!!! That was too much for them so they started to give me tests to impress the teacher. The whole thing was ridiculous. To make a long story short, I finished four years of college in two years by going day and night. I took thirty-eight credits in one semester once. It was absolutely killing, but I was entitled to take a certain number of semesters under the GI Bill, which was calculated by my service. So I had a limited number of semesters to work in, and I did not have another penny to spare for studies. As a matter of fact, when we got married, I had income assistance which the GI Bill gave me, one hundred and six dollars a month, and my wife, who was a nurse, started working at the Graduate Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. As a graduate nurse, she got one hundred twenty dollars a month for forty-eight hours a week without laundry. We had to do our own laundry, that is the uniforms and all that.

They worked from 7:00a.m. until 7:00p.m., with three hours off for lunch. You know, we made a budget, so much for every item. So I said: there is no money left for music, let us take it away from the food - we will eat less.

Rosemary Lawson:

After you left Alabama, you went back to Europe, didn't you - in the Army?

Kurt Fish:

Oh yes, we were shipped overseas and landed in Casablanca (Morroco's largest city). That was in March of 1944. We went across North Africa into Italy, where the war was going on at that time. We landed in Naples, Italy. We went to a replacement depot and waited a few days or weeks. Pretty soon, I got sent up to the front lines in the 88th Division in an Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon as an interpreter. The job consisted mostly of going behind enemy lines. That is what you expect from a reconnaissance unit. To find out what the troops strength and disposition of the enemy units were, how deep the river we were about to cross was. Our unit had to cross the river first, to find out. If it was too deep we would not come back. That is the type of things we were to find out. Everything went fine. We went about on thiry patrols, that is our platoon of I & R. We worked together very well. One day they wanted to promote the lieutenant, our platoon leader, because he was so good. The only way they could promote him was to give him a line company, since, as a platoon leader he could not be more than a lieutenant. So they took him away from us and gave him a whole company and made him a captain. Then they sent in some rookies from Fort Benning, Georgia, who had no idea what the war was all about. They succeeded in getting themselves and us shot up. There was one instance where I was the only survivor of the entire platoon. I got shot, actually, I was the first one to be shot. I believe that I did mention it to you briefly.

Rosemary Lawson:

Yes, the story was very limited. (Actually it was cut off because the tape ran out.)

Kurt Fish:

I was shot by a sniper who aimed at my heart, but just because my pack had pushed itself high up, because I was sitting on a steep hill, the bullet hit the top of the cartridge belt, rather that the heart. It got deflected and hit me in the soft part, under the ribs. It was the one in a million wound about which every GI was dreaming. It just felt like a hot foot - that is when someone strikes a match in your shoe and then lights it, you do not notice it until all of the sudden, you get a burning sensation and you exclaim "outch"! That was exactly what I said: outch. And just like a hot foot that

is all it was. However, it served to get me out of the Infantry. I got reassigned because I had a sore, tender side so that I could not wear a cartridge belt. I got reassigned, and that was a very interesting thing, to the Postal Directory Service. I am not really certain that this is of any interest to you.

Rosemary Lawson:

It is, so please go on.

Kurt Fish:

Postal Directory Service consisted of finding people who somehow are not at their address any more. So we had to have records for all the military and the civilians who were or had been in our theatre of war so that we could get the mail forwarded. In our case, the theatre of war was the Mediterranean. There was a large quonset hut.

Rosemary Lawson:

Where was that located?

Kurt Fish:

That was near the headquarters in Caserta (41.04 north and 14.20 east) in southern Italy, near Naples. That was actually detective work which we had to do. Each man had to deduce, from some clues which he picked up, who the recipient was. For example, if we had ten thousand John Smith's - a John Smith without a serial number - how could you find him? Maybe we could figure out from where the letter came that the serial number should start with (serial numbers being assigned by areas of the United States and chronologically). It was interesting work.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you spend the whole war doing that?

Kurt Fish:

Oh no no. I was wounded in September of 1944. Then I was in the hospital for about four to six weeks. So it must have been November of 1944 that I got assigned to that. I worked on that pretty well until VE day (Victory in Europe Day which occurred on May 7, 1945) otherwise said for about one-half year. As I said before it was very interesting work since you had to do some detective work in order to locate people. So people who had gotten killed and they failed to notify us. Some people were taken prisoners. Some were transferred to hospitals. This gives just some examples of what could happen. No matter what it was, we were supposed to find the people. I found out later on that most, if not all of the people in my platoon, were killed.



Rosemary Lawson:

Did you stay in Italy? Did you ever go back to Austria?

Kurt Fish:

Oh, I am coming to that. About three or four months after I stopped working in this postal directory service, my commanding officer got re-assigned. We got another officer assigned to our unit who took an instant dislike to me. I do not know whether it was personal, anti-Semitic, or a combination of both, maybe neither, maybe it was just that he did not like me. I should mention that there were some demonstrations of anti-Semitism throughout my Army career, from fellow soldiers. This was very disconcerting to me. Here I thought that we were out to fight Hitler and here we had anti-Semitism, maybe behind our backs, but it was there all the time. Oh there were little things such as they stepped on your shoes while you were marching, from behind, so that you would stumble and things like that. They looked for an excuse to beat you up. They were starting arguments. I had developed a technique, I must say this much, that goes back almost to the pre-Nazi times, because I had grown up with all that. That technique was that the moment that you show them that you are not afraid by what he is trying to hurt you with, they lose interest in it. You know, the notorious word which they used in all their virulence was "sau Jude" or "Jewish pig", or "Jew bastard" could correspond to that. For example when an SS man (SS stands for Schutz Staffel, these were the notorious black-shirted men who formed the core of the Gestapo and the concentration camp guards) who came, a classmate of mine and I said to him: "Hey, you Jew bastard, come over here". Obviously, he did not come, but when you repeated that he was non-plussed. He figured that here is someone who apparently is bouncing off me. So they, in turn, stopped doing that. In a sense, it applied in the Army also; if you showed them that you had a tough skin they lost interest in it. They just wanted to hurt you somehow and if you show them that they were not getting to you, they quit. It comes back to that lieutenant or captain who took over the postal directory service, he would not give me a week-end pass and he gave passes to others and other such things. I got sick and tired of it. So I walked down one day, through the village where we were stationed and I saw a sign going up: 'Military Government in Austria: I looked up at that and I went in and asked someone what was going on? They told me that this was going to be the military government of Austria. This is the nucleus of it and it is going to be formed right now. I asked them: would you be interested in someone who could speak German? Not only that but I could do German shorthand. They were absolutely entranced. They wanted me very badly. The commanding officer was General McNamoy (editorial note: I am not at all certain of this name, however, it sounds like this), who later, after General Eisenhower retired, became his successor in the command of the Allied Forces in Europe, however, he was a General even then. So I applied. I told them that I was working for the Postal Directory Service; I do not know if they will let me go or not. They told me not to worry about it, that they will take care of it. Then there

was an occasion when I happened to be in the 1st Sargaent's office and the door was open to the Commanding Officer. The commanding officer received a phone call, apparently from that outfit, that they were requesting my services. He said: 'you cannot have him! The fellow apparently said something like: My commanding officer will not like that': My Commanding Officer said: I do not give a damn what your Commanding Officer likes or not'. So the other fellow apparently said: ' Well, I will tell him that.' My Commanding Officer said: Who is this Commanding Officer?" The answer was that it was General McNamay. So my Commanding Officer said: " Yes sir, of course he can go. So everything was settled. I got over to the other unit - and that turned out to be a very pleasant period of time. You know in the Army, in war time in the front lines, or near the front lines where we were, there is no median, either it is very miserable or it is very, very nice, and it is all bigger than life. It is hard to explain, but all these experiences are standing out just like it happened yesterday. Everything is blown up, out of proportion in one's memory. This started a very nice period for me. I was completely free, coming and going. There was no Army routine whatsoever. I had a jeep. I could drive into Naples and I did. I went to the opera there every night. A pack of cigarettes got me in. I did not need tickets or anything like that. Again, I became the interpreter for the outfit, and it was more or less on the basis of technical intelligence. We had captured German documents of what they were doing; some with technical and scientific information. My job ultimately, actually, the job of my Commanding Officer, was to check out the commercial establishments of Austria which were potentially capable of war production, because this was really demobilization and disarmament. We had to disarm all the potential arm production, or other war production. This was right down the pike, as far as I was concerned, because I was fully familiar with the country and I even knew most of the factories; what they were doing and where they were located and so forth. As a matter of fact, the OSS (Officer of Strategic Services) which later became the nucleus of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), this was our spy organization, they came to me for information if they needed to know something about Austria. I made a whole file system as to whom we were going to visit once we would get there. They (the OSS) heard about it and they were interested so they copied it. So when we finally got to Vienna - my return there was almost like a storybook, you know - the Conquering Hero - comes along. I got my own driver even, a local driver, who was assigned to me. You must realize that I was a private. You know normally only officers had assigned drivers. I did not even have any emblems since we did not show what we were. When they assigned me a chauffeur, I said: I do not need a chauffeur. I know my way around better than chauffeurs! You know, I knew all the shortcuts.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you visit your old home?

Kurt Fish:

Oh, sure.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was it well kept?

Kurt Fish:

Oh, no, no. Former neighbors, some of them did not recognize me, they were so shell shocked, from what went on apparently, that it was only like a dream for them. Some said: "Oh yes. I think that I remember Kurt Fish. But that is so long ago. Yes."

Rosemary Lawson:

Was there any bombing damage?

Kurt Fish:

Not in the building where I lived, where I had been born. That had not been damaged. Lots of other buildings had been damaged, but not mine. I came to Vienna in August 1945 and I was there until the end of the year. In other words, I spent almost one-half year there, with more or less, a free hand. I guess that if I had gone down the street and killed someone, nobody would have even turned around. We were absolute masters of the city. The Russians were not there then. The Russians came to Vienna and raped every female in sight; they took and stole anything which was not nailed down, and even much of what was nailed down. We (the Americans) were very popular because we brought some civilization back into the town after all the excesses which had gone on.

Rosemary Lawson:

Your parents were both dead by this time?

Kurt Fish:

Yes.

Rosemary Lawson:

Were you able to find out anything?

Kurt Fish:

Oh yes. There were official records in the files of the Jewish Community in Vienna which files showed which day everyone was deported and where they were sent. Later on, we checked with the Jewish Community in Prague, Czechoslovakia - since that is where they were sent, originally. They were sent to Theresienstadt, which was the show place of the concentration camps, as I mentioned earlier. My Father died there shortly after their arrival, of presumably natural causes. I suppose mainly lack of medication. My Mother was there until January 1943. They were deported in June of 1942. My Mother was shipped to Auschwitz in January 1943. My Grandfather was also in Theresienstadt. He was there and he died supposedly two months after my Mother was shipped.

Rosemary Lawson:

Was any of your household furniture left?

Kurt Fish:

The furniture had already been taken away after a forced sale. It was sold before we left. I did not even make any effort to look for furniture. As I said, I met a couple of former neighbors. Actually some of them were pretty decent people and I visited them once or twice and brought them some food. At that time everybody in Austria was starving. Literally collapsing in the street from lack of food. People were then actually dying in the streets, that was not just an expression. We were the only contact they had. The Chancellor of Austria required my services, because he wanted to write a letter to his son in the United States, and there was absolutely no mail other than military mail. I agreed to include his letter in my letter to the United States. At this time, all normal services had stopped. These were my war experiences.

(End of Side 1: Tape 2)

I was in Europe during the war and my wife was in England. In the spring of 1945, as a matter of fact, the day President Roosevelt died, the Hungarian quota finally got to her.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did she come over on the Hungarian quota?

Kurt Fish:

Oh yes. There was no other way. She came here, but I was still in Europe at the time. She came over shortly before VE Day. She went to Cleveland and stayed with her sister-in-law. Her brother was also overseas. We actually

met in Salzburg. He found out that I was in the neighborhood and so he dropped in. So she spent the next year preparing and taking her state board exams, in Cleveland, to be able to work as a nurse here. She did, and then I came back at the beginning of 1946. Shortly after that she came to Philadelphia and we got married. I went back to school in June 1946. I stayed in school for two years. Then I applied for a job. I actually did not work until February 1949, because I was lacking one point. I had to take one more chemistry course, which I did in evening school. In the meantime, I got a job working for the Federal Civil Service at Frankford Arsenal in Instrument Lubricant Research and Development. I remained there until 1959, otherwise said, about eleven years. Then I transferred to Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio and I worked here, in the Materials Lab of Air Force Systems Command, until I retired, otherwise said for about seventeen years.

Rosemary Lawson:

Your degree was in chemistry then, and you worked in research, in lubricants?

Kurt Fish:

Yes.

Rosemary Lawson:

Most of the time.

Kurt Fish:

No, only in Philadelphia, here I worked in polymers. You know that nylon is a polymer. Polymers are synthetic materials, mainly high temperature materials, which are good to one thousand degrees, Fahrenheit. In 1976 I had a heart attack and I retired. Anyway, I worked for the Federal Government for thirty years. The heart attack speeded up my retirement by one-hundred days. I had planned on retiring.

Rosemary Lawson:

Can you tell me about your wife's experiences then? Was she able to work, in England as a nurse, and then was able to go to school and work here? So her job experience did not change much from England to the United States.

Kurt Fish:

No, not from England to the United States. As a matter of fact, she is going to retire now, at the end of this year. She has just applied for retirement in four weeks. She became an overachiever, in contrast to me. She is about the best nurse imaginable. I will now be tested back and forth from all sides in four weeks.

Rosemary Lawson:

Where is she working?

Kurt Fish:

At Good Samaritan Hospital, here in Dayton. She is still in charge of the CCU, the Coronary Care Unit.

Rosemary Lawson:

You said that because she was a nurse and had that skill, it was not too hard for her to get into England?

Kurt Fish:

No, she was not a nurse when she got to England. She was just a medical student. She applied for nursing studies and that was one of the ways, as I mentioned last time, to get into England. There were only two jobs which were in short supply in England, jobs for which they gave out job permits, one was butler and maid and the other was nursing. So she decided to take up nursing, and she got into nursing in England and continued to do that throughout the war. When she came here she started working in Graduate Hospital in Philadelphia. That was the Graduate Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. She worked there until she became pregnant, so that the uniforms would not fit her anymore. As soon as the kids were out of elementary school, she returned to work; first part-time and then full-time.

Rosemary Lawson:

Yes. Could you tell me about your children? You had three children.

Kurt Fish:

First we had a little girl and then a set of twins.

Rosemary Lawson:

Let us go back then to a part which might be pretty interesting. When I said: when did you decide to get out of Austria? And you said: I got kicked out.

Kurt Fish:

I was in a better position than most of the other people because I had been here before. I had visited my uncle and aunt in Germany in 1937 and I saw first hand the situation as it was. At that point, the situation was rapidly deteriorating there for the Jews. They were making it economically impossible for the Jews to exist. Jewish doctors could no longer treat patients, other than Jewish patients. Jewish lawyers could no longer appear in court, and so forth. Jewish businessmen were forced, more or less, to sell out at cheap prices. Everyone knew it was coming to a head and it was just a matter of time.

Rosemary Lawson:

This was not true in Austria yet?

Kurt Fish:

In Austria this came on almost overnight. The thing which in Germany took from 1933 to 1938 was imposed overnight in Austria. Hitler got in on Sunday and on Monday we were no longer permitted into the university. While some businesses still stayed open, the public was urged not to patronize Jewish places. You were called a traitor if you did. Pressure was put on very hard. Half the Jewish merchants were arrested and the other half were to wait in the stores, they had no customers left. So the merchant had to sell out and sell out for something like a penny to the dollar.

Rosemary Lawson:

Were you in the university at the time?

Kurt Fish:

Yes.

Rosemary Lawson:

So you went to school one day and the next day you were told not to come back.

Kurt Fish:

We did not have to be told. We knew that we better not go, that if we went we would get murdered.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you pretty much hide out then?

Kurt Fish:

It was not a matter of actually hiding out all the time. As I mentioned last time, I got forewarned so that I could get away from raids. Actually you could not avoid it because you had to be someplace. If you were unlucky and they caught you in the street. Sometimes they closed both ends of the street and stopped everyone and checked documents. If you could not prove that you were an Aryan you were arrested and sent off to a concentration camp.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you carry identification cards?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, everyone had to do that.

Rosemary Lawson:

When did you have to start carrying identification cards?

Kurt Fish:

Oh that was already in Austrian times. Everyone had to carry identification cards in Europe. In addition to that, everyone who was non-Jewish went around with a swastika on his or her arm. Whether they were Nazi or not, they knew it was safer that way. Now if a Jew was caught wearing a swastika, heaven only knew what would happen to him. So everyone in the street who did not wear a swastika was either a foreigner or a Jew.

Rosemary Lawson:

You came in under the quota?

Kurt Fish:

Yes.

Rosemary Lawson:

You went to the embassy and how long did the actual arrangements take you?

Kurt Fish:

I should have been on the first boat to leave, but I did not make that one because there were some underhanded activities at the American embassy, and consulate, you remember that the vice-consul was selling visas to the high bidders. They just conveniently lost my papers, so when the summer went by and I could not get notification I got concerned. The visas were supposed to be given out in the order in which you were registered. I had registered I believe, two days after Hitler got in, at the American consulate. You were given a number and you were to be called in the order in which the numbers were. So when I found out that people who I knew had registered long after me were already leaving and I was still there waiting. I figured that something was wrong. I finally got an appointment at the consulate and they looked up the file and they found out that it was missing. That was nothing new to them, since it happened to other people.

Rosemary Lawson:

You did not have to bribe anyone to get out?



Kurt Fish:

No. No. I was in the trouble because others did the bribing. Then, since they said that they lost my papers, they had to send for another set of papers from the United States. That arrived in October. As a matter of fact, do you remember that we talked about the "Kristallnacht"? On the tenth of November. On that day, I received my invitation to come to the consulate, on January 13, 1939. They said that my papers were there and that everything is in order and that I would be granted my visa on January thirteenth. So now I had to get my passport in order, which for a student was not hard to do. I want now to jump to another story and tell you about my uncle. This was a most impressive experience. This uncle was a very rich man in Vienna. He actually was a millionaire. He owned several apartment houses. He owned the largest umbrella factory in Europe. He was exporting umbrellas all over the continent, and because of that he had a permanent visa to go to England. He did a lot of business in England. As a matter of fact, when Hitler came in he was in London. He left his daughter there. His daughter never experienced Hitler because she had gone along on a business trip, and he left her there. My uncle had to come back because his wife was in Vienna. So one day he was warned - during lunchtime, they called him at home, at my Grandfather's home - that the gestapo had come to pick him up at the business. So he went out with what he had on his body. It was June and it was warm, so he was not wearing much. He went to the airport and grabbed the next plane to Berlin. That was the next plane leaving Vienna. At that time there were no such frequent air services as today. There were planes between cities such as only three times a week. That afternoon there was a plane leaving for Berlin. He knew that plane because that plane stopped in Prague on the way. As the plane approached Prague in Czechoslovakia, he played as if he was sick. So they took him off the plane and called a doctor. They let the plane take off. Now he was out of the country. Then he took a plane from Prague to London, that is what he had schemed on doing. So he got out with just what he had on his body. When he came to the United States, he did not have a tie. Now please remember that he was a millionaire. When he came to the United States, I gave him one of the ties which he had given me...in a moment of generosity-"here take the tie". I told him: "Here, you see. You got your tie back"! He then in the United States worked for some twenty-five dollars a week in an umbrella factory. This was the line in which he was experienced. I visited him there one day, shortly after I arrived in Brooklyn. He was sitting there during lunchtime as I came in - drawing on the brown paper bag, his lunch bag. I asked him what he was doing. He told me that he was laying out the factory. I looked at him as if he was crazy. What, he had one tie now; he had money for car fare to go home; and he was laying out the factory. Suffice it to say, about one-half year later, he did have that factory. It was absolutely stupendous, what that man accomplished. He did not live long, because ten years later he was dead of a heart attack. What he accomplished, very briefly,

was that there in the beginning of 1939, he had nothing, but, by the time the war started he had his factory back - on a shoestring to be sure, but he had his factory. He sold umbrellas to Macy's, to Gimbels, and to all the other good department stores. When I came back from the war, the man owned a large apartment house in the Bronx, he had a place in West Palm Beach of his own, he lived in Forest Hills, in Queens, New York in a beautiful house and he was again well off. It was almost an Horatio Alger story.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did his entire family come to the United States?

Kurt Fish:

His daughter came over. He lost son over there, before Hitler. His wife came out. Strange as it might seem, the collateral which he had for the factory was his wife's earrings, which she wore when she left Austria. All she was permitted to take with her as she left was what she was wearing. That did include a nice set of earrings which he gave as collateral for a loan. He borrowed the money to get the machinery which he needed. As soon as he had the machines, he could operate. It was all borrowed money. Within a year, it was all paid off and he was making profits. It was an unbelievable story.

Rosemary Lawson:

What were you able to bring with you? Did the nazi's rob you of anything before coming to the United States? Did they rob you of anything you were going to bring?

Kurt Fish:

Not really. Of course, I had to make a detailed list, down to matchsticks of everything I took along. I still have that list someplace; it is worthwhile looking at. I was permitted to take my personal belongings along. They did not let me take my violin along. I had played the violin. You were not to take any art objects along. However, at the time, they did not care about personal things. For example, I took along sixty-six handkerchiefs and I did not need to buy underwear for twenty or thirty years after that. You know the stock from the business was not worth anything and we could not take it with us, so at least as far as clothes were concerned, we fitted ourselves out. I took a large steamer trunk of clothes with me. So, since I did not have any money, at least, I did not have to worry about that.

Rosemary Lawson:

You then went from Vienna to Paris.

Kurt Fish:

Right, almost directly. Actually, I came almost directly to New York.

Rosemary Lawson:

You were talking about your brother coming. He worked for your uncle, I believe.

Kurt Fish:

No. I told you that the American consul in Vienna made such problems for my sister-in-law. He claimed: "Your husband is in the United States, he has to support you". So my brother showed that he was working for my uncle. That he was making forty dollars a week, and then seventy-five dollars a week, and that the consul kept saying that this was not enough.

Rosemary Lawson:

He was then only able to bring his daughter from England?

Kurt Fish:

His daughter went with a children's transport to England. They took only pre-school age children, one time, it was May of 1939; at that time there were several transports. People in England, individual families, pledged to take these children in. She lived with a couple in London. She stayed there until the end of the war, and, after the war, my brother brought her over. Then, actually, she came to live with me since my brother was single - actually he was not single, but his wife was dead. One day she came to visit me and she liked it so well, like the Man Who Came to Dinner, that she stayed and completed high school with me. Then she got married, right out of my house. At one of the high school dances, she met her future husband. They are happily married to this day.

Rosemary Lawson:

You were talking about living through the Kristallnacht in Vienna.

Kurt Fish:

Oh yes. This comes back to how I got out. When Hitler came into Austria, I had already laid the groundwork for coming here, as I told you, through that uncle of mine. Actually, he was my Mother's uncle. He died shortly after he gave me the affidavit, so that was no good. His daughter had to send me papers. That delayed the granting of the visa. Then the consul delayed it some more. So it took me until January of 1939 to get the visa

and then I left a couple of weeks later. I came over on the SS Queen Mary. That arrival in New York City, at night, was unbelievable, with the lights on. That is such an unbelievable thing, that you felt you were in a fairy-land. It was so beautiful.

Rosemary Lawson:

You landed in Ellis Island?

Kurt Fish:

Oh no. Right on the Cunard Line Pier on 42nd Street. That was an unforgettable sight. We came slowly into the harbor, past the Statue of Liberty, then you went by Manhattan which was all lit up. This is a sight which everyone should see. Later on, you find out about the other side of the coin, actually, very quickly. New York City is a wonderful town. It is the most fantastic town in the world. Only if you have money. To be in New York without money, that is not bad either. I will say this much: you can do more in New York without money, more than in any other town...and that is true also, but if you want to do everything you would like to do, you need money.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you live in Manhattan?

Kurt Fish:

No, I lived in Jackson Heights, on Long Island, the first year. Then in Elmhurst, also Long Island, the second year. These two are not too far apart, near where the World's Fair took place.

Rosemary Lawson:

I hate to be going back, but is there anything else you feel should be added.

Kurt Fish:

Yes, I am certain that as soon as you walk out I will think of many other things, but right now, unless you have some specific questions - I do not know.

Rosemary Lawson:

Would you like to talk about the various points which we listed.

Kurt Fish:

The association was almost entirely with non-Jewish kids, although I lived in a predominantly Jewish area. Actually that is interesting also, if you come to Vienna - I had been under the impression that while we were not, so to speak, well to do, we were adequately provided for. When I came back, times had changed and the war had intervened., but the area I had lived in actually impressed me as being shabby. It was a ghetto. Of course, the

war did not help, but even so, after it was reconstructed; what I considered normal, it was substandard. It was just that while I was a boy, we did not see much else. This area was the ghetto. While it was not a ghetto in the physical sense, that it was locked away, it was the concentration of most of the Jews who were living in close proximity to each other. Although there was a synagogue at every street corner practically, something like the Lower East Side. It was not quite that bad. I am trying to compare the concentration of Jews in one place. Vienna's ghetto was not quite as poor as the Lower East Side. However, when I live there, this appeared normal to me. I did not see anything wrong while I was living there. Sometimes my Mother went for a cure at the mineral baths, or special spas, for, you know, miraculous cures. We had a maid while I was young. Then my Father retired and then the income was down, but still there was a steady income. We could not go on wild financial splurges, still my parents were able to make me go to Germany and France as a graduation gift. I guess they could afford to do that. So I guess you could say that we were lower-middle class.

Rosemary Lawson:

I guess you were pretty satisfied.

Kurt Fish:

Yes, we had everything we needed with a few luxuries thrown in...very few, but still some. However, coming here, our standard of living took a nose-dive and stayed down there for quite a while - I would say for about ten to twelve years. Then we again could afford some luxuries.

Rosemary Lawson:

You were talking about leaving your violin and you mentioned about your musical education. Had you actually played with a group?

Kurt Fish:

No, not really. I took lessons from the Father of a very famous man, however, they were actually friends of the family. That whole family was world famous musicians. I just grew up with music and to this day it is a very important part of my life. Music never stops, it goes along all day long.

Rosemary Lawson:

What about here, do you have a very close association with the synagogue here?

Kurt Fish:

Not now no. While the kids were smaller we had more.

Rosemary Lawson:

Your children had religious training?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, it was not very successful; however, they might be back tracking. You never know. You see I have a very strong feeling. Today, it is strictly a post-Auschwitz complex, which most of the Jews who survived have. I divided the world into two kinds of people: the guards and the internees. I just want to stay away from the guards. My life, here in this country, after all, I have lived here in Dayton for the last twenty years, has been largely a-social. I do not have many outside activities and associations. I do not belong. I do not have many friends. I pick my friends with extreme care and, even then, you make mistakes. They are restricted to maybe a dozen people, who are spread out, not necessarily here.

Rosemary Lawson:

And they are not necessarily all Jewish?

Kurt Fish:

No, they are not all Jewish by any means. That surprises me, in retrospect, but then I did not make that a pre-condition. I just said that you are more suspect, if you are not, but, I may pass you if you qualify. In any case, you have to qualify. However, with a Jew, there is not that pre-condition. He may be a louse, but at least he is not a potential concentration camp guard.

Rosemary Lawson:

You actually had no experience with concentration camp guards, but you just feel that way because your family was involved.

Kurt Fish:

That is right. People just cannot understand, as I said before, the actions which the Germans - such a cultured nation - undertook. How could they do this? What people have not studied enough about the Prussians? What the Prussians can do - what the Prussians will do? Just like the Japanese in a lot of respects. I was in Japan not too long ago. Incidentally, for your information, we travel to a large extent.

Rosemary Lawson:

I am interested in whether or not you have been back to Europe.

Kurt Fish:

Several times. Yes, several times. However, what I wanted to say about the Japanese is that they are similar to the Prussians in that respect, of super-

discipline and the blind obedience to the superior officer. If you are so ordered, you do it. The world has not payed too much attention to this and that is the root of what the trouble was - all that blind obedience. The idea of "Fuehrer order! We will follow." That was the motor and they actually carried it out. The idea of being subservient.

Rosemary Lawson:

You do not feel that this is true of the Austrians. They just went along.

Kurt Fish:

The Austrians were natural anti-Semites, primarily, and in second line, pro-Hitler. With them anti-Semitism was a tradition, much more so than in Germany. In Germany, there were the Protestant anti-Semites. I make that distinction. The Protestants anti-Semitism was an economic anti-Semitism and a social anti-Semitism such as I will not do business with a Jew and a Jew will not set foot in my house, but I leave him alone otherwise. In Austria, that was an active Christian anti-Semitism. Actually, they went out to bash in some heads for the greater glory of the world. You see that was the difference, except for Hitler.

Rosemary Lawson:

So this was the problem then?

Kurt Fish:

The Austrian Nazi's said: "We will show the Germans how to treat the Jews". They said that openly." We are specialists in that" and they have a thousand years to look back on for that specialty. This was a tradition in Austria. What I can not understand is, to this day, when you look back, why did those stupid Jews stay there under these conditions? Of course, a great number of them came to the United States, but I can not figure out why, consistently, under constant threat and constant discrimination they stayed.

Rosemary Lawson:

Your ancestors came to Austria?

Kurt Fish:

They just came from one point of Austria to another. It is as if you were born in New Mexico or like the Negroes, came from the South to New York.

Rosemary Lawson:

They then came in much the same situation. Confined to a deadly situation.

Kurt Fish:

Yes, look at Ireland.

Rosemary Lawson:

But your parents were able to make a good living there?

Kurt Fish:

Oh, a lot of people could do that. I could give you a lot of examples, but I will write a book about it in the future. Up until very recently, until the industrial revolution, we had basically one kind of civilization. The cities were only transportation points and communication points for shifting the crops. With the industrial revolution we started an urban civilization. The advantage of the Jews were that circumstances forced them to live in an urban society, while the rest of the world lived in an agrarian society. That is what was called the ghetto. Jews were not allowed to own any land. They were practically forced to stay in the financial business. They pretty much had to develop an urban society within an agrarian community. Then when the industrial revolution came and the rest of the world started to catch up with the urban society, because you had to catch up. The Jews were better in financial enterprises, not because of something genetically, but because they were training in that when the rest of the world did not know about it. Without reservations, that is all they were allowed to do. All they were encouraged to do. You know, when the Duke or the Baron wanted money, they went to the Jews, since there were not banks. This is also the basic difference when you compare the Blacks to the Jews. Their hang-up is that they still live in an agrarian society, when the rest of the world lives in an urban society, and even physically, within the city, they have not aculturated. That is what it is and unless they do this, all the affirmative action programs are just a joke. They have to learn to live in an urban society, with all the demands that puts on you, as far as education is concerned. This takes at least a generation, if not more, and it can not be speeded up. All this fussing about integration is all for the birds, because it is not the root of the problem. The root of the problem is that we have to change the people, as a unit, from previous ways to new ways. You just cannot do this overnight, you cannot be forced into it. You have to assimilate this change slowly. It is notorious that they cannot handle money. To a large extent, the people who came from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and so forth, into Philadelphia and Boston and Chicago, and other cities, get into a mode of living that is a complete mystery



to them. All they can see are television sets and nice things which you would like to have, but you do not have the means for acquiring them. So you go out and steal them, you know, you loot or do something like that. That is a natural reaction. You cannot blame them. So, if you come back to the problem at hand, the Jews have a lot of advantages over the other people, because of what they punished them with which turned out to be an advantage in the long run. I now forget what started me on my digression.

Rosemary Lawson:

You were talking about living in the ghetto and making a good living there. You also said: Why did the Jews in Austria ever settle and stay in Austria. Actually they made a good living there also.

Kurt Fish:

Yes, as long as they were left alone. But it still was not worthwhile. You see we were discriminated against twenty-four hours a day. There was a "nemerus clausus" at the university, a quota system, where so and so many were admitted. By the way, this is another point which I would like to make and which is treated in a book which I have here somewhere, but I have the figure pretty much in my mind anyway. I believe that I touched on this subject last time, just as you were on your way out. This point is the fantastic contribution - completely out of proportion to their number - by the Jews in cultural objects. It is illustrated best by the 1970 figures of how many Jews received the Nobel Prize, it is completely disproportionate to the number of Jews in the world. Today, we are in 1978 and I do not know how these figures have kept up. At that date it looked as if between thirty-five percent or forty percent of the laureates were Jews...All this does not mean that there is a genetic trait, but it is basically that we had two centuries of training before the rest of the world started in on it, in only the last one hundred years or so. You see, when this country was founded, it was partly agricultural. If you did not own any land, you could not even vote. You basically did not even count as a citizen, if you did not own land. The entire nation was agricultural.

Rosemary Lawson:

You were talking about not leaving those countries since there was no other country which was really better.

Kurt Fish:

That is very true. While the United States was better as far as official persecution is concerned, the citizens still had their private discrimination. Of course, the economic conditions were such that there were only a few -

you know, the Horatio Algiers - who made it. You overlook those who did not make it. We asked other people prior to 1938: why aren't you leaving? It is very hard indeed to give up a business; a way of life to which you are used to , and knowingly go into poverty. That was the alternative - at least it was by 1938 - since you were not allowed to take anything along. I actually helped my uncle and his family to smuggle out some gold. When I was there to visit them, I took along some wristbands and a camera and such things. He sent that to the United States so that he would have a few pennies, here, when he got here. So he had a few pennies and he got cheated out of them in the first six months. He got involved in a phony business deal and lost it all.

Rosemary Lawson:

You say that Europeans would have come, if they had gotten under a right quota. Your parents would have come if the Czech quota had been open?

Kurt Fish:

No, the Polish quota. They were considered under the Polish quota even though they never had anything to do with Poland. The territory they were born in was seceded to Poland after World War I. It had been Austria at the time when they were born. The United States recognized the territory as part of Poland. That did not make sense, but that is the way it was.

Rosemary Lawson:

They would have considered coming here, if they could have?

Kurt Fish:

After Hitler got in? Oh sure! They were waiting for salvation. You see, in file, which I showed you, there is a letter from my Mother which described to us their efforts to go to Cuba. Do you remember the ship, the SS St. Louis, and the voyage of the damned. They wanted to get in on that deal.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did you Grandfather want to come also?

Kurt Fish:

Everybody would have jumped at the chance. It was not a matter of feeling, but a matter of salvation. It was a matter of survival. They knew what was in store for them if they stayed. This letter from the seventeenth of November 1941, three weeks before Pearl Harbor, she said in so many words: 'If you do not do it now, it will never be done.' She knew that time was running out when she wrote the letter. She said: Right after you receive this letter, go out and get us a visa for Cuba. You needed Thirty-five Hundred Dollars for such a

visa, and we, together had Nine-Hundred Dollars. Those were all the combined assets of the family. You needed something like Twelve-Hundred Dollars per person, including ship tickets and other expenses. That included what you had to pay to the dictator who was in charge at the time. Of course, you had no assurance that they would let you in after they took the money. At that point, we tried anything we could.

Rosemary Lawson:

How did your brother get out?

Kurt Fish:

The same way I did. The same person who gave me an affidavit gave him one. He came a year after me. That lady who gave us the affidavits had given sixteen others, to other people. That was a lot. Her husband had died the year before and left her a large amount of life insurance. She, herself, was just a school teacher and could not have done it on her own. Since she had that large amount of life insurance, she could guarantee the subsistence of all these people.

Rosemary Lawson:

However, she actually did not have to support you?

Kurt Fish:

No. Normally, what happened was that they could not say this openly because Congress frowned upon it. Refugee organizations which existed made certain that you did not become a burden. They supported you for a while, then they tried to get you jobs and training to learn skills. So there was no record of public burden, or anything like that. However, they could not, as an organization, sponsor you to get you to come over. You had to be brought over by an individual. An interesting case is my brother-in-law who came here. He is the one whom I told you about, who went to Belgium on that famous weekend when they opened the border. His Mother stayed behind in Vienna. Her name was Strauss, which is a very common name. She went to the American consulate and got hold of the phonebook and copied the names of all the people whose last name was Strauss. She wrote each of them: I do not know about you, but maybe we are related. I have a daughter and a son here and maybe you can help them to get out. Some of them turned those letters over to the Jewish Agencies, maybe it was a Family Service. Whereas she did not receive any answers back, there was a rich Jew in Cleveland, who walked into that office one day. He said: I want to do something - what can I do? They pulled out the letters, they had gotten a whole bunch of letters. He picked just one out from a pile, at random and he said: "OK, I bring this boy over" That is how my brother-in-law came over. That man from Cleveland was a perfect

stranger. These people from Cleveland were delightful people. I met them through the years. They also came to visit us later on. He was a very rich man, he worked in plumbing supplies and they were a rich childless couple. They just wanted to do something good, so my brother-in-law owes them his life, so to speak. They maintained a very nice relationship with him.

Rosemary Lawson:

Did your wife have just this one brother?

Kurt Fish:

Yes. Both of them were able to get out, but the Mother did not make it. She had a cousin who went to Auschwitz and survived and came out from that extermination camp. She now lives in London. I also have a few cousins over the world, mostly in Canada and England. They also survived, but most of the rest of the family perished. Now this uncle here, whom I described, he is my wife's uncle. He was in Dauchau, and he described it in the greatest details and I was working on this. I believe that I did translate the first several pages. I did that on tape and then ran out of a spool, so that my work was spoiled. He lived in Hungary.

(End of tape two—Here there is some fading out, so some material is lost by the transcriber)

Rosemary Lawson:

This is an interview of Mr. Kurt Fish at 4424 Broadbush by Rosemary Lawson, who is the interviewer. There were three tapes. Two of them were complete, one and one-half hour tapes and then just about thirty minutes on this tape. This is November 28, 1978 of Mr. Kurt Fish, at his home.

Kurt Fish:

OK. Now let us start with the Krystallnacht of November 10, 1938. As I stated before, the episodes which I remember most vividly was when I looked out of the windows, every once in a while you could see people being mistreated by some roving gangs who were going around. As soon as somebody came along who looked Jewish, they were mistreated, kicked, slapped, and so on. An episode which I witnessed was: I had to go out at one time during the day and as I was returning to a certain street, near a marketplace, I saw myself, some uniformed SS troops standing up on the upper story of an obviously Jewish

apartment and throwing out all kinds of valuables and carting them off. The valuables included candlesticks and vases, and trays, silverware, and such; whatever small objects they could lay their hands on. The Synagogue was dynamited and blown up. I heard that, I did not see it myself, but it was not too far away. That went on most of the day except that it had started already during the night of November 9th, however, it went on for most of the following day for most of the daylight hours. Of course, the entire thing was very well organized. All this "spontaneous" rage of the Germans was very well organized from above. It was a good excuse to show what would happen if one of the big shots would be killed. The interesting part of this incident is that the fellow who killed the German consulate officer Von Raat in Paris, and that Von Raat was not even a Nazi. The fellow who did the killing was a young Jewish boy from Poland who was desperate about his parents. This boy did not know what to do anymore so he killed the first German who came along. The boy went into the embassy and shot the first guy who came along. This first guy turned out to be an innocent victim. That however, was the excuse that Hitler used. Interestingly enough, on that same day, in the mail, I received the letter from the American consulate giving me the appointment for the visa. That day had its compensation for me since that letter meant that I was saved. Of course, they could still have killed me in the street: "Oh, we made a mistake!" In general, however, they let go, whoever could show that they could go. That, so to say, put me "over the hump". The last couple of months after that were just used in preparing for a voyage. I started learning a little English which was truly minimal.

Rosemary Lawson:

That covers that part pretty well, now I would like your comments about your brother being beaten.

Kurt Fish:

Oh yes. My brother came in during the day smiling and said: I just made thirty schillings (that was the Austrian currency). We looked at him dumbfounded so he explained that someone came along and slapped him until his glasses fell and they did not break. So he was thirty schillings ahead. That was an idea of what went on at that time. Here are about eighty handwritten pages which my uncle, upon my request, wrote to tell his experiences. He lived in Hungary, not Austria.

Rosemary Lawson:

What was his name?

Kurt Fish:

His name was Schammogi. He is still alive. He is over eighty now and lives up in Montreal. He lived in Pe'cs, in Southern Hungary (46.05 N, 18.15 E). He was an officer in World War I. He was a businessman there. He sold automobile parts including tires and such. He describes here, in these eighty pages the entire situation from the time Hitler got into Austria to the time at which he came back from the concentration camp. In 1944, the Germans occupied Hungary. On May 9, 1944, he was called in for forced labor. First he had a pretty easy job, near a railroad station, not far from where he lived.

Then things changed and they set up a ghetto, where all the Jews were concentrated, and they were marched to the Austrian border. There they were taken over by the German army. Then they were put in a train and sent to Dachau, near Munich. Then he started describing his experiences in Dachau itself. I am not going to go through that now. I will just mention that it exists so that if someone is interested they can contact me, since here I just would have to pick up items at random. His journal about life in Dauchau, including how he got there is written down in minute details.

Rosemary Lawson:

How did he finally get out?

Kurt Fish:

Yes, at the end of the war he was liberated. They did not know what happened. Just one day, the guards were gone. Then he just lived in the neighborhood. Interestingly enough, I lived within fifty miles of that place, but, of course, I did not know that they were there. My brother-in-law came to visit me; he came to the Third Army. I came from Italy with the Fifth Army. Since we both were corresponding with my wife (to-be) who was in England then, he found out from her where I was and came and visited me in Salzburg, where I was stationed with the Army of Occupation. It was while he was with me that that uncle was just leaving Dachau to go back to Pe'cs. He may very well have come through town and we were both there and we did not know about it. These eighty pages are in German and I will translate them within the next year or so, and make them available. They contain many details including the warnings which they were given repeatedly by the authorities not to run away or to upset the plans of the authorities in any way. Also available will be the letters which my niece, a thirteen year old girl, wrote back from Poland after they had been rejected.

Rosemary Lawson:

I believe that it is valuable to know that all that is available, if someone is interested in it. Also, when you get your book published, you might be willing to enclose these kinds of things. Maybe once you are finished with it, you would be willing to contribute it to the archives at Wright State University.

Kurt Fish:

This is certainly to be considered. Even if you do not get the original, a copy would be useful. As a matter of fact, it will be more meaningful to you after translation. I want to, however, include an extract of the end of the book. The all prevailing fear which was generated and' which was experienced by us, existed from the time you got in until the time you got out - and even remained with us after that. You realize that you are without any recourse. The police would not help you, you are just a play thing so that they can do

with you as they please. You go around a corner and you never know what awaits you, and by whose whim. You jump if even someone knocks at your door, or looks at you with interest. That kind of fear is hard to describe, but it is there all the time. In Germany, you had the parallel to the night riders, to the cross burnings, and to the lynch parties.' I also particularly remember the day of the Anschluss (the day the Germans incorporated Austria). All kinds of rumors were going around, but I strictly remember that, before anything was known, I came home from the university on that Friday afternoon, there was such a leaden atmosphere that you wondered what was going on. You felt something was happening, but you did not know what.